

PRE-DEPARTURE
TRAINING FOR
STUDY ABROAD:
PREPARING
FULBRIGHT SCHOLARS
FOR STUDY IN THE USA



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The Cultural Challenges of Study Abroad

Both theorists and practitioners have described culture as having many layers, much like an onion. It is what is at the center of the "onion," that which we cannot see when encountering people from another culture, that has the biggest impact on behavior. The outer layers of culture include symbols (e.g., words, gestures, pictures), heroes (persons, real or imagined, that serve as role models), and rituals (e.g., ways of greeting, social and religious ceremonies). The inner layer is formed of values and underlying assumptions that are not easily understood by others from a dissimilar culture and are most resistant to change. They are taught to the young, and most children have their basic value systems established at a young age. Due to this ingrained value system, miscommunication and conflict can easily occur when first encountering people from different cultures. These differences introduce several incompatible practices related to academics, communication and interaction styles, health, safety, legal practices, professional standards. Foreign students preparing for study in the United States are likely to have different values than the professors and students they will encounter in the United States (U.S.).

Hofstede (2001, p. 234) observed that the relationship between individuals and groups is established in a child's mind early on through their upbringing, reinforced through schooling, and "very visible in classroom behavior." For example, in a "collectivist classroom," individual initiative is discouraged, learners associate according to pre-existing in-group ties, and learners generally do not speak up in large groups. This is in marked contrast to an "individualist classroom," where individual initiative is encouraged, students associate according to tasks and needs, and learners are expected to speak up in large groups. In contrasting the learning preferences of individualists and collectivists, Traiandis, Brislin, and Hu (1988) encouraged teachers encountering both types to investigate the beliefs, attitudes, and values of individualists and the attributes of groups of collectivists. "Among individualists one is what one does; among collectivists one is what one's group does" (Traiandis, Brislin, & Hu, 1988, p. 274).

Other cultural differences are likely to come into play in the classroom. For example, how high a pedestal does a foreign student put their professor on? Is it appropriate to disagree with the professor in class? What is the appropriate level of risk? Is it ever appropriate to share an opinion without first having done extensive research? Is it appropriate to ask questions in class or give negative feedback to a disruptive or lazy classmate? How can I work with a fellow student on a project when I have no relationship with them outside of class and they are not interested in spending time getting to know me?

Research by The Georgetown Consortium Project shows that it is not the amount of knowledge one has about cultures, the time spent engaging with people in country, or even learning a new language that increases a person's cultural competence. It is the *intentional, persistent, and focused attention of a person's self-reflection on their learning – over time* – that leads to greater understanding and competence. If this is true, students preparing for study will likely increase their cultural competence if they begin their reflection on cultural difference before they begin study in the United States.

The Study

In an effort to investigate pre-departure cultural competency preparation, this phenomenological study examined how pre-departure cultural and academic preparation affects foreign students' integration experiences during a study-abroad assignment in the United States. The study was conducted from July 1 –

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July 29, 2017, with assistance from the Fulbright Commission in Warsaw, Poland, who invited 14 Fulbright Scholars to volunteer for the pilot research study. Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 38, their home cities were from throughout Poland, English was their second language, and this was their first time to study in the USA. The fourteen participants were split into two groups: seven Treatment Group participants; seven Control Group participants. All participants were preparing to travel to the U.S. for study and research during the fall 2017 semester.

Both groups were required to complete Fulbright's mandatory one-day pre-departure orientation in Warsaw. Afterwards, the Treatment Group received a 29-day pilot training program offered through Sierra Nevada College, a private liberal arts college, and Steps2Success, a non-profit education foundation. The pilot training program included a one-day in-person workshop (Warsaw, Poland), a four-week online cross-cultural training class with a U.S. professor, and a one-day in-person closing/wrap-up workshop (Warsaw, Poland). The Control Group received no additional training.

This Treatment Group's pilot training program examined cultural dynamics, communication styles, and academic systems unique to international students' transition and adjustment in U.S. education and work environments. This course investigated cultural differences and similarities between Polish and U.S. cultures, in addition to creating action plans that manage cross-cultural and academic adjustment. Students learned about U.S. classroom dynamics and study skills, student responsibilities and ethical academic practices, classroom etiquette, APA formatting, cultural integration, intercultural communication, and professional development skills. The course was designed to aid in the development of more accurate expectations of contemporary student life and responsibilities, in addition to post-arrival adjustment management skills related to U.S. practices.

Several types of instructional methods were used for this online course including lecture videos, audio podcasts, small group discussions, readings, student reflections, validated instruments, and a final written preparation plan. During the 29-day program, students completed 20 homework assignments and 20 online quizzes. The quizzes ensured that students had understood the learning objectives from the homework assignments. Throughout the program, students worked on a "My Action Plan" written assignment that required them to describe specifically what they learned in this class and how they planned to use this new knowledge to integrate, transition, and adjust into U.S. academic systems, U.S. culture, and to improve Western communication and professional skills.

Validated Instruments

The Treatment Group's training program included two validated instruments. The GlobeSmart Profile (GSP) was used to help students better understand their own cultural preferences and tendencies for interacting with others, and provided points of comparison to other individuals and groups, as well as norms for the U.S. The GSP was a starting point for reflection on the impact of participants' preferred styles of engaging with others. The GSP includes five key cultural dimensions rooted in Hofstede's model that will most likely manifest themselves in the classroom and in the workplace. Users complete a 40-question survey and get a personalized report that illustrates their placement on a spectrum of five dimensions:

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- Independent - Interdependent
- Egalitarianism - Status
- Risk - Certainty
- Direct - Indirect
- Task - Relationship

Once the psychometrically validated assessment was completed, participants received a personalized report that analyzed their preferences and provided suggestions for overcoming cultural gaps they may have with those who have different preferences. Participants were required to compare and reflect on their personal preferences and how they may have differed with the cultural norms in the USA.

The Treatment Group participants also completed the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES). This assessment measures competencies essential for effective interaction with people from different cultures. Treatment group participants completed the IES twice, before the pilot training program began, and after they completed their My Action Plan paper and the rest of the course requirements, before departing for their study in the USA. The pre-and post-course assessments provide an objective assessment of the impact the pre-departure course may have had on their cultural competence.

The IES examines the following three dimensions of cultural competence:

- Continuous Learning: Does one learn effectively? What is one's interest in people from other cultures and in self-understanding?
- Interpersonal Engagement: Does one develop and maintain relationships well? What is one's interest in developing relationships with people who are different from us?
- Hardiness: Ability to manage one's thoughts and emotions effectively in challenging situations.

Other Sources of Data

In addition to the two validated instruments, several other assessments were used to identify the trainings' impact on participants; these included surveys, self-assessments, written reflections, teacher observations and notes, and quizzes.

Data collection from both groups was ongoing during their first semester in the USA. Both the Control and Treatment groups completed three post-arrival online surveys (one each month after arriving to the U.S.). These post-arrival surveys inquired about relocation and adjustment experiences, what they wished they had known before arriving to the States in order to avoid the hardships they were currently facing, and what future preparatory programs should be provided to students prior to relocating to the U.S.

Research Findings

The Treatment Group participants completed both the Pre-and Post-Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) scale. Cultural competency was measured on a Likert scale of 1 (low) to 7 (high) for Continuous Learning, Interpersonal Engagement, Hardiness and Overall Cultural Effectiveness. Treatment Group students showed increases in most of their IES scores between the pre-and post-test results. Average scores for Continuous Learning increased from 5.00 to 6.00; average scores for Interpersonal Engagement increased from 4.80 to

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5.00; average scores for Hardiness increased from 3.60 to 4.40; and averages scores for Overall Cultural Competency increased from 4.40 to 5.60.

After collecting and analyzing all participant surveys, assessments, journal notes, homework, office hour and workshop observations, and Action Plan Worksheets, the following themes emerged from the data for the Treatment Group:

- Increased IES scores (Intercultural Effectiveness) after completing the training (Pre/Post assessment)
- Increased language and communication skills
- Increased U.S. networking skills
- Increased U.S. cultural knowledge
- Increased confidence to travel to the USA
- Increased U.S. professional skills
- Increased U.S. integration skills
- Increased U.S. academic readiness
- Increased confidence to speak with U.S. natives

Based on the observations above, it appears that the Treatment Group students benefited from their pre-departure training.

Several quotes from the Treatment Group's post-arrival surveys illustrate these themes:

- "I really appreciate the opportunity to learn more about the U.S. culture with your program! It really helped me in my first weeks here."
- "Knowing that people from the U.S. do not expect to establish relationships with their coworkers, it helps set expectations because I am not disappointed when someone is only focused on his or her work."
- "I don't take personally every remark. People here are usually very direct and sometimes they say something point-blank."
- "The pre-departure training helped me to clarify my doubts and concerns that I had before I came to the U.S."
- "Before I have the chance to talk with Americans, the professor and pre-departure class were good examples and training before my relocation."
- "Even though, some aspects of U.S. culture may seem obvious, it is always worth trying to understand it better and learn more about our own expectations and needs."
- "I recommend taking it [the training class] for everyone who is curious about other cultures! Thank you for sharing that with me!"
- "I definitely recommend this course, especially for people who aren't aware of intercultural differences or for those who have never been overseas before."

After collecting and analyzing all participant surveys, assessments, journal notes, homework, office hour and workshop observations, and Action Plan Worksheets, the following themes emerged from the data for the Control Group:

- Wished there was more training before going to the U.S. on culture, law, transportation, lifestyles
- Shared having difficulty with understanding why they were experiencing intercultural communication issues after arriving in the U.S.
- Expressed having more surprises and challenges with U.S. nuances such as socialization and transportation issues

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- Shared feelings of being unsafe and homesick more often than the Treatment Group
- Shared being unfamiliar with U.S. laws and policies, university rules, and legal processes related to housing and banking
- Indicated that friends were their main source of support and information

Several quotes from the Control Group post-arrival surveys illustrate these themes:

- "I wish I had known more about U.S. culture, life styles, people, communication, transportation, laws, and banking before arriving in the U.S."
- "The first week was the hardest one. It was not the first time when I moved abroad, but this time the administration part was really difficult... Everything takes forever!"
- "I am here around 3 weeks and still I am not completely done with all the documents, banking and another registration stuff."
- "Formalities! The way how the U.S. takes care about it (work, banking etc.) is too challenging for some European people here."
- "I think it would have been nice if I had a preparation training program before coming here."
- "In Chicago I don't feel very safe, even in Hyde Park."
- "It is very hard to build friendship to US people; friendships - hard to establish."
- "I am adjusting to the culture of "unofficial", that is something different than in my home country. I guess that in classrooms this facilitates the contact with students, but on the other hand it may impact on the respect towards the professor."
- "I am not sure if I am addressing everyone properly, though."
- "My challenges are making friends, meeting people, hanging out with people from other nations."
- "I am afraid that I take care about my health less because of the speed of work in which I'm involved here."
- "It is still hard to build relationships here among other people - the best way is to keep with other polish people."
- "I don't feel that building relationships/friendships are possible here without being completely fluent in English and culture. It has an impact on me. Also, I spend lot of time in close polish society which is little unhealthy - closed societies are always unhealthy at some point."

Furthermore, the Treatment Group reported in a post-training reflective questionnaire that the pre-departure class helped improve their cultural readiness for study in the U.S. All seven Treatment Group participants evaluated the effectiveness of the pre-departure training in a questionnaire included in their July 29 reflection. All participants reported "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the following related questions:

- GlobeSmart was a helpful training tool to prepare for U.S. communication, culture, and professionalism.
- The training helped improve language and communication skills
- The training helped improve U.S. professional skills
- The training helped improve U.S. cultural knowledge

Conclusion and Recommendations

The data and the research findings suggest that the Treatment Group benefitted from the pre-departure program, providing further evidence to support the conclusion of The Georgetown Consortium Project that the intentional, persistent, and focused *attention of a person's self-reflection on their learning – over time* – leads to greater understanding and competence.

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University administrators addressing negative first-year international student experiences that affect retention and overall student experiences should consider investing in pre-departure training like that described in this study. Such training should include assessments that identify cultural orientations, instructional tools that teach cultural differences that students will encounter, and thoughtful reflection and planning activities on how to manage cultural differences. As foreign students and their families become more discriminating in their choice of U.S. colleges, it is likely that universities that invest in such programs will have a competitive advantage in the educational marketplace.

A future study should track the performance of both the Treatment and Control Groups' academic performance in the U.S. to assess the possible impacts of pre-departure training on retention, student satisfaction, and academic achievement. The study should also be replicated with students from China, India, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and other countries sending large numbers of students to study in the USA.

About Aperian Global

GlobeSmart[®] is an online cultural intelligence tool that includes the GlobeSmart ProfileSM, which enables individuals to discover and compare their own unique work styles and gain insight on how to work more effectively with other colleagues and teams across boundaries, both geographical and functional.

The **Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES)** is an online assessment that evaluates competencies critical for effective interaction with people from different cultures and demographic backgrounds.

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Tara Madden-Dent, Ph.D., designs higher educational programs that foster cross-cultural and academic adjustment skills in students preparing for international study. As Director of Global Programs at Sierra Nevada College, Dr. Madden-Dent manages an array of international services but is known for developing study abroad readiness courses and transitional courses to aid with post-arrival integration at the high school and university level. Central to her work and research is the advancement of credit-based coursework that empower students to navigate diverse school and community environments, increase intercultural communication skills, and foster global leaders.

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