

# The Impact of a Short-Term International Experience on Undergraduate Students' Cultural Competency

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## Abstract

*Historically, education abroad has been designed to provide students a full immersion experience by way of semester or year-long study at a foreign university. However, this traditional format has been redefined to include a variety of non-traditional international experiences, such as international service learning projects, internships, and short-term international experiences. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to develop a deep understanding of the lived experiences of agricultural education undergraduate students participating in a short-term international experience. The overarching question that guided the study was: What were the lived experiences of agricultural education undergraduate students during a short-term international experience? As a result of the short-term international experience, students did not progress fully through all levels of development needed to be considered proficient in cultural competence. However, students demonstrated significant gains in cultural awareness and some gains in cultural understanding and cultural sensitivity. Finally, participating students verified some progress toward building cultural communication competencies as a result of their experience.*

**Keywords:** international experience; cultural competency; agriculture; undergraduate

## Introduction

Many institutions of higher education have increased efforts to develop and promote opportunities for education abroad to produce globally competent graduates (Childress, 2009; Parsons, 2010; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005). Traditionally, education abroad has been designed to provide students a full immersion experience by way of a semester or year-long study at a foreign university. However, this conventional format has been redefined to include a variety of nontraditional international experiences (IEs), such as international service learning projects, internships, and short-term educational excursions (Dwyer, 2004; Engle & Engle, 2004; McCabe, 2001). As short-term program models provide a more cost and time effective approach, the increased number of these programs is of little surprise (Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005). Moreover, these nontraditional programs have been well-received by students. In fact, several studies have shown that college students prefer short-term IEs (Bunch, Blackburn, Danjean, Stair, & Blanchard, 2015; Danjean, Bunch, & Blackburn, 2015).

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Per the recent *Open Doors* report from the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2015), much of the proliferation of education abroad in recent years can be attributed to an increase in student participation in nontraditional, short-term IEs rather than traditional, long-term study abroad.

Regarding the aforementioned trend toward short-term IEs, Engle and Engle (2004) noted “the shrinking of program duration seems to be responding to the desire to send more students abroad, to make study abroad as widely accessible as possible” (p. 220). However, the answer to whether short-term IEs are an effective mechanism for producing desired learning outcomes among students or are merely a means of increasing study abroad participation numbers remains inconclusive. While outcome assessment for short-term IEs has emerged as a new theme in education abroad research, the relevant body of literature is slim and characterized by mixed findings.

Some researchers have argued that short-term IEs do not achieve desired outcomes to the same degree as longer programs. Bok (2006) argued that a one or two-week long study abroad program is too short to impact students’ degree of cultural competence and intercultural sensitivity significantly. Similarly, Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) found students who participated in a longer education abroad program showed significant gains in intercultural sensitivity, whereas students who participated in a short-term IE did not. Findings by Dwyer (2004) also indicated that students who participated in a longer-term study abroad program experienced greater cultural gains than students who participated in a short-term program. However, while a larger percent of students in long-term programs achieved the desired outcomes than those in short-term programs, the majority of students who participated in short-term programs demonstrated some achievement of the desired study abroad outcomes (Dwyer, 2004).

On the other side of the traditional versus nontraditional program debate, several researchers have identified short-term IEs as a worthwhile pursuit. However, findings vary across studies regarding the specific outcomes achieved from short-term IE participation, as well as the degree to which those outcomes are achieved. Short-term IE outcomes reported most consistently across the literature include (a) gains in cultural awareness, (b) intercultural sensitivity and acceptance of cultural differences, (c) a more positive world view, (d) increased acceptance and adaptation to cultural differences, (e) personal growth and development, and (f) growth in intercultural knowledge (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Czerwionka, Artamonova, & Barbosa, 2015; Poole & Davis, 2006).

Much of the support for short-term IEs is based on the postulation that, regardless of whether short-term experiences can produce outcomes comparable to those of longer programs, student participation in a short-term IE is, at the very least, a better alternative to students having no education abroad experience at all. Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) conducted a study to determine if differences existed between students enrolled in a short-term IE and students enrolled in courses at their home institution and found students enrolled in the short-term IE demonstrated greater development in select measures of global awareness, including (a) intercultural awareness, (b) personal growth and development, (c) awareness of global interdependence, and (d) functional knowledge of world geography and language. The IE participants in the study were more cognizant of varying cultural perspectives than students at home, as well as were more likely to recognize the world as being inclusive of cultures different than those experienced in the U.S. Further, IE participants were more disposed to communicating in a foreign language and perceived themselves as being more patient with individuals not fluent in the English language. Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) attributed this finding to the daily communication challenges and more immediate need for language acquisition experienced by students abroad and identified these communication

challenges as having potential to foster empathy among students toward non-English speakers in the U.S.

Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011) conducted a qualitative study with participants of a weeklong IE to examine the extent to which the participants continued to make meaning of their experience. They reported that all participants did, in some way, continue to integrate their IE experiences into their daily lives. However, differences existed in the degree to which the integration occurred. Some students in this study changed their perspective as a result of their IE experiences, but did not demonstrate a change in their actions. Others demonstrated a change in both perception and action. Further, students who did not experience change in their actions appeared to have begun the process of transformation, but may have experienced challenges that hindered them from carrying out their intentions. Based on the findings of this study, Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011) maintained that, while short-term IEs may not produce outcomes as life-changing as those produced in longer experiences, short-term experiences may be an initial step in helping students experience other cultures and serve as catalyst for future, longer-term travel.

While much of the findings in the existing literature support the notion that participation in short-term IEs is beneficial compared to no IE participation, it should be noted that some findings suggest otherwise. In a study examining global-mindedness as an IE program outcome, Kehl and Morris (2008) found no statistically significant differences between students who participated in a short-term experience and students who planned to do so in the future. The global-mindedness of students who completed a semester-longer program, however, was significantly greater than students who planned to study abroad in the future (Kehl & Morris, 2008). Similarly, Fabregas-Janeiro, Kelsey, and Robinson (2011) found no change in students' worldview after their participation in a short-term IE.

In order to better evaluate the impact of short-term IEs and design future programs, it is necessary to first identify and describe the desired outcomes of an IE program. Targeted student outcomes of study abroad identified most frequently in the literature pertain to various measures of cultural competence. Cultural competence has been widely acknowledged as a desired outcome of education abroad and numerous scholars have sought to define and assess it. Considering the diversity in disciplines and goals among these scholars, a wide array of models, definitions, and associated terminology used to depict cultural competence exist. Other outcomes associated with cultural competence include (a) cultural awareness, (b) sensitivity, (c) knowledge, and (d) communication (Bennett, 1993; Clarke et al., 2009; Perry & Southwell, 2011).

Cultural awareness can be considered a preliminary step in development of cultural competence that may result from mere exposure to another culture. Coryell (2011) reported that students who studied abroad demonstrated an increased curiosity of other cultures, as well as increased acknowledgement of their personal growth. Coryell (2011) maintained that this self-acknowledgement is necessary for increased awareness of how much there is to learn about various cultures and communities across the world. In this respect, cultural awareness is developed when an individual is able to conduct self and other-centered analyses of the values and beliefs of another culture (Perry & Southwell, 2011; Winters Group, n.d.).

Cultural knowledge involves a gain in knowledge of another country and cultural differences, while cultural sensitivity refers to an individual's response to that knowledge of cultural differences (Perry & Southwell, 2011). According to Bennett (1993), responses to cultural sensitivity can be grouped into two categories, ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism, each of which are comprised of three distinct stages. Ethnocentrism is composed of the stages (a) denial, (b)

defense, and (c) minimization; ethnorelativism is comprised of the stages (a) acceptance, (b) adaptation, and (c) integration. In the denial of cultural differences stage, the individual has had limited exposure to other cultures and his or her own culture is experienced as the only culture. Defense against cultural differences is the stage in which the individual perceives his or her own culture as being superior to others. Minimization of cultural differences is the stage in which the individual observes some cultural differences but still perceives all people as being similar. In the next stage, acceptance of cultural differences, the individual not only recognizes, but also respects differences in cultures. Adaptation to cultural differences is the stage in which the individual is capable and willing to consider how the person from another culture is thinking or feeling. Finally, the integration of cultural differences stage is where the individual feels comfortable immersing him or herself in various cultural groups (Bennett, 1993; Kim & Goldstein, 2005).

Lastly, a targeted outcome objective of IE participation is to increase students' cultural communication capacities. Broadly defined, cultural communication is the ability to appropriately and effectively communicate with people of different cultures (Perry & Southwell, 2011). While select characteristics have been identified in prior research as contributing to the likelihood of successful cultural communication, it remains unclear whether cultural communication ability is an individual attribute or a characteristic of the relational and situational context (Perry & Southwell, 2011). However, regardless of context, successful cultural communication requires an understanding of cultural differences that may influence communication, as well as the ability to overcome those differences when interacting with people of another culture (Clarke et al., 2009). Other attributes associated with intercultural communication include empathy, intercultural experience, motivation, world attitude, and listening skills (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual model chosen for this study was The Cultural Competence Model developed by Winters Group (n.d.). The model was chosen because the students who participated in the short-term IE would be immersed in another country for a week-long experience and be exposed to many different cultural experiences (see Figure 1). The Winters Group (n.d.) model depicts an individual's ability to gain cultural competence as a four-part linear process in which the individual conducts a series of analyses.

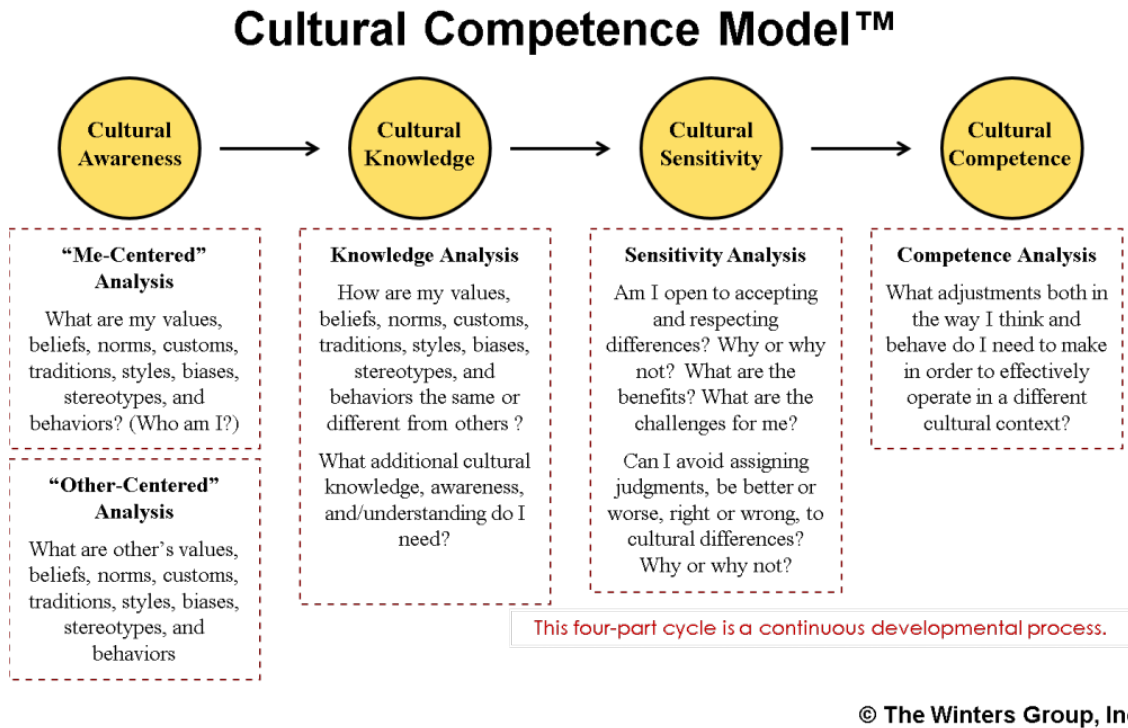


Figure 1. Cultural Competence Model (Winters Group, n.d.)

The first component of the model is cultural awareness where the individual begins to question their own beliefs and the beliefs of others. The next stage is cultural knowledge where the individual, now culturally aware, begins analyzing his or her knowledge to examine the differences and similarities between cultures. Additionally, the individual will determine what additional knowledge and awareness is needed. The third section of the model is cultural sensitivity. During the cultural sensitivity stage the individual will examine his or her ability to be open and accepting of others. Finally, cultural competence occurs when the individual determines adjustments to be made both mentally and behaviorally.

The research on nontraditional, short-term IEs remains inconclusive and is not yet as robust as the body of research for more traditional education abroad programs. As such, program assessment of short-term IEs is needed to better understand what program objectives are achievable in a shorter length of time abroad, as well as to identify program design characteristics that best facilitate achievement of those outcomes. This research aligns closely with the American Association for Agricultural Education’s Research Agenda, specifically Research Priority 3: Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016).

### Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to develop a deep understanding of how participating in a short-term international experience influenced undergraduate agricultural education students’ cultural competence. As such, the overarching question that guided the study was: *How did the common lived experience of participating in a short-term international experience in Nicaragua influence undergraduate agricultural education students’ cultural competence?*

## Methods

### Research Design

Phenomenology was chosen as the most appropriate approach of inquiry to answer the research question of this study. The overarching purpose of phenomenological research is to capture the “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Specifically, this study focused on the experiences of undergraduate agricultural education students who participated in a short-term international experience (IE). This short-term IE was a nine-day field-based course located in Granada, Nicaragua. During the course, students participated in hands-on agricultural activities alongside local professors and students. Topics discussed were (a) banana production, (b) coffee production, (c) tobacco production, (d) rice production, (e) agro-tourism and the environment, and (f) Hispanic culture and politics pertaining to agriculture. In addition to academic topics, students were immersed in the local culture and surrounding cultures through day excursions that not only provided an opportunity to learn about agriculture but learn about history and the everyday lives of locals.

Creswell (2007) discussed two approaches to phenomenological research – hermeneutical and transcendental. For this research, we utilized the transcendental approach described by Moustakas (1994). Transcendental phenomenology required the research team to (a) identify the phenomenon to study, (b) bracket our personal experiences (i.e., reflexivity), (c) collect data from multiple individuals and sources and (d) analyze and interpret data to create a textural and structural description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The textural description focuses on *what* the participants experienced, while the structural description centers on *how* they experienced it. The combination of textural and structural descriptions is known as the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007).

### Reflexivity

One of the most important aspects of qualitative research is for researchers to understand their natural biases and motivations that may ultimately influence the process of data collection and interpretation (Creswell, 2007; Krefting, 1991; Tracy, 2010). The process of reflexivity, or bracketing, enhances rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research by allowing the research team to take a fresh perspective of the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the subsequent narrative is designed to inform the reader of the backgrounds of the research team as it pertains to perceptions of IEss of undergraduate students.

Our research team was comprised of three assistant professors and one doctoral student. The lead researcher was the faculty charged with taking the students to Nicaragua. He has been involved in IEs as a graduate student and has led two short-term study abroad programs. Further, he has been involved in international development in several grant-funded international development projects. Additionally, his main line of inquiry centers on undergraduate students’ perceptions of IEss, and the impacts of IEss on student learning.

The second researcher is an evaluator who has led or contributed to more than 130 program evaluations, including contributions to an evaluation of an international agriculture diploma program. She approached the study from a methodologist’s standpoint and provided leadership to the data collection and analysis processes. The third faculty member participated in an IE to Western Europe while an undergraduate student and has been involved in two research projects focused on perceptions of undergraduate students on participating in IEss.

Finally, the doctoral student involved in this research project lived abroad for a semester during her undergraduate education. She is completing her dissertation research and has participated in several research projects centered on the internationalization of undergraduate curriculum. She also attended the experience in Nicaragua and participated as a field researcher where she collected detailed field notes and observed the undergraduates as they experienced the phenomenon. Because of our previous involvement with IEss, it was important for our research team to acknowledge our biases prior to collecting and interpreting data.

### **Participant Selection and Description**

The participants in this study were undergraduate agricultural education majors from Louisiana State University who participated in a short-term IE during the spring break holiday in 2015. Polkinghorne (1989) suggested that researchers interview between five and 25 participants when conducting phenomenological research. However, due to the number of participants in this IE, this research represents the lived experiences of the four students who met the criteria of being undergraduate agricultural education majors. In all, one student was male, and three were female (see Table 1). All students were juniors or seniors in the program. The male student was the only student who had previously studied abroad. Three students had no IE or extended interactions that were known to the researchers.

Table 1

#### *Pseudonyms and Descriptions of the Participating Undergraduate Agricultural Education Students*

Student Pseudonym	Description
Jennifer	Female; former FFA Member; junior standing
Jessica	Female; former 4-H Member; junior standing
Erin	Female; former 4-H Member; junior standing
David	Male, former FFA Member; senior standing

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected from multiple sources to develop an overall description of the students' lived experience (Creswell, 2013). The sources of data collected for this study included pre and postexperience group interviews and students' reflective journals. After receiving approval from IRB (IRB #E9177), students were invited to participate in the study.

Photolanguage (Cooney & Burton, 1986) was utilized during the post-experience focus group interviews. Photolanguage employs a variety of black and white images to solicit an emotional response from focus group participants and convey a deeper meaning of the subject being discussed (Bessell, Deese, & Medina, 2007; White, Sasser, Bogren, & Morgan, 2009). Photolanguage procedures described by Bessell et al. (2007) and White et al. (2009) were followed during the data collection period. Fifty non-specific, black and white photographs were arranged on a table in the location of the interviews. Participants were instructed to view the photographs and to choose one that represented their feelings about their experience. Each participant chose a photograph and was allowed to explain how it represented his or her feelings. Photolanguage was utilized to elicit deeper responses about how the students felt after their travels. Field notes were also used.

## **Enhancing Quality in Qualitative Research**

Credibility and trustworthiness is a central concept of high quality qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Credibility and trustworthiness refer to the plausibility and dependability of the research findings and is achieved through triangulating multiple sources of data and providing rich, thick descriptions. As previously discussed, multiple sources of data, including focus group interviews, document analysis, and field notes, were utilized in this study. Rich, thick descriptions, including direct quotations, were provided to enhance multivocality (Tracy, 2010).

## **Ethics in Qualitative Research**

An additional consideration of high quality, qualitative research is ethical considerations that arise from the intimate relationship between researchers and participants (Tracy, 2010). As human instruments, it is crucial that researchers consider procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics (Clark, Kelsey, & Brown, 2014; Tracy, 2010). To ensure procedural ethics, our research team took measures to avoid deception by being transparent with our participants as to the nature of our interview goals, sought IRB approval, received informed consent, and utilized pseudonyms to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Situational ethics revolves around the concept of “do the means justify the ends?” (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Researchers must reflect continuously on the methodology employed and data gathered to ensure the data are worthy of exposing. Reciprocity is the key concept to ensure qualitative researchers do not violate relational ethics (Clark et al., 2014; Tracy, 2010). Reciprocity is the concept that the collected and reported data benefit the participants as well as the researchers. This was accomplished by ensuring no harm could come to the participants because of their responses, ensuring the data were reported truthfully and accurately, and that they, and future study abroad participants, would benefit from the researchers gaining a deeper understanding of their experiences before and after their travels (Tracy, 2010). Finally, existing ethics were addressed by ensuring as we left the data collection phase of the study, we accurately reported data to avoid unintended consequences that could arise from misinterpretation of findings (Tracy, 2010). Member checking was utilized to ensure interpretations of data were accurate.

## **Results**

Three themes emerged from the analysis of pre- and post-experience group interviews, researcher’s field notes, and students’ reflective journals. These themes were: (a) development of trust, (b) establishment of relationships, and (c) growth of cultural awareness.

### **Development of Trust**

A recurring theme of the post-experience focus group was the development of trust. Trust embodies the “confidence that [one] will find what is desired [from another] rather than what is feared” (Deutsch, 1973, p.148). Our initial field notes revealed a distinct feeling of apprehension among the students that was expressed both through their body language and through observations of their interactions with the local citizens. Their conversations were marked by hesitancy to engage and minimal use of sign language as a communication tool. As the experience progressed, both student journals and the post-experience focus group suggested that the students began to build trust based on explicit behaviors they saw enacted around them and the close bonds that were established among the students. The group began to bond, almost immediately, as part of the social time spent together with our in-country host. The young women in the group forged friendships with citizens working at local restaurants. These interactions extended over a space of several hours and seemed to alleviate much of their initial unease. Erin reported that she “became comfortable



with the idea of being away more easily because of this amazing bonding experience” while Jessica reported that the social “was great for fostering a sense of community among those of us on the experience.”

At one point during the experience, the students observed the theft of another student’s wallet. While the student was not part of our group, his wallet was retrieved by our in-country host. Erin journaled that this incident made her realize that they were putting a lot of trust in a stranger. However, she later realized that she believed his actions were all directed at helping the students feel more secure. During the post-experience focus group she recalled the theft incident from a place of confidence, “at this point my trust went through the roof!” I knew everything was going to be okay if [our host] was there”. She had processed her earlier uneasiness and, possibly because she experienced no true problems on the experience, only remembered the feelings of trust.

At another stage of the experience, the students described visiting a farm where extra security was provided and expressed feelings of “being in good hands.” By the end of the day, the students seemed to have centered their trust around the in-country host as they journaled about merging him “into the group which created a great deal of trust moving forward.” Trust was also built through students’ one-on-one interactions with the shopkeepers at the market. The students’ were tasked with buying food to create baskets for needy families. While the Spanish language presented a barrier, the students felt a sense of trust in the shopkeepers’ honesty because they gave them the correct change for the food they were trying to buy. In each case, students’ unease was reduced to the point that, by the end of the experience, they seemed to actively seek reinforcement through observations of peoples’ actions that they could trust the people around them.

### **Establishing Relationships**

The second theme emerging from the post-experience focus group and journals was contribution of the experience to the formation of close bonds among students and locals. The group began to bond, almost immediately, as part of the social time spent together with the in-country host, staff, and locals. The time spent at the in-country host’s family laguna “was great for fostering a sense of community among those of us on the experience and broke down barriers between our team and [the in-country host].” The sentiment of developing closer bonds was echoed by students who said that they moved from feeling like they were with a group of friends to feeling like they were part of a family unit. Jessica seemed really surprised about this increased feeling of closeness because she thought they were already close. She did not think that they could grow closer, but they did. The group related how the activities and program structures helped them to build stronger bonds and helped to eradicate differences between undergraduate and graduate students.

The importance of relationships was also reiterated in students’ recognition of how relationships could help them in their own career paths. David recognized this as an opportunity to develop his future and connect with people who could speak to his students or host his students for a similar experience. It really moved him that he could receive a job offer from anywhere, especially in agriculture. Erin reported that one of the graduate students was offered an outstanding opportunity to return to the country and do research on the owner’s farm with the possibly to start a career there.

### **Cultural Awareness**

The experience of this group of students is best described as revelation. Prior to the trip, they were aware that there were differences in their own culture in the U.S. and that of those in Nicaragua, however first-hand experience changed them. During the pretrip interviews,

conversations nervously focused on personal gain from the experiences. Jennifer and Jessica both discussed the resume building aspects of the IE and being able to relate the experience with their future students. The feel of the post-trip interviews was very different. The students spoke with confidence, excitement, and reflection. The students described their experiences as “eye opening” and “unbelievable.” When asked to explain, Jennifer recalled interactions with local children who were selling various goods along the street. She talked at length about these children working all week and “basically being adults at age 13” to help their families pay for housing and food. She compared this with herself and exclaimed “I’m still not fully grown up . . . and I’m 21 years old!” Jessica and David reflected on their experiences on the last day of their trip when they were tasked to complete a service project by buying food in the local open-air market. David specifically discussed that “when you come into contact with those less fortunate enough than you . . . it immediately makes you realize how lucky you are to have what you have, it just brings it into perspective.” Jessica continued, “it will make you feel like a spoiled little American brat”, referring to how she felt as she personally interacted with street vendors and the families to whom they donated food. She went on to discuss how “humbling” the experience was. These students were all aware that poverty and hunger exist in the world, however these first-hand observations and experiences touched them deeply and began the process of change in becoming culturally aware.

Jennifer reflected that one of the graduate students helped facilitate cultural awareness helping them to communicate with the local people and reflect on their experience. The graduate student posed questions that helped the group reflect on what impressed them, what shocked them, and what upset them. Basic cultural differences were also reported. Jennifer described an incident outside of a restaurant where a man shooed away a cat with a broom. He later used the same broom to beat a mentally ill man. This incident made her consider the blessings of the mental health system and other short-term and long-term treatment centers in the U.S.

David described a lunch experience where he ordered fried bass and got the whole fish on a plate. He exclaimed that apparently the cheeks were a delicacy and the tail could be eaten like a potato chip. Basic sanitation differences between the two countries also seemed to be very eye-opening for the students. Students described that the local people sold their rice and beans in the same place they sold their fancy shoes and dresses. Jessica pronounced their meat market as absolutely disgusting. She recalled fresh chicken sitting out for hours in the open air. They had flies flying all around. Erin expanded on this recollection by telling us about the trash lining the neighborhood streets. She noted that it was shocking because of the quantity of trash.

The economic differences between the two countries were a dramatic realization for the students. David said his biggest realization was how much he took for granted the little things in the U.S., like the expectation of job benefits. In Nicaragua, a benefits package included transportation to and from work, child care for some workers, as well as bonuses for surpassing quotas. David noticed that 17-18-year-old men were the most common field workers and that women were typically found in the processing facility. It was interesting how they aligned gender with work roles.

Jennifer talked about the disparities in salary, noting that farmers in Nicaragua make 130 USD per month. Jessica added to this by comparing the cost for a single meal for her family at thirty dollars while Nicaraguans have only 18 USD for entire day’s meals for the family. She was also intrigued by the Nicaraguan diet being more plant-based, with very little meat as compared to her family’s diet of meat with every meal.

Erin was moved by the differences in expectations for young children in Nicaragua as compared to expectations for young children in the United States. She exclaimed, “My heart just

got left with the kids at the after-school program in Nicaragua. They were absolutely precious. At four years old they were working on CURSIVE WRITING! We don't learn that here until like second or third grade. And it isn't mastered until like fourth grade. It blows my mind how soon these kids are forced to grow up."

### Conclusions and Recommendations

As a result of the short-term IE to Nicaragua, students did not progress fully through all competencies needed to be considered proficient in cultural competence. Shorter IEs may not produce the desired cultural outcomes to the same degree as longer IEs. However, short-term programs do produce gains in some aspects of cultural competence and should be offered (Anderson et al., 2006; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Mapp, 2012; Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011).

As a result of this experience, students demonstrated growth in all areas of cultural competence to some degree. Specifically, students exhibited significant gains in cultural awareness. Students also showed significant growth in cultural knowledge through cultural knowledge analysis (i.e., how do my values, beliefs, norms, traditions etc. differ from those of another culture?). Minimal gains in cultural sensitivity were observed as students experienced sensitivity analysis (i.e., am I open to accepting and respecting cultural differences? Why or why not? What are the benefits? What are the challenges? What additional knowledge do I need?). However, their analyses were predominately conducted in consideration of how establishing relationships could benefit them personally. Because of the students' limited sensitivity analyses, it can be determined that students displayed ethnocentrism (Bennett, 1993; Kim & Goldstein, 2005) and were only able to evaluate the Nicaragua culture from the perspective of their own cultural value system as the standard. This was most evident when the U.S. students would refer to locals as *them*, indicative of a *them* versus *us* mentality.

Students also exhibited growth in areas not identified in the Winters Group (n.d) model. Students' communication with locals increased consistently throughout the duration of the experience. In the initial stages of the experience, the students demonstrated cultural communication apprehension, which refers to the felt concern related to real or anticipated interactions with people outside of one's own culture (Kim & Goldstein, 2005). However, as the time spent in country progressed, students began to exhibit a greater communication confidence, trust, and willingness to communicate with locals.

It can be recommended that short-term IE program leaders include learning objectives to assist students in achieving outcomes (i.e., cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, cultural communication) associated with cultural competence. Particularly, learning objectives should be aimed at personal enhancement of cultural sensitivity and cultural knowledge and reflective assignments should be included for students to conduct each of the personal analyses. As increased cultural knowledge and sensitivity may lead to an increase in cultural communication (Kim & Goldstein, 2005), targeting learning objectives and assignments in these areas can help program leaders increase students' overall cultural competence.

In addition, future research should continue in the area of the impact short-term IE programs have on students regarding cultural competence and technical agriculture competence. In order to examine impacts, researchers must first identify what are the desired outcomes of these short-term IE programs. Thus, future research is needed in the area of desired outcomes. Lastly, future research should be conducted in the area of program design. Future investigations should focus on design characteristics (i.e., activities, assignments, reflections, etc.), and how these design characteristics assist in the facilitation of achieving the identified desired outcomes.

### **Discussion**

The conclusions of this study support a slightly more complex model than the original model (Winters Group, n.d.) used as the conceptual framework. Specifically, the experiences of the students encourage the notion that cultural knowledge and cultural sensitivity are not mutually exclusive but are interdependent and necessary for the achievement of cultural understanding. Further, students' growth in their ability and willingness to communicate with locals during the experience supports the inclusion of cultural communication as a key component to achieve cultural competence. As such, a modified conceptual framework is proposed to better examine or explain an individual's development of cultural competence during an international educational experience (see Figure 2).

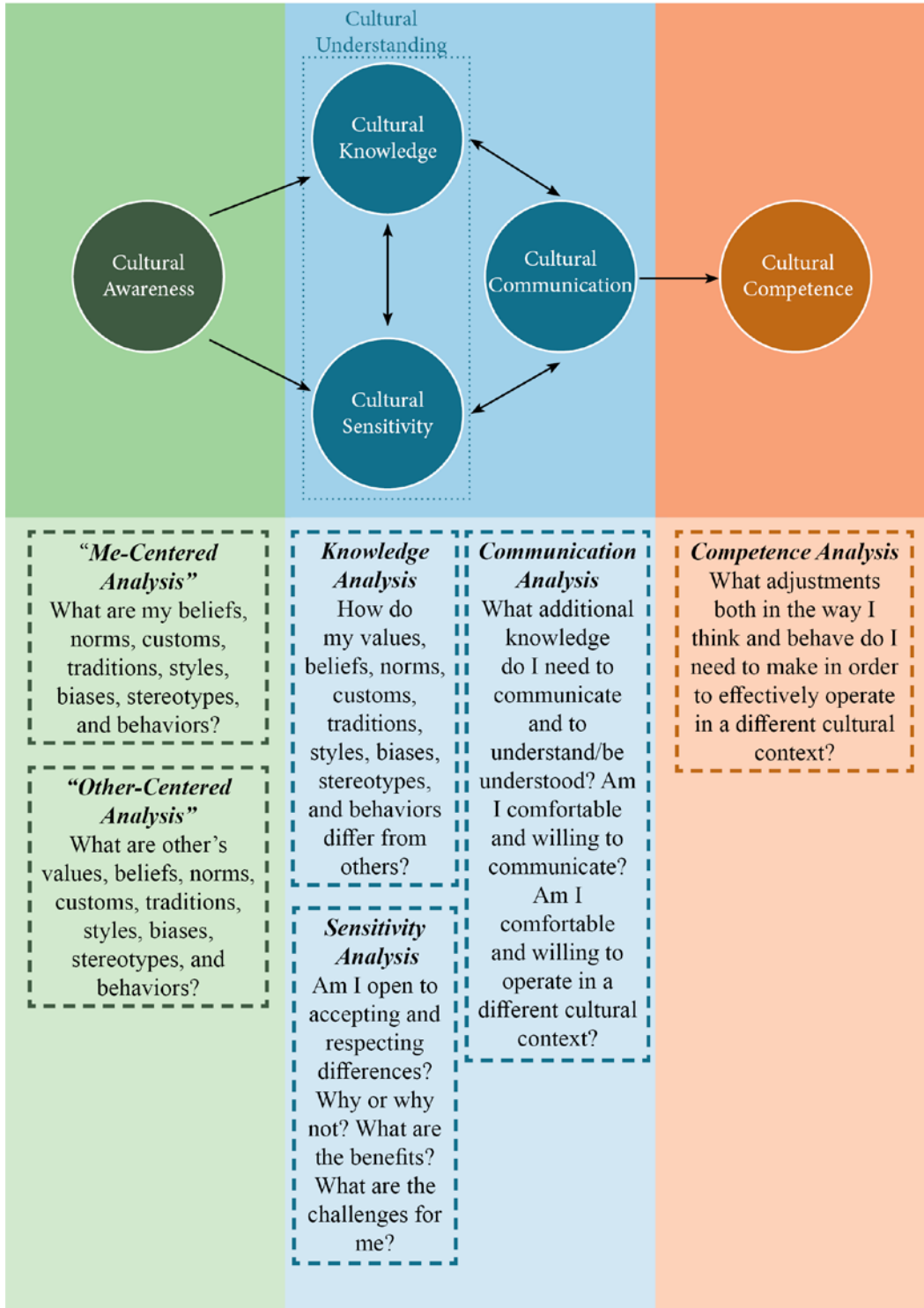


Figure 2. Personal Cultural Competence Enhancement Framework (adapted from Winters Group, n.d.)

The main difference between the original Winters Group model and the new Personal Cultural Competence Enhancement Framework is the inclusion of an interaction among latent constructs (i.e., cultural knowledge and cultural sensitivity) and the addition of cultural communication as a construct. Per the newly proposed model, the elements of cultural competence include (a) cultural awareness, (b) cultural understanding (i.e., knowledge and sensitivity), and (c) cultural communication (see Figure 2).

Cultural understanding comprises both cultural knowledge and sensitivity (see Figure 2). Cultural knowledge represents the cognitive domain of cultural understanding and involves gains in knowledge of another country and cultural differences, whereas cultural sensitivity refers to the affective domain of cultural understanding and describes an individual's response to knowledge of cultural differences (Perry & Southwell, 2011). Students in this study exhibited an equal need for growth in both domains to further develop their cultural understanding and progress toward cultural competence achievement.

Cultural communication involves the ability to appropriately and effectively communicate with people of different cultures (Perry & Southwell, 2011). Successful cultural communication requires an understanding of cultural differences that may influence communication, as well as the ability to overcome those differences when interacting with people of another culture (Clarke et al., 2009). Students did not become fully competent in cultural communication, which may have been due to the presence of ethnocentrism among students. In prior research, communication apprehension has been found to have a positive relationship with ethnocentrism and, therefore, has the potential to diminish cultural communication competence by reducing cultural sensitivity and generating misperceptions about other cultures (Bennett, 1993; Kim & Goldstein, 2005). The gains students did make in communication may be attributed to the gains made in cultural understanding that reduced students' initial misperceptions as more time was spent in country.

Further investigation should be conducted using the proposed framework. Specifically, the interactions between latent constructs (i.e., cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and cultural communication) and the strength of relationships between latent constructs should be examined.

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