

# The Impact of Short-Term Study Abroad on the Identity Development of College Students with Learning Disabilities and/or AD/HD\*

**W e n d y S h a m e s**

*Landmark College*

**P e g A l d e n**

*Landmark College*

## **I n t r o d u c t i o n**

How often do we hear students returning from their sojourns abroad proclaiming that their study abroad experience has profoundly changed the ways that they look at themselves and the world? These types of proclamations can be heartening in general, but they are particularly inspiring when they come from students whose educational histories have made learning difficult, if not painful, in the past. This study was inspired by just such students: students who, due to a learning disability (LD) and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), had historically struggled with learning, yet consistently reported enthusiastic and positive gains from their study abroad experiences.

This article explores the identity changes that college students with LD and/or AD/HD report after participating in a short-term study abroad program. The reflections of thirteen short-term study abroad participants, all of whom have been diagnosed with LD and/or AD/HD are presented. Particular attention is focused on the ways in which these identity changes impacted the students as learners and the factors unique to short-term study abroad that facilitated those identity changes. It concludes by proposing a model of identity development for students with LD and/or AD/HD and recommends methods for greater inclusion of students with LD and/or AD/HD in short-term study abroad programs. We hope that our findings will help to reframe notions about the ability and adaptability of students with LD and/or AD/HD, lower current barriers to participation in study abroad for

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students with LD and/or AD/HD, and contribute to the dynamic discussion currently underway about study abroad and student outcomes.

## **L i t e r a t u r e   R e v i e w**

In order to understand the impact of short-term study abroad on the identity development of students with LD and/or AD/HD it is necessary to visit briefly some of the foundational literature in the fields of learning disabilities and AD/HD, college student development, curriculum design, and study abroad.

## **D e f i n i t i o n s   a n d   L e a r n i n g   P r o f i l e s o f   S t u d e n t s   w i t h   L D   a n d / o r   A D / H D**

Given the diversity of individual cognitive, cultural and affective behavior over a lifetime and the broad range of stakeholders interested in understanding, treating, and accommodating these differences, it comes as no surprise that providing definitive definitions for learning disabilities and AD/HD is a challenge. Despite a complex history, some useful legal definitions and typical educational and behavioral profiles exist within the LD and AD/HD fields. We will look first at the concept of learning disabilities, then at AD/HD, and finally we will conclude with a short discussion of their frequent comorbidity.

In order to be identified as having a learning disability, one must experience significant difficulty in the areas of oral language, reading, written language or math, and one must present a significant discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability. Diagnosis requires that other possible explanations for these difficulties, such as sensory impairment, socioeconomic status or psychological issues, have been excluded. The most widely used legal definition of LD requires that a person

...have a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 1990)

In addition to the academic and cognitive challenges associated with LD, Gerber and Reiff (1994) noted that LDs “affect each individual uniquely.

For some, difficulties lie in only one specific functional area; for others, problems are more global in nature, including social and emotional problems” (p.7). These social and emotional issues for LD adults can range from a diminished self-concept and the range of feelings associated with a sense of inadequacy and lack of confidence (Gottesman, 1994; Gunther-Mohr, 2003; Reiff & Gerber, 1994; Rock, Fessler, & Church, 1997; Saracoglu, Minden, & Wilchesky, 1989, Shmulsky, 2003), to isolation and withdrawal (Gottesman, 1994; Reiff & Gerber, 1992; Rock et al., 1997; Wilchesky & Minden, 1988), and from peer rejection (Gottesman, 1994; Reiff & Gerber, 1994; Valletutti, 1983) to peer victimization (Wiener, 2003). What all of this research indicates is that college students with LD experience both educational and social marginalization over the course of their lives.

In order to be identified as AD/HD six or more symptoms of inattention and/or hyperactivity, as identified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Text Revision (DSM-IV- RT) of the American Psychiatric Association (2000) must be present and must have existed for at least six months in a maladaptive and developmentally inconsistent manner. Additionally, these symptoms must have been present before the age of seven, must present in an incapacitating manner in two or more settings, and cannot be better accounted for through another type of disorder. Symptoms associated with AD/HD include difficulty focusing on one task for sustained periods of time or persisting with long-term projects, problems managing time, forgetfulness, organizational challenges, lack of motivation, difficulties with relationships, low self-esteem, and not understanding social cues (Cherkes-Julkowski, Sharp,& Stolzenberg, 1997; Hallowell & Ratey, 1994; Novotni & Whiteman, 2003). Those with AD/HD are described as having an intolerance for boredom which inclines them to pursue high stimulation activities (Hallowell & Ratey, 1994), coupled with a lack of organizational behavior oriented toward both the short- and long-term future (Barkley, 1997). Like LD, AD/HD is a persistent issue, occurring into and throughout adulthood.

Similar to their peers with learning disabilities, college students with AD/HD face social and emotional issues frequently associated with the diagnosis. In their work, *Driven to Distraction*, Hallowell and Ratey (1994) note that “ADD can interfere with one’s interpersonal life just as dramatically as it does with one’s academic or job performance” (p. 19). The associated features listed in the DSM-IV-RT (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) highlight characteristics of AD/HD that have profound implications for social and emotional functioning, such as “low frustration tolerance,” “temper outbursts,”

“bossiness,” and “stubbornness.” The college student with AD/HD, like the LD college student, may have significant challenges in the social and emotional sphere.

The number of students enrolling in college who have an LD and/or AD/HD diagnosis has significantly increased over the past several years (DuPaul et al., 2001; Farrell, 2003; Haimester, Matthews, Hosley & Groff, 1999; Wolf, 2001). Of college freshman that reported a disability in 2000, 40% identified themselves as learning-disabled as compared to 16% percent in 1988 (HEATH Resource Center, 2000). Currently, the proportion of students with LD in higher education ranges from 0.5% to 10% depending upon the type of college (Vogel et al., 1998), while the proportion of students with AD/HD stands between 2% and 4%. (Weyandt et al., 2003). These figures would be even greater if they were able to take into consideration those students who do not choose to disclose their diagnoses, or who have yet to receive a formal diagnosis for their LD and/or AD/HD.

While many college students come to campus with a diagnosis of either an LD or AD/HD, research shows that these are frequently co-morbid conditions; a diagnosis of one may often coexist with a diagnosis of the other (Brown, 2000; Katz, 2003; Pliszka, Carlson, & Swanson, 1999; Willcutt, 2000). Some suggest that the percentages of adults diagnosed with AD/HD who have also been diagnosed LD to be as high as 40% (Katz, Goldstein, & Geckle, 1998). Due to the similar challenges faced by those with AD/HD and LD and the frequent overlap of these two conditions, we refer to students with LD and/or AD/HD throughout this article.

While much focus has been paid to the challenges that students with an LD and/or AD/HD face (Defur & Reiff, 1994; Gobbo, 2003; Levine, 1984 and 2002; Ratey, 2002; Shmulsky, 2003), it is important to remember that these same students often are profoundly intelligent and able to perform academic tasks in both conventional and alternative ways (Gerber & Reiff, 1994; Novotni & Whiteman, 2003). Individuals with LD and/or AD/HD, both in spite of and due to their learning and social challenges, can and do experience self-acceptance, resilience, and success. (Durm & Glaze, 2001; Gerber & Reiff, 1994; Miller, 1997).

## **College Student Development and the Student with LD and/or AD/HD**

Similar to the dynamic that we find in the field of learning disabilities, the study of identity development can be confounded by the multiple definitions and understandings currently available. For the purposes of this study, we will be utilizing the identity constructs provided by Chickering and Reisser

in their book *Education and Identity* (1993). According to Chickering and Reisser, college students develop along three interrelated tracks, “intellectual competence, physical and manual skills, and interpersonal competence” (p. 45) throughout their educational experience. Additionally, Chickering and Reisser define identity as “that solid sense of self, that inner feeling of mastery and ownership” (p. 181). We use this notion of identity — how one thinks and feels about oneself in relation to the self, to others and to the world over time — as the foundation for our exploration of how students with LD and/or AD/HD experience identity changes as a result of studying abroad.

Many factors, including learning profile, can impact an individual’s pathway to identity development. Diversity models that look at college student identity formation from the perspective of an individual’s gender (Belenky, Clinchy, & Golderberg, 1986), racial background (Cross, 1991), ethnicity (Atkinson, Morton, & Sue, 1983), and sexual orientation (D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995) have been developed in order to address the range of developmental experiences. Although many authors have discussed challenges to student development presented by an LD and/or AD/HD (Bassett, Polloway, Patton, 1994; Gobbo, 2003; Levine, 1984 & 2002; Ratey, 2002; Shmulsky, 2003), there have been few attempts to devise models that explore the particular identity development pathways for students with these profiles (Pliner, 1999). Since the literature on the identity development of college students with LD and/or AD/HD is so scant, it comes as no surprise that there currently exists no literature that explores the impact of the learning context on the identity development of this population of students.

### **The Learning Context and the Student with LD and/or AD/HD**

It is widely recognized by proponents of field-based and experiential learning that the context in which learning takes place is a crucial component of the overall learning process (Hovde, 2002; Kolb 1984). In fact, sometimes the learning context is equally important to the course content and/or the particular faculty member’s ability to present it. The learning environment is the “stage” on which all unfolds.

Advocates of Universal Design of Instruction (UDI) recognize that learning environments can, and do, extend beyond the classroom and that all students should have equal access to those learning environments regardless of race, age, religion, ethnic background, sexual orientation, and/or disability (Barajas & Higbee, 2003). Although UDI focused initially on the barriers to learning access for those

with physical disabilities, there has been an increasing emphasis on UDI and learning disabilities. The importance of understanding how the learning context impacts students with LD and/or AD/HD is particularly important given their frequent history of academic failure and their resultant resistance to traditional educational environments (Gerber & Reiff, 1994; Hallowell & Ratey, 1994; Vogel & Reder, 1998).

### **S t u d y A b r o a d a n d t h e S t u d e n t w i t h L D a n d / o r A D / H D**

While the numbers of college students opting to study abroad has increased over the years (Bollag, 2003; McIntosh, 2004), students with LD and/or AD/HD have historically been, and seem to continue to be, underrepresented on these programs (Anderson, 2004; Haimester et. al, 1999; Matthews, Hameister, & Hosley, 1998). The reasons for this are varied. In some instances, admissions criteria favors non-learning disabled students. In other instances, the students themselves (and/or their families, college and study abroad advisors and personnel disability advisors) may misperceive that accommodations are either necessary or unavailable (Hameister et. al 1999; Matthews et. al, 1998). Cultural attitudes towards learning disabilities, both in the US and abroad, may also contribute to the underrepresentation of students with LD and/or AD/HD on study abroad. These attitudes may be, for example, educator perceptions about the legitimacy of the LD and/or AD/HD diagnosis (Jensen, McCrary, Krampe, & Cooper, 2004) or differing cultural constructions of learning issues (Ideaus, 1998; Jacobson, 2002).

### **M e t h o d o l o g y**

This qualitative study set out to answer the following questions: what aspects of their identity, if any, do students with LD and/or AD/HD perceive as changed as a result of their participation in a short-term study abroad program, and what factors do they identify as contributing to their identity changes?

Participants for this study were drawn from the student body at Landmark College in Putney, Vermont, a college designed exclusively for students with LD or AD/HD. All students who met the criteria of having participated in the college's short-term study abroad program in the previous summer were invited to participate. Thirteen students enthusiastically agreed to participate: eight participants were males and five were females. All were traditional college-age students and were either freshmen or sophomores when they sojourned abroad. There was at least one representative from each of the colleges' short-term study abroad programs.

These programs are three, five, and six weeks in length and include options for study in England, Ireland, Greece, Italy, or Spain. For the purposes of this study, we will refer to short-term study abroad as programs of six weeks or less.

Data used for this report included transcripts from individual, 60- to 90-minute interviews and a series of sorting activities to elicit additional commentary. The interview and sorting activities took place in the spring semester, allowing students ample time to reflect upon and integrate their short-term study abroad experience from the previous summer. The interview protocol probed for students' perceptions of changes on the intellectual and interpersonal level as a result of their short-term study abroad experience. If a student reported changes, further questions were asked about programmatic elements that contributed to these changes.

Two sorting activities were utilized to help organize student thoughts, to elicit more data, and to provide a multi-sensory interview option. One sorting activity consisted of cards focusing on the intellectual, physical and interpersonal development of students (i.e. "my critical thinking," "my sense of myself as a student," "my ability to get myself to places on time," and "my ability to get along with my peers"). Students were then asked to place them in piles that represented the possible levels of impact that their study abroad experience had on these areas (i.e. "negative impact," "no impact," "a small positive impact," and "a significant positive impact"). At the completion of this activity, further discussion about the student's perceptions ensued.

The second sorting activity focused on short-term programmatic elements (i.e. "site visits," "living in another culture," "forging new relationships," and "being away from home"). Participants were asked to arrange these cards into piles that represented possible levels of impact on their reported identity changes (i.e. "no impact," "some impact" and "major impact"). Again, at the completion of this activity, more discussion took place. The analysis process in qualitative research includes unitizing and coding the data, designating emergent categories for organization of the data, and exploring themes, patterns and relationships between these categories (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993; Guba & Lincoln, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 1998). Each of these steps was completed and documented in this study. In order for a theme to be considered significant, and thus reported as a finding, at least one-third of the participants had to share that particular perception. The researchers strove for internal validity by triangulating the information from the interviews and sorting activities and by combining their independent investigations of the data.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Six themes emerged from the data that shed light on the identity experiences of students with LD and/or AD/HD on short-term study abroad programs. The first two themes, increased intellectual and social curiosity and increased knowledge and skill, represent the cognitive changes that students reported. The second two themes, increased normalization and increased independence and self-confidence, touch on the affective changes that the study abroad experiences yielded for the participants. The final two themes, novelty and intensity, speak to program elements that students reported as having the most impact on these identity changes. After each of the themes is explored, this section will conclude with a proposed model of identity development for students with LD and/or AD/HD on short-term study abroad that takes into consideration the findings of this study.

### **Increased Intellectual and Social Curiosity**

Students with LD and/or AD/HD are often perceived as being “bored” in the classroom (Barkley, 1997; Hallowell & Ratey, 1994; Novotni & Whiteman, 2003; Vogel, 1998). However, during the interviews for this project, students reported heightened levels of intellectual curiosity not only about their intercultural experience, but also about their coursework and the application of their content knowledge to other issues. Student stories regarding their increased interest in coursework, both on the abroad program and after the program, were noteworthy.

It was stuff I read before [but] to go in there, I was...in awe. I loved it. We would go to classes for the British Experience and then class would end and I would keep going. Two other people and me, we would do that...’Let’s go eat and keep going. Let’s see as much as we can.’

When I came back to the US, into my communications class, I don’t know why, but I was more into the class. I really got a lot out of that class. I think if I didn’t go on the abroad program I still would have liked the class, but I wouldn’t be into it as much.

In addition to increased curiosity and interest in their coursework, participants discussed their growing interest in topics outside of their courses as a result of study abroad.

Just seeing that there’s more out there makes me more interested... [Take] the government. I never thought of it before...Maybe now I ask more questions because I’ve been able to see everything and be there.



For some students a major contributor to their intellectual motivation was the perceived level of relevance that their courses had to their interests, experience, and potential major. Some students reported that they were highly engaged in the class because its focus was either a long-term or newly-found passion of theirs.

The reason I chose Italy is because it was offering the art program and I knew I wanted to do some type of art as a career...I took classes that I'd never taken. I was thrown into classes with people that had worked with mediums I never had, but they helped me out and I actually got to learn a new style. It was just another variant on my interests.

Perhaps of greater interest, however, were the students that reported that, despite their lack of interest in the course subject, they nevertheless sustained their engagement over the course of the program. This was significant because these students discovered, some for the first time, that they could learn even when not innately interested in the subject matter.

I didn't like the classes I was in at all, but I was still able to learn a lot. And, I still did pretty well... I don't think Gothic Literature is something I need to know or wanted to know... [but] it was cool to see that kind of stuff.

Their own heightened intellectual curiosity demonstrated to these students that despite being "bored" (a common claim among students with LD and/or AD/HD due to reasons ranging from attentional, processing, comprehension and memory issues to inappropriate course fit and teacher ineffectiveness), they were able to actively and consistently engage in the course material. This type of engagement didn't stop with intellectual curiosity, but spilled over into social spheres as well.

The participants in this study consistently reported that they were both interested in and successful with individual relationships with their peers, with host nationals and with their professor. The significance of these reports of positive social interactions rests on the fact that students with LD and/or AD/HD are typically described as having difficulty cultivating and maintaining social relationships due to the co-morbid, embedded, and secondary social and emotional issues related to their specific diagnoses (Katz, 2003; Reiff, 1997; Reiff & Gerber, 1994; Synatschk, 1995; Wilchesky, 1991). Yet the data reported indicate that the participants in this study were keenly interested in and, according to their own reports, capable of making and managing connections during their study abroad experience.

As we will explore in further depth in the section on novelty, it is not a surprise that students with LD and/or AD/HD maintained high levels of intellectual and social curiosity for the duration of their study abroad programs. Yet, given the track records of many individual students with LD and/or AD/HD and their general image of being more disengaged from their learning than typical students, this finding is important. The frequency and intensity of student comments about both their increased intellectual and social curiosity may point to study abroad as an environment uniquely suited to cultivate these abilities for students with LD and/or AD/HD.

### **I n c r e a s e d   K n o w l e d g e   a n d   S k i l l s**

One of the explicit goals of many study abroad programs is measurable learning outcomes. There are currently several instruments available to measure language proficiency, such as the ACTFL's Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), and some, such as the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI), that measure intercultural learning. However, there still exists a dearth in the standard means of measuring other types of learning such as gains to cross-disciplinary critical thinking and elements of personal development (Bolen, 2001-02; Rubin & Sutton, 1999; Sidelli, 1999; Vande Berg, 1999). To date, there have been no studies that link learning outcomes of any type with students with LD and/or AD/HD on study abroad. Participants of this study reported positive learning outcomes in the following domains: traditional learning, intercultural knowledge, self-knowledge, knowledge of others, knowledge of physical environment, and knowledge of time.

#### **Traditional learning outcomes and skills**

The students with LD and/or AD/HD that participated in this study reported that they could more adequately comprehend, retain and express college-level material as a result of their study abroad experience.

My parents are floored that I comprehended a lot more Spanish... It's hard for me to learn language. When I hear it I understand, but replying back is difficult. But I had that opportunity to use it in different situations, which brought me to a new level.

Now I find myself doing things that I didn't use to, like asking questions. I feel more involved. And, [I'm] not just learning a bunch of information and losing it, but trying to keep it.

Surprisingly, students reported that they felt better able to read, write and manage school expectation as a result of their short-term abroad experiences.

I didn't take seriously the skill of reading...While I was there, for whatever reason, my reading picked up a lot because I was getting more passionate about subjects...So I started to read a lot more when I got back.

My writing reflects more of a variety of things, so it's not about one thing all the time. [Studying abroad] gives me more of a background. If I was just here, I wouldn't have that extra thing in my writing. I have a different outlook on writing and my papers.

These findings are significant because students with LD and/or AD/HD often are described as having a lack of background knowledge and critical thinking skills due to attentional, language processing, and memory issues (Barkley, 1997; Cherkes-Julkowski et al., 1997; Levine, 2002; Reiff & Gerber, 1994; Shmulsky, 2001; Vogel, 1998). Traditional learning outcomes, such as coursework, class participation, and G.P.A.s are frequently impacted by the struggle that these students often have in demonstrating their knowledge, due to both expressive and executive functioning issues (Cherkes-Julkowski et al., 1997; Levine, 2002; Vogel, 1998). While this study did not set out to compare traditional learning outcomes, it is important to note that student perceptions of these outcomes were positive.

### **Intercultural knowledge and skills**

Increased intercultural knowledge and intercultural empathy is a desired student outcome for many study abroad programs and the participants in this project certainly moved in the direction of achieving this outcome.

I definitely learned a lot about what people thought about us or about their own country. If you actually listened in to conversations, you really got a good sense of what people believed in and what they were thinking...That was just one of my goals, to see their perspectives.

It made me think about more than the US, it made me learn more about the world and how it functions. Why we have all these wars and altercations with other countries...I want more than just an associate's degree to learn about more world events.

What is noteworthy is that these students' abilities to both learn and appreciate different perspectives, values, and traditions seemed to be cultivated

on their short-term programs despite the literature's assertion that students with LD and/or AD/HD are typically slow to develop these types of reflective skills (Novotni & Whiteman, 2003).

### Self-knowledge

Having an experience that clarifies who they are, what they need, where they're going, and how others receive them, is a profound developmental leap for the college student. As Reisser states in her article *Revisiting the Seven Vectors* (1995), when "[c]olleges and universities provide a myriad of opportunities for students to explore the different rooms in the house of the self...[p]ersonal stability and integration are the result" (p.509). Clearly the study abroad experience, and its endless opportunities for self-exploration, seemed to have promoted this type of self-knowledge for the student with LD and/or AD/HD that were interviewed. Participant reports of increased self-knowledge circled around three areas: learning style, academic/professional direction, and social behavior.

For students with learning disabilities, a keen awareness of how they intake, process, and express information is necessary for successful self-understanding and self-advocacy. Because the program at their home college emphasized metacognition, participants in this study brought to their study abroad experience at least a basic understanding of their own learning styles and their time overseas provided an opportunity for many participants to exercise regularly these preferred learning styles. This experience either clarified or confirmed their previous understanding of their learning.

Yeah, I was definitely walking around, seeing it, touching it, smelling the places, using all of my senses. It...definitely made me understand that I'm more that type of a learner.

Another participant added,

The tours and excursions... the hands-on experience, kinesthetics, and visuals. It helped me remember things. I learned different types of learning."

Particularly for individuals that have had a history of educational failure, social challenge, and cultural marginalization, believing in and planning for the possibility of future success can be difficult. The challenge of overcoming discouraging past educational experiences is exacerbated for the AD/HD student who struggles with future goal setting as part of their clinical diagnosis (Barkley, 1997). Several participants claimed that the short-term study

abroad program lessened their struggle to envision their future by helping to clarify a potential major, a profession, or their general love of learning.

I've now applied to art schools. In Italy, if you want to see real art, they've got glass, they've got the fabrics, they've got the leather, they've got the paintings, the ceramics, the tiles, everything... I can now talk to certain professors... more interested in getting inside [the art field].

I took photo[graphy] the semester before...I bought a digital camera and Mr. K. told me to take as many photos as I could and that's what I did. I took it with me everywhere.... It wasn't until I got back home and brought my photos in and looked at them...I couldn't believe it! It really put things in perspective...I think I might be a photo or film major. I guess I discovered my eye.

The fact that these students felt that their study abroad experience allowed them to make headway in one of the most important domains of college student development, "developing purpose," is significant. Again we refer to Chickering and Reisser's, *Education and Identity*. In this work they emphasize the importance of students clarifying their vocational plans, sharpening their priorities based upon their personal interests, and making initial lifestyle choices. Clearly, short-term study abroad, provided fertile ground for this type of development for these students with LD and/or AD/HD.

As stated earlier, students with LD and/or AD/HD often have difficulty cultivating and maintaining appropriate social relationships due, some would say, to an inability to read social cues (Cherkes-Julkowski et al., 1997; Hallowell & Ratey, 1994). Interestingly, student reports of their study abroad experiences revealed a heightened awareness of their own social behavior in relation to both their peers and members of their host culture.

I learned to cope and deal with people a little better [going on study abroad]... I know more of what I have to do if something [or someone] is frustrating.

I had to think about what I was doing and what messages I was sending. I spent a lot of time watching people on the tube and how they walk and hold themselves.

Students may have been hyperaware of their social behavior because they were concerned about the impressions of US and Americans in our post-9/11 world and wanted to show the care, compassion, and reason of Americans.

The result of their concern was attention to their behavior in an unfamiliar environment. Again, this increased self-awareness is significant as it demonstrates that in the study abroad context, students with LD and AD/HD can understand and demonstrate the self-reflection necessary for inter-cultural success.

### **Knowledge of others**

Not only did the study participants express an increased awareness of self, they also reported a heightened awareness of and appropriate response to other individuals, specifically their peers and the members of their host culture. Students discussed their ability to attend to the emotional needs of others, “accept” and “appreciate” differing opinions and behaviors, and to be “accountable” to the group. The study abroad experience seemed to be a catalyst for such tolerance for many of the students interviewed, as evidenced in the words of the following students:

We all come from different places and go to a different country and the only way to work together is to work as a family. It made me meet new people, people I never dreamed of meeting. And you learn more about people, their interests. It made me more tolerant.

When you go on study abroad you talk to everybody, not just people you're friendly with at [home]; you associate with everybody. You gain friends from that and that skill carries over.

Although these types of changes might be routine for the typical sojourning college student, they represent significant leaps in social development for the student with LD and/or AD/HD. It is a fascinating finding that, despite past difficulties, these students were successfully cultivating the skills and practicing the behaviors associated with managing appropriate social relationships and appreciating diversity.

### **Knowledge of physical environment**

Due to their disability, students with LD and/or AD/HD may have visual, spatial and/or organizational difficulties that can result in challenges with orienting oneself to a physical space or maintaining the organization of one's personal environment. Despite this, participants in this study reported that they were able to harness the skills necessary to find their way around an unfamiliar environment, including planning, observation and map-usage.

I had to do a lot of thinking about how I was going to get to places. We went to Holland and we went to Belgium... so we had to figure out the ferries and the trains. I'm really bad at directional skills but I figured out the trains pretty good...I was working on it the whole time.

Additionally, some students reported that they were better able to keep their spaces optimally organized due to the study abroad environment.

I can keep track of things a bit better now. It was easier when I was in an unfamiliar place, I knew if I lost something it was a big deal, so it made me more aware of it.

Clearly, there was something about the short-term study abroad experience that helped some students master the skills necessary to manage and negotiate their physical environment.

### Knowledge of time

As Levine states in his book *A Mind at a Time* (2002), “[b]eing organized in time rallies the ability to allocate time, to estimate time, and to be aware of the passage of time” (p. 159). Students with LD and/or AD/HD often face significant difficulties coordinating these abilities. It is not uncommon for these students to face recurring difficulties with timeliness for appointments, classes, and social meetings as well as difficulties with planning for, attending to, and completing important tasks (Barkley, 1997; Cherkes-Julkowski et al., 1997; Levine, 2002; Ratey, 2002). Interestingly, the students in this project reported that they were better able to plan and execute their assignments both during and after the study abroad program, that they were seldom late for required courses and meetings, and that they had a greater sense of time in general.

[Studying abroad required] a lot of planning to leave on time. There were strict penalties for not showing up on time, so you had to plan. And now, I live [off campus], so [I've] got to plan to get to...classes on time.

My challenge was to write and travel. If you were late, you got a zero...I learned a lot about getting work done on time and not cramming. [Study abroad] taught me more about time management and how to get work done without the consequence of a lower grade.

Contemporary US culture attaches a high value to time; a decreased ability to attend to it can be a major concern for those with an LD and/or

AD/HD diagnosis, their loved ones, and their educational professionals. The fact that students perceived that their study abroad experience cultivated in them a greater awareness of time is significant.

### **I n c r e a s e d N o r m a l i z a t i o n**

Students with LD and/or AD/HD often face discrimination based upon their disability, due to misunderstanding, misperceptions, and an over-emphasis on the limitations of the diagnosis, or what has been referred to by Dembo, Leviton, and Wright as “disability spread” (as cited in Hameister et al., 1999). These students find themselves in a challenging bind. They are legally guaranteed equality of educational access if they disclose their disability, but in doing so, they are simultaneously confined to a seemingly limited educational and social identity, defined by others as “different.” The result is that students with LD and/or AD/HD often feel on the outside of the dominant group in our educational and social culture (Pliner, 1999). This study revealed that participating in short-term study abroad seemed to help normalize these students’ perception of themselves. They reported feeling both well “adjusted” to their new surroundings and “more similar” to both their peers and their parents who had traveled previously. This process of “normalization” seemed to come as students adapted to both their new environment and to their own expectations of what it means to be a “normal” college student.

As stated earlier, this study’s participants were clearly able to find their way around new environments, adapt to new cultures, new monetary systems, new belief systems, and new ways of life. The fact that students reported an ability to acclimatize quickly to new living and learning environments, without distress, is an important finding.

I’m capable of learning even though I’m in an environment [in] which people would think, ‘ADD kids...it would probably throw them off’... but [I’m] capable of learning anything, anywhere.

I’m more capable of being able to go anywhere and do anything...Being in another country and not being able to understand the language or anything and still being able to ...get by. [Studying abroad] helped me feel...that I can be more successful anywhere I go.

The second type of “adaptation” students engaged in was their ability to conform to their own perception of “normalcy” in relation to both their peer group and their family. Because of their participation in study abroad, many



students reported feeling that they now had the “experience,” the “knowledge,” and the “opportunity” that others had. Because of this, they were now “in.”

[Before study abroad] I was a bit jealous cause [other people got] to go places and see other things... [Now that] I actually got to do it myself...I'm happier. I don't feel so left out...I got to see London and...I'm now in the same boat as them. I've been somewhere and I've seen things and I think we're more on the same wave length.

Cultural anthropologists and other scholars have long argued that participating in perceived rites of passage and shared social experience is important for an individual's sense of group membership. Likewise, having a genuine sense of belonging is important for any student's development. For the student with LD and/or AD/HD, being able to adapt in ways that make them feel a part of the group is both unusual and essential for positive identity formation.

Although the ability to change and adapt is essential for all humans, for the student with LD and/or AD/HD this process can sometimes be difficult (Gerber & Reiff, 1994; Miller, 1997; Miller & Fritz, 1998; Shmulsky, 2003). Clearly, study abroad provided the sense that, at least in this instance, these students could successfully adapt and “fit” with the dominant group.

### **I n c r e a s e d I n d e p e n d e n c e a n d S e l f - C o n f i d e n c e**

As Chickering and Reisser (1993) express, “[t]he first step toward emotional independence involves some level of separation from parents, increased reliance on peers, authorities, and institutional support systems, and growing confidence in one's own self-sufficiency” (p. 117). Yet for students with LD and/or AD/HD, claiming independence can be challenging. Due to their specific diagnosis, educational experience and social needs, students with LD and/or AD/HD are frequently dependent upon loved ones (Defur and Reiff, 1994; Minskoff, 1994.) For these same reasons, it can be equally challenging for parents of students with LD and/or AD/HD to detach healthfully from their college student. Interestingly, participants in this study reported that they were able to be comfortably independent from both their families and their significant others.

I think it showed that I was independent. That I know I can do things on my own without having anybody tell me to do this and that. I know I can do stuff on my own.

My boyfriend just didn't go. It was too late to sign up. But it was good to have gone separately, to have the experience on my own. I would have been spending more time with him than making new friends.

This successful autonomy cultivated a sense of self-confidence among participants. Self-confidence here refers to the ability to value and affirm oneself in relation to the self, others, and various cultural mores over time and in various contexts. Increased confidence in one's abilities, opinions, and experience is integral to developing a positive identity. It is clear that short-term study abroad significantly impacted these students' sense of confidence. Whether it was confirmation of their ability to take on their burgeoning adulthood, affirmation of their ability to make decisions, or demonstration of their ability to express their opinions, these students sensed that they had changed.

I felt more confident coming back from Greece, that I was pursuing my education more seriously, so that in a sense uplifted me in my own head...when you have a little more confidence it makes a world of difference because you start to articulate better, because you start to realize that 'I do have something to say'...At some point you start making conclusions and decisions on your own, whether they're right or wrong, you've got to make them.

I gained the confidence to step up and say something whereas before I wasn't able to as much. Now that I've gained the confidence in that type of community I can do it now in other types of communities and situations.

These findings are significant because they challenge the notion that students with LD and/or AD/HD necessarily have a diminished sense of self and cannot adequately forge their own independence, notions that were proven false by this study's participants.

### Catalysts for Change

The students with LD and/or AD/HD that participated in this project reported that their study abroad experiences spurred changes in their intellectual curiosity, their knowledge and skill in various traditional and non-traditional domains, and their sense of themselves as "normal," independent and self-confident. Of equal importance to hearing *what* students felt changed, is understanding *why* these changes took place. The following section will outline the two aspects of short-term study abroad that students consistently reported as having the most impact on their identity changes.

### Novelty as a catalyst for change

The new learning environment provided by their study abroad experience was of primary significance to the participants in this study, as evidenced by this oft repeated theme:

The material didn't make a whole lot of difference because...that learning environment stimulated your brain a bit more and made you want to learn more about it.... It was the intrigue.

The importance of novelty as a motivator in the learning environment is summarized in John Ratey's book, *A User's Guide to the Brain* (2002). In it he discusses how "[d]etecting novelty and seeking reward are the two primary forces that direct the selection of where to focus our attention. The novelty system takes note of new stimuli. The reward system produces sensations of pleasure...therefore...providing motivation" (pp. 116-117). Study abroad, by its very definition, provides novelty for all students, but this novelty may have been especially significant for the participants in this study.

Particularly for students with AD/HD who, due to the nature of their diagnosis, are "always on the lookout for something novel, something engaging, something in the outside world that can catch up with the whirlwind that's rushing inside" (Hallowell & Ratey, 1994, p. 74), the uniqueness of study abroad may serve as the necessary stimuli for learning. But the novelty of study abroad may be of importance to *any* student with LD and/or AD/HD, simply because it provides a contrast to and a break from the negative associations that these students often have with traditional learning environments due to past educational failures (Dunwoody & Frank, 1995; Gunther-Mohr, 2003).

In addition to the new learning environment, participants reported benefiting from the teaching and learning techniques that were facilitated by this new environment. It has long been recognized that students with learning differences profit from multimodal teaching strategies that draw upon their individual intelligences, strengths, and aptitudes (Herbert, 2003; Levine, 2002; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1999; Meltzer et al., 1996), yet traditional teaching styles provide decreasing novelty with increasing grade level (Cherkes-Julkowski et al., 1997). Engaging in college-level work that draws upon alternative modalities such as movement, hands-on tasks, and field-based learning, may "bring verbal skills and intellectual abstractions down to earth" (Reisser, 1995, p. 506) for students with LD and/or AD/HD. This was supported by the number of students that voiced thoughts similar to this student's:

You've always read about it in books, and what the teacher tries to teach you, but then you go on a fieldtrip and you see Parliament, and you think, 'Oh wow, this is what it looks like.' I have a better chance of remembering what it looks like because it's more exciting, it's more captivating than in a book.

Not only did the new teaching techniques and learning environments help student cognitive development, but they made learning more pleasurable. For students that are often described as being disengaged and distant from their learning process (Gerber & Reiff, 1994; Hollowell & Ratey, 1994; Novotni & Whiteman, 2003), having access to a novel educational environment (Ratey, 2002) and new teaching modalities (Levine, 1984 & 2002) seems to be essential for positive intellectual growth. This was certainly the case with the participants in this study who consistently reported that the novelty of their short-term study abroad programs were instrumental to their reported identity changes.

### **Intensity as a catalyst for change**

Short-term study abroad by its very nature tends to be an intense experience. In this study, students reported that the intensity of their programs markedly enhanced their overall experience via three different programmatic aspects: the short duration, the singular academic focus, and the increased academic challenge.

The study abroad programs that these students enrolled in were short-term, lasting from three to six weeks depending upon the particular site and courses selected. There were a number of positive student responses to this short program duration that echoed the following sentiment:

I actually felt sad at the end, because it was over with and I was enjoying myself so much. But [back on campus] when the courses are going...I can't wait to get to the end point.

National statistics on study abroad show that increasing numbers of students are choosing programs of ten weeks or less (Dwyer, 2004) and, if given the choice, 70% of students with disabilities would opt for a semester-long program over an academic year-long program (Matthews et al., 1998). Pedagogically, short program duration may be sound for a student with LD and/or AD/HD given what we know about these individuals and their difficulty with sustaining attention over prolonged periods of time (Cherkes-Julkowski et al., 1997; Levine, 2002; Ratey, 2002). Students with AD/HD,

in particular, “struggle to sustain the drive required to complete important but tedious tasks that only reward after a long period of time” (Ratey, 2002, p. 126), making programs of shorter duration particularly appealing.

Participants in this project were enrolled in either one course over a three-week period or two courses over five or six weeks. No students were enrolled in more than two classes at a time. This factor allowed participants to devote a majority of their attention to the particular course at-hand, as opposed to dividing it between the normative four to six courses attempted during the typical academic semester at their home institution. The ability to attend consistently to one course was a significant issue when students assessed the benefits of their study abroad experience.

I guess I learned to work a little harder because it was a very intense class. It was a lot of work every night, so it improved my work ethic.

The quick pace and one-class at a time kept me focused.

The benefit of a singular focus for students with LD and/or AD/HD is supported by the literature on attention, working memory, and mental alertness. Additionally, the narrowed academic focus afforded by short-term study abroad may minimize these students’ feelings of being overwhelmed by a large number of stimuli and a high level of attentional demands. If, “[t]he challenge for the limited capacity attentional/working memory system is to regulate the allocation of resources” (Cherkes-Julkowski et al., 1997, p.41), then limiting the breadth, while increasing the depth, of their academic focus is likely to sustain the attentional abilities of students with LD and/or AD/HD on short-term study abroad.

Due to the short duration of the study abroad courses, students were challenged by the level of reading, writing, discussion, reflection and commitment required on a daily basis. Surprisingly, this challenge seemed to invigorate participants rather than overwhelm them, as many of their previous academic challenges had. Several students commented that their performance was enhanced by the high expectation of short-term study abroad.

I had always sort of copped out on reading and I’d always said that I’m not a good reader because I read very slowly... and when I was in Greece, because I was challenged to read a large amount of material in a short period of time, I learned that...it’s not something you can make an excuse for... You say, ‘I’ll figure out what I can do to get it done’... I just used the enthusiasm of the trip... I’m in Greece and I’m learning about this stuff and I want to know it.

At least for some students, their ability to respond successfully to the high expectations on their study abroad program seemed to have carried over to their on-campus experiences.

I was able to sit down and write essays and papers and things without the same issues, so now I can relate back to the experience there... [I] get it out of the way, and go have fun.

As mentioned previously, due to their specific diagnosis, students with LD and/or AD/HD often struggle to meet the academic expectations typically associated with college, yet the fact that the participants in this study felt more able and more excited to contend with these challenges may point to important aspects of motivation cultivated by the short-term study abroad experience.

### **S u m m a r y o f F i n d i n g s**

Reflecting back on Chickering and Reisser's definition of college student development as "that solid sense of self, that inner feeling of mastery and ownership" (p. 181), we can see that the students with LD and/or AD/HD that participated in this study reported considerable developmental leaps as a result of their short-term study abroad programs. They reported increases in their intellectual and social curiosity, as well as increases to their knowledge and skill base. In addition to these cognitive changes they reported an increased sense of normalization and independence. When explored further, the participants attributed these changes to two aspects of their study abroad experience, the novelty and the intensity of their programs. These findings are reflected in the proposed model of Identity Development for Students with LD and/or AD/HD on Short-term Study Abroad in Figure 1.

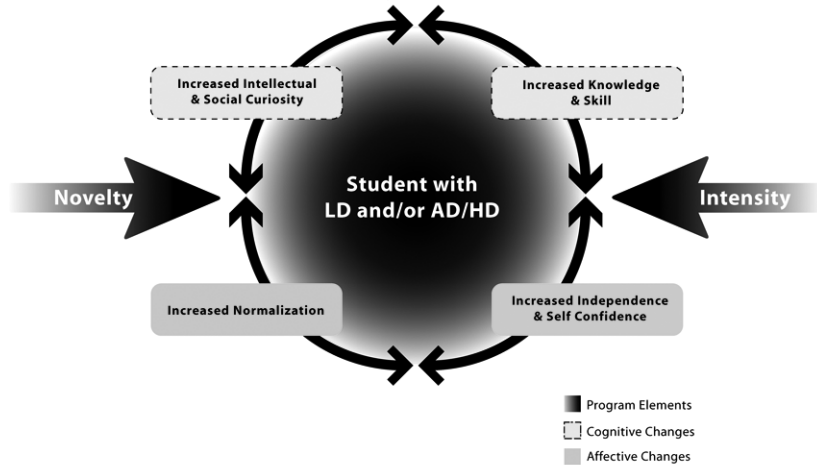
It is important to note that because identity development is highly individuated and may take place across or within several developmental domains simultaneously, students may experience the highlighted cognitive and affective outcomes of short-term study abroad in any sequence, as long as the necessary programmatic elements of novelty and intensity are present.

### **R e c o m m e n d a t i o n s**

Based upon the findings of this study, we make the following recommendations for college study abroad personnel and administrators who are interested in making study abroad programs more responsive to students with LD and/or AD/HD. We offer these recommendations in the spirit of the Universal Design model, which is intended to benefit both traditional and

non-traditional learners (Welsh & Palamas, 1995). We assume that the recommendations proposed, while essential to students with LD and/or AD/HD, will stand up to the test of good pedagogy for all study abroad students, regardless of ability/disability.

**Figure 1: A Model of Identity Development for Students with LD and/or AD/HD on Short Term Study Abroad**



**1. Emphasize “novel” and “intense” elements of program curriculum and instruction.**

In the study abroad field we are fortunate that the very educational model that we have to offer students has inherent elements of novelty and intensity. In meeting the expressed needs of students with LD and/or AD/HD, our task becomes one of emphasizing these elements when designing and implementing our programs. We recommend that study abroad programs, regardless of the student populations that they serve, immerse students in cultural and academic challenges both in and out of the classroom. Instructors should strive to use the cultural environment as a primary learning tool and should provide diverse opportunities for student interaction with the curricular material in order to heighten their experience and involvement. Whether it be structured field work, home stays, or assignments and co-curricular activities that require that they interact with host-nationals, students should be given the opportunities and support that they need to confront and constructively engage with the differences that come with the abroad experience.

Likewise, courses should be rigorous, well-paced and well-organized; academic expectations should be clearly articulated. Contrary to some

educational models that would cut back on the input for students with LD and/or AD/HD we recommend the opposite. For this group, cultural and academic saturation seems to be not only appropriate, but also advantageous.

Further, we should recognize that the short length of the experience may be another essential ingredient in the developmental success that students with LD and/or AD/HD had while on study abroad. We should take this into account when developing programs and when advising students about study abroad.

## **2. Develop holistic admissions criteria.**

Many short-term study abroad programs require a cumulative G.P.A. between 2.0-3.0 (Peterson's, 2004). While G.P.A. might be a reliable measure of study abroad success for some students, it may serve as a significant barrier to participation for students with LD and/or AD/HD, due to their challenging educational histories in traditional learning environments. A student's G.P.A. does not necessarily reflect prior learning, ability, or motivation or perhaps more importantly, it may not indicate future learning, ability, and motivation, especially in an environment that may be uniquely suited to the student that learns differently. We recommend that admissions criteria include several equally-weighted factors such as an in-depth interview, a personal essay outlining educational history and motivation for participation, references from advisors, teachers or other educational professionals, and the current G.P.A.

## **3. Measure multiple domains of development when assessing student outcomes.**

It is clear that students with LD and/or AD/HD change on a number of developmental levels due to short-term study abroad, and thus the way we assess short-term study abroad outcomes should reflect a range of developmental outcomes. Measures of educational success on short-term study abroad should not only include academic aptitude and intercultural skill, but also should include other important developmental outcomes such as social and emotional growth. The findings of this project point to the following abilities for exploring student outcome: reading social cues, attending to others' needs, building friendships, and managing time, directionality, personal space, and belongings.

## **4. Formalize study abroad post-reflections.**

Debriefing is an essential part of any study abroad program for the continued development of the college student (Dennehy, Sims & Collins, 1998; Kinsella, Smith-Simonet & Tuma, 1995). Inviting students with LD and/or AD/HD to participate in a formal post-program reflection process allows them



the same continued growth that it does all students, but it may have added benefits as well. Because of the cognitive and social deficits frequently associated with LD and/or AD/HD these individuals are seldom deemed the owners of knowledge. Being asked to deliver their “expertise” on their study abroad experience gives them the opportunity, in some cases for the first time, to be respected and valued for their knowledge.

**5. Continue to explore the types of development experienced by students with LD and/or AD/HD on study abroad and the catalysts for these developments.**

It goes without saying that the voices of student participants in this small project do not speak for the entire LD and/or AD/HD college student population. There are, no doubt, multiple variations on the themes presented here and numerous themes yet to be discovered. It is our hope that the findings presented in this study can be used as a springboard for further exploration of LD and/or ADHD student development on study abroad. We therefore recommend that such exploration be incorporated as part of study abroad program evaluation and student outcomes assessment.

**C o n c l u s i o n**

Many researchers suggest that students with LD and/or AD/HD, in traditional educational settings, are slow to learn, adapt, transition, and experience success (Bassett et al., 1994; Defur & Reiff, 1994). Yet, despite histories of misunderstanding and marginalization and assumptions by many that they could not be academically successful at home, let alone abroad, participants in this study reported positive identity changes as a result of three, five or six weeks of studying abroad. While novelty and intensity are features of study abroad that appear to amplify the cognitive and affective development of students with LD and/or AD/HD, it is our hope that these findings are just the beginning of the conversation about how to make the life-altering experience of study abroad more equitable and inclusive for all students, regardless of their learning differences.

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