

THE IMPACTS OF COSTA RICAN SHORT TERM STUDY ABROAD ON THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES OF BUSINESS STUDENTS IN A SMALL, RURAL, PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Pre- and post- intercultural competency results are compared from multiple groups of undergraduate students participating in short-term (<14 days) study abroad to students completing junior-level course work in global business and to students participating in an introductory global business course with cultural mentors. Cultural competencies were measured by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) value rubric Intercultural Knowledge and Competence along with global literacy from the Miville-Guzman Universality Diversity Scale (MGUDS-S). General demographic information, previous international experience, and general global literacy exposure were collected for each student. Results from this study found short-term study abroad programs are more effective than traditional business curriculum to improve the intercultural competencies of undergraduate students. A key finding indicates that for students to develop intercultural competencies, it is essential to have personal contact and experiences with those from different cultures.

JEL: M1, I21

KEYWORDS: Intercultural Competencies, Short Term Study Abroad, Global Business Education

INTRODUCTION

Short-term study abroad programs are often 1-3 weeks in duration and are completed during school break periods, reducing potential barriers to participation. Short-term study abroad programs allow students to engage in a diverse set of experiences without the financial and time commitments of a long-term residential study-abroad program. These types of programs are often more palatable to students from small, regional schools with a large population of rural and first-generation college students. Small regional schools can also have a large ratio of student-athlete to the total student population which further complicates participation in long-term study abroad programs.

Historically, the concept of complete cultural and language immersion was considered the hallmark of study abroad programs for students from the United States. Surrounding themselves for long periods in household and classroom settings was considered the only way to truly develop an understanding and appreciation for a new culture. However, over time the idea of exposing students to new and different cultures could have a profound impact on their cultural awareness and sensitivity began to take hold. Simply having a meal with a family in another county could potentially have a positive impact on students with limited to no experiences with others that may be different from themselves. Students may not need to commit months to full cultural immersion on their own to receive the benefits of cultural development. For students from small regional schools in rural areas, their experiences with exposure to unique places and unique cultures are very limited. Travel outside of their domestic region is limited and often constrained to within their home state. Developing a short-term study abroad program to a country that has significant cultural

differences, while not being too far away, would allow these students to begin to explore unique places and unique experiences in a metered approach.

Short-term study abroad programs to Costa Rica allow for just such an experience. Many rural students may have had some experiences traveling to Canada or Mexico, but no real meaningful and significant experience in interacting and understanding cultural differences and a low probability of improving their cultural competencies. Costa Rica allows students to experience real cultural differences with just a short 3-hour plane ride from the United States. This allows for affordability and accessibility to students who may not otherwise have this opportunity. For business students, Costa Rica also offers interesting and relevant economies, such as coffee, chocolate, and ecotourism to study. Costa Rica is a successful economy in the region, is committed to sustainability, and is considered to be stable and safe for visitors. The climate in Costa Rica also allows for study abroad programs to occur at any time of the year which adds flexibility in scheduling the short-term study abroad.

Cultural competency assesses an individual's ability to apply a set of personal attributes that are related to the knowledge, skills, and abilities to work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds (Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006). To examine this further, intercultural competency versus global competencies should be considered. Intercultural competence is the ability to self-reflect and look inward toward one's self to identify cultural norms and biases that may exist within themselves. This enables one to better identify and value differences in traditions, customs, and practices across cultures. Global competence prepares one to look outward to the world for inspiration and guidance and to bring those understandings back to their future careers and workplace. Both elements are critical in the development of cultural competencies of graduates in higher education. In hopes of improving future graduates' global competence and performance.

According to Jones (2013), increasing globalization and the interconnectedness of the global workplace has intensified the need for graduates who can function in diverse environments. Therefore, it is critical to know what aspects of the business curriculum and the student's educational experiences lead to effectively producing the desired outcomes of their education and to provide the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to be successful in today's global workforce.

While the number of U.S. students studying abroad has been growing, studies on the impacts of short-term study abroad experiences are lacking. This research serves to fill the gap in current research relative to the impacts of short-term study abroad. It will address whether short-term study abroad programs are effective in improving undergraduate business student's intercultural competencies.

The remainder of this paper will explore the role and impacts of study abroad in higher education in the United States. Specifically, the paper will review the current literature associated with study abroad; the methodology used in this research to determine the impacts of short-term study abroad programs, the results and findings of this research, and concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The past two decades have brought increased attention, awareness, and action relative to internationalizing education in the United States. Particularly higher education has been a focus of efforts to increase global literacy and awareness of college graduates (Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner, 2014). The American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAA&S, 2013) states graduates must be prepared to participate in the global economy and understand diverse cultures. The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and American's Promise (LEAP) report identifies global knowledge and engagement and intercultural knowledge and competence as essential learning outcomes for university graduates.

Accreditation for business programs has also placed increased importance on global competencies and the internationalization of curriculums in higher education (Kahlid, 2013). Globalization refers to the changes occurring in the global economy and are exogenous changes to the higher education institutions and associated curricula. The internationalization of curricula is the endogenous response of higher education in updating their curriculum based on globalization. According to Hawawini (2016), the act of internationalizing higher education is the “simultaneous process of bringing the world to the institution as well as bringing the institution to the world” and includes curriculum development, new pedagogies and knowledge networks.

Surveys conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU) in 2005 and 2009 found a major rationale for internationalizing in higher education was to prepare students to be interculturally competent (Knight, 2012). Recent updates to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE) accreditation standards have included new standards to address these global competencies. Consequently, universities should provide these skills by creating and expanding robust internationalized curricula and other initiatives to foster these competencies (Stoner, et al., 2014). However, challenges exist in developing such a curriculum.

An internationalized business curriculum is defined as “integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension in the purpose, functions, or delivery” of the curriculum (Knight, 2006). According to Knight (2004), the internationalization of the business curriculum is complex and confusing as it is influenced by authorities, stakeholders, and policy at multiple levels. Recent developments in the internationalizing of higher education have occurred with the “internationalization at home” and “cross-border education”. Internationalization at home includes campus-based strategies and initiatives that include international and intercultural dimensions to teaching/learning, curriculum, research, extracurricular activities, and relationships with ethnic and cultural groups. Additionally, the “at home” concept includes the integration of foreign students and scholars into campus activities (Knight, 2012). (Knight, 2012). Cross-border education is the mobility and movement of people, programs, providers, policies, knowledge, ideas, services, and projects across national boundaries (Knight, 2012).

Rumbley, Altbach, and Reisburg (2012) provide a summary of key elements for the internationalization of higher education and illustrates the multifaceted nature of internationalization and its effect on individuals, institutions, and the national and regional higher education systems. The elements included are: increasing the number of internationally mobile students and scholars, moving to and from ever more diverse locations; rapid growth in cross-border educational provision; the push to achieve world-class status; interest in producing globally competent graduates capable of understanding and functioning in a complex and interconnected world; increasing prevalence of the English language for teaching and research; significant emphasis on cooperative networking among higher education institutions and national higher education systems; strong efforts by individual institutions and national higher education systems to compete internationally; and the dramatic increase in the commercialization of international education, particularly in terms of the growing opportunities available to for-profit enterprises.

However, study abroad is not a new development in higher education. In the early twentieth century, educational exchanges began to formalize, and students and scholars began studying abroad in foreign countries. At this same time international associations, organizations, and foundations began to formalize and fund study abroad travels (de Wit and Merckx, 2012). Study abroad programs can significantly contribute to the university, program, and accreditation outcomes in multiple areas and improve student's “worldliness” (Douglas and Jones-Rikers, 2001). A substantial body of research in higher education environments support the need for cultural competencies in today’s college graduate and the role of long-term study abroad in developing these competencies. Research shows study abroad programs in higher education can be more effective than intercultural/multicultural centers on campus and bring international students to US campuses in increasing the intercultural competences of graduates (Salisbury, 2011).

Existing research concludes students' cultural competence is significantly increased when students in higher education participate in study abroad programs (Salisbury, 2011). Salisbury, An, and Pascarella (2013) examined pre-college characteristics (traits) that impact intercultural competence, including race, gender, socioeconomic status, parent's educational attainment, and positive attitude towards literacy. These findings suggest students who enter with certain traits/characteristics score higher in intercultural competencies and are more likely to participate in study abroad. Further research shows students strengthen their creative thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and exhibit higher levels of emotional resilience, openness, flexibility, and personal autonomy due to their study abroad experience (Lee, Therriault, and Linderholm, 2012).

Previous research has also suggested further research is needed to identify what experiences have a positive impact on intercultural competence (Salisbury, An and Pascarella, 2013, and Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner (2014). Mayhew et al. (2016) found a moderate increase in elements of cultural awareness occurs from simply attending college due to universality-diversity orientation, pluralistic orientation, and support for gender equity and lesbian, gay bisexual, and transgender rights. This would further support the idea that specific college experiences have the potential to positively impact the intercultural competence of college students.

However, very little literature exists on the impacts of short-term study abroad programs. One study from Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) examined data from 2300 students and determined short-term study abroad programs have significant impacts on the self-perceived impacts on students' intellectual and personal lives. Carley and Tudor (2010) found students significantly changed their perceptions after a short-term study abroad trip to Mexico. A recent study specifically examining the impacts of short-term study abroad on intercultural competencies found it was an effective tool in improving undergraduate student's intercultural competencies (Senzki, et al., 2018). This research serves to fill the gap in current literature relative to the impacts of short-term study abroad. It will address whether short-term study abroad programs are effective in improving undergraduate business student's intercultural competencies.

METHODOLOGY

Eastern Oregon University (EOU) is a liberal art university designated as a LEAP (Liberal Education and America's Promise) institution which endorses high-impact learning and commitment to general and liberal arts learning outcomes. EOU is in rural Eastern Oregon and is officially Oregon's rural university. EOU is in a county with approximately 25,000 people across 2,000 square miles. EOU is four hours from the metropolitan area of Portland, Oregon, and 2 and ½ hours from the regional city of Boise, Idaho. The College of Business at EOU is accredited by the International Accreditation Council of Business Education (IACBE). The short-term study abroad program is an element of the curriculum utilized in meeting the global business competency requirements of the University's LEAP commitment and the business program accreditation requirements. Other curriculum elements include relevant course work in global business.

As a rural university, it is of particular importance for EOU to effectively meet the global and intercultural competencies associated with the LEAP designation and the College of Business' accreditation. The student population of EOU typically has little experience outside of rural America prior to university enrollment. Sixty-five percent of EOU's student population is a first-generation college student. Only 22% of EOU's student population identifies as a student of color and there is a very small population of international students on-campus (less than 25 students per year out of a total population of 3500 students). Fifty-three percent of undergraduates receive loans and 43% receive federal grants. Sixty-four percent of EOU's total population identifies as female and 36% as male. Business is the largest degree program at EOU with an average of 729 undergraduate students.

This research analyzed the impacts of short-term study abroad (STSA) on intercultural competencies of

business students at a small, regional, public university participating in study tours to Costa Rica. The total number of students participating in five Costa Rica study abroad programs from Eastern Oregon University between 2015-2019 was sixty-one. Assignments and discussions were designed to explore intercultural elements and personal interactions and included self-reflection and journaling. STSA in this analysis had an average duration of 9 days and were conducted during the “Spring Break” period. The size of the study abroad programs ranged from 4 to 22 students with an average of 13 students per trip. The same business professor organized the curriculum and the corresponding STSA and accompanied the students on the STSA. Students were housed in small, local motels and were transported via small, motor coach throughout Costa Rica. All STSA had similar cultural, business, and recreational experiences during their STSA. Emphasis was placed on authentic cultural and local business interactions.

Pre- and post-intercultural competency results from this group were compared to a group of 105 undergraduate students enrolled in two online and two on-campus sections of a junior-level course in global business (BA 380). BA 380 focuses on the cultural, financial, marketing, management, and operational aspects of business in a globalized economy. It aims to prepare students to be competent business professionals in the continually evolving global environment and to meet the challenges and complexities associated with globalization. Special emphasis is given to cultural factors, fostering a global mindset, and understanding the role of global enterprises. Assignments and discussions focus on using primary and secondary sources.

Results were also compared to twenty-two students enrolled in an introductory global business class (BA 101) with international MBA students assigned as culture mentors. BA 101 provides an overview of business in a global society, exploring the historical, social, economic, ethical, and legal environments. The course also explores the major functional areas of business: marketing, management, human resources, financial markets in a global setting. This section of BA 101 was unique in that it integrated six cultural mentors into the classroom setting and students were required to interact with these mentors in small group settings, class discussions, and class projects. Assignments and discussions were designed to explore intercultural elements and personal interactions.

Table 1 presents the summary statistics of the demographics of the student sample population and provides the results of the relevant demographics of the student sample population evaluated in this research. Three groups of students were analyzed in this research: students participating in short-term study abroad (n=61); students participating in BA 380 (n=105); and students participating in BA 101 (n=22). Students analyzed in BA 380 were enrolled in two different online sections (n=63) and two different on-campus sections (n=42). The professor of BA 380 was the same across all sections in this analysis and was different from the professor delivering the STSA and BA 101 course. Student demographics were not significantly different across groups analyzed within the research except for self-reported age and self-identification as a person of color (POC). Age and percent self-reporting as a POC was significantly higher in the on-line sections of BA 380 than the STSA, BA 101, and BA 380 on-campus groups.

Relative sample demographics indicated: 66% of the sample population was from “small” or rural towns; 45% percent identified as first-generation and only 24% of the population identified as a person of color. Twenty-nine percent of the sample had previously traveled out of the United States and 21% had not been out of their home state. Twenty-one percent of the sample population spoke more than one language and 94% were United States citizens.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Sample Population (n=188)

Demographic	Percent of Sample
From a “small” or “rural” town	66%
First-Generation College Student	45%
Previously travelled outside of U.S.	29%
Not Travelled outside home state	21%
Spoke more than 1 Language	22%
Self-identified as female/male	59%/41%
Self-identified as a person of color (POC)	24%
Between 18 and 25 years of age	46%
United States citizen	94%

This table provides the results of the demographics of the student sample population evaluated in this research. Three groups of students were analyzed in this research: Students participating in short-term study abroad; student participating in BA 380; and students participating in BA 101.

Pre- and Post- intercultural competencies were measured for all 188 students examined in this research along with general demographic information, previous international experience, and general global literacy exposure. There was no overlap of students among the three sample populations (STSA, BA 380, BA 101). Prior authorization and approval for data collection were obtained by the university (human subject research) and through individual student consent. Participation in the pre- and post- evaluations was a required component of the courses. The total sample population represented 5% of EOU’s student population and 25% of the College of Business’ population.

Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale - Short Form (MGUDS-S) (Miville et. al., 1999) was used to evaluate pre- and post- levels of intercultural competencies based on self-reporting. This scale has been extensively tested and validated in the evaluation of intercultural competencies. The short form contains 15-items in three major factor areas which include: Diversity of Contact which corresponds to the interest in participating in diverse and internationally focused activities of social and cultural nature; Relativistic Appreciation which reflects an appreciation of similarities and differences in people; and Comfort with Differences which reflects the comfort level with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Students were also self-assessed pre- and post by the American Association of Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) Intellectual Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric. The rubric identifies six key components of intercultural knowledge and competence: Cultural Awareness; Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks; Empathy; Verbal and Nonverbal Communication; Curiosity; and Openness. To determine the impacts of the short-term study abroad, student scores on the pre- and post-survey instruments were compared using one-tailed, paired *t*-tests within the three sample groups. Changes in pre- and post-levels of intercultural competency were measured within each group with a significance level of 0.05.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This analysis examined whether short-term study abroad (STSA) was more effective at increasing undergraduate student’s intercultural competency skills than traditional business curriculum. Tables 2 and 3 show the findings of the intercultural competency assessments performed pre- and post- for STSA and each business course examined. The results presented are the average scores for each of the elements evaluated in the MGUD-S Form and the AAC&U Value Rubric as self-reported by the student.

Scores for the MGUD-S ranged from 1 as strongly disagree to 6 for strongly agree. Table 21 presents the mean results for each group of students analyzed: STSA, BA 380, and BA 101. Overall, the initial scores across all groups are relatively low and would be consistent with the population demographics of the

sample.

Table 2: Results of Mean Differences in the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale - Short Form (MGUDS-S) by Sample Group

MGUD-S Element	Pre-/Post-Mean Score Group: SDSA n=61	Pre-/Post-Mean Score Group: BA 380 n=105	Pre-/Post-Mean Score Group: BA 101 n=22
Diversity of Contact (Behavioral Elements)	2.79/3.75**	2.43/2.84**	2.32/2.78**
Relativistic Appreciation (Cognitive Elements)	2.66/3.82**	2.46/2.60	1.94/2.21**
Comfort with Differences (Affective Elements)	2.41/3.71**	2.10/2.15	1.89/2.25**

This table provides the results of the pre- and post- means for the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale - Short Form (MGUDS-S). The columns listed represent the group evaluated for their intercultural competency elements.

Significant differences in the pre- and post- means (at the 0.05 level) were observed in all of the intercultural competency elements of the MGUD-S instrument for the SDSA group. Significant differences were also observed in the BA 101 group in all elements of the MGUDS-S. However, the magnitude of these differences was not as great as those observed in the SDSA group. Only one significant difference was observed in the BA 380 group and was in the Diversity of Contact group which evaluates students' interest in participating in diverse social and cultural activities. Interest in participating is somewhat of a lower level of intercultural competency as compared to the other two elements of the MGUD-S which measure value and comfort. Increased interest would be expected before increasing levels of value and comfort.

Table 3 presents the results of the pre- and post- means for the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) Intellectual Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric. Once again significant differences existed in all the pre-and post- mean values of the intercultural competency elements assessed for the SDSA group. Two elements were significantly different in the BA 101. It appears the face to face interactions in the BA 101 has created new levels of openness and curiosity than a traditional curriculum.

Table 3: Results of Means Differences in the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) Intellectual Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric by Sample Group

AAC&U Value Rubric Element	Pre-/Post-Mean Score Group: SDSA n=61	Pre-/Post-Mean Score Group: BA 380 n=105	Pre-/Post-Mean Score Group: BA 101 n=22
Cultural Self Awareness	2.65/3.45**	2.29/2.30	1.79/2.00
Knowledge of Cultural Worldviews	2.87/3.55**	2.37/2.54	1.94/2.05
Verbal and Non-Verbal Communications	2.57/3.13**	2.40/2.51	1.84/2.10
Curiosity	2.79/3.67**	2.35/2.21	2.11/2.44**
Openness	2.81/3.49**	2.44/2.56	2.24/2.87**

This table provides the results of the pre- and post- means for the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) Intellectual Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric. The columns listed represent the group evaluated for their intercultural competency elements.

CONCLUSIONS

This research served to fill the gap in existing literature on the impacts of short-term study abroad programs on undergraduate student's intercultural competencies. As it is critical to know what aspects of a student's educational path lead to effectively producing the desired educational outcomes, this research addressed

the question of whether short-term study abroad programs are more effective than traditional business curriculum designed to provide the same intercultural competency outcomes.

Pre- and Post- intercultural competencies were measured for all 188 students examined in this research along with general demographic information, previous international experience, and general global literacy exposure. Results indicate that short-term study abroad programs are effective at improving intercultural competencies. This finding supports the idea that short-term study abroad programs can be considered high-impact learning and supports EOU's LEAP outcomes of Global Knowledge and Engagement and Intercultural Knowledge and Competence.

Findings from this research indicated significant differences were observed in all elements of the pre- and post- evaluations of intercultural competencies in the means of the study abroad groups. Significant differences were observed in some of the elements of the pre- and post- evaluations of intercultural competencies in the means of the BA 101 group. No significant differences were observed in any of the elements of the pre- and post- evaluations of intercultural competencies in the means of the BA 380 group. This study concludes that in order to develop intercultural competencies, it is essential to have personal contact and experiences with those from different cultures. The findings from this study support AACU's (2012) position that institutions of higher education should create settings and experiences that foster students understanding and connectedness to global issues.

The results of this study are based on a student demographic of a public, rural, regional university and are limited to students enrolled in the on-campus and on-line business undergraduate courses under review in the College of Business and the short-term study abroad programs offered through the College of Business. Responses were limited to self-evaluation responses of participants. Only one location (Costa Rica) was visited for the short-term student abroad programs in this research. No long-term study abroad program impacts were reviewed in this research. Very few students at EOU participate in long-term study abroad programs, minimal data exists for comparison to the results from this study. To the extent that the institutional characteristics, the student demographics, and student majors may have an effect on student perceptions and expectations of learning this may limit the ability of the results to be generalized across institutions and across majors. Future research will look at the impacts of these factors on the results along with the impacts of pre-college characteristics and experiences on the cultural competencies of students that participate in short-term study abroad programs. Further research will also examine factors that affect a student's decision to participate in short-term study programs and the long-term impacts (five years post-graduation) of the study abroad program.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Gow-Hogge has been actively involved and responsible for the development, delivery, and review of the curriculum for the past eighteen years at EOU. Her areas of expertise include Agribusiness/Business, Economics, Global Business, Leadership, Ethics, and Fire Science and was awarded the Mackenzie Endowed Professorship. She has been fortunate to teach fourteen different courses for EOU's College of Business and has received national teaching awards. She has been recognized as an Honored Faculty Member at EOU for demonstrated excellence in research, teaching, community service, and leadership in the performance of duties serving the institutional mission of Eastern Oregon University. She currently serves on EOU's Leadership Team, as the College of Business Chair and Assessment Coordinator, regional President for the College's accrediting body, and represents the College on several university committees. She has also served as an academic advisor for the past 18 years and is passionate about student success. In her free time, she loves scuba diving, attending Seattle Mariners and Seahawk's games, and traveling the world with her family.