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# Assessing Study Abroad: Rubric Shopping, Managerialism, and Audit Culture at the Neoliberal University

Gareth Barkin<sup>1</sup>, Lauren Collins<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This article investigates the increasing prominence of intercultural and global skills assessment in study abroad administration and pedagogy, and how it influences the practice of international education and the roles it plays in the administrative spaces of U.S. higher education. Drawing on a series of interviews with administrators, faculty leaders, and international programs staff, as well as the authors' experience in international education, this essay explores the diverse functions served by assessment rubrics in real-world educational contexts. Drawing on the work of Shore (2008), Wright and Shore (2017), Doerr (2015, 2017), Slaughter (2014), and Slaughter et al. (2004), we first discuss the rise in popularity of quantitative assessment tools that purport to measure individuals' and groups' intercultural abilities, awareness, or "competence," in the context of neoliberalization and "audit culture" in higher education. We then describe the results of our qualitative research, focusing on (1) the diverse relationships different faculty, staff, and administrators have to assessment rubrics and their implementation; (2) their importance in administrative decision making and accreditation processes; (3) their relationship to neoliberalization concerns in international education and its increasing professionalization; and (4) the role these rubrics can play in promoting intentional program design and

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1 UNIVERSITY OF PUGET SOUND, TACOMA, WA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

2 UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT BOULDER, BOULDER, CO, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**Corresponding authors:** Gareth Barkin, [barkin@pugetsound.edu](mailto:barkin@pugetsound.edu); Lauren Collins, [lauren.collins@colorado.edu](mailto:lauren.collins@colorado.edu)

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pedagogy. We demonstrate that international programs stakeholders engage in what we call rubric shopping, in which they move between different assessment tools and implement them in different ways and toward different ends, for a variety of contrasting reasons. We argue that these rubrics' power in administrative spaces comes from the reification of authored concepts like "global citizenship" and "intercultural competence," along with the scientism of the tools themselves; this cultivates a fuzzy, variable perception of positivism that is juxtaposed to and undermined by the ongoing practice of rubric shopping, among other factors. Finally, we encourage study abroad practitioners maintain a degree of critical distance from the field of intercultural skills assessment, while recognizing its utility in advocating for particular outcomes and pedagogical interventions.

**Keywords:**

Study abroad assessment, taxonomies of learning, academic capitalism, intercultural competence, intercultural communication, global citizenship, assessment tools

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**Introduction**

This essay is focused on the assessment rubrics and associated tools<sup>1</sup> frequently used to measure the apparent "effectiveness" of certain international education practices, and study abroad in particular (Doyle, 2009). The authors were drawn to this topic from an interest in the migration of intercultural communication (hereafter ICC) ideas that originated in mid-century anthropology<sup>2</sup>, from academic to administrative spaces, and increasingly toward intermediary organizations (Koester & Lustig, 2015). As study abroad programs at each of our institutions ramp back up with the resumption of international travel, we want to continue our work pushing faculty and study

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing on our interviews and popular usage of the terms in study abroad assessment spaces, we use the word "rubric" to indicate evaluation criteria or inventories and their qualitative description, along with related rationale and concept-building (e.g., the Intercultural Development Inventory's articulations of intercultural competence – the construct they are measuring (Bennett & Hammer, 1998)). We use the word "tool" to describe exams, texts, and other interventions that specifically measure or score individuals' or groups' capacities in relation to these rubrics. In practice, there is variability in how these terms are used by different rubric developers, and in the assessment literature. In distinguishing a "rubric" from a "tool" in this article, we are seeking to broadly reflect our interviewees' usage, but also to separate the more abstract and theoretical work that often accompanies these assessments from their exams and other measurement tactics.

<sup>2</sup> Hall also drew on linguistic theory, Freudian psychoanalytic theory, and ethology in developing his original work on intercultural communication and his State Department training materials (Rogers et al, 2002).

abroad administrators to critically consider the underlying values and power structures that support study abroad practice through its evaluation. Having respectively been involved in the roll out of large-scale organizational assessment, teaching coursework to prepare students to study abroad, as well as designing and leading study abroad programs, the growing focus on assessing student learning using proprietary assessment tools has interested and concerned both of us. This is not because we object to assessment nor the use of intermediary organizations, but rather because we are interested in learning what the framings and practices associated with intercultural skill assessment might tell us about the administrative structures and assumptions present in these tools and how they may influence program design, student learning, and the role of study abroad in the American university's administrative spaces.

We are most interested in the role these rubrics and related tools play in the adoption, framing, and evaluation of study abroad programs, and their adjacent (and often tacit) pedagogical narratives regarding cultural difference and its negotiation. As international educators and study abroad scholars ourselves, we were drawn in by the narrative of Edward Hall's pioneering work (Hall & Whyte, 1960; Hall, 1973) that began through his time as a Foreign Service instructor at the State Department (Rogers et al, 2002). His work then moved into the Peace Corps and their training regimen, before migrating into different academic disciplines through the 1970s and 80s (principally Communications and Education, but also International Relations (Croucher et al., 2015) and eventually toward increasing professionalization in the 90s and the 21st century, through a dialogue between increasingly assessment-focused university administrators and burgeoning private sector assessment firms (Raaper, 2016). Our interest in this professionalization was piqued by a reflection on the broad shifts in academic discourse on power and authority over the last sixty years, from which ICC, with its assessment-centric orientation, appear (to us) to have largely remained insulated (cf. Hammer et al., 2003; Wiley, 2016).

Investigating this field has been an education for both of us. Delving into this diffuse, somewhat cacophonous area of the intercultural assessment literature necessitated navigating the divides between the practical, the applied,

and what anthropologists might label the emic<sup>3</sup> perspectives coming from the toolmakers themselves and those adjacent professionals (e.g., Williams, 2005). This research showed us how deeply accepted and administratively powerful these tools can be. As this project went on, we made an effort to reflect critically on not just the assessments themselves, but on the universalizing and arguably reductive lens they bring to the discussion (and production) of cultural difference (Doerr, 2015, 2017; Tooker, 2012). This approach, what we might label an aspiring etic perspective, has inspired us in this project.

Increasingly, it seems that the impacts of study abroad are being assessed firstly by the number of students who study abroad and then by the diversity and representation of types of students who study abroad looking at gender, race, socioeconomic status, major and so on. With the benefits of study abroad assumed, assessment centers on documenting metrics of participation, and student achievement of learning outcomes using established tools that can track student development on a quantitative scale to see how far they have come in achieving these goals (see Salisbury et al., 2013 for a detailed breakdown of the relationship between study abroad and intercultural competence acquisition).

Through an original research project focused on university staff, faculty, and administrators who are directly involved with the assessment of study abroad, this paper looks at the utilization of range of popular tools. The most prominent of these has been the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a tool catering to a broad range of academic, public, and private organizations interested in their widely accepted conception of intercultural competence (Hammer et al., 2003). However, many other tools focused on similar (though distinct) intercultural outcomes came into our conversations inductively, including the Beliefs, Events, and Values Inventory (BEVI), the Global Perspectives Inventory (the GPI), as well as more business-oriented Thunderbird Global Mindset (GM), and Cultural Intelligence (CQ®), and the Global Citizenship Framework (GCF), a more International Relations and environmental studies-oriented tool connected to UNESCO.

All these tools purport to measure individuals' cross-cultural empathy, self-awareness, and their awareness and handling of cultural difference, if with

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<sup>3</sup> Historically, anthropologists have used the term "emic" to describe how local people perceive, categorize, and explain the world as well as their beliefs and practices, while "etic" has referred to the outside perspective of a social scientist attempting to characterize those same beliefs and practices through a more critical, removed, and ostensibly impartial point of view (Harris, 1976).

different prioritizations and imagined goals. The IDI positions test-takers along a simple spectrum related to these competencies, called the Intercultural Development Continuum, ranging from denial of difference at one end to acceptance and “adaptation” on the other (Hammer et al., 2003). Tools like the GCF include more area-studies, historical, and political knowledge as well, while framing ICC largely as a means to an end. This end usually seems to be effective political or business relationships and the production of “global citizens,” from which the tool draws its name. Global CQ (Cultural Intelligence), is a trademarked and more transparently business-oriented training and certification program that rates individuals and teams using a score it analogizes to IQ (intelligence quotient), and which promises increases in CQ will be accompanied by greater “negotiation effectiveness,” as well as “profitability and cost-savings” (Cultural Intelligence Center, 2021). This range of assessment tools reflects those brought up in our conversations with collaborators and their relationships to the broad array of available tools for evaluating study abroad work.

Below we will provide background on the rise of assessment cultures in higher education, as well as the emergence of tools that purport to measure individuals’ intercultural skills, competences, and awareness. We then describe our original, holistic research project, including our methodological approach to collaboration and data collection, followed by a discussion of results organized around the following themes: the variable use of different assessment tools in varying contexts; the roles these tools play in different administrative spaces of the American university; economic concerns surrounding the rubrics and their usage (including the increasing professionalization of assessment tools); and finally, the rubrics’ influence on study abroad pedagogy and program design. We conclude with a discussion in which we introduce the idea of rubric shopping, which describes our collaborators’ agency in choosing different assessment tools and approaches, based on a range of intersecting exigencies. Finally, we leverage Porter’s (2020 [1995]) critique of the pursuit of objectivity through quantitative social science to describe the ironic and variable perception of positivism that is at the heart of these tools’ power in the administrative spaces of higher education. This depends on a largely uncritical approach to the historically contingent and culture-bound nature of concepts like intercultural competence, intercultural humility, and global citizenship.

## Assessment Culture in Higher Education

In 2016, Fuller et al. set out to measure changes in assessment culture in American higher education by longitudinally comparing assessment-related job postings on HigherEdJobs.com. They found that in 2004 there were 484 such job postings compared to 1,204 in 2013 – nearly triple the number of postings. This is just one way to demonstrate how the prominence of assessment has skyrocketed in higher education (Fuller et al., 2016). Institutional rankings themselves rely on a wide range of data metrics increasingly being linked to perceptions of the quality and value of higher education (Oravec, 2019; Stanny, 2018). Perceptions of educational quality influence student enrollment, as well as state allocated and private funding opportunities in increasingly resource scarce environments (Hartle, 2012; Taylor et al., 2015). Assessment data has become a key tool to demonstrate and document effectiveness of educational programs (Astin & Antonio, 2012; Ewell, 2002). How institutions implement assessment on campus reflects the external pressures of enrollment, accreditation, and funding, as well as the ways student learning goals and their achievement are perceived. How assessment is implemented is influenced by, and generative of, beliefs about learning held by faculty, administrators, and students (Fuller et al., 2016). This focus on the variable practice of assessment, and its related approaches, beliefs, and values is commonly referred to in education discourse as “cultures of assessment” (Banta, 2002; Holzweiss et al., 2016). Across U.S. campuses, significant resources are dedicated to gathering, analyzing, and disseminating data.

Scholars of higher education including Cris Shore and Susan Wright have written extensively about these slow shifts toward increasing focus on assessment in university practice which they term “audit culture” (2000; 2008; 2010). They argue that this culture of assessment is neither neutral nor innocuous, but instead serves as new forms of governance and reflects shifts in power. “They embody a new rationality and morality and are designed to engender amongst academic staff new norms of conduct and professional behaviour” they write, adding that tools such as assessment “...are agents for the creation of new kinds of subjectivity: self-managing individuals who render themselves auditable” (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 57). These critical voices, which include prominent scholars Sheila Slaughter (2014) writing on academic capitalism, as well as Wright and Shore (2017) writing on the decline of public universities as spaces for free thought, see the rise in assessment as reflecting a

new managerialism that mirrors neoliberal economic trends. From this perspective, assessment brings ideas and practices associated with corporate culture into higher education, including stricter monitoring, pervasive oversight, and a prioritization of ostensibly neutral assessment strategies. Shore and Wright (2000) argue the migration of auditing ethics and conceptions of accountability, which originated in corporate and financial spaces, take on coercive functions in higher education, promoting conformity of pedagogical practice through the reification of new norms of best practices and restrictive conceptions of “professionalism.”

Study abroad is not immune from the fixation on assessment in higher education, with assessment rubrics and tools frequently used to measure the “effectiveness” of international education practices broadly and study abroad in particular (Savicki et al., 2015). A research culture around study abroad itself has grown in tandem with the rise in assessment throughout higher education (Acheson et al., 2020). Pedagogical research on study abroad began to take root in the 1990s with the crystallization of various common learning goals for students including language development, intercultural competence, global knowledge, global competence, and personal growth (Roy et al., 2014; Schenker, 2019). *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* published its first issue in 1995 with the goal of providing a forum for study abroad research for practitioners and scholars (Vande Berg et al., 2012).

The reasons for assessment and research on study abroad are multifaceted. Many want to identify and document the added value they believe study abroad can bring to students’ education (Kauffmann & Kuh, 1984; Williams, 2005). Others want to demonstrate that particular pedagogical approaches are more effective or that impacts on students demonstrate variation based on demographic factors (Lee & Negrelli, 2022; Wandschneider et al., 2015; Watson & Wolfel, 2015). Others want to understand what length of program has the most impact on student learning (Kehl & Morris, 2007). Understanding what and how students learn is critically important and assessment of study abroad has led to many important understandings and interventions including embedded reflection as part of programs and homestays with local families. The wide range of learning goals for study abroad, as well as the fuzzy and flexible definitions of many key goals—like intercultural competence or cultural humility—have created an environment in which a wide variety of professionalized assessment tools have flourished (Savicki et al., 2015). These

include the Beliefs, Events, and Values Inventory (BEVI), the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), the Global Mindset Inventory (GMI), the Global Perspectives Inventory (the GPI), and many others have been operationalized by private sector organizations and used widely throughout higher education institutions, as well as non-profit and business institutions (ZoomInfo Technologies, 2022).

This influx of intercultural skill assessment tools in the field of study abroad has unfolded in tandem with the rise both private sector organizations who specialize in and sell these tools, materials, and trainings, accompanying the rise of neoliberal practice throughout high education. Applying Slaughter's concept of "New Circuits of Knowledge" (Slaughter et al., 2004), which describes how faculty power has declined while non-academic professionals have gained influence over curricula, is evident in the number of these established tools that have become private businesses, selling not just their assessments, but a variety of related trainings geared toward improving scores, as well as the certifications needed to administer those assessments.

Within study abroad, Collins (Collins, 2020, p. 20) describes academic capitalist practice taking three principal forms: "1) the increasingly managerial economy of study abroad within higher education institutions, 2) the rise of intermediary organizations that contract with higher education institutions, and 3) the production of global knowledge workers." This shift toward assessment rubrics like the BEVI, IDI, GMI, and GPI, which institutions contract out to bring intermediary organizations into administrative and accreditation processes, influences educational goals and practices, and introduces more market-oriented conceptions of global citizenship to the university (Andreotti, 2006). This echoes some of Barkin's previous work (2018, 2021) focused on the constitutive roles played by provider agencies that facilitate most short-term study abroad programs.

## **Assessing Skill Development Through Study Abroad**

By and large, much of the literature suggests that study abroad participation positively impacts students in several ways, but intercultural skills (as well as varied conceptions of global citizenship) are often at the center of such outcome discussions. In the skills and knowledge-based economy of the twenty-first century, the ability to successfully navigate difference, both



domestically and globally, is seen as a critical skill for personal and professional success. These skills have had various labels attached to them over time, including ICC, cross-cultural community, and global citizenship or competence (Kehl & Morris, 2007; Roy et al., 2014). Tools to measure intercultural skill development came to prominence in the 1990s drawing on three decades of scholarship across a range of disciplines (Bennett & Hammer, 1998; Wiley, 2016), marshaling varied approaches and epistemologies to provide an administration-friendly means of measuring the apparent effectiveness of international education programming.

It would be helpful to define what “intercultural competence” means, both to understand the teleological aims of associated skills and awareness, and to provide a basis from which to understand the extent to which students have or have not achieved it. But despite the term’s common usage in U.S. study abroad and higher education’s administrative spaces, there is no single accepted vision of what constitute intercultural skills or competence (Deardorff, 2011; Roy et al., 2014). Related terminology also commonly differs by discipline (Fantini, 2009; Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009). For the purposes of this article, we will be commonly using the terms intercultural competence and skill development but are not focused exclusively on these categories. Other common terms that represent variants of these ideas include cultural humility (Danso, 2018), cross-cultural communication (Hofstede, 2001), and global mindset (Levy et al., 2007), all of which have associated assessments.

Study abroad is commonly seen as a signature experience for students to develop intercultural skills and competence (Altbach & Knight, 2007). In 2012, Twombly et al. conducted extensive reviews of study abroad programs’ learning goals and found four main learning objectives for students common in these programs: academic and intellectual development, individual development, career development, and intercultural skill development. Of these, intercultural skill development is the goal most closely linked to study abroad, as the others may be more readily developed through domestic experiential learning or even classroom work. Although well intentioned, it is arguable that intercultural competence and global citizenship have become higher education buzzwords that most study abroad programs invoke indiscriminately (Andreotti, 2006; Doerr, 2020; Zemach-Bersin, 2010). This is demonstrable through both the ubiquitous use of these phrases and the difficulty isolating any universally accepted definition of their meanings. It is also possible to further complicate

the use of these terms by considering how existing skills in intercultural and global perspectives are often ignored by institutions, as Doerr shows in research on how minority immigrant students with high levels of existing experience navigating difference and diversity have their skills minimized by universities, while study abroad is held up as the best tool to gain these skills (Doerr, 2020).

This study is guided by the notion that assessments are a manifestation of the rise of audit culture (Shore & Wright, 2000; Wright & Shore, 2017) in higher education whereby these new systems of measuring and ranking educational institutions and practices is a key form of bureaucratic governance. These processes, procedures, and beliefs manage what counts as knowledge in different contexts and reshape how organizations and the individuals within them function. In this essay, we are interested in how audit culture, vis a vis intercultural skill assessments and their implementation, influences study abroad discourse, practice, and outcomes.

## Methods

Our initial interest in intercultural assessment tools and related administrative culture came from our own experiences in several roles: first, we are both active practitioners of faculty-led study abroad programs and have worked across a range of universities and other educational institutions conducting short and long-term programs since 2007. We are both also scholars of study abroad and have conducted ethnographic research work on others' study abroad programs (e.g., Barkin, 2021; Collins, 2019), as well as on best practices for international education (e.g., Barkin, 2016; Collins, 2021; wherein intercultural assessment often plays a central role, Engle, 2013; Hadis, 2005; Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). One of us (Collins) has also worked for two third-party provider agencies, as administrative staff reviewing study abroad program bids, as an instructor teaching global citizenship courses for students preparing to study abroad while at home in the U.S. Collins also facilitated assessment of student learning using the IDI and GMI frameworks. Finally, in addition to leading short and long-term study abroad programs, Barkin has spent the better part of the past fourteen years as an active member of his university's International Education Committee, chairing or co-chairing it for the past five years. In this role, he conducted early research on intercultural assessment tools as part of an institutional exploration of options for study abroad assessment and has overseen the use of several tools.

All this background has informed our approach to this investigation, and we draw on that experience in our discussion and analysis. At the same time, we recognize our combined experience represents a narrow slice of the intercultural assessment field, which includes a range of administrators, assessors, trainers, academics, and tool developers, in addition to students and others who are themselves assessed. To get a more holistic understanding of the roles these tools play in international education at U.S. universities, in 2021 we set out to identify and conducted a series of in-depth interviews with prominent academics, professional staff, and administrators directly involved in study abroad assessment at their respective institutions.

We started by reaching out to collaborators whom we already knew through our years in international education, as well as those whose work we had become aware of through our engagement with intercultural assessment literature. We continued with limited snowball sampling where these collaborators identified contacts whom we thought could provide fresh insights. Our goal was to interview people involved in intercultural assessment at multiple levels and at different institutional types, to better explore the range of roles these assessment tools play in different university environments. Interviewees ranged from international education and global engagement directors to deans of internationalization to ICCs instructors, as well as some academics directly involved in the development of popular assessment tools. Our discussion below draws on eight in-depth interviews with these collaborators, some over multiple sessions, whose identities and home institutions we have anonymized. Additionally, we have drawn on our own prior experiences with assessment, including a range of related conversations with faculty, international programs staff, and administrators at seven different colleges or universities with which we have been respectively affiliated.

Our interviews were semi-structured and were conducted via videoconferencing. Initial questions differed somewhat between staff or faculty roles, but in all cases, we focused on developing rapport and a collaborative environment to facilitate a more open-ended and holistic conversation about intercultural skills assessment and its relationship to study abroad. This approach was effective, leading us in a number of unexpected directions throughout the data collection process. Below, we discuss prominent patterns that emerged from these conversations, in dialogue with our historical and scholarly research into the tools and associated rubrics.

## Results

In identifying the themes and patterns that emerged in our interviews as well as reflections on our own encounters (direct and indirect) with intercultural assessment, several struck us as significant and recurrent: (1) the broad variability of the goals and outcomes different tools elevate; (2) the diverse and important roles they play in administrative spaces of the university; (3) tools' relationship to the market and the professionalization of ideas that originated in academic spaces; and finally (4) their relationship to program design and pedagogical interventions. The meta-theme that encapsulates many of these results can be characterized as the variability of available rubrics and the ways they can serve different pedagogical or administrative agendas. As we lay out below and return to in our conclusion, many of our collaborators discussed what we came to label rubric shopping, in which they shifted between different intercultural assessment tools to find one they felt fit their programmatic goals, financial constraints, personal values, and even accrediting agency preferences. Some also noted they use tools pluralistically, depending on the student constituency or other contextual factors. This experimentation was not necessarily to show improving outcomes; it was also to align with their own ideas about which skills or competencies should be emphasized and, in some cases, which particular pedagogical interventions the rubrics championed.

Another theme that emerged, albeit less explicitly, on the margins of our conversations was assessment tools' seemingly anachronistic silencing of inequality and the role of host communities in the acquisition of the competencies and awareness that the tools purport to measure. We also encountered varied perspectives on the validity of intercultural assessment rubrics and related tools, as well as differences in opinion on how well they captured student learning, skill acquisition, and intellectual/emotional development during their time abroad. Because these themes revolved around more meta-level analysis of intercultural assessment and its deficits as a practice, they are beyond the scope of this essay, but we plan to return to these subjects in a future publication. We mention this here to provide some additional context, as the themes loomed in the background of many of our conversations.

In our discussions, collaborators reflected on their use of a range of different tools, and on their relationships to the underlying rubrics, foci, and roles of the tools in their academic and professional lives. Most had used or were using the IDI, with several having known IDI authors like Milton Bennett personally. Others, particularly those overseeing more business-oriented programs or market-driven sectors of their universities were more interested in tools that measured business-oriented skills. For example, Vanessa, who directs an internationally-focused MBA program, noted that she had used the IDI for a year but then switched to Thunderbird's Global Mindset Inventory or GMI (see Javidan et al., 2010). "The IDI felt too theoretical... less applied," she noted, pointing out that GMI is more oriented toward "global professionals." She pointed out that, like the IDI, "culture is woven through" the GMI rubric, in part through its "social capital" criteria (one of four that the tool focuses on) but is "less prioritized."

Many collaborators had experimented with different approaches to implementing assessment tools in their campus environments. These approaches ranged from one-off uses to try out different rubrics for fit with their programs, to pre-departure and post-return testing connected to particular study abroad programs, and to comprehensive pre/post testing for all students as part of their overall degree enrollment. The latter included Vanessa's internationally-focused MBA program. In another case, all incoming students into an undergraduate program would take the IDI upon matriculation and again on graduation, allowing them to explore not only the apparent effectiveness of study abroad (and of specific programs) but also other intercultural coursework and programming on their campus. The latter program had been implemented by Sofia, who served as the senior executive director of all study abroad and international learning at her university. More commonly, tools were used to assess only students studying abroad, but we found that assessments were often used inconsistently, with many collaborators discussing various specific occasions on which they had used a particular assessment tool, but not broad programmatic or campus-wide policies.

The significant expense of testing and training with certain tools was often cited as a reason for these sporadic forays into assessment, and indeed Sofia's university-wide testing regime had only been made possible by external grant funding. Related to this concern, two collaborators mentioned internal "homebrew" assessment tools they had been involved in designing and

implementing. The term “homebrew” was used by one of our participants describing a term for “ad hoc” rubrics. We borrow this term from our interviewees, who were describing tools developed largely for internal use (within their international programs offices) rather than in dialogue with broader university hierarchies or as part of accreditation, where more professionalized tools like the IDI, GMI, or Cultural IQ held greater sway. One of my (Barkin) experiences underscores this patchwork approach to testing and its financial contingencies, where my university was able to secure funding to train a staff member as an IDI tester only because of a temporary funding surplus. Since that time, with no dedicated source of funding and a cash-strapped international programs office, IDI testing has been sporadic and aligned more with faculty who are interested in such assessment and who are able to find financial support to use the tool, rather than a systematic assessment plan.

We also encountered a range of teleological roles and functional uses that intercultural assessment served for different collaborators. Alan, an international programs director who had a close relationship to the IDI, used the tool as part of a broader pedagogical agenda, to experiment with and implement specific interventions associated with “moving the needle” on students’ IDI scores. On the other end of the spectrum, Maya, an IDI facilitator and director of a language learning center at a large university, noted that although she used the IDI, her focus on language learning rendered its results secondary. Commenting “assessment for the intercultural element in language learning is not really a thing,” she was generally content with informal self-assessment accompanying more formal language learning outcomes. And Sam, who runs a nonprofit organization dedicated to service learning (and whose doctoral dissertation had focused on assessment of student learning abroad), said he had felt compelled to develop his own survey tool to bring a focus on those outcomes he thought were important but overlooked in common intercultural assessment rubrics.

### Administrative Spaces

Perhaps one of the most widespread themes we observed through our research, and in our own experience, was the important, if variable roles, that intercultural assessment plays in the administrative spaces of U.S. universities. The topic came up in all our interviews, whereas the use of assessment tools for internal, pedagogical or program development-related ends came up less frequently. As mentioned above, several of our collaborators had implemented

pre-departure and post-trip assessment programs for students participating in study abroad, while others had experimented with different implementations including selective pre/post assessments for specific programs, only pre assessments, and only post assessments. Some noted they used the tools just to get a sense of where particular cohorts of students ranked on a particular rubric, to better inform classroom instruction. For Vanessa, GMI pre- and post- were a required part of her institution's global MBA program, which integrated two-week study abroad programs (visiting "a more developed and a less developed" country). These were managed through third-party providers such as World Strides and Austral Group (see Barkin, 2018). At a university with no set assessment policies, tools like the GMI had been integral to establishing study abroad as a required component of the MBA. Vanessa experimented with several tools before arriving at Thunderbird's GMI, which was also helpful in the school's AACSB accreditation – "they like Thunderbird," she noted.

Sam, who was skeptical of existing tools' foci and blind spots, participated in the development of his own assessment rubric and evaluation tool. He emphasized that the audience for assessment data was administrators, and that he and his co-authors had developed their rubric specifically to provide administrator-friendly data on international programs. Roger brought up the interplay between administration and study abroad learning goals at his university, noting that their now-formalized outcomes had been chosen by a vice-provost in dialogue with assessment data and the categories it emphasized. He noted that their assessment data was shared with the university as a whole and that his office used it to advocate for more work on intercultural programming across the campus, in addition to programming changes in international education.

Alan described assessment tools as handy reference points for high-level administrators and accreditors to use in gauging the impact of study abroad. He brought up a common question he had heard from administrators over the years – "why even bother [to study abroad]?" – noting that his assessment numbers gave them a touchstone that helped reify progress toward specific goals and outcomes, as well as the import of those outcomes. He also mentioned that the IDI specifically can help to bring domestic and international diversity advocates together on a campus, as its implementation is often used to track the effectiveness of on-campus, curricular interventions in addition to international education. "Intercultural competence is a widely accepted value, and it's grown

a lot over the past 15 years,” he said, adding that “the instrument makes it real” and convinces many outside his office of their effectiveness.

The use of intercultural assessment tools in accreditation processes, which increasingly draw on assessments administered by what critics of the neoliberal university label intermediate agencies (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), came up independently in seventy-five percent of our principal interviews. Among the most compelling narratives on this topic came from Sophia, who described the central role of assessment in her university’s embrace of intercultural learning. Some 15 years earlier, the institution was going through a major accreditation process for which they needed to choose a focal point or central goal for their undergraduate education as a whole. Several focal points were in contention, including social justice, civic engagement, and intercultural competence / study abroad. Sofia knew Milton Bennett and had been certified in IDI administration, and while she had used it more selectively before, she began using the instrument across the whole campus, following students through their four-year experience, after having secured a large endowment that allowed most students to study abroad if they chose to. Data from the tool showed no change for students who did not study abroad, but by encouraging the sorts of interventions advocated by scholars like Bennett, Hammer, and Vande Berg (e.g., Bennett, 2012; Hammer, 2012; Vande Berg et al., 2012), they were able to demonstrate significant score increases among students who took part in their own international programs. This helped Sophia to convince her provost to choose intercultural competence and study abroad as the focal point for the university’s undergraduate learning outcomes, principally because of the progress that could be quantitatively demonstrated through assessment data, and its comportment with accreditors’ priorities.

### Economic Exigencies

Financial concerns related to tools were prominent across our interviews, ranging from the cost of some intercultural assessment tools to the broader role of assessment as undergirding a professionalized, neoliberal turn in higher education (Wright & Shore, 2017). Related to the cost of administering these assessments, our interviews also educated us in the scholarship-to-private-sector migration that many successful intercultural tools have gone through. The IDI, for example, came to prominence in the 1990s, but drew on three decades of scholarship across a range of disciplines (Bennett & Hammer, 1998; Wiley, 2016), marshalling varied approaches to provide a corporate and



administration-friendly means of measuring the apparent effectiveness of intercultural skills development, via study abroad or otherwise. It is now an LLC with purported revenues of over US\$ 20 million per year (ZoomInfo Technologies, 2022). Any visit to the annual conference of NAFSA: Association of International Educators will quickly reveal how many competitors' tools like the IDI, GMI, and GCF have, with scores of tables occupied by agencies offering specialized assessment solutions that cater to a range of institutional needs and learning outcomes. Rachel described the NAFSA annual meeting as "now like an industry conference," noting that sessions often focus on particular tools and how to use them, but then she would walk out and find the same tools on offer in the exhibitor area, "trying to sell you their pitch."

Indeed, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) lists over 90 intercultural assessment tools, with a number being freely available, homebrew rubrics and tools developed by faculty and staff involved in international education. We wondered why some of these public domain alternatives had not caught on more widely, but many interviewees noted the importance of using established, well-respected tools that could put administrators and accreditation agencies at ease. Indeed, Sophia's success described above depended on the widespread acceptance of the IDI. The academic bona fides of the tool and its theoretical framework, she emphasized, were critical to her steering institutional focus toward international education, which led to her office receiving significant resource investments linked to the elevation of ICC at the university.

As with Sophia's rubric of choice, many of these established tools have become private businesses, selling not just their exams, but a variety of related trainings geared toward improving scores, as well as the certifications needed to administer those exams. The IDI, GMI, BEVI, and GPI are also frequently deployed by organizations, private and non-profit, and their promotional materials show efforts to align themselves with diversity and inclusion discourses. In most cases, the tools point organizations and universities alike toward the need for more intercultural training, which may also be on offer from the developers' corporations. For example, "IDI Guided Development®," the organization announces, "is a proprietary, proven approach for designing training and other interventions that substantially increases intercultural competence for groups and organizations based on IDI profile results" (Intercultural Development Inventory, 2021). Several collaborators discussed

the cost of training staff to administer the tools, along with rubric-makers' recertification timelines, as factors around which they had to budget. Rachel, who had been in international education for decades, noted this as part of a broader professionalization of the field in the 1990s. She described her somewhat accidental entry into the profession, which began with her volunteering to help a faculty member develop a study abroad program, as no longer possible – “now, people usually get a Master's in international education or something similar that's more curated toward study abroad” she noted.

Of course, informal and cost-free options remain available. For example, many universities build their own trainings or draw on published ICC scholarship to advocate for particular pedagogical interventions in their programs. But the expense associated with more prominent tools meant that collaborators often required outside funding or generous administrators to implement them in the consistent, comprehensive way that is most helpful. As Roger noted, this expense also helps to explain why the assessments are not administered more broadly—for example, among program participants in host communities—since “no one's going to pay for assessment of anyone other than our students.” Meanwhile, those using homebrew or self-developed rubrics tended to use them primarily for internal evaluation, since these tools were reportedly taken less seriously in administrative spaces.

### Assessment and Program Design

Another key theme that emerged from our interviews was the usefulness of assessment tools in thinking through learning goals as well as structuring faculty-led study abroad programming. Assessment frameworks provided ideas for faculty on how to organize study abroad programs in the field, as well as development of on-campus courses to support student preparation for study abroad and reflection/integration upon return. This utilization of tools to think through program design and coursework was articulated by both administrators seeking to deepen student learning, as well as faculty with direct experience leading programs. The use of these assessment rubrics to frame learning outcomes and to develop pedagogical strategies appeared to us to be a key reason practitioners found value in their use of these tools.

For many faculty, the goal of increasing the number of students who go abroad had led to their being asked to lead students on short term programs during winter and summer breaks or January terms (see Barkin, 2018). While

many are excited about the opportunity to do so, they often lack knowledge and experience in designing and structuring high-impact programs that balance and integrate academic content with experiential engagements abroad. Rachel, who had used the IDI, as well as several homebrew tools for assessment, found that in addition to assessing learning on programs, rubrics worked well to facilitate more intentional practices. As an example, she brought up a Ghana-based program wherein she had implemented homestays and interventions focused on rubric-specific learning outcomes from the AAC&U intercultural knowledge value rubric. She then used assessment outcomes to push faculty toward more intentional program design, showing them how prior programs with interventions like homestays and more structured opportunities for reflection had been more successful in achieving desired learning outcomes.

Alan similarly noted that his familiarity with the IDI allowed him to advocate for specific interventions in short and long-term faculty-led programs. These included pre-departure and during-program coursework, ongoing research projects, and other strategies that are presented in the rubric's literature as contributing to improved ICC and higher scoring on the IDI (see Bennett, 2010). He said that he preferred these sorts of "immersive" interventions independently, since before he became familiar with ICC theory, but that the scholarly weight of the rubric helps to shift such discussions from a matter of individual teaching style to one of "best practices." And, I (Barkin) should myself confess that, in my capacity as chair of my university's international education committee for the past few years, even though we've only used the tool intermittently, I have wielded the IDI literature liberally in meetings and in working with faculty to improve their abroad programs.

Roger, who had roles as both faculty and a high-level administrator, found that assessment rubrics served his goal of deepening student intercultural skill development (as measured by the IDI) through the development of pre and post study abroad courses focused on cultural difference and ICCs theory. Sofia, chief international officer of her institution, also reported that targeted, on-campus, curricular programming was key to seeing significant changes in student learning, based on assessment tool metrics. Both Roger and Sofia remarked on how students were taught about the theory behind the IDI as part of the framing and debrief of IDI assessment. This raises the question of the intersection between student achievement on IDI assessments and their potentially becoming conditioned to see their perspectives on difference as

moving toward the desired goals of “adaptation” or “acceptance” because of being taught about the rubric and its theory of intercultural skill development (cf. Wiley, 2016).

## **Discussion: Rubric Shopping and its Discontents**

These conversations have raised important questions about the variable mobilizations of intercultural assessment tools, among them the different framings and foci they elevate, as well as how and why they are chosen by staff, faculty, and administrators across different contexts. One theoretical lens through which we have considered these results is the academic capitalism literature that emerged in education studies around the turn of the millennium. Slaughter and Leslie’s pioneering work (1997) illustrates how higher educational institutions are increasingly focused on generating external revenue through market-like behavior, while Collins’s work (2020), as discussed above, pointed out how this shift influences study abroad through an increasingly managerial approach among universities, the rise of intermediary organizations and contractors, and a focus on producing global knowledge workers. All these characteristics are demonstrable in the assessment narratives described above, through their roles in administrative and accreditation processes, through their common focus on market-oriented conceptions of global citizenship, and particularly through their insertion of new intermediary assessment organizations that influence educational approaches and practices.

Returning to Slaughter’s concept of “New Circuits of Knowledge,” (2004) which describes how faculty power has shrunk while non-academic professionals gain influence over curricula, we have found that rubric agencies, in asynchronous dialog with professional staff, are playing a larger role in framing and identifying what counts as meaningful knowledge in the context of study abroad, and how it ought to be acquired. At the same time, the use of assessment rubrics seems a particularly powerful means for study abroad administrators and directors to push faculty and staff toward more reflexive and deliberate pedagogical choices. But even then, the broad range of rubrics available seemed to demonstrate that “best practices” for study abroad are largely in the eye of the rubric-chooser, tempered somewhat by the prestige and acceptance of different assessment tools. Even as they reified a range of abstract constructs, such as a universal vision of intercultural competence that is

rejected by some (Williams, 2006), or a model of global citizenship some have described as ethnocentric (Zemach-Bersin, 2010), their power within administrative spaces seems to depend on a tacit neutrality — the notion that they are measuring some quasi-empirical dimension of “success” in international education, across a range of disciplines.

### Rubric Shopping

We use the term rubric shopping to describe the agency of international programs staff and faculty in choosing different assessment rubrics and tools, as well as overseeing their variable implementation. As pervasive as assessment has become in higher education, our interviews show we are still in something of an anarchic period where staff, faculty, and administrators regularly choose different assessment rubrics at different times, for a range of reasons and with uneven implementation strategies. Blanket institutional assessment policies remain rare, as are the economic resources needed to implement widespread and deliberate assessment protocols. This patchy and inchoate state of study abroad assessment allows international education staff to shop for rubrics that meet their needs in a range of ways.

First, rubric shopping reflects Shore and Wright’s (2003) notion of audit culture and the increasing need to create paper trails that demonstrate “effectiveness” for what were once open-ended, experimental, and creative educational practices. Most of our collaborators chose assessment tools not just for their own benefit or that of their offices alone, but in dialog with broader assessment regimes at their universities and organizations. Several used assessment tools specifically to influence administrative policy at their home institutions. Here we see the broader and top-down impact of Slaughter’s neoliberal university, including a growing role for for-profit, intermediate agencies such as the Intercultural Development Inventory LLC and the Cultural Intelligence Center LLC corporations.

At the same time, we can also see rubric shopping as a form of resistance against increasingly pervasive audit culture. While international education practitioners may not be able to avoid the use of assessment rubrics in the face of normative institutional cultures and accreditation processes, rubric shopping allows them to engage in a degree of “malicious compliance” by trying out different tools until they find one that shows the results they would like to see. Maurer describes this approach as people doing, “... just enough to keep the

consultants off their backs” (2019, p. 1). While we did not hear about approaches quite so disaffected from our collaborators, our conversations reflected a widespread and strategic awareness of the roles assessment played in their institutions’ administrative spaces. Several collaborators discussed trying out different rubrics until they could find the right fit for their programs. That fit was constructed in various ways, from compoment with their own judgement, to acceptance by university administrators, to showing the progress they wanted to show. In this form, rubric shopping serves as a low-risk strategy to placate or subvert powerful overseers, and which avoids the risks inherent to a full-scale rejection of their priorities.

Finally, stepping outside of the critiques of audit culture and the neoliberal university, our interviews and professional experience also demonstrate that rubric shopping can be a powerful avenue toward intentional pedagogy on study abroad programs. Choosing a rubric that aligns with one’s own goals and priorities for international education can provide a range of ready-made pedagogical strategies and interventions, the importance of which is transformed by the level of acceptance of the tool itself. Thus, if international educators are sufficiently invested in the IDI, for example, they can draw on a range of training materials, workshops, and literature from rubric developers and adjacent scholars (e.g., Bennett, 2012; Lee, 2017; Spenader & Retka, 2015) to develop and improve their study abroad programming and approaches, and to encourage others developing and leading programs to adopt similar techniques. These will presumably align not only with the goals and values of those personnel choosing the rubric, encouraging (in this example) higher levels of intercultural skill and awareness among students, but also produce quantitative assessment data that aligns with institutional needs and demonstrates program improvement and impact. These tools, then, can be wielded intentionally to advance pedagogical priorities and encourage specific interventions and approaches to international education.

### Perception of Positivism

All these functions that rubric shopping can serve depend on a fuzzy and intermittent perception of positivism, which is to say a widespread perception of the tools’ objectivity and a sense that they are objectively measuring positive qualities, skills, or awareness. The sense relates to positivism because the tools draw socio-institutional power from the perception that concepts like “global citizenship,” “cultural intelligence,” or “intercultural competence” are fixed and

measurable, rather than authored phrases representing contingent social constructs (Bennett, 2013; Holmes, 2007). The sense is fuzzy and intermittent because administrators and practitioners in our study often expressed an awareness of the contingent histories of these rubrics and tools (or at least that they have histories), as well as the option to rubric shop in a marketplace of varying products designed to measure similar capacities in different ways. They know (or could know) that the concepts being measured are constructed and mutable. Yet, these awarenesses largely coexist without much in the way of explicit conflict or dissonance; they are not grammatical with one another, to borrow an idea from Boellstorff (2005).

Max Weber argued “[b]ureaucratic administration means fundamentally domination through knowledge,” (Weber, 2016 [1921], p. 277) describing the institutional power that accompanies the appearance of objectivity in characterizations of the social world. Critical social theorists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer also targeted positivism and its framing allusion to objectivity in social research, arguing that it effaced the localized and interested individual (see Keuth, 2015). Theodore Porter’s influential book *Trust in Numbers* (2020 [1995]) demonstrated how positivism developed in the post-Enlightenment world alongside the belief in quantitative data as more reliable and objective. He argued that quantification is a technology of alienation which reduces the need for personal trust and deep understanding, elevating the authority of science and scientism in socio-political life. Porter links the power of “facts and figures” to the rise of bureaucratic decision-making but critiques its implicit narrative that quantitative approaches are uncovering universal, valid knowledge. Rather, he argues quantitative science reflects broad cultural trends, formalized tacitly through interpretative communities with common expectations. In study abroad and related intercultural skills assessment, we can see these dynamics at work in the bureaucratic power associated with quantitative assessment tools and the audit trails they produce, regardless of how abstract and contingent the concepts they purport to measure.

Of course, impressions of positivism can break down with homebrew rubrics, or assessment tools that have little in the way of supporting research to buttress their claims. These may perform very similar functions to branded, corporate rubrics, but carry less weight in administrative spaces that rely on the authority of professionalized, intermediate agencies and perceived rigor of both their background research and the competence of their testing procedures. The

implicit positivism of these informally developed tools have insufficient social capital to carry much weight in administrative spaces; they are insufficiently professionalized. But even with seasoned tools like the IDI—the reliability of which is well supported (Intercultural Development Inventory, 2022)—the variety of rubrics available purporting to measure closely related intercultural capacities points to the variable and constructed provenance of these concepts. This variability validity is supported by Chen and Gabrenay’s (2021) study of cross-cultural competence measurement instruments, which found inconsistent or poor validity across a number of validity dimensions. Administrative buy-in for assessment tools depends on an interested avoidance of this mutability, and an embrace of their authors’ allusions to positivism, even as practitioners are more than willing to switch between rubrics for all the reasons we have described above.

### Implications for Practice

Assessment culture in higher education is broad and systemic (Raaper, 2016); in this essay we are not arguing against the value and the importance of trying to understand what and how our students are learning. Rather we seek to call attention to the proliferation of these tools, and to challenge uncritical perspectives that posit them as value neutral. In particular, the phenomena of rubric shopping that we discuss in this paper is one that should continue to be interrogated not only through research but in reflection on our habits and practices as practitioners. What are we trying to assess and why? What role do assessment tools play in our teaching and our sense of success? By making visible and describing the practice of rubric shopping, as well as the myriad ways that assessment influences the practice of study abroad, we hope to encourage others to investigate assessment’s relationship to study abroad administration and pedagogy, and to the professional autonomy and creativity of practitioners. Our goals here are to make the real-world functions of assessment tools more transparent, and to encourage critical distance along with a measure of humbleness regarding the empiricism of its results.

Assessment rubrics can play an important role in program design and improvement and these tools provide an administratively helpful way to evaluate and share program impact. For faculty and administrators, the challenge of gaining familiarity with the overarching theory of intercultural skill development while maintaining healthy skepticism toward it can be a daunting one. But we would argue that it is critical for all involved in



international education to develop a clear sense of what their learning goals are for students, and to maintain an awareness of the different options for assessment that align with those goals. Developing literacy across a range of popular rubrics allows for greater agency in determining which tool or ad hoc assessment would best suit a particular program, while foregrounding their variability and countervailing the tacit positivism associated with rubrics and the concepts they purport to measure. This awareness of diverse assessment approaches allows for more reflexive and deliberate pedagogical choices and helps to foreground that these tools are lenses through which to explore socially constructed goals and outcomes.

Recurrent concepts in these rubrics, such as culture, cultural difference, intercultural competence, as well as the communication tools to bridge apparent differences, share an uncomfortable history that weds mid-twentieth-century anthropology with U.S. government power and Cold War priorities (Price, 2016). Reductive mobilizations of “cultural difference” have been the target of critical deconstruction in anthropology since at least the 1970s (Patterson, 2020) but have nevertheless made their way back into the academy through different avenues, reifying and credentialing the field of intercultural skills assessment. During the same period, and accompanying Foucault’s critiques of Western taxonomy (2005 [1966]), scholars have increasingly questioned the impulse to categorize, quantify, and compare cultural groups and processes, arguing these ostensibly neutral impulses can perpetuate a prejudiced colonial imaginary by “othering” categories of people, producing the very “difference” they intend to examine (see Doerr, 2015). Assessment rubrics can play important roles in international education – they can help us think through program goals and learn new ways to achieve them – but they trade in constructed social concepts and reflect a contingent point of view. In our efforts to improve study abroad, we should not be perpetuating reductive perspectives on culture and identity.

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## Author Biography

**Gareth Barkin** is a sociocultural anthropologist whose research is focused on different intersections of neoliberalism and cultural representation in and of Southeast Asia. His early research focused on neoliberal and religious intersections among mass media producers in Indonesia; his current work examines study abroad at U.S. universities and has focused on market-driven representation of culture, the role of provider agencies in shaping programs, assessment cultures and related metrics, and pedagogical best practices.

**Lauren Collins** is a higher education scholar whose work explores the relationship between the United States' global power status and the practice of global education, especially economic and socio-cultural impacts of global education programs on local communities. She is particularly interested in how communities are building global education program provision infrastructure in response to the desires of U.S. study abroad programs to place students in “non-traditional” experiences.