From Learner to Leader: The International Student's Journey of Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

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From Learner to Leader: The International Student's Journey of Intercultural Competence

Chair of Dissertation Committee: Tori Colson

This study follows the journey of international alumni from learning intercultural competence as students in a small, Midwestern university to using and teaching intercultural competence to others upon completion. The mixed-methods approach seeks first to identify the common experiences that international students have learning and using intercultural competence and then to highlight the unique stories of the participants gathered from interviews and written responses. The study concludes that challenges associated with learning intercultural competence are quite normal for international students, but also that these challenges move the students to a greater appreciation and understanding of cultural diversity. In many cases, the participants went on to greatly impact their social circles by both modeling and teaching others the skills that they learned during their studies in the U.S. The findings of this study further highlight the value of an international education at fostering cooperation and peace between people of diverse backgrounds.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my family and close friends, who have been the rocks that held me on stable ground and the lights that helped me find my path.

Acknowledgments

Thank you first of all to my dissertation chair and committee members. Your encouragement and support kept me going in times when I wanted to give up. Dr. Colson, your guidance was invaluable, and I know without it, this dissertation would be an utter mess. I would also like to thank the participants of my study, especially those from across the world who stayed up late into the night to interview with me over Zoom. I hope that my words shone a light on your passion for learning and improving the cooperation and peace between people from all over our globe.

Chapter 1: A Problem of Practice

Problem of Practice

Higher education has as one of its primary purposes the goal to enlighten minds, to teach understanding and cooperation among diverse people, and to train global leaders—in other words, to help students develop intercultural competence. While much research exists about how American students might acquire skills in intercultural competence through studying abroad and international exchanges, there is significantly less literature about the perspectives of international students on acquiring these skills while studying in the United States or about how they continue using intercultural competence in their lives after they have completed their studies. Research determining the extent to which intercultural competence is acquired and later used by international students would either substantiate this critical higher education purpose or identify a gap in the training of international students. More research in this area would help universities to better understand their global reach, including how their international alumni are impacting the world and how the educational programs that universities provide can contribute to this impact.

Background

The mission statement of the University of Southern Indiana states a goal to "prepare our students to lead and make positive contributions to our state, their communities, and to be lifetime learners in a diverse and global society." A look at mission statements from several universities throughout the Midwest points to similar goals in turning out socially- and culturally-diverse and -conscious individuals with an eye toward positive local and global impact:

- to produce "ethical, global citizens" (University of Evansville),
- to "[prepare] graduates who support and create positive change in their communities and the world" (DePauw University),

- "to enhance the lives of citizens . . . around the world through our leadership in learning, discovery, engagement and economic development" (University of Illinois),
- to "transform the world through research, artistry, teaching and outreach" (Northern Illinois University), and
- "to cultivate in students habits of lifelong learning and critical and ethical thinking, thereby enabling them to be productive members and leaders of a global society" (Washington University in St. Louis).

Universities throughout the United States have similar missions and yet there is very little research that explores the role that international students play in these higher education goals.

U.S. higher education has long had aspirations to influence the world outside of its borders. Organizations like Fulbright attract the best minds from other countries to pursue their education in the U.S., while organizations such as the Peace Corps send Americans abroad to provide education to impoverished communities. In recent years, higher education has been one of the United States' most profitable exports, worth more than $44 billion in the 2017/2018 school year, confirming the global reach of its higher education (IIE, 2019).

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In this effort to impact the world, international students are poised to play a critical role. Among all the students at a U.S. higher education institution, they are the most likely to develop global outlooks, skills to work with diverse groups, and cultural understanding. Many also acquire leadership and career expertise that could give them a valuable advantage when they return to their home communities. In fact, a large number of world leaders have pursued international study, hinting that international education prepares students to be community-minded individuals capable of great impact (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, n.d.).

However, there is insufficient research about the intercultural skills that international students develop while studying at their U.S. university. We also know very little about what they are doing in their communities after returning home. Are they utilizing the intercultural skills and global outlooks that they learned in the U.S.? Are they teaching these skills to others in their community in an effort to increase global understanding? This study aimed to answer questions such as these and to provide insight into the value of education in fostering intercultural cooperation and positive community impact on a worldwide scale through the influence of international students.

Research Questions

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to gather the perspectives of alumni international students who studied at a regional, Midwest U.S. university on their acquisition of intercultural competence, and to explore the extent to which they use and share their acquired intercultural competence in their community, career, and personal life after completing their academic program in the U.S.

In order to address this purpose, the study answered the following five research questions:

(RQ1): What aspects of intercultural competence did international students report gaining during their time studying at the university?

(RQ2): What activities, occurrences, interactions, or situations were influential in helping international students develop intercultural competence?

(RQ3): What unique situations helped the international students to become more interculturally competent and to learn about the importance of having these competencies?

(RQ4): After international students finished their program of study in the U.S., how many of them felt they continued using intercultural competence in their jobs, community activities, and social situations?

(RQ5): How did participants utilize and share intercultural competence in their community subsequent to completing their studies in the U.S.?

Research Methods

A mixed-methods design was chosen for this study in order to provide both generalizable and individual data to answer the research questions. The quantitative stage of the study included a survey which was distributed to alumni international students to collect feedback about their perception of developing intercultural competence at the university and then how they used intercultural competence in their lives afterwards (see Appendix A). The qualitative portion of the study was collected in both write-in questions on the survey and in follow-up interviews. All quantitative data was analyzed and represented using frequency distributions, while the qualitative data was coded and analyzed to identify significant observations about intercultural competence development and use. Six themes were identified in analyzing the findings of the data:

(Theme 1): An international study experience is effective at helping students develop some amount of intercultural competence;

(Theme 2): One semester is sufficient time to develop intercultural competence;

(Theme 3): Participants became practitioners of intercultural competence in their communities;

(Theme 4): Skills related to intercultural competence are transferable to other situations;

(Theme 5): Online platforms are an important emerging pathway for teaching intercultural competence; and

(Theme 6): Intentionality is the key to becoming an intercultural leader.

Definition of Terms

IC: Used in this study as an abbreviation of the term intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence: This study uses the definition of intercultural competence from the study of Deardorff (2006): "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role" (Byram, 1997, p. 34, as cited in Deardorff, 2006, p. 247).

International education: Used in this study to refer to any education that takes place outside of the home country.

International students: Used in this study to refer to non-U.S. born students pursuing tertiary education or English-language training at a U.S. higher education institution.

Study abroad: Commonly used to refer to American students studying internationally.

Chapter 2: A Review of Relevant Literature

The review of literature begins with an exploration of international education, including benefits of pursuing an international education and a look into the state of international students in the U.S., including why they are recruited, benefits that they provide to the local community, and some criticisms about international recruitment and its ties to U.S. soft power and cultural dominance. Following that, the review focuses on intercultural competence, its definition and synonymous terms, the importance of learning intercultural competence, and theory developed about the acquisition of intercultural competence. The review will end with the societal impact of intercultural competence and international education.

Overview of International Students Studying in the U.S.

In the 2020-2021 academic year, nearly one million international students either studied or engaged in optional practical training (OPT) in U.S. universities and colleges, representing 220 countries and more than $28.4 billion in income for the U.S. economy (Institute of International Education, 2021b). Although these numbers represent a sharp decrease from pre-COVID years, the rebounding numbers in the years since the 2020 worldwide lockdown point to the enduring appeal of pursuing an education in the U.S.

The benefits of an international education, including second language acquisition, career training, and intercultural exposure (Arghode, Heminger, & McLean, 2020; DeLoach, Kurt, & Olitsky, 2021; Dewan Türüdü & Gürbüz, 2020), have long been used to sell the experience of studying in the United States. Likewise, the benefits for U.S. higher ed institutions—both economic and cultural—have ensured that recruitment of international students to the U.S. remains strong.

General Benefits of International Education

The benefits of higher education in an international setting (no matter the origin of the students or destination of travel) are well-documented. Studies on international education often include language acquisition, sociocultural and pragmatic exposure, career training, and increased self-efficacy as common gains made during the time abroad (Arghode, Heminger, & McLean, 2020; Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012; Dewan Türüdü & Gürbüz, 2020; Grace Chien, 2020; Sánchez-Hernández & Alcón-Soler, 2018; Scoffham, 2020; Sobkowiak, 2019).

Language Training and Academic Skills

English language acquisition and self-efficacy in language skills are especially important for international students studying in English-speaking countries as second language learning is often statistically the area with the most improvements (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012; Dewan Türüdü & Gürbüz, 2020; Grace Chien, 2020; Jochum, 2014). English language learning in particular is one of the greatest appeals of education in an English-speaking country such as the U.S., as English is widely recognized as the preferred *lingua franca* for travel and business. Similarly, language fluency gains for English-speaking sojourners has long been one of the selling points for study abroad among foreign-language majors (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1995; Kinginger, 2008). Because these language-acquisition benefits are much discussed, recent studies have begun to focus on more nuanced aspects of language development. One study by Sánchez-Hernández and Alcón-Soler (2018) shows the positive connection between language development and exposure to pragmatic routines—"semi-fixed expressions used recurrently by members of a speech community in specific situations of everyday life" (p. 55). Other studies simply find that study abroad increases the participants' interest in foreign language (DeLoach, Kurt, & Olitsky, 2021).

International study also provides participants with educational skills that they may not be able to receive in their own country. Coker, Heiser, Taylor, and Book (2017) explore education abroad

as a highly impactful form of experiential learning leading to gains in writing, speaking, and critical thinking skills, especially when the experience lasts a semester or longer. Cubillos and Ilvento (2012) also reported increased competence in the four skills related to language—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. International education has also been proven to provide valuable training in 21st Century Skills, especially intercultural capabilities, flexibility, curiosity, problem-solving, and self-awareness (Jon & Fry, 2021).

Career Impact

One of the primary individual benefits to be gained from international education is perceived career impact. International education is often viewed as critical training for engaging in today's global economy (Arghode, Heminger, & McLean, 2020; Engle & Engle, 2003; Karakaş, 2020). Some studies have found that education abroad led to increased career self-efficacy, in turn leading to higher job satisfaction (Arghode, Heminger, & McLean, 2020), or that the experience altered the participant's career trajectory, often leading them into more internationally-oriented jobs (Jon, Shin, & Fry, 2020; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, & Jon, 2009; Scoffham, 2020). One study found that 75% of participants expressed a positive impact on their career due to their international education experience (Paige et al, 2009), and another reported that participants conducted their work more effectively due to skills learned during their international study and internship experiences (Arikawa, 2014). Franklin (2010) found that positive career impact persisted even ten years after the study abroad experience.

Why International Students Pursue a U.S. Education

The benefits of an international education mentioned above tend to apply universally to all experiences regardless of country of origin. However, the appeal of an education in the U.S.

specifically varies a bit. International students tend to seek out an educational experience in the U.S. due to the high quality of a U.S. education and the collaborative nature of the education system.

The High Quality of a U.S. Education

The primary reason that international students pursue education in the United States, apart from learning the English language, is that they believe the educational quality to be superior and that it will consequently lead to better career opportunities (Banjong & Olson, 2016; Urban & Palmer, 2016). Education in the United States has long been considered among the best in the world. According to the World University Rankings 2022, eight of the top ten universities in the world are in the United States, with ranking being determined by teaching, research, knowledge transfer, and international outlook. The reputation of these high-ranking universities seems to transfer to U.S. higher education in general, which still attracts more international students than any other country (Institute of International Education, 2020). A survey of more than 9,000 potential international students found that 76% of respondents highly esteemed the U.S. higher education system, contributing to why they might choose the U.S. as their study destination (Chow & IIE, 2011).

STEM Majors at U.S. Higher Ed Institutions

The U.S. is an especially attractive study destination for those in STEM majors. Engle and Engle (2003) identify two types of international education experiences: knowledge-transfer and culture-based. While much of the study abroad engaged in by American students is still culture-based and short-term—with the majority of participants coming from liberal arts and second language majors—many international students studying in the U.S. seek a knowledge-transfer type of experience, which the authors say is more popular for science-centered studies abroad. In fact, the majority of international students studying a degree in the U.S. pursue STEM fields (Bound, Braga, Khanna, & Turner, 2021; Hegarty, 2014; Institute of International Education, 2021a; Macrander,

2017). In 2017, 62% of all master's degrees in computer science and 55% of engineering degrees were awarded to international students, demonstrating the influence that international students have in the enrollment and success of these programs (Bound, et al., 2021). In the 2021 academic year, 54% of international students were in STEM majors (Institute of International Education, 2021a), indicating that the U.S. is still the primary destination for degrees in these majors.

Other Appealing Features of a U.S. Education

Many international students are also drawn the U.S. because of the high quality of domestic students, leading to a symbiotic relationship that adds both intellectual rigor and funding to U.S. higher ed institutions (Hegarty, 2014). Additionally, many international students feel that they will get a better educational experience in the U.S. due to the collaborative nature of the U.S. educational system (Hegarty, 2014). For developing nations, the U.S. may also offer academic programs that are not available in their own country, making the U.S. an appealing destination to earn a degree that will help students stand out among their peers back home (Bound, et al., 2021).

Why U.S. Universities Want International Students

Although the push for attracting international students to U.S. higher ed institutions perhaps began as a rather altruistic goal of diversifying U.S. culture and improving educational opportunities and quality worldwide (Banjong & Olson, 2016), today the goal is more closely bound to economic gain (Macrander, 2017). With the passing of three key pieces of legislation in 1961—The Fulbright Hays Act, the Foreign Assistance Act, and the Peace Corps Act—the U.S. confirmed its mission to provide aid and education to developing countries, making education one of its largest exports (Larmer, 2019) and in essence solidifying its international soft power (Banjong & Olson, 2016).

It has also been a trend that educational exchange has increased between the U.S. and other countries in conjunction with increased trade, leading to better diplomatic relations between the

partner countries (Bound, et al., 2021). It has even been noted that cultural exchange programs like study abroad between the U.S. and rival countries may increase feelings of goodwill and build more peacekeeping between the countries (Deardorff, 2018).

Economic Benefit

Over the last few decades, with changes to federal funding of higher ed institutions and with the steadily increasing number of international students pouring into the U.S., the focus for international student recruitment became more about the revenue that they bring to the university and surrounding community (Cudmore, 2005; Hegarty, 2014; Macrander, 2017). International students have become a lifeline for universities facing decreased domestic enrollment and state/federal funding. In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic severely limited student mobility, international students contributed $44 billion dollars to the U.S. education system, the highest amount to date (*United States*, 2020). International tuition dollars made up around 20% of tuition revenue for many large institutions (Larmer, 2019). Other countries have also begun to catch onto the lucrative business of hosting international students and have increased their recruitment efforts, with Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom among the top competitors (Bound, et al., 2021).

Campus Internationalization and Global Learning

Although the recruitment of international students in recent years has placed a heavy emphasis on the economic benefit they bring, the majority of scholars in the field would likely argue that this is secondary to a more important goal of campus internationalization (DeLaquil, 2019; Perez & Barber, 2018; Zhou, 2022). Recent years have seen an increase in attention paid to internationalization efforts on campuses. DeLaquil (2019) charts the evolution of defining internationalization over the years, from 2005 when internationalization was the goal itself—with no emphasis paid to its impact or importance—to 2015 and 2019, when scholars began connecting

internationalization of higher ed institutions to its potential positive impact on society. This re-envisioning of the purpose of internationalization connects it to improved diversity, inclusion, and massification of higher ed—all goals that can be found in the mission statements of most universities (DeLaquil, 2019; Zhou, 2022).

Zhou (2022) sees global learning as the product of campus internationalization. Zhou's (2022) study connects global learning to achievement of KSA learning outcomes—Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes—as defined by Kraiger, Ford, and Salas (1993). Students who engaged in global learning reported knowledge of cultural differences between the U.S. and other countries, skills related to engaging in intercultural situations, and attitudes of curiosity, empathy, and open-mindedness (Zhou, 2022).

Campus internationalization also provides much-needed diversity to campuses that many scholars have found to be ethnocentric or lacking in intercultural interest, and it may lead to increased study abroad participation (Marcotte, Desroches, & Poupart, 2007). Finally, some studies have found that campus internationalization and its resulting diversity lead students to engage in interactions that increase their intercultural effectiveness and, subsequently, integration of this learning into other areas of their lives (King, Perez, & Shim, 2013; Perez & Barber, 2018).

Intellectual Contribution

The intellectual contribution that international students bring to U.S. universities also contributes to their continued recruitment. The U.S. has long relied on international talent to bolster the workforce and contribute to the U.S.'s position as a leader in innovation (Chevalier, 2014; Douglass & Edelstein, 2009). For example, Hegarty (2014) identified an increase in U.S. patents congruent with a rise in international graduate students (Hegarty, 2014). There is also a fear that if

international numbers continue to decrease, there will be a corresponding decline in the value of U.S. doctoral programs (Bound, et al., 2021).

Criticisms of U.S. Recruitment of International Students

While U.S. universities seek to increase the number of international students studying in the United States (Yao & Viggiano, 2019), many caution that the motives for seeking international students need to be reexamined. Questions about international student recruitment as a type of colonization and exportation of Western culture have been brought up (Cudmore, 2005), and study abroad by American students has been similarly criticized for its potential hidden curriculum of furthering American soft power, colonialism, and othering (Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Lansing & Farnum, 2017; Martin, 2011), and although the connection has not been directly made by critics, the presence of international students in American universities could be viewed as an extension of this attempt at colonization.

Interest Convergence

Yao and Viggiano (2019) warn that the U.S.'s goal of increasing campus diversity through recruitment of international students echoes Bell's (1980) *interest convergence*, an idea rooted in critical race theory that posits "that the majority group advances equality and justice only when it suits their own interests" (Yao & Viggiano, 2019, p. 88). By recruiting international students to U.S. universities for the purposes of increasing diversity, contributing to foreign policy, producing knowledge, and generating economic gains, these universities are contributing to the United States' soft power, economy, and political sway under the guise of educating the world (Nye, 2008). Hegarty (2014) addresses the same issue in a more positive light, claiming that international students become a source of good will for the U.S. upon returning to their home countries and can represent an economic and political benefit for the U.S. if these students become influential in their home country.

Hawawini (2011), although critical of U.S. ambitions, proposed the best approach to international student recruitment is that U.S. institutions should focus on learning from the world instead of teaching the world.

Brain Drain

Another criticism that the U.S. has faced for recruiting international students from developing countries is that it can both negatively affect the developing country's economy (while boosting the U.S. economy) and contribute to "brain drain"—a situation where the hosting country, the U.S., recruits the best minds from developing countries, which in essence deprives that country of the benefit that these people could contribute to their own countries, and leading in turn to a negative impact on global development (Banjong & Olson, 2016; Bound, et al., 2021; Cudmore, 2005; Macrander, 2017). However, there is also a possibility that these home countries may receive a "brain gain" once highly-educated individuals return to their country (Bound, et al., 2021).

A More Ethical Approach to International Recruitment

In light of these criticisms, there is a call for a re-evaluation of the U.S.'s recruitment of international students and a more egalitarian approach (Macrander, 2017). Future studies about the presence of international students on U.S. campuses should be conducted with sensitivity to these racial, political, and cultural dynamics. One way to achieve this is to improve the university's understanding and practice of intercultural competence.

Intercultural Competence and Its Importance in International Education

Because of the abundance of research establishing international education as an endeavor full of *individual* benefits (Arghode, Heminger, & McLean, 2020; Coker, et al., 2017; Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012; Grace Chien, 2020), researchers over the last several years have been exploring the impact that international education can have on the well-being of society in general. This refocusing

of studies done on international education typically explores topics related to positive cross-cultural interactions, ideas of peace and cooperation, and global citizenship (DeLoach, Kurt, & Olitsky, 2021; Jon & Fry, 2021; Paige, et al., 2009; Scoffham, 2020; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014).

Studies in Global Awareness

One of the largest studies to this effect was in 2009, when the Study Abroad for Global Engagement (SAGE) project was established by Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, and Jon (2009). This massive longitudinal study gathered responses from more than 6,000 participants from study abroad trips as early as the 1950's. Put simply, their study found that education abroad positively impacted the participants' inclination toward global engagement, even long after their time abroad had come to an end. Participants also reported impactful changes in areas of civic engagement, simple living, philanthropy, and social entrepreneurism as a direct result of their study abroad experience (Paige, et al., 2009). The findings of this study are still being used by researchers trying to evaluate and—more difficultly—quantify a student's increase in intercultural and global knowledge, sensitivity, and interest (Jon & Fry, 2021; Murphy, Sahakyan, Yong-Yi, & Magnan, 2014). Other studies have attempted to establish a new or increased attitude of global awareness and a decreased attitude of judgment in study abroad participants (DeLoach, Kurt, & Olitsky, 2021; Scoffham, 2020; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014) or have tracked changes in participants' attitude toward sustainability and environmental issues (Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014; Zhang & Gibson, 2021).

Why Intercultural Competence Matters for U.S. Universities

Pursuits in globalization, global learning, and global engagement have become standard for many U.S. universities (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Carley, Stuart, & Dailey, 2011; Zhou, 2022). One study found that 64% of U.S. institutions listed global learning as a desired educational outcome, with many mentioning global awareness/competence in their mission statements (Zhou, 2022). Because of this

increased interest, many universities are looking for methods to incorporate a global focus into their curriculum, perhaps with core classes that have global learning objectives (*University Core 39*, n.d.) or by partnering with international universities through COIL partnerships—Collaborative Online International Learning (*SUNY COIL*, n.d.)

Researchers have found that many institutions use study abroad as a way to increase their domestic students' global learning (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Carley, Stuart, & Dailey, 2011; Engle, 2013), while other studies seek to establish the possibility (or unlikeliness) of increasing global awareness while remaining on campus (Ramirez, 2016; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014). In these studies, the key players in increasing global awareness and engagement on U.S. campuses are international students. While the presence of international students benefits the campus in general and domestic students specifically, to date, however, there is little research exploring the growth that international students have in their own development of global communication skills. Although they seem key in furthering a university's goals of diversification and global awareness, their own path toward intercultural competence is rarely explored.

What Is Intercultural Competence?

The practice of being able to effectively communicate and adapt between and within cultures is frequently discussed in the world of international education and has therefore come to be called by many names, including intercultural competence, cross-cultural adaptation, and global connectedness. Nearly every term includes the word global, intercultural, or cross-cultural, but beyond that, the definitions and terms become more nuanced. Further examination into the terms reveals the following themes and synonymous expressions:

- *Communication between cultures*: intercultural communication (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018), cross-cultural interactions (Glass & Westmont, 2014), intercultural/global connectedness (Killick, 2017)

- *Sensitivity to cultural differences*: intercultural sensitivity (Bennett & Hammer, 2017; Williams, 2005), global perspective (Braskamp & Engberg, 2011; Engberg & Fox, 2011; Reason & Braskamp, 2013), global awareness (DeLoach, Kurt, & Olitsky, 2021), cross-cultural sensitivity/development (Rexeisen, 2013), cultural awareness (Haas, 2018; Williams, 2005)
- *Development of intercultural skills*: global competence, global citizenship (Braskamp, 2008; Mason & Thier, 2018; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014), global learning (Zhou, 2022), cross-cultural competence (Engle & Engle, 2003), intercultural effectiveness (Lee, Williams, Shaw, & Jie, 2014), intercultural development (Anderson & Lawton, 2011), intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006)
- *Adaptation to different cultures*: cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001; Williams, 2005), cultural immersion and global engagement (Hubbard & Rexeisen, 2020), globalization (Cudmore, 2005; Hozdik, 2017), transnationality (Karakas, 2020), acculturation (Glass & Westmont, 2014)

Roy, Newman, Ellenberger, and Pyman (2019) go into a detailed explanation of the most commonly used terms in their systematic review of empirical research, drawing attention to the slightly different goals and underlying subtleties of each. However, outside the inner circle of the field, many of these terms are used interchangeably. Although they all have nuanced differences, they essentially all reflect the act of adopting an attitude of tolerance and acceptance for diversity. The slipperiness of defining terms related to intercultural skills was also discussed by Anderson and Lawton (2011), who said, “One of the major obstacles to documenting the impact of a study abroad program is defining precisely what should be measured. . . However, constructs like cultural sensitivity and cultural competence are abstract, nebulous concepts.” (p. 88). Deardorff (2006) is one scholar who answered the call to clear up these definitions.

Deardorff’s Intercultural Competence. One of the leading authorities in defining IC is D. K. Deardorff (2006). Deardorff first drew attention to the prevalence of many U.S. universities seeking to produce globalized and globally-competent students, but noted that there was very little consensus about what this entails. Deardorff’s seminal work (2006) is a Delphi study that attempts to establish a set definition for IC by seeking consensus from both institutional leaders and intercultural

scholars. The study provided participants with nine definitions collected from writings about IC, and found that the following definition by Byram (1997) was the most agreed-upon, with an average rating of 3.5 out of 4.0: "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role" (Byram, 1997, p. 34, as cited in Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). Another highly ranked definition from the work of Lambert (1994) received an average rating of 3.3: "Five components: World knowledge, foreign language proficiency, cultural empathy, approval of foreign people and cultures, ability to practice one's profession in an international setting" (Lambert, 1994, as cited in Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). Both definitions mention the importance of valuing cultural diversity and linguistic ability but differ in other aspects. While Byram's (1997) definition emphasizes the role of self in establishing intercultural competence, Lambert's (1994) places importance on professional flexibility in various cultures.

In addition to this definition, participants in Deardorff's study agreed upon certain characteristics required to become interculturally competent. "Understanding others' worldviews" was unanimously agreed to be essential, while others received nearly-unanimous consensus:

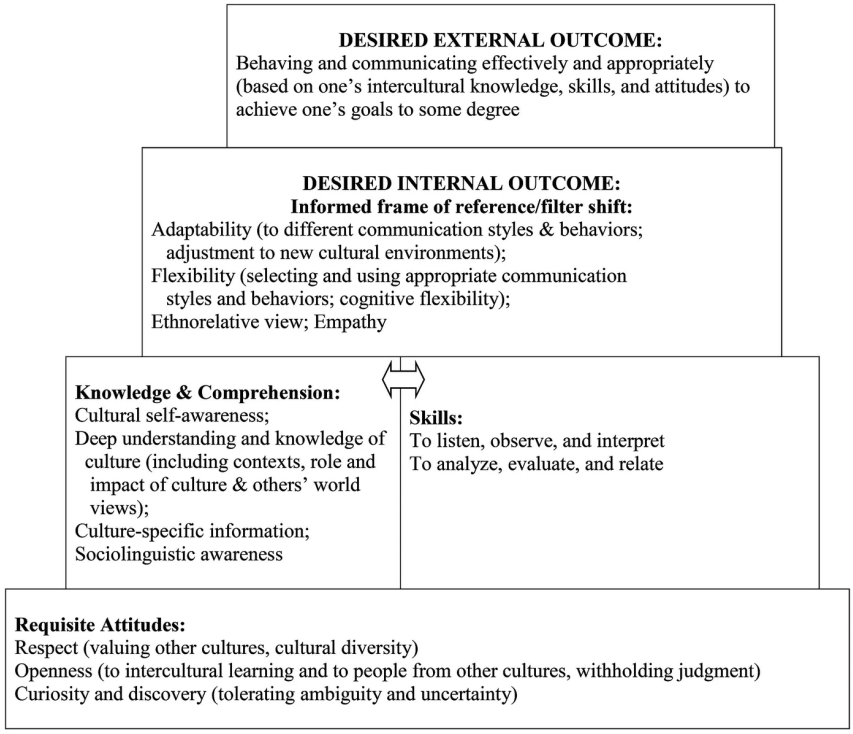
- "Cultural self-awareness and capacity for self-assessment"
- "Adaptability and adjustment to new cultural environment"
- "Skills to listen and observe"
- "General openness toward intercultural learning and to people from other cultures" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 249)

Deardorff also developed a pyramid model of intercultural competence—and a similar circular process model—that places importance on attitudes of respect, openness, and curiosity as the foundation or entry point of achieving intercultural competence (Figure 2.1). Once the proper

attitude is established, knowledge and comprehension of culture as well as receptive and evaluative skills can lead to internal outcomes of self-improvement and external outcomes of effective intercultural communication and skills (Deardorff, 2006).

Figure 2.1

Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence



NOTES:

- *Move from personal level (attitude) to interpersonal/interactive level (outcomes)*
- *Degree of intercultural competence depends on acquired degree of underlying elements*

Developing Intercultural Competence Skills

There has been much discussion in recent years about how students develop IC and how it can be assessed. Do students learn this by osmosis? Is it directly or indirectly taught in higher education? Is it learned through interactions or by reflection? While every study has slightly different findings on the question, the fundamental answer seems to be that students should be put into a situation that allows them to develop intercultural competence.

International Education. International study has been widely explored as a means of developing intercultural competence (Anderson & Lawton, 2011; Blake-Campbell, 2014; Haas, 2018; He, Lundgren, & Pynes, 2017; Lowe, Byron, & Mennicke, 2014; Mason & Thier, 2018; Ramirez, 2016; Scoffham, 2020; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014; Tompkins, Cook, Miller, & LePeau, 2017), but the exact process is more tenuous.

Sobkowiak's (2019) study confirms that the act of studying abroad is not in itself a guarantee that students will gain intercultural competence. This study found that one-third of students preferred to stay in the "bubble" of students from their own culture during a study abroad, while the other two-thirds were willing to make intercultural friendships. Those willing to go outside the bubble tended to have previous experience with international travel and acknowledged the importance of overcoming stereotypes and being culturally conscious in order to achieve gains in intercultural competence—a finding similar to one made by Stone, Duerden, Duffy, Hill, and Witesman (2017), who found that participants with previous travel experience were more likely to make advances in transformative learning. Sobkowiak (2019) emphasizes the importance of training students in intercultural communication and reflective thinking prior to and during the experience in order to help them develop intercultural competence and go outside of their comfort bubble. Other studies also stress the intentional teaching of intercultural communication and the value of personal

reflective activities before IC can be achieved (Braskamp, 2008; Perez & Barber, 2018; Stone, et al., 2017).

Contact Hypothesis. Deardorff (2018) also calls on Allport's (1979) contact hypothesis to help explain how IC is developed. According to contact hypothesis, merely bringing students together—contact—does not necessarily lead to learning. Instead, four criteria are necessary to ensure that the experience yields maximum learning results—equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support by social and institutional authorities. In essence, we may assume that merely placing students in a culturally unfamiliar environment leads them to develop intercultural competence, but this is not necessarily true. They tend to stay in their own homogeneous groups, which may halt their growth. Sobkowiak (2019) noted something similar with students who resisted making contacts outside of their bubble. Therefore, intentional situations need to be devised in order to help students develop IC in educational settings. One early study found proof that Allport's theory was applicable to helping participants of international study develop global skills (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

Unlearning. Kim (2001) suggests that before some new concepts can be introduced, deculturation—unlearning—of previously held beliefs has to occur. This step of eliminating what may be harmful beliefs is consistent in many discussions of intercultural growth. Deardorff (2006) suggests that respect and openness to other ideas is a requisite attitude for intercultural competence. Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which outlines stages that one must go through to become intercultural, lists denigration and superiority as attitudes on the negative spectrum of cultural sensitivity. Adaptation—on the positive spectrum—is the act of adding, not replacing, new worldviews to previous ones. At the heart of all these ideas is the understanding that unhelpful beliefs and attitudes must be replaced with more open attitudes before IC can be learned.

Evaluating and Measuring Intercultural Competence

A number of tests have been developed—the Global Perspectives Inventory (GPI) and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) are two of the most popular among many—to measure intercultural competence. However, the measurement itself is tricky. Assessment of IC traditionally has both direct (observations, reflections, etc.) and indirect (pre/post-assessments, self-reported surveys, etc.) approaches and happens through qualitative and/or quantitative means. Some methods are more formative and take place throughout a time period when IC should be developing, while summative approaches might survey students at the end of an experience (Deardorff, 2015).

Although the GPI, IDI, and others are reliable tests proven to have effective and useful results, there are still issues related to accurately assessing IC that these tests cannot account for. One issue is that IC is a process and indirect methods of assessing it rely solely on a person's IC at a point in time, and not on the development process. Appropriateness and assessing behavior are other aspects that many IC assessment instruments cannot evaluate. The appropriateness of a person's interactions with another and the extent to which these interactions demonstrate IC can only be judged by an outside observer, so self-reporting instruments are incapable of capturing it (Deardorff, 2015).

Theory about International Education and Intercultural Competence

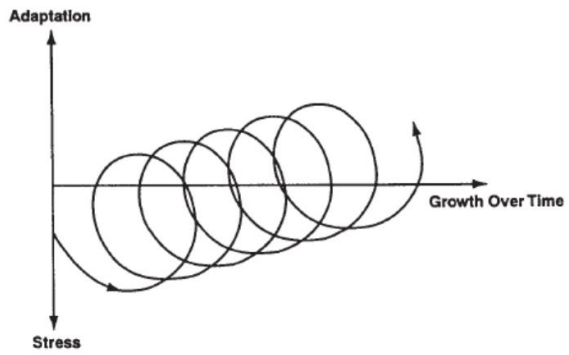
A number of theories have been developed to understand the psychological and cultural changes that students go through when studying in another country and when undergoing these changes in attitude and perceptions (Bennett, 1993; Kim, 2001; Mezirow, 1991). Central to all of these theories is the assumption that cultural dissonance, misunderstandings, and uncomfortable situations are steppingstones to developing intercultural competence.

The Disorienting Dilemma. One theory that has been frequently linked to education abroad is Transformational Learning Theory (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Pilonieta, Medina, & Hathaway, 2017; Stone, et al., 2017). Mezirow's (1991) Transformational Learning Theory (TLT) includes 10 phases necessary for transformation of thought and attitude to occur, including a disorienting dilemma. The discomforting aspect of immersing oneself in a foreign culture and the necessity of experiencing disorientation and disequilibrium in order to undergo a transformative experience is frequently discussed as a catalyst for helping one develop intercultural competence (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Engle & Engle, 2003; Grace Chien, 2020; Varela, 2017).

Stress-Adaptation-Growth. Another theory often linked with education abroad and developing intercultural skills through discomfort is Kim's (2001) Stress-Adaptation-Growth Model (see Figure 2.2). Kim—a foundational theorist on cross-cultural adaptation—developed the Stress-Adaptation-Growth dynamic, represented by a spiral showing periods of stress followed by adaptation and ultimately growth.

Figure 2.2

The Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic: A Process Model



The Stress-Adaptation-Growth model somewhat aligns with TLT's disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991) and is often referenced by researchers in their studies of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2018) and the effects of international education (Dewan Türüdü & Gürbüz, 2020). In this model, those in new intercultural situations go through phases of stress related to cultural misunderstandings and discomfort, followed by periods of adaptation once new customs are understood and adopted. The growth over time shows that participants face less stress as new cultural elements are adapted to.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) is another theory that places critical importance on discomfort as a prerequisite for making gains in intercultural competence. Bennett stresses the unnatural nature of intercultural sensitivity and draws attention to the thousands of years' worth of war and bloodshed that resulted from lack of intercultural understanding. However, despite that it may be contrary to human nature, intercultural sensitivity can be achieved through education. In Bennett's model, individuals go through six stages. The first three (denial, defense, and minimization) reflect an ethnocentric worldview—essentially that the point of view of the individual is the central one to reality. The next three stages (acceptance, adaptation, and integration) are reflective of an ethnorelative worldview—that other cultural attitudes and values are valid, despite their divergence from the individual's. Bennett's (1993) DMIS is the basis of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a survey instrument developed by Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) to evaluate intercultural competence and the progress of an individual from ethnocentric to ethnorelative.

Societal Impact of Intercultural Competence

Many universities are embracing globalization, multicultural leaning, and intercultural communication skills as vital elements of their curriculum. In other words, intercultural competence

is seen as essential to the future of an effective, educated society. One organization based in Germany is leading the study of internationalization in higher education for society (IHES) by identifying connections between internationalization and social responsibility, including the ability to solve societal problems such as radicalization, populism, and integration of refugees (Kercher, n.d.).

Another study exploring the impact of international education on society is the IFP Alumni Tracking Study (*International Fellowships*, n.d.). The IFP study is a 10-year longitudinal study tracking the achievements of recipients of the Ford Foundation International Fellowship Program (IFP) scholarship. The recipients, chosen from marginalized communities in 22 countries, reported significant impact on their local communities subsequent to completing their degrees. More than 80% of respondents reported helping their organizations to improve equal treatment for individuals from marginalized ethnic or religious groups. More than 63% reported improvements made in their communities, including becoming more aware of social and cultural diversity issues. Finally, 76% of respondents indicated that they helped their communities advocate for social justice (Martel, 2019).

In one recent study, the authors explored long-term impact of study abroad through three conceptual frameworks: common good, global engagement, and agency. One unique aspect of this qualitative study is that it explores whether and how study abroad contributes to the well-being of society through these frameworks, whereas previous studies primarily focused on personal benefits from study abroad (Jon & Fry, 2021). These studies are drawing attention to the need for larger-scale exploration of the impact of international study on global and societal well-being.

Community Engagement

Another study examined the high impact that community service activities had on international students and the resulting change in attitude toward community well-doing. Outcomes from the students' service experiences included academic, personal, and intercultural benefits—

including learning more about American culture, changed perceptions of the U.S. and American culture, and appreciation of diversity. Participants also expressed a future intention to engage more in community service. The study found that students engaging in community service underwent interpersonal development and changes in perspective, as well as developing citizenship skills and values. The author proposed that this high-impact experience has the potential to cause positive cultural changes across borders and could lead to better global understanding and citizenship (Hozdik, 2017).

Multiple other studies have confirmed the importance that an international experience has on the participants' development of intercultural skills and attitudes (Jon & Fry, 2021; Paige, et al., 2009; Rexeisen, 2013). Many participants reported permanent changes in their views on global issues and confirmed the long-term impact that the experience had on their community and career impact.

Lasting Impact

To date there have been a very limited number of investigations into whether or not the impact of international education endures after some time has gone by—in other words, do these tendencies toward intercultural competence, global citizenship, and societal impact stick with participants? In recent years, scholars have called for more longitudinal and long-term impact studies—conducted more than 5 years later—on the benefits of international education (Arikawa, 2014; Jon & Fry, 2021; Paige, et al., 2009; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014). One of the earliest studies (Engle & Engle, 2009) and a recent follow-up to it (Jon & Fry, 2021) explored the lasting impact that international education had on global perspectives and intercultural sensitivity and found that American study abroad participants had retained their global tendencies many years after their return. Other studies are consistent with these findings that international education has lasting impact on knowledge, awareness, and interest of participants as well as their professional impact,

intercultural sensitivity, and self-reflection (Arikawa, 2014; Costello, 2015; Hubbard & Rexeisen, 2020; Scoffham, 2020). However, many of these studies investigate this impact in American students studying abroad. The lack of substantial investigation into how intercultural competence develops and endures in international students studying in the U.S. opens the door for new studies to contribute meaningfully to the field.

Summary

The last twenty years have seen a bounty of studies published about the importance of learning intercultural skills, studying internationally, and diversifying curriculum to include global learning. However, due to the potential difficulty of accessing international students after they return to their home countries, studies exploring the experiences of international students in the United States and their movements after finishing their studies are lacking.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Problem of Practice

Higher education has as one of its primary purposes the goal to enlighten minds, to teach understanding and cooperation among diverse people, and to train global leaders—in other words, to help students develop intercultural competence. While much research exists about how American students might acquire skills in intercultural competence through studying abroad and international exchanges, there is significantly less literature about the perspectives of international students on acquiring these skills while studying in the United States or about how they continue using intercultural competence in their lives after they have completed their studies. Research determining the extent to which intercultural competence is acquired and later used by international students would either substantiate this critical higher education purpose or identify a gap in the training of international students. More research in this area would help universities to better understand their global reach, including how their international alumni are impacting the world and how the educational programs that universities provide can contribute to this impact.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to gather the perspectives of alumni international students who studied at a regional, Midwest U.S. university on their acquisition of intercultural competence, and to explore the extent to which they used and shared their acquired intercultural competence in their community, career, and personal life after completing their academic program in the U.S.

In order to address this purpose, the study answered the following research questions:

(RQ1): What aspects of intercultural competence did international students report gaining during their time studying at the university?

(RQ2): What activities, occurrences, interactions, or situations were influential in helping international students develop intercultural competence?

(RQ3): What unique situations helped the international students to become more interculturally competent and to learn about the importance of having these competencies?

(RQ4): After international students finished their program of study in the U.S., how many of them felt they continued using intercultural competence in their jobs, community activities, and social situations?

(RQ5): How did participants utilize and share intercultural competence in their community subsequent to completing their studies in the U.S.?

Research Design

The mixed methods design of this study was chosen so that the researcher could capture both the common experiences of international students and the stories unique to their experiences. The quantitative questions sought to evaluate the perceived changes in intercultural competence that international students went through during their time studying in the U.S., while the qualitative questions asked participants to share defining moments developing intercultural competence and stories of how they continued using these competencies.

Research Questions 1, 2, and 4 were answered through the collection of quantitative data utilizing a survey written by the researcher (see Appendix A). Research Questions 3 and 5 were answered through qualitative methods, including write-in answers on the survey and a follow-up interview with participants who indicated their willingness to be interviewed at the end of the survey.

Instrumentation

Quantitative Data. All quantitative data was collected via Qualtrics survey. The survey, designed by the researcher, asked participants to report on their perceived learning in certain areas related to intercultural competence. The survey included the following sections:

- Demographic information about the participants' time studying in the U.S., length of time since completing their studies, country of origin, current country of residence, and details about the educational experience. There were no questions about race, sexuality, or other potentially sensitive topics as they were not relevant to the study.
- A series of questions asking participants to report on their perceived growth in several competencies, including characteristics of intercultural competence and global perspectives. All questions used a 4-point Likert scale with answers ranging from "A Great Deal" to "None at All." This section directly answered Research Question 1.
- A list of potential influences that helped participants develop intercultural competence, including a space to write in an answer. This answered Research Question 2.
- The final quantitative section collected feedback about the participants' use of intercultural competence in their careers, community, social media, and personal interactions after their educational program in the U.S. ended. This answered Research Question 4. This section of the survey also included optional spaces to provide more detailed feedback, which provided some of the qualitative data to answer Research Question 5.

- At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would like to participate in an interview meant to provide the remaining qualitative data to address Research Questions 3 and 5.

While the survey was designed by the researcher, some studies were referenced in order to identify important descriptors for intercultural competence. Deardorff's (2006) study defining intercultural competence, including descriptors of the competencies, was used to ensure that all aspects of intercultural competence were captured in the Likert-type questions. However, all questions were written by the researcher.

Qualitative Data. To gather the remainder of the qualitative data, a semi-structured interview was designed to collect feedback from the volunteer survey participants. The interviews began by reviewing the definition of intercultural competence from the work of Deardorff (2006) and ensuring that participants understood it. The interview then moved on to ask the following two descriptive questions:

- Many theorists talk about a disorienting or uncomfortable situation or some moment of misunderstanding or frustration as an important catalyst to developing intercultural competence. Please think about your time studying in the U.S. Can you remember a specific interaction or situation that caused you to develop some intercultural competence skill? Describe the situation and explain how it helped you to develop some aspect of intercultural competence.
- Improving understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds through intercultural competence is one way that we can make the world more peaceful. Thinking about the skills that you learned and the activities that you've engaged in since finishing your time studying in the U.S., can you give some examples

of how you have used intercultural competence in daily interactions with your community, coworkers, or contacts?

The first question directly answered Research Question 3 and included reference to several theories about an important first step in developing intercultural competence—encountering an uncomfortable situation (Bennett, 1993; Kim, 2001; Mezirow, 1991). It also attempted to provide context to Research Questions 1 and 2 by asking both about a specific situation and about the skills learned. The second interview question answered Research Question 5 and included prompts for stories related to community, career, and interpersonal use of intercultural competence. To provide some rationale to participants about the importance of the question, reference was made to concepts found in several articles about the value of intercultural experiences in the long-term goal of increasing global cooperation and peace (Braskamp & Engberg, 2011; Deardorff, 2018)

Validity and Reliability. Validity for the survey was established using the Lawshe method, following the guidelines provided by Gilbert and Prion (2016). The survey was distributed via email to six content experts in the field of international education. The experts included two local university professors and four authors of peer-reviewed articles on the topic of intercultural competence. The experts were asked to independently rate each survey question as Essential, Useful but Not Essential, or Not Necessary. Space was also provided for feedback on each question. Once all responses were collected, the content validity ratio (CVR) was calculated for each question. The CVR, used to establish the validity of each question, is calculated using the following formula:

Figure 3.1

CVR Formula

$$CVR = \frac{N_e - (\frac{N}{2})}{N/2}$$

Note: Where: n_e is the number of panelists identifying an item as an "essential" and N is the total number of panelists (N/2 is half the total number of panelists)

Based on the CVRs, each question with a score under 0.99 (essentially a perfect score) was re-evaluated. While the original survey included 31 questions—both Likert-type and write-in—the final survey was reduced to 18 questions. Some questions were slightly revised based on feedback, and most questions with low scores were eliminated. A few questions with lower scores were retained because they directly answered the study research questions. Additionally, the Likert scale for the first group of questions (2a-g) was changed from a 5-point Strongly Disagree / Strongly Agree scale to a 4-point scale including the responses A Great Deal, A Moderate Amount, A Little, None at All. Two qualitative questions were removed from the survey to be used exclusively in the interview portion of the research. The content validity for the instrument (CVI)—the mean CVR of all items in the final instrument—was then calculated based on the 18 remaining questions. This CVI was 0.80, putting it within the established CVI threshold of 0.80 (Davis, 1992).

After the initial validity testing and edits to the survey were completed, the survey was then distributed to a pilot group of six participants for reliability testing. These participants were all foreign-born ESL speakers who had studied as international students in the U.S. After responses were collected, statistical analysis was done via SPSS to determine reliability. The first statistical test was

Cronbach's alpha, used to establish internal consistency reliability, or how consistently items in a test measure the same construct (Nardi, 2018). This statistical test was chosen for question 2a-g because all the questions measure intercultural competence and are therefore related to each other. All questions with the scale of "A Great Deal" to "None at All" were analyzed, revealing a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.790. One question about "willingness to change previous stereotypes/beliefs" received a low score, and when Cronbach's alpha was run again without it, the score raised to 0.892. This low score revealed a flaw in the language of the question—specifically that stereotypes and beliefs are not necessarily interchangeable terms—so the decision was made to rephrase this question instead of eliminating it completely. The question then read "willingness to change previous stereotypes."

The remainder of the survey asked for feedback about personal experience and did not measure a construct, so Cronbach's alpha was not an appropriate reliability measure. In order to establish reliability for the remainder of the instrument, the original test participants were asked to repeat the test, and test-retest reliability was used. To analyze the data in SPSS, all answers were given a numerical value from 1-5, with 1 corresponding to Strongly Agree and 5 corresponding to Strongly Disagree. Then the total value of each participants' answers from the first test to the retest were compared. This reliability test resulted in an intraclass correlation value of 0.852 (single measures) and 0.920 (average measures), concluding that this section of the survey has strong test-retest reliability.

Table 3.1

Reliability Correlation; Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

		95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
	Intraclass Correlation[b]	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.852[a]	.274	.978	12.552	5	5	.007
Average Measures	.920[c]	.431	.989	12.552	5	5	.007

Note: Two-way mixed effects model where people effects are random and measures effects are fixed.

a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.

b. Type C intraclass correlation coefficients using a consistency definition. The between-measure variance is excluded from the denominator variance.

c. This estimate is computed assuming the interaction effect is absent, because it is not estimable otherwise.

Two participants were also asked to compare the English version of the survey to a computer-translated version. The participant who evaluated the survey in Spanish determined that the translation was sufficient, but had some mistakes with formal and informal structures, while the Arabic translation had numerous errors that would potentially hinder comprehension of the questions. Based on this feedback, it was decided not to offer translated versions of the survey.

The approximate time for completing the survey was between 10-20 minutes depending on whether or not participants elected to complete the short answer questions and the demographics section, which was optional for the test participants.

Context

There have been numerous studies tracking the intercultural competence growth of American students studying abroad, but very few that use international students as a participant group. One of the primary reasons is that international students, unlike American students, are difficult to contact after they leave the university. Many of them may not provide their personal contact information and are not locatable through means that might be used to contact domestic students. Additionally, many universities disable email addresses after some time has gone by, essentially cutting off the only means of contacting former international students. Only universities with established international alumni groups or more intentional and strategic means of student tracking will have the resources to conduct this type of study. With the recent establishment of the USI International Alumni Network, the opportunity to conduct a study of former international students became possible. Therefore, while the methods of this study are replicable for any setting where international alumni would be surveyed, this particular study used participants from this limited group of international alumni from the University of Southern Indiana.

Ethical Concerns and Reciprocity

All participant contact information was obtained by permission from the USI International Alumni Network. To maintain privacy for participants, the survey did not require any contact information. For those that volunteered for the interview, the contact information was extracted, but was not connected to that participant's survey. When interview data was collected and reported, pseudonyms were assigned to maintain participant confidentiality. Any sensitive information collected during the interviews was discussed with the participants to assure that it could be used. Names of people, classes, offices, etc. that were collected during the interviews or write-in answers on the survey were changed to ensure confidentiality if deemed necessary.

As for reciprocity, the study could be used to provide a justification for universities to develop more structured teaching and evaluating of intercultural competence for international students and to proactively engage international alum in order to identify achievement of university missions.

Reflexivity and Positionality

The position of the researcher as a faculty member in the Intensive English Program at the university that participants were recruited from means that there may have been a prior connection to some participants. This potential connection as a former teacher might have encouraged some participants to complete the survey when they may not have for someone they did not know. This connection might have also influenced the data collection because participants may have focused more on positive experiences instead of providing a complete picture that included negative interactions and self-perceptions. The researcher did expect that social desirability bias would affect the responses of some participants.

The researcher made every attempt to maintain proper reflexivity in the examination of the data.

Research Procedures

Participants

Participants for the study were former international students from the University of Southern Indiana, a regional U.S. university in Indiana with an annual international student population of less than 200. Participants were recruited by utilizing the newly formed USI International Alumni Network directory—both through targeted emailing and social media postings. Snowball sampling was also utilized to identify other participants that fit the parameters of the participant demographics—namely a former USI international student. To ensure that the participants were former USI

international students, a question was added to the demographics section of the survey. If participants indicated that they were not former international students at USI, they were sent to the end of the survey and no data was collected.

The goal of the researcher was to gather data from 30-50 participants for the survey and up to 10 for the interview. The final numbers were 48 for the survey and 14 for the interview. The participants were not limited by race, gender, age, or ethnic background. The only limiting factors were that they had to be former international students studying at USI. If participants indicated through their demographic information that they did not meet these restrictions, their responses were not included in the findings and analysis of the data.

Data Collection

Survey Data Collection. All quantitative and some qualitative feedback was collected through the survey. After participants were identified through the USI International Alumni Network directory, they were sent a recruiting email that included a link to the survey. The link to the survey, as well as an introduction from the researcher, was also posted on social media for the USI International Alumni Network, including Facebook and LinkedIn. Participants had approximately two weeks to complete the survey. A follow-up email was sent to all participants from the directory after one week thanking them for participating or reminding them to participate if they would like. Social media reminders were also posted after one week. The survey was open from January 11 to January 31, 2023.

Interview Data Collection. After all surveys were completed, the researcher contacted the interview volunteers and began conducting the interviews via Zoom. The qualitative data was recorded and transcribed using Zoom (with accuracy verified by the researcher) and then was coded

for recurrent themes using descriptive codes and inductive coding. All interviews took place between February 6 and February 24, 2023.

Data Analysis

Once data from the survey was collected, the researcher used SPSS, Excel, and Qualtrics to analyze it. Some demographics were represented using tables and other data was presented textually. Because of the relatively small number of participants, correlations were not viable, so all data was presented using descriptive statistics. For the quantitative research questions, RQ1, RQ2, and RQ4, the data was presented as measures of frequency.

- Research Question 1: What aspects of intercultural competence did international students report gaining during their time studying at the university?
  - Survey questions 1, 2a-g, and 3 were analyzed for frequency using Excel. Answers were represented in one table.
- Research Question 2: What activities, occurrences, interactions, or situations were influential in helping international students develop intercultural competence?
  - Survey question 4 was analyzed for frequency of answers using Qualtrics. The answers were represented in a table.
- Research Question 3: What unique situations helped the international students to become more interculturally competent and to learn about the importance of having these competencies?
  - Qualitative data was gathered from the interviews. The data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed for recurrent themes.

- Research Question 4: After international students finished their program of study in the U.S., how many of them felt they continued using intercultural competence in their jobs, community activities, and social situations?
    - Survey questions 5, 7, 9, and 11 were analyzed for frequency using Excel. Answers were represented in a single table.
- Research Question 5: How did participants utilize and share intercultural competency in their community subsequent to completing their studies in the U.S.?
    - Qualitative data was gathered both from survey write-in questions 6, 8, 10, and 12, and the interviews. The data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed for recurrent themes.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

At the end of the study, no ethical issues had revealed themselves. As with any study conducted some time after the experience ends, there is a limitation in terms of participants' memory of events, sense of nostalgia about the experience, and ability to be objective. The study may also have been limited by participants' apathy toward the study if their educational experience was not good or if the experience was a long time in the past. In other words, the survey was likely to only be completed by students who had a good experience. Similarly, the interview participants likely only included volunteers who had memorable experiences that they wanted to share.

Another potential limitation could be an inability to make definitive claims of growth in areas of intercultural competence since international students are already more likely to have some intercultural competence due to their decision to study outside of their country. Deardorff (2006) claims that some requisite attitudes are necessary to enter the cycle of developing intercultural competence, and international students likely already possess these attitudes and are therefore

more prone to develop intercultural competence than students who do not study outside their home country.

A final important limitation is language. Although participants could have used translators to help them take the survey, it is likely that some questions either were not clearly translated or, if the participant chose to take the survey completely in English, that their comprehension skills may have limited their ability to provide appropriate responses.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to gather the perspectives of alumni international students who studied at a regional, Midwest U.S. university on their acquisition of intercultural competence, and to explore the extent to which they use and share their acquired intercultural competence in their community, career, and personal life after completing their academic program in the U.S.

Data Collection

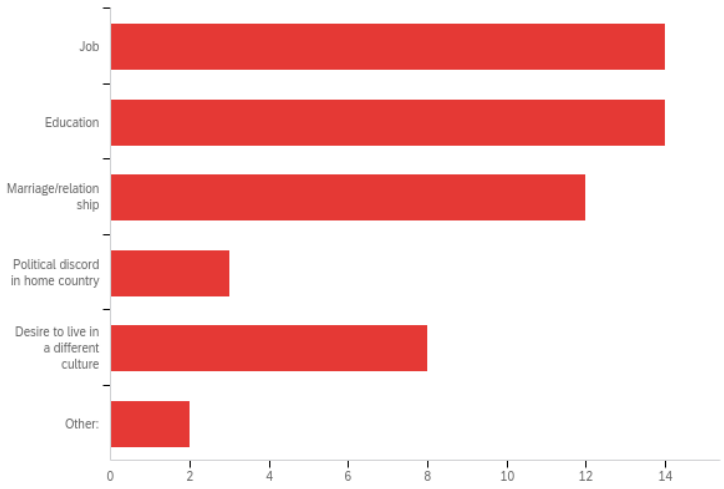
Data collection took place in two stages. The first stage was a survey designed to collect all of the quantitative and some qualitative data. This data was collected during the month of January, 2023. The survey ended with a call for participants for the next stage—a semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted during the month of February, 2023. The survey was completed by 48 participants, 29 of whom provided their contact information to participate in the interview. After contacting all of the 29 volunteers, 14 interviews were conducted.

Participant Demographics

The 48 survey participants were from 28 countries, representing 7 geographical areas—19% from Asia/South Asia (n=9), 10% from Africa (n=5), 17% from Europe (n=8), 4% from Central America / Caribbean (n=2), 6% from South America (n=3), and 4% from Middle East (n=2). Out of these participants, 46 answered the question of where they currently reside: 43% reside in their home country (n=20), 41% in the United States (n=19), and 15% in another country (n=7). When asked why participants chose to live in a country other than their home country, job and education were the most frequent answers (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1

Why Participants Live in a Country Other Than Their Home Country



Time Spent Studying in the U.S.

Participants were also asked how long they studied in the U.S. and how long ago they completed their studies. The majority of respondents spent two to four years (n=17), followed by those who spent more than four years (n=15), one semester (n=10), and a full academic year (n=6).

Time Elapsed Since Studying in the U.S.

The span of time that had passed since the end of participants' academic program in the U.S. was also important data for the study as it is meant to investigate long-term impact of the study experience on the participant's use of intercultural competence. The majority of participants had finished their studies more than three and even more than ten years prior to participating in the study (see Table 4.1), lending weight to the observation that intercultural competence is a lasting trait in those that study internationally.

Table 4.1

Time Elapsed Since Studying in the U.S.

Time Elapsed	Percent	Number
Less than 1 year ago	14.58%	7
1-2 years ago	16.67%	8
3-5 years ago	22.92%	11
6-10 years ago	22.92%	11
More than 10 years ago	16.67%	8
Have not completed	6.25%	3

Note: N = 48

Chapter Organization

The study included five research questions meant to investigate participants' learning of intercultural competence at the time of their studies in the U.S. and their later use of intercultural competence in their communities. The first, second, and fourth research questions were answered using quantitative data gathered from the survey, while the third and fifth questions were answered through qualitative data gathered from write-in questions on the survey and post-survey interviews. Research Questions 1, 2, and 3 are concerned with the participants' development of intercultural competence during their studies. Research Questions 4 and 5 explore the participants' use of intercultural competence in their lives after completing their studies. Each research question and the associated findings will be discussed in turn.

(RQ1): What aspects of intercultural competence did international students report gaining during their time studying at the university?

(RQ2): What activities, occurrences, interactions, or situations were influential in helping international students develop intercultural competence?

(RQ3): What unique situations helped the international students to become more interculturally competent and to learn about the importance of having these competencies?

(RQ4): After international students finished their program of study in the U.S., how many of them felt they continued using intercultural competence in their jobs, community activities, and social situations?

(RQ5): How did participants utilize and share intercultural competence in their community subsequent to completing their studies in the U.S.?

Research Question 1

The first of the quantitative research questions asked: What aspects of intercultural competence did international students report gaining during their time studying at the university? A quantitative approach was chosen for this question to try to capture a common experience among international students. The results indicated that the majority of international students studying in the U.S. do develop characteristics of intercultural competence.

In the part of the survey that related to this question (see Appendix A), participants were asked to indicate their perceived growth in certain aspects of intercultural competence. These characteristics were derived from the traits identified by the study of Deardorff (2006), which was the definition used throughout the study and given to participants during the survey and interview. These traits include:

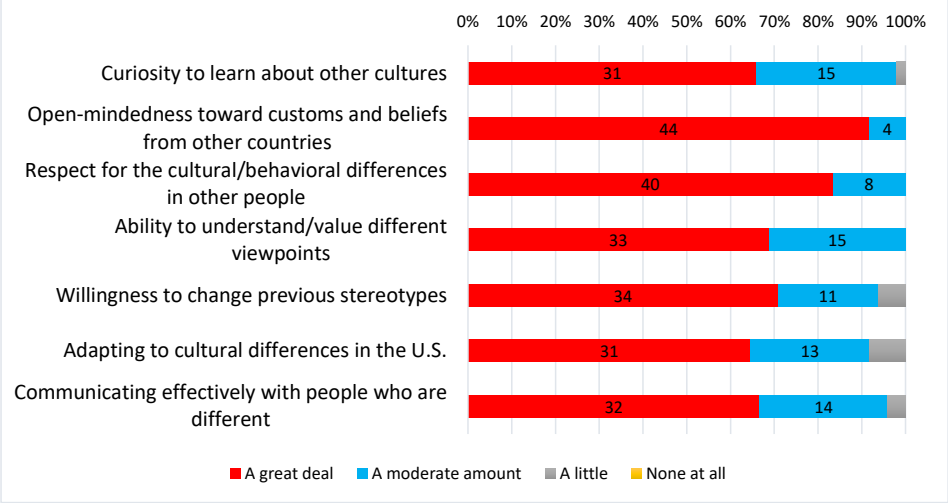
- "Understanding others' worldviews" (survey questions 3, 4)
- "Cultural self-awareness and capacity for self-assessment" (survey question 5)
- "Adaptability and adjustment to new cultural environment" (survey questions 2, 6)

- "Skills to listen and observe" (survey questions 4, 7)
- "General openness toward intercultural learning and to people from other cultures" (survey questions 1-2) (Deardorff, 2006, p. 249)

Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they developed or improved upon certain traits of intercultural competence during their time studying in the U.S. As this is not a study meant to measure intercultural competence, all questions asked only for the participants' perceived change based on their understanding of intercultural competence and their own self-reflection. Growth was reported using a Likert-type scale with the indicators "A great deal," "A moderate amount," "A little," and "None at all." The following table shows participants' amount of perceived growth in these intercultural competence areas:

Figure 4.2

Intercultural Competence Skills Gained



The majority of participants in each category indicated a great deal of growth, and every category indicated at least a little growth. The area with the highest percentage of perceived growth—92%— was "Open-mindedness toward customs and beliefs from other countries" (n=44), with "Respect for the cultural/behavioral differences in other people" (n=40) coming next. All other traits had very similar responses in the "A great deal" area (n=31-34), although "Adapting to cultural differences in the U.S." did gather the greatest number of "A little" responses (n=4), perhaps hinting that this was an area with slightly less impact.

Research Question 2

The second research question sought to identify areas that were influential in helping international students develop intercultural competence. It asked: What activities, occurrences, interactions, or situations were influential in helping international students develop intercultural competence? This quantitative question was meant to be general and capture a wide range of experiences. Survey participants were asked the question "What aspects of life in the U.S. most helped you develop intercultural competence?" Responses for each category could be A lot, Somewhat, Not at all, or No experience. Table 4.2 shows the number of responses in each category.

The category with the highest number of "A lot" responses was "Interactions with friends from different backgrounds," followed by "Social activities." The area with the least impact was "Leadership opportunities," followed closely by "Job." Out of the 46 participants who responded to the category "Leadership opportunities," 11 claimed to have no experience. Similarly, out of the 47 who responded to "Job," nine had no experience. So while the numbers in these two areas may have indicated that they were not very impactful, if the "No experience" responses were not considered, these areas still did have a considerable number of responses of "A lot" and "Somewhat," indicating that they were influential in helping participants develop IC (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

Areas That Helped Participants Gain Intercultural Competence

Area	A lot	Somewhat	Not at all	No experience	Total
Living with intl students	27	11	1	8	47
Living with U.S. students	21	16	1	9	47
Interactions with professors	24	20	3	0	47
Interactions with staff or administrators	23	17	7	0	47
Classes—content	23	22	1	1	47
Class-related activities such as service learning, community engagement, campus events, or projects	28	14	4	1	47
Classes—interactions with other students	22	21	4	0	47
Interactions with other intl students	36	9	1	1	47
Interactions with friends from different cultural backgrounds	40	6	0	1	47
Social activities	33	13	0	0	46
Involvement with campus organizations	21	17	4	5	47
Leadership opportunities	18	12	5	11	46
Job	16	15	7	9	47
Travel in the U.S.	27	15	4	1	47
Community interactions (religious affiliations, friendships, etc.)	24	17	2	4	47

Apart from social activities and interactions with other international students and with friends from different backgrounds, other areas with the strongest impact included class-related activities, living with international students, and travel in the U.S.

Participants were also given space to write in an area not covered in the selections from the question. Mets bus, host family, international office activities, and iClub were some of the answers.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was the first of two qualitative questions and was designed to add personal context to the first two research questions. It asked: What unique situations helped the international students to become more interculturally competent and to learn about the importance of having these competencies?

For context, the first question of the survey used for this study asked participants to what extent they felt they developed intercultural competence. Out of the 48 participants to answer the question, 35 reported *a great deal* of growth in their intercultural competence. In fact, all but one participant reported some amount of perceived growth. From this response, we can assume that growth in the area of intercultural competence is present for nearly all international students. The question of how this growth comes about is answered in Research Questions 2 and 3 through both quantitative and qualitative data.

While Research Question 2 does attempt to identify those common experiences that helped participants acquire IC, it should be noted that the development of intercultural competence is complex and unique for every person, and perhaps not adequately captured through quantitative data. Despite the pervasiveness of tests designed to evaluate intercultural competence, many experts in their field still believe that self-reporting tests are inadequate to capture the complexities and layered nature of developing intercultural competence—only qualitative data can do that

(Deardorff, 2015). Therefore, Research Question 3 sought to capture some of the unique experiences of participants in their various stages of developing IC and to point out the ways that these experiences led to their understanding of the need for IC. Their stories were categorized according to how they fit within the larger scope of developing intercultural competence, with further breakdown of themes and sample quotes following.

Stories about Early Experiences Developing Intercultural Competence

The first steps that many people take in developing intercultural competence have to do with gaining knowledge about aspects of daily life and existence. Oftentimes, these early experiences may cause culture shock or be a source of frustration for those living in a new culture. The following participants recounted stories of how early experiences helped them to understand their need for adapting to the new culture and for developing intercultural competence (see Table 4.3).

These examples reflect the experiences of nearly all international students in adapting to basic and everyday situations that they encounter in a different culture. While they may seem rather simple, the participants' ability to deal with these initial differences demonstrates a larger capacity for developing intercultural competence. In many cases also, these small steps helped students understand the importance of flexibility and openness in their journey toward becoming more competent and adapting to the new culture.

Table 4.3

Early Experiences Themes and Sample Quotes

Theme	Sample Quote
Difficulty adjusting to everyday aspects of life	Khan: "You know the restrooms in the U.S.… In my country people use water in their restrooms. Americans don't, and they don't even have the option to do that. The first time that I encountered this situation, it was heavy, like it was burdensome, right, and I was thinking, how do I spend the whole semester here? But then I was like, wait a minute…everyone in America does it, so it's not a big deal, right? So as soon as I thought like that it was a moment of breaking free from what I had constructed myself in the initial few weeks. It was nothing by the end of the semester."
Differences in dining customs	Josef: "I think when it comes to intercultural competence, an example would be just eating and having dinner. Back home, I wouldn't say it's an occasion to have dinner, but you'd always just sit together and talk about your day. But it was just eating at all times whenever you wanted to—random times. Sometimes you would just sit by yourself at the desk, on the table, and just eat by yourself kinda like lonesome. Play on your phone. I thought, okay maybe personal interaction like that was not something that was very high value the same way that I have from back home."
Learning customs related to communication with professors	Arshad: "I was expecting that I can just walk in and talk to my professor, but they politely told me like it's good if I can write them, shoot them an email, and I can then ask them the time which they have. So indirectly this kind of thing you can say, I learned. So I would interpret this intercultural competence in terms of something electronic. Because I think this electronic life is a big part of U.S. culture."

Stories about Intercultural Interactions

Beyond acquiring knowledge of cultural differences—essentially just recognizing them—is the need to develop skills that can be used in intercultural interactions. Many participants in the study recounted interactions that were perhaps troubling for them, but which in the end helped them to become more conscious of cultural differences and adept at solving miscommunications.

Table 4.4

Intercultural Interactions Themes and Sample Quotes

Theme	Sample Quote
Conflicts with roommates	As a Muslim, Noori was troubled by the presence of pork products in her apartment's shared refrigerator, but unsure of how to deal with it. After some time worrying, she chose to be direct with her roommates: "When I talked to them, we decided to keep a portion separated. That was the one solution, and what was the best thing about all this entire experience that I get chance to interact with my American roommates. They were pretty nice and pretty sensitive to understand the issue rather than exaggerate or just like making a thing. They understood what my culture is, and what are the specifications. And after that we actually became good friends, and we started to watch movies together… like before that we don't even interact like, just not even a hi. But after that we actually understand each other's perspective and we became more close friends."
Poor communication about cultural differences	Yuri shared her confrontation with a classmate over a cultural miscommunication: "When I was at the IEP, there were many students who came from other countries and I had a friend who used to point using [her] finger. I hate this gesture, and I was patient. I didn't say anything, but one day I got annoyed, so I told her to stop. "Stop! I don't like this. Please stop. [angrily] At least in front of me. Don't do that." So I ask her. She said, "Oh, I'm sorry," she apologized, and she looked very sad. After that I regret [that] I didn't try to accept her gesture. But that time I should tell her, this is my culture, but how about her culture? I didn't discuss about this gesture. So this is a negative, my regret point."

These and other participants were able to work through potential conflicts with others and learn the importance of both adapting to different cultural norms and effectively communicating differences. In one example, the clear and compassionate communication between roommates led all parties to become more interculturally competent and even helped to forge new friendships. In the other example, poor communication led the participant to learn more about her own misunderstandings and to become more flexible in the future.

Stories about Valuing Other's Beliefs / Respecting Cultural Differences

Valuing cultural differences—a crucial trait of an interculturally competent individual—is an important step toward ethnorelativism, which according to Bennett (1993) is the concept that a person can move past the idea that their culture is the only "right" one and into a place of adapting and appreciating cultural diversity. Many participants from the study had the experience of being confronted with a cultural attitude or difference that challenged them to evaluate their own cultural positions and, in many cases, choose to see their own cultural position as just one of many valid positions.

Table 4.5

Valuing / Respecting Themes and Sample Quotes

Theme	Sample Quote
Encountering roommate prejudice	Josef: "I think day one when I first met my roommate—his brother served overseas and he had a huge American flag that was from the base I guess—and he was coming in knowing that I was gonna be an international student, he was going to hang it up regardless and he was like 'deal with it.' And I was like you know, this is the U.S. I was really excited to see the flag and I was like 'Hang it up! I really like the idea. Let's hang it up.' And he really liked that. I think we started bonding over that a little bit. That first interactions was very important. Yeah that was a good example I think of intercultural competence. Me kinda accommodating a little bit."
Cultural differences in freedom of sexuality	Beyouo: "The first thing I would like to share is this sort of big shock that I had. Studying in U.S.… it was the first time ever I met somebody who wouldn't hide their identity, and who plainly told me that they were gay. Coming from a country where it is culturally sensitive for them to express their sexual identity, I had never really met somebody who revealed that sexual identity. First it was a very big shock, and then it made me also reflect, you know, on I myself being a sort of minority coming from a majority group and then being a minority in the U.S. So, then, this was like a first battle to change my perceptions of the different thing, that I will find a new context that might be different from what is going on in my country. So little by little, I was able to maybe shift my understanding of gender. And then we became very good friends. But again that was the first time I ever actually experienced it. And so this up to now had a sort of big change in my perceptions of gay or lesbian people."

In both of these examples, participants demonstrated an acceptance of cultural difference which then led to cultural learning and friendship. Without the ability of these participants to put away ethnocentric beliefs, it is possible that they would not have been able to have positive interactions with these and other groups.

Stories about Self-Assessment

Research Question 3 also, beyond just recounting stories of IC learning, sought to identify those instances where participants learned to reflect on the value of acquiring IC. This ability to not only grow but recognize and reflect on the growth is an important step in Deardorff's (2006) Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence and Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity.

The stories of these participants demonstrate a critical aspect of developing intercultural competence: the ability to self-reflect and "relative one's self" (Deardorff, 2006). By re-evaluating and reconceptualizing their home cultures and the stereotypes they carried from them, these participants were able to grow in their intercultural competence and represent a position of willingness to learn, grow, and accept personal shortcomings (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6

Self-Assessment Themes and Sample Quotes

Theme	Sample Quote
Talking about home culture	Beyouo: "When I came here, there were many, many occasions where as international students, we were called to talk about ourselves. And I wouldn't even at the time know what is important thing to show. And so this really get me to self-reflection on some of the thing that I might be taking for granted that might have important meaning to others. So I started writing about it, so that whenever people ask questions I would then already have that information to share. [Later I thought] what am I going to do with all this information? I will maybe put some reflection, draw some lesson for every step of my stories and see how those lessons could be useful to other children who might be on my path. And so I turned those stories into a book." Kittipong: "I never had to learn so much about my own culture or what it meant to be a Thai person or think very much about Thai culture. I really had to learn and totally understand my culture to explain that to people. And with that I learned to appreciate little things of other people too. And it feels good for people to kind of recognize small things about your country."
Overcoming personal biases	Ali: "Before coming to the U.S., I had a lot of stereotypes about the culture, about the people, about the system and how people would behave with me. And I was thinking they might not be very accepting of people like me. I'm a Muslim. For the first 15 days I was like bounded in my shell, not interacting with people because I had that misconception in my head because of all those things." He goes on to talk about a shift in his attitude: "So during those conversations, during those interactions, those activities, I was opening up a little bit, and I got to know—I felt it actually—all those misconceptions that I had, all the stereotypes I had, that people might not be accepting… this was not the case. So this was a very positive shift in my perspective where I was kind of adapting and getting to know and unlearning bad stereotypes that I had previously and relearning new things."

Note: For a more in-depth discussion of these stories and a different framing of their intercultural growth through the steps of Deardorff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (2006), see Appendix B.

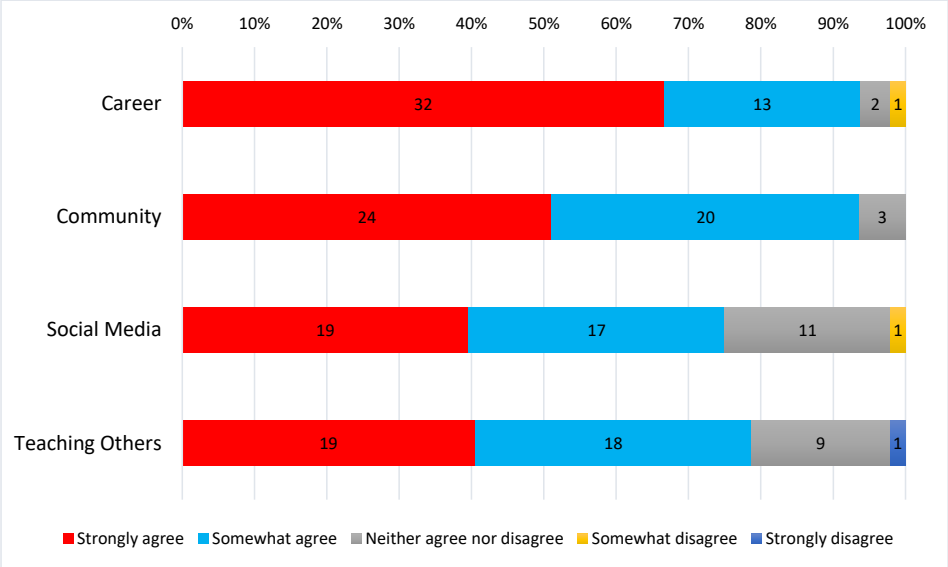
Research Question 4

Research Question 4 was the first of two questions that explored areas where participants continued using intercultural competence after completing their program of study in the U.S. It asked: After international students finished their program of study in the U.S., how many of them felt they continued using intercultural competence in their jobs, community activities, and social situations? This section about Research Question 4 will show the quantitative data gathered from the survey. Research Question 5 will show the qualitative data provided through write-in questions on the survey and further qualitative data gathered from the interviews.

In the survey, data for this Research Question was collected through four questions asking about the degree to which participants felt they currently use intercultural competence in their career, community, social media, and helping others learn IC. Participants could indicate their use of IC in these areas on a Likert scale with the indicators Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree. Figure 4.3 represents the data gathered for Research Question 4.

Figure 4.3

Using Intercultural Competence



According to the data gathered from the survey, the majority of participants indicated that they strongly or somewhat agreed that they continued using IC in every area. In the area of career, 45 of the 48 participants strongly or somewhat agreed that they use the IC skills they learned during their time studying in the U.S. in their current careers. This was also the area where the most participants strongly agreed that they use their IC skills (n=32).

The next survey item read: "I believe that developing my intercultural competence skills while studying in the U.S. has helped me to make positive contributions to my local community." In answer to this, 24 strongly agreed, 20 somewhat agreed, and 3 were neutral (n=47).

The next two areas had fewer numbers of participants agreeing, although the answer strongly agree was still the most common. In answer to the statement "I use intercultural

competence when interacting on social media," 19 strongly agreed, 17 somewhat agreed, 11 were neutral, and 1 somewhat disagreed (n=48).

Finally, in response to the statement "I have helped other people in my social network become more interculturally competence," 19 strongly agreed, 18 somewhat agreed, 9 neither agreed nor disagreed, and 1 strongly disagreed (n=47).

The high number of positive responses to these questions provides some proof that intercultural competence is a lasting trait that not does diminish in effectiveness even after the passage of time.

Research Question 5

The final research question—which asked: How did participants utilize and share intercultural competence in their community subsequent to completing their studies in the U.S.? —provided a more robust picture of the true impact that intercultural competence can have in fostering effective communication between diverse groups, training others in developing intercultural skills, and molding community leaders of intercultural competence.

Survey Feedback

Data for this research question was initially gathered through write-in questions on the survey. Following each quantitative question about impact in the areas of career, community, social media, and teaching others, participants were given the space to write examples demonstrating how they use IC.

Using Intercultural Competence in Their Career. Based on the survey data, career was the area that was most strongly impacted by participants' development of IC skills (see Figure 4.4). In the qualitative data collected through write-in answers on the survey, 25 participants offered examples of how they use intercultural competence in their career. Four themes emerged from these

responses, including international business, understanding others, teaching others intercultural competence, and career changes or further education to utilize IC.

Ten participants gave examples of working with international businesses or with coworkers or customers from different cultural backgrounds. Participants held jobs in areas such as engineering, nursing, education, childcare, business management, advertising, and international relations. Several participants reported that they used intercultural competence in their careers to help them understand coworkers or clients with different cultural backgrounds. Often, they felt more patience or more willingness to understand the perspectives of those they were in contact with at their jobs (see Table 4.7).

Table 4.7

Career Themes and Sample Quotes

Theme	Sample Quote
Working with international business	"I work at a company where there are people from all over the country and the world. Therefore, having the intercultural competence helps me to interact with them in a better way."
Understanding and patience for diverse perspectives	"When I meet someone from another culture, which happens often in Engineering, I like to keep an open-mind and make sure I respect both American customs, but also those in which my client may be from."
	"As a nurse, it is very important to me to deeply understand my patient´s believes so I can provide a great care. I help people from a variety of cultural background, values and beliefs."
Helping / teaching others to use intercultural competence	"I teach German to refugee kids from Ukraine. My experience of living in a foreign country, especially having witnessed many students struggling with the language, helps me understand them and their needs better."
	"Sometimes I advise my colleagues about cultural differences and respect their culture."
Career change or further education to utilize intercultural competence	"I carried on studying abroad after my experience at USI (in 3 other foreign countries!) for my Masters. Then I worked in Switzerland, in NYC as a Marketing Manager and then lived in Berlin for 6 years. I studied at USI in 2006-2007 and finally went back to my home country in 2022. USI was the beginning of a very long and enriching journey that might not even stop here."
	"I am an International Relations student so I am working towards a career in the field of international affairs, where intercultural competence skills are highly valued in diplomatic relations."

Using Intercultural Competence in the Community. After career, the next question of the survey asked how participants felt that they made positive contributions to their local communities. Eleven participants provided write-in answers, with several themes emerging.

Table 4.8

Community Themes and Sample Quotes

Theme	Sample Quote
Creating situations for intercultural engagement or learning	"I created an international club and I also created a travel group to help students in my university to learn languages and cultures."
Being more tolerant of diversity	"My country is a very diverse society in terms of religion and ethnicity. The U.S. experiences enhanced my ability to be more competent with diversity."
Helping others deal with intercultural challenges	"The concept of community in my home country is a bit trickier to grasp than in the U.S. I think I used these intercultural competence skills in helping the Ukrainian refugees in Berlin, for instance."
Teaching others about cultural differences	"I often tell people about my past and usually it is followed by 200 questions. Here I take the opportunity to broaden their minds, as Danish culture is very different and usually shocks Americans when I explain it."

Using Intercultural Competence on Social Media. Participants were also asked to relate some ways that they use intercultural competence in their social media interactions. While the quantitative data did show that this was one of the lesser areas of impact (see Figure 4.3), results do indicate that the role of IC in social media is one worth exploring more. Those who did recognize the importance of IC in their social media presence acknowledged increased sensitivity to diversity and a higher willingness to share positive intercultural content.

Table 4.9

Social Media Themes and Sample Quotes

Theme	Sample Quote
Engaging in intercultural exchanges	"I keep in touch with my international friends on social media, and I expose my culture to them, and at the same time, I get exposed to their culture and American culture ."
Being sensitive to and respecting cultural differences	"I lived abroad at the same time I was going through an important maturity process. I was young and learning. These two processes combined made me realize the world is much bigger than I expected, and I need to be conscious when speaking and consuming information on social media."
Talking about intercultural competence	"I promote the benefits of living and accepting different cultures. I also invite people to travel to know culture rather than just believing stereotypes."
Sharing diverse perspectives	"When I was in the U.S., I used social media to document my experience for Cambodian friends to see and learn about the culture of different international students. Likewise, when I'm back here, I try to put up content about my culture so that my international friends can learn more about my country and people."

Helping Others to Be More Interculturally Competent. Finally, participants were asked the extent to which they felt they helped other people in their social network to become more interculturally competent. In the quantitative data—like the question about social media—this was an area where fewer participants indicated strong agreement. However, the write-in responses do indicate that this is an area where the participants can have a strong impact (see Table 4.10).

Table 4.10

Helping Others Themes and Sample Quotes

Theme	Sample Quotes
Breaking down stereotypes	"I help many of my Asian students to learn how to accept others. I tried my best to set a good example and help them to understand [that their stereotypes are incorrect]."
Encouraging intercultural interactions	"I mostly help students to understand other cultures and to value others not because of the way they look, not because of stereotype but I invite them to understand people by chatting with them and understanding their life and background"
Sharing diverse perspectives	"I do share my experience in the U.S. with people here (they mostly ask me about it). I can only imagine that it impacts and hopefully helps them in some way at least."
Increasing information	"Helped them to understand other cultures by giving examples of my experience in the U.S."
Training community members	"When back home, I trained members of the Burkina Faso English Teachers Association on how to effectively teach students from different sociocultural background. I have also organized trainings on interpersonal communication in a multicultural setting and organized four annual cultural integration activities."
Unknown impact	"Without trying you just influence coworkers and family members and make them aware of different cultures and viewpoints"

Interview Feedback

One-on-one interviews allowed participants to delve more into their use of intercultural competence in their communities. Nearly all of them discussed using IC in their current jobs or that they even altered their career trajectory based on new-found interest in international cooperation (Kittipong, Josef, Jeanne, Yuri, Javier, Kofi). Participants told stories of starting new educational pursuits outside their home countries, where they relished opportunities to use their cross-cultural

communication skills and deepen their global connections (Ali, Beyouo, Khan, Ashrad, Sana). Others shared perspectives about being life-long travelers and intercultural learners (Jeanne, Nina, Javier).

What most stood out in the interviews were the stories of those who had taken their education in intercultural competence beyond just practicing it and went on to become teachers of intercultural competence. For some participants, their change in perspective was so dramatic that they felt led to ensure others were given the same opportunity to experience cultural diversity and develop intercultural skills. These participants became leaders of intercultural competence in their communities, both teaching IC to others and initiating situations wherein others could learn to be more respectful, accepting, and curious toward cultural diversity.

Beyouo. One outstanding example of a participant who demonstrated a strong commitment to community engagement and leadership was Beyouo, an alumni master's student from Burkina Faso. Prior to attending USI, Beyouo had already been somewhat of a community leader of intercultural engagement. He began a cultural celebration in 2015 with the purpose of sharing cultural aspects of the community amongst the different ethnic groups. After completing his studies in the U.S., he expanded this work:

> I feel like [if] we have peaceful life at the community level, this can positively affect life at all the other levels. Before coming here I had a cultural festival that I initiated with my village and four ethnic groups. When I went back, we reinforced that event to open it up to other surrounding villages. In 2021, despite COVID-19, we were able to have a lot of cultural groups from Ghana and far away villages who came to showcase their cultures. Those are generally occasions for me to sort of "preach," or teach about integration and social equality, and hit on divisive topics at the community level. And so last year, for example, we had some

> authorities from Ghana who came because they wanted to learn from what we are doing and see how they can also do the same thing in their communities.

He goes on to explain the depth of impact that this event has, especially in building trust and cooperation between different villages and ethnic groups.

> We share a border with Ghana, and there is a lot of intercultural or inter-community conflict that is happening from time to time around shared resources. The land can be a source of division that will lead to a sort of conflict.
>
> So then, organizing those events, we use them as venue to talk about it. We are obliged to live together, so there should be grounds for discussion about things and finding compromises instead of always using weapons. So yeah, I think the main thing is to help for mutual understanding. Help them understand that I have a blood which is similar to the color of your blood, or I am from the east or the west but we still have something in common.

Although he had started this cultural event prior to attending USI, he talks about how his vision for it changed:

> Like I said, the cultural festival I started in 2015. The love for community engagement was something I was doing. Now, the meaning I attach to it is different, based on what I have learned here [in the U.S.]. Like my interest for the link between school and community engagement activities [referring to volunteering at a homeless shelter]. Those activities reinforced my belief that, yes, we need to be giving back to those who contributed to who we are today. I think my coming here [to the U.S.] reinforced some of the beliefs that I had, and also helped me reject some of the beliefs that I had.

He goes on to explain how his experiences in the U.S. inspired him to reflect more on his personal beliefs and cultural attitudes and to be much more intentional about sharing them.

> The second thing is, I made a sort of journey back to my roots. I mean having to talk about all those particularities that I brought to the U.S. helped me understand myself better. And I feel like if I don't go back to my people and document some of the practices that they are doing without even understanding the meaning behind them—if I'm not able to capture the meaning of those cultural practices, there might be time when we will probably want to go back, but we will, you know, have the performance, but the meaning behind the performance would be lost. So for that reason I really invest a lot in rediscovering the self, understanding the self, and sharing the meaning of that self with the people of my community, and then also share it with the world.
>
> Then I decided to use my Facebook as a channel through which I will be sharing some cultural content. My YouTube channel, also, I put a lot of cultural content there. The objective is to make them a sort of database for future generations, like people who might be interested in learning. Whenever I post something on Facebook, people will comment, people will share, and in the sharing, sometimes some of my elders would come and put a thought on it. And then I would copy the post, copy their comments, and reflect deeper on them. And then the objective is at a certain time I have to publish a book on this list of cultural concepts, with the definition that I got from the community and also the contribution of my Facebook followers. So this is a big thing that I'm doing for the promotion of cultural value, hoping that people from other parts of the world can learn something.

Beyouo's influence in the community went well beyond just his social media presence, however. Because of his cultural training and dedication to preserving intercultural peace, he developed a reputation within his community of someone whose wisdom could help solve issues of division. He says:

> Even though I am a baby among most of the people at the village, whenever there is division on a certain topic that involves two or three ethnic groups, I'm always consulted to see if I can help them find a solution. And you know it has only been a pleasure for me doing that.

Beyouo has recently returned to the U.S. to pursue a PhD with the hope of returning to Burkina Faso and starting a Dream Center for school-aged children. His vision is that this center would help those of lower economic standing with their studies and finding a job, as well as provide "trans-language and transcultural training."

Ali. Another participant whose experience in the U.S. helped him to challenge his own misconceptions and come to place high value on intercultural competence talked about his desire to share intercultural experiences with a mass audience. He returned to his home country of Pakistan mere months before the COVID-19 outbreak caused most countries in the world to go into lockdown. He explains:

> During that time, me and a couple of my friends who were also exchange students to the U.S. in different universities started an online initiative where we talk about culture and cultural peace. What we did is basically to conduct a Facebook live session or Instagram live session where we invited other exchange students from different countries to share about their country, culture, cultural misunderstandings and how they learn the competencies of cultural tolerance, cultural relativism, and patience.

In talking about his motivation for doing this, he said:

> 20,000 people apply every year for my exchange program, but only 200 are selected. I personally feel everyone should have a chance like this, should have this learning that I've got and everything because it has changed me a lot. Why not everyone? So when we started, we started sharing our journeys, started sharing our experiences, our learnings. And not from me—like people from 30 different countries. Every single week. And I could see there was a lot of impact. A couple of videos have been watched by thousands of people in my country. And we have a very diverse audience as well; we had people who were actually following this from more than 30 to 40 countries at that time.

This virtual cultural exchange series lasted around six months, after which time Ali began a job in an under-resourced government school, which he describes as "very much opposite from where I have been brought up, even in my own country." He explains how the skills he learned in the U.S. to accommodate cultural differences helped him to be a better teacher and colleague at this school where he taught for two years:

> As a teacher for two years, I could see I had a lot of patience, like whenever I had conversations with the parents of my students, I never judge them on first sight. If they were just saying "we don't want to send our kids to the school," rather than being very defensive and judging them, I was trying to deal very well, like unboxing the problem so that I can get to the root cause, so that I can make a reliable impact. I was trying to understand during all my two years of teaching experience in most case like, how can I better understand the society, their environment, their culture, their experience, their constrictions, and everything like that. I tried to have conversations with their own perspective by dealing directly to their

> own culture. And with that I could see my kids, as well as the parents of those kids, have a lot of confidence. While having conversations with me, they were more open.

In addition to having the intercultural competence to work within the community where he was living and teaching, he was also able to positively impact his colleagues and teach his intercultural skills. He says:

> I had also chance for all those two years every single day to meet with other staff and teachers and have discussions with them over a cup of tea or coffee. And I was always engaging them in conversations. During conversation, I was trying to make them understand if, let's say, one kid is not performing well, is not achieving the learning outcome, then you need to understand his community where he is coming from. If he is not completing his homework or something like this, what's he doing when he goes back home? Maybe he has an extra job, or maybe he's working, or something like this to support his family because he comes from a very under-resourced community.
>
> So having these conversations with teachers, I feel some of the teachers really try to understand and really change their teaching strategies by designing lesson plans which are more receptive and inclusive for all the kids coming from different literacy backgrounds, from different financial backgrounds. And all this, and understanding the culture and the background of those kids, and the communities also, [it helps to] have teachers who are really interested to make an impact in a meaningful way.

Ali has now moved on from teaching in this school to pursuing further education in a Canadian university. His time as a teacher put him in the path of many students with learning disabilities, and the lack of resources and understanding of conditions like autism led him to pursue his current position studying a Master of Science degree and assisting with autism research. His future plan is to

return to Pakistan and help improve the perception, diagnosis, and teaching strategies of autism and other learning disabilities.

Muhammad. A participant who had been one-semester exchange student from Pakistan, Muhammad, was one of the few participants who came to the U.S. with quite a lot of previous intercultural training. As an 11-year-old, he was chosen for a program that selects children from 40+ countries to attend a cultural learning experience in Fukuoka City, Japan. The goal of the program is to teach "peace, brotherhood, about different people, understanding, and appreciating differences." At the end of the program, the children return to their respective countries and continue engaging in intercultural exchanges. Those who are most successful in this—one participant from each country—are invited back to Japan to be a "peace ambassador." Muhammad was one of those chosen to be a peace ambassador in 2016, prior to his time studying in the U.S. Following the peace ambassador training, participants return home "so that they can go back and train people from their communities, their circles, their schools, their own organizations on the topic [of] diversity, communication, accountability, [and] nonviolent communication."

After these experiences in Japan, Muhammad was granted a scholarship for a one-semester study exchange in the U.S. through Global UGRAD. In the spring semester of 2019, he came to the U.S. for the first time. Despite his two experiences in Japan and the training he had both received and given on aspects of intercultural competence, he did feel that his time in the U.S. provided him with experiences and critical training that he did not receive elsewhere. He says:

> When I was in U.S. I got to see diversity for real. I would say, if I'm in Japan, I would meet people from 40 countries. The diversity is there. I wouldn't deny the diversity is there. But in the U.S., I got to see and experience diversity, as in the true meaning of diversity, in terms of culture, food, traditions, beliefs, opinions, economies, politics, everything. So it was not only,

> you know, a different skin color or a different country or a different language. It was individualities. I saw diversity in individuals as a whole. Appreciating diversity is the best thing that I learned over there.
>
> And if someone comes in and says, “Hey, I don't like the way you think. And here's what I think.” I'm like, “I appreciate how you've come up to me and said you didn't like the way I think and this is the way of your thinking,” because it gives me a way to listen or look into a completely different perspective, which helps me to improve my own perspective. Because our learning is a continuous running process.

After returning home to Pakistan after his semester at USI, Muhammad continued using his intercultural experiences in the training of others, specifically by becoming a trainer in the same Japanese program that he had participated in as a young person, in addition to helping in the selection process of the 11-year-old participants from his country. He goes on to say:

> If someone has more impact, they're invited again to train the future peace ambassadors. So I've been putting in a lot of hours into this to be honest, because I feel like, I guess, my way of giving back to this society. I think it's going to be my fourth year in 2023 where I’m training different peace ambassadors from all over the world.

In addition to his continued work with this Japanese cultural program, Muhammad also helps train new Pakistani exchange students on cultural adaptability prior to their departure to the U.S. He also works with a U.S. company, where he has the opportunity to continuously use and teach intercultural competence.

Conclusion to Findings

The mixed methods approach for this study was able to provide both evidence of common experiences for international students studying at a U.S. university—namely that they were able to develop some measure of intercultural competence—and specific examples of how intercultural competence was developed and used later in life. The qualitative data, in particular, provided a rich portrait of the impact that small exchanges can have on a person's perceptions of both themselves and the cultures in which they exist. Furthermore, the interviews revealed a theme of leadership in the utilization of intercultural competence in the home communities of those participants who placed the highest value on their learning of intercultural skills. Discussion of how these themes both support existing research and provide new insights can be found in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to gather the perspectives of alumni international students who studied at a regional, Midwest U.S. university on their acquisition of intercultural competence, and to explore the extent to which they used and shared their acquired intercultural competence in their community, career, and personal life after completing their academic program in the U.S. This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings as they relate to the development of IC for international students and to what areas of impact the alums had upon returning home. Also included is a discussion of applications of this research for administrators of higher education in the training and tracking of international students. The chapter concludes with a look at areas for future research.

This chapter contains discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the research questions:

(RQ1): What aspects of intercultural competence did international students report gaining during their time studying at the university?

(RQ2): What activities, occurrences, interactions, or situations were influential in helping international students develop intercultural competence?

(RQ3): What unique situations helped the international students to become more interculturally competent and to learn about the importance of having these competencies?

(RQ4): After international students finished their program of study in the U.S., how many of them felt they continued using intercultural competence in their jobs, community activities, and social situations?

(RQ5): How did participants utilize and share intercultural competence in their community subsequent to completing their studies in the U.S.?

In conjunction with answering the research questions, the findings of the study revealed six themes: (a) an international study experience is effective at helping people develop some amount of IC, (b) a one-semester study was adequately sufficient time to develop IC, (c) participants became practitioners of intercultural competence in their communities, (d) skills related to IC were transferable to other situations, (e) online platforms are an important emerging pathway for teaching intercultural competence, and (f) intentionality was key in participants' evolution into an intercultural leader.

Interpretation of the Findings

Because this study examined two different time periods and situations in the lives of the participants, it is helpful to separate the themes into those culled from Research Questions 1-3, which deal with the time that the participants were studying in the U.S., and Research Questions 4-5, which examine the actions of the participants once they finished their studies and moved to the next phase of their lives. The first two themes have to do with RQs 1-3, and findings three through six relate to RQs 4-5.

Theme 1: An International Study Experience Is Effective at Helping Students Develop Some Amount of Intercultural Competence

Research Questions 1-3 essentially seek to find out whether or not international students learned intercultural competence, how they learned it, and what particular skills they learned. What was discovered in answering these research questions was that education in another country had a great impact on participants' development of intercultural competence. Survey data showed that 47 of the 48 participants indicated some amount of perceived growth in IC, with 35 of those indicating "a great deal" of growth. The assumption that study abroad can lead to the development of intercultural competence is nothing new in the field of international study and has traditionally been

one of the cornerstones for expanding study abroad within higher education institutions. Numerous studies from the past 20+ years investigating American students studying abroad have made this conclusion (Anderson & Lawton, 2011; Blake-Campbell, 2014; Haas, 2018; He, Lundgren, & Pynes, 2017; Lowe, Byron, & Mennicke, 2014; Mason & Thier, 2018; Ramirez, 2016; Scoffham, 2020; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014; Tompkins, et al., 2017). However, there is significantly less research into the extent to which international students studying in the U.S. develop IC. This study does align with previous findings that studying internationally can lead to growth in intercultural competence and supports that this growth is as strong for international students as it has been for American students.

Strongest and Weakest Traits. When it comes to specific aspects of IC that students developed—Research Question 1—open-mindedness was the area with the most growth. This can perhaps be explained because of the tendency of international students to spend the majority of their time with other international students, thus exposing them to a wide range of other cultures. Although this study does not attempt correlations, this assumption is supported by other survey data where participants indicated that interactions with friends from different backgrounds / international students were the most influential factor to developing IC.

On the other end of the spectrum, responses indicated that adapting to the cultural differences that participants encountered in the U.S. was perhaps the most challenging trait to acquire. This could be due to any number of reasons, including some students' tendency to stay in their homogeneous groups or stay with other international students, or it could be due to difficulty developing friendships with domestic students. A study of international students by Sobkowiak (2019) found that one-third of students preferred to associate only within their group and did not make significant intercultural gains. Another study similarly found that a group of Turkish students studying in the U.S. preferred to stay with other Turkish students and had trouble finding social

situations to make friends with American students; for this reason, their intercultural and language growth were limited (Dewan Türüdü & Gürbüz, 2020). So while the connections with other international students may have helped develop open-mindedness and appreciation for cultural difference within these participants, it may not have been helpful in their adjustment to life in the U.S.

The "Disorienting Dilemma." Research Question 3 was useful in revealing one aspect of the participants' study experience that helped them to develop IC—the "disorienting dilemma." One pervasive theory across the field of intercultural competence and its partner concepts—see page 21 for more about this—is that some moment of discomfort, stress, or misunderstanding is often a catalyst for moving people into the next stage of adapting to a new culture. Mezirow (1991) calls this moment a disorienting dilemma, while Kim (2001) incorporates it as a critical part of her stress-adaptation-growth model. Bennett (1993), the creator of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Competence (DMIC), proposes three stages (denial, defense, and minimization) that one goes through before moving into adaptive stages. Encountering conflict or discomfort is very much a part of these early stages. The theories of Mezirow, Kim, and Bennett that uncomfortable or stressful moments lead to IC growth were all consistently found in this study.

This trend was largely consistent especially throughout the interview data collection part of this study. The first interview question that participants were asked—as part of the answer to RQ 3—was:

> Many theorists talk about a disorienting or uncomfortable situation or some moment of misunderstanding or frustration as an important catalyst to developing intercultural competence. Please think about your time studying in the U.S. Can you remember a specific interaction or situation that caused you to develop some intercultural competence skill?

Describe the situation and explain how it helped you to develop some aspect of intercultural competence.

A few interview participants shared moments of discomfort having to do with roommates, such as Noori, who had to confront her roommates about religious conflicts, and Josef, whose effective communication with roommates helped to solve what could have been a very damaging intercultural exchange.

Other participants had uncomfortable or stressful moments brought on by their own lack of cultural understanding. Ali, Khan, Yuri, and Beyouo are examples of participants who had to confront stereotypes or cultural differences in order to adjust to U.S. culture. In every participant's case, they were able to reflect on the situation, learn from it, and overcome their misunderstandings. Two other participants, Jeanne and Kofi, faced moments of confusion or conflict with other people, which helped them to learn new ways to communicate and overcome cultural differences.

The Shift to Ethnorelativism. The findings in answer to Research Questions 1 and 3 also revealed consistency with theories about the process of developing IC. According to Bennett's (1993) DMIC, subjects in a new cultural environment go through stages of denial before they can enter stages of accepting the new culture. Bennett says:

> I used the term 'ethnocentrism' to refer to the experience of one's own culture as 'central to reality.' By this I mean that the beliefs and behaviors that people receive in their primary socialization are unquestioned; they are experienced as 'just the way things are.' I coined the term 'ethnorelativism' to mean the opposite of ethnocentrism—the experience of one's own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities… In general, the more ethnocentric orientations can be seen as ways of avoiding cultural difference, either by denying its existence, by raising defenses against it, or by minimizing its

> importance. The more ethnorelative worldviews are ways of seeking cultural difference, either by accepting its importance, by adapting perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of identity. (Bennett, 2004)

This study had multiple participants demonstrating this move through the stages of IC from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Yuri, Arshad, and Khan were participants operating in the stage of Minimization—where a person believes that their cultural worldview is universal—and had to learn to accept different cultural attitudes when it came to hand gestures, professional communication, and bathroom facilities, respectively. These three participants demonstrated their move into the ethnorelative stage of Acceptance, where they all said they were no longer bothered by the cultural difference that they had struggled with prior.

Ali was in the Defense stage—essentially "us versus them"—mentality when he first arrived in the U.S. and believed that no one would accept him because of his nationality and religion. Over time, he learned that this was not the reality, and he was able to move into ethnorelative stages. Similarly, Beyouo was in the Denial phase before his first encounter with a person of openly different sexuality. But because he was open to new cultural experiences, he was able to accept this new worldview and move into a further stage of his intercultural development. Both Ali and Beyouo demonstrated characteristics of the Adaptation stage, which Kim (2001) says is "not a process in which new cultural elements are simply added to prior internal conditions. As new learning occurs, deculturation (or unlearning) of at least some of the old cultural elements has to occur… The act of acquiring something new is inevitably also the act of "losing" something old" (p. 51). Both lost previous misconceptions while developing open-mindedness for diversity.

Several interview participants were more overt at stating their new cultural worldview: Ali, Muhammad, Javier, and Noori all shared a similar viewpoint that every culture has value and should be respected despite differences of tradition, perspective, or religion. Noori said it best:

> One thing that I learned from my U.S. experience [is] that every person should have some kind of compromising skills. We cannot just rely on the other person to understand everything. You have to make changes in your personality first. Just because your religion is different, just because your culture is different, doesn't make you a better person. What makes you a better person that you make efforts as much as they are doing. We are living in a world where people are different, and we need to accept them for who they are, and we need to develop connections with them.

Both Noori and Javier mention the idea that a good person is one who works hard at intercultural understanding. Javier shared:

> Whenever you see the world, you see people have different ways of seeing things. Doesn't mean somebody's right and somebody is wrong. It's just different ways of thinking. But you can see that in every single culture and every single country, no matter what the religion, what they believe, what they think... if there is a good person, they just want to make it right.

Muhammad and Nina also pointed out that "learning is a continuous running process," which is an important consideration in the move into ethnorelativism. These participants, and undoubtedly others from the study, acknowledged the importance of valuing another culture and being respectful of differences.

Theme 1 in Summary. Theme 1, that the experience of studying in the U.S. was effective in helping participants develop IC, was seen throughout both the survey and the interviews. Research Questions 1-3 were vital in helping to align this study with much of the research and foundational

theories about intercultural competence. In fact, Research Questions 1-3 were able to go beyond much of the existing research to identify IC skills that were easiest or hardest to develop and to provide contextual evidence supporting the most pervasive IC theory.

Theme 2: One Semester Is Sufficient Time to Develop Intercultural Competence

Research Questions 1-3 worked together to establish both that participants learned intercultural competence and that they were able to move through multiple stages of IC development during their time studying in the U.S. One theme to come from the findings of RQs 1-3 is that participants were able to have meaningful encounters and experiences that helped them develop IC even during a short study timeframe.

In the field of international education, there has been much discussion about the effectiveness of a shorter study abroad compared to one of a semester or longer (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Coker, et al., 2017; DeLoach, Kurt, & Olitsky, 2021; Hubbard and Rexeisen, 2020; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014; Varela, 2017). Studies have found that trips as short as 4-8 weeks were sufficient to impact the participants' global awareness, while other studies found that a full semester or longer was best (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012; DeLoach, Kurt, & Olitsky, 2021; Pilonieta, Medina, & Hathaway, 2017; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014).

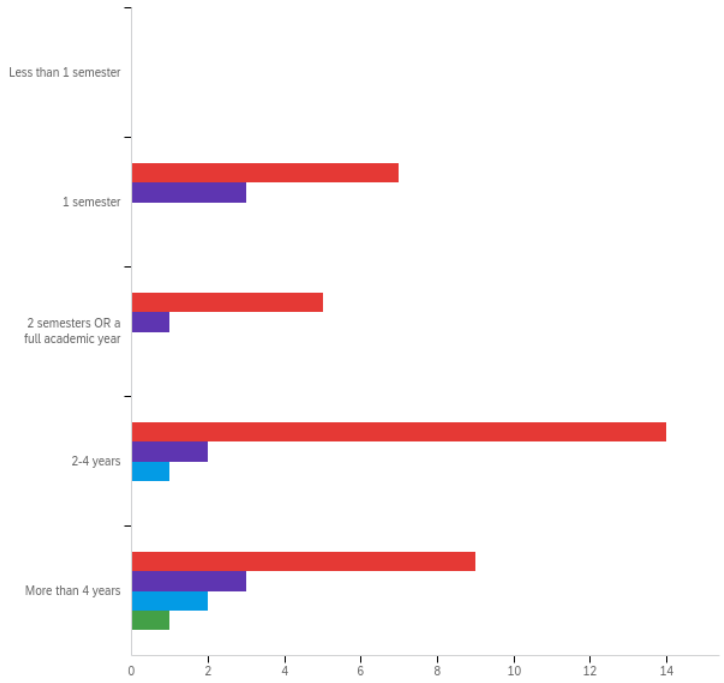
In this study, results indicated that intercultural competence could be gained as effectively in one semester as in multi-year programs. According to the demographics, there were no participants who indicated a study time of less than one semester (see Figure 5.1). The reasons for this absence of short-term-study participants are purely speculative: perhaps less than one semester was not enough time for international students to feel connected to the university, so they didn't join the alumni network, or perhaps it was not enough time for them to acknowledge their own intercultural competence, suggesting that a shorter study is not enough exposure or time to create the buy-in. In

either case, there is little data from this study to support claims about the likelihood to develop intercultural competence with a study duration of less than one semester. One participant, Arshad, shared that he had participated in two six-week study programs in the U.S. prior to attending the university for a longer study period, but that these shorter programs in his estimation were insufficient to develop intercultural skills.

Those who spent a full semester in the U.S. indicated through the quantitative data that their experience at USI helped them to develop intercultural competence. In fact, their experience seems equitable to those who spent longer in the U.S., as indicated in Figure 5.1. Out of the participants who indicated they studied at USI for one semester (n=10), 70% (n=7) reported significant gains in their intercultural competence, while 30% reported moderate gains (n=3). Out of the study participants, five from Pakistan who studied for one semester completed both the survey and interview—the highest number of participants from any country. The high level of interest from this group indicates a positive experience and buy-in with the topic. Furthermore, the qualitative data collected from the interviews indicates that this group had large gains in their intercultural competence, including addressing and eliminating stereotypes, communicating through uncomfortable situations, developing an appreciation for cultural difference, and becoming intercultural leaders. A future study examining the intercultural gains of Pakistani participants of the Global UGRAD exchange program would perhaps show a similar strong impact.

Figure 5.1

Length of Study and Amount of Intercultural Competence Gained



Note: The red indicates the number of participants who answered "a great deal," dark blue = "a moderate amount," light blue = "somewhat," green = "none at all"

Interestingly, study times of longer than 4 years had a lower percentage of strong intercultural competence growth within that category, which aligns with a large-scale study conducted by Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige (2009), who found that American study abroad participants who studied abroad for 13–18 weeks—approximately a semester—had high levels of intercultural development growth, while those who studied for longer or shorter periods did not. The study actually found that longer durations of study correlated with decreased interest in intercultural

matters (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). This study similarly hints that perhaps after an extended amount of time studying, the initial impression of intercultural differences had worn off; however, without accompanying qualitative data, this study has no explanation for the numbers in this category beyond connecting it to similar previous findings.

Theme 3: Participants Became Practitioners of Intercultural Competence in Their Communities

Research Questions 4 and 5 attempt to explore an area that is under-researched in the field of international studies—that of what international students do after they complete their program of study in the U.S. A comprehensive look at the quantitative and qualitative data gathered through the survey and interviews provided astounding evidence that participants continued using and even further developing intercultural competence after they finished.

Out of the 48 participants who completed the survey, more than 90% felt they used intercultural competence in their careers and community, while more than 70% felt they used it in social media and teaching others (see Figure 4.4), providing affirmative feedback for RQ 4, which asks how many participants continued using intercultural competence in their jobs, community activities, and social situations after completing their studies.

To date, there have not been many studies investigating the impact that international students have on their communities upon returning home. However, what data does exist paints a picture of great potential change in the communities and for the individuals in it. One of the few studies is a large-scale longitudinal study conducted by the Ford Foundation International Fellowship Program, exploring the impact its alumni have had on their communities. In one report, 80% said they felt they improved equal treatment for individuals from marginalized ethnic or religious groups, and 76% said they helped their communities advocate for social justice (Martel, 2019). Another study by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs found that 565 heads of government around the

world had participated in a Department of State sponsored exchange program, 49 were representatives to the United Nations, and 42 were current or former members of U.S. Congress (Bureau, n.d.), definitely lending weight to the claim that intercultural exchanges provide participants with skills that can be used to impact their communities. This study, while not necessarily taking a social justice or political leadership angle, similarly found that participants advocated for others (Ali, Beyouo, Kofi) and took on leadership roles for the improvement of their communities (Beyouo, Javier, Mohammad). Although sadly not available to participate in the study, one international alum of the university where this study was conducted is currently serving as an ambassador from his country to China, which certainly brings some of this data home in a meaningful way.

Long-term Impact. In addition to the presence of community impact, this study can also make some claims as to the long-term duration of this impact. Out of the 48 survey participants, 63% (n=30) indicated that they had completed their studies at USI three to 10+ years prior. While no direct correlations have been made in this study between the amount of community impact and the elapsed time since studying in the U.S., the survey data does generally support the claim that the impact these international alum had on their communities continued many years after they finished studying. Scholars in the field of international education continue to call for more longitudinal and long-term impact studies on the benefits of international education (Arikawa, 2014; Jon & Fry, 2021; Paige, et al., 2009; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014). While some studies do exist that make claims about positive lasting impact on global perspectives, intercultural sensitivity, and self-reflection (Arikawa, 2014; Costello, 2015; Engle & Engle, 2009; Hubbard & Rexeisen, 2020; Jon & Fry, 2021; Scoffham, 2020), they primarily look at American study abroad participants. This study exploring international students studying in the U.S. does support some of the same findings with a different participant group.

Theme 4: Skills Related to Intercultural Competence Are Transferable to Other Situations

The findings from Research Questions 4 and 5 showed that participants continued using intercultural competence skills, although not always in intercultural exchanges. While of course many participants continued dealing with international people in their careers, education, and personal lives, data from both the interviews and the survey revealed that several participants were applying the IC skills that they had learned in other situations. The supposition that IC skills are transferable to other communicative and diversity situations is important for universities to recognize, especially when deciding whether or not global issues should be included in curricular outcomes. In fact, the connection between global learning—essentially a curriculum that highlights intercultural situations—and improved cooperation between diverse groups has been made before:

> As defined by the AAC&U (2009), global learning stresses the importance of students being "attentive to diversity across the spectrum of differences" with the goal of transforming students so that they may interact effectively and appropriately with those from other backgrounds—whether that be locally or globally (Hoff, 2021).

The skills learned while developing intercultural competence are ones that would go a long way toward solving current cultural strife around issues of diversity, inclusion, political polarization, gender/sexuality bias, and racism, among other things. Connections have also been made between internationalization and social responsibility, including the ability to solve societal problems such as radicalization, populism, and integration of refugees (Kercher, n.d.). From Deardorff's (2006) Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (see Figure 2.1), we see skills related to analyzing oneself, listening and observing, being adaptable and flexible, having empathy, and being able to communicate appropriately, which are trademarks of intercultural competence that can be easily transferred to other situations.

Several responses from the survey write-in questions showed ways that participants use their skills outside of intercultural exchanges. One anonymous participant said, “Apart from the soft skills associated with intercultural competence, I use it in professional writing and branding projects that I currently take up part-time.” Other participants said that their IC skills help them to better understand their coworkers’ perspectives, to have better work ethics, to be more sensitive about their social media posts, and to subtly influence their friends and family to be more open-minded.

In his interview, Kofi shared his experience utilizing his IC skills in his job. Kofi remained in the U.S. after completing his graduate studies, and now works investigating housing and employment discrimination claims. He says:

> I work with people from various backgrounds, people who have been discriminated against at their workplaces. I think that my experience at USI helped me to understand people better, to understand the role that I play, to know that I’m not dealing with just one group of people. They're from different backgrounds, different homes, different cultures, different trainings. Once I meet someone like that, I just try as much as possible to understand where they're coming from.

Another example comes from Noori, an exchange student who recently returned home after one semester at USI. In a follow-up communication after her interview, she shared, “I recently won a community development initiative by Global UGRAD and IREX (International Research and Exchange Board) in which I will be training 25 schoolteachers about good and bad touch awareness for kids in school.” While not specifically in the realm of cultural diversity, the IC skills she learned about respect, compromise, and effective communication are relevant to topics such as consent and bodily autonomy.

A final example comes from Ali, whose work as a schoolteacher in his native Pakistan led him to pursue an advanced science degree and participate in research about autism. His experience developing IC gave him the skills to be more sensitive in identifying and sympathizing with students who demonstrated learning disabilities. His future goal of returning to Pakistan to improve the educational opportunities and public perception of children with learning disabilities will potentially make a great impact on his community.

Theme 5: Online Platforms Are an Important Emerging Pathway for Teaching Intercultural Competence

Research Questions 4 and 5 of this study explore the impact that participants had on their local community and social network, and in today's interconnected world, that invariably includes their impact via social media platforms. In the survey, more than 70% of participants felt they used IC in their social media. This finding paired with recent moves universally toward more technologically-centered educational and work models—what many refer to as the post-COVID world—points to the importance of social media and other online platforms as mediums for sharing intercultural competence. The role of virtual platforms has been especially important in international education:

> As travel came to a halt at the onset of the pandemic, the question of mobility's role in global citizenship emerged. The past year has brought to light a new, viable approach for international education. For many in the field, travel limitations highlighted the case that mobility is not a requirement for a global citizenship. In fact, some argue that virtual opportunities help level the playing field when travel is not accessible. (Bowman, 2021)

The post-COVID rise of virtual exchanges and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) programs have highlighted this now-pervasive trend toward virtual instead of in-person approaches

to developing intercultural competence. The participants of this study presented effective models at how social media can be utilized to put forth an interculturally-sensitive agenda.

In the survey qualitative data, anonymous participants shared that they "promote the benefits of living and accepting different cultures," "try to give different perspectives from different cultures," are "more sensitive and mindful in social media interactions," and "only share my opinions without downplaying other people's views and experiences." Data gathered from the interviews was also rich. Beyouo and Ali especially are two participants who exhibited very intentional use of their social media platforms to share multicultural information and specifically try to teach others about intercultural skills (read more about them in Chapter 4, Research Question 5).

This survey data does point to the potential great impact that social media and online platforms have in putting forth an intercultural learning agenda; however, studies as to the real impact of this are quite limited at this time.

Theme 6: Intentionality Is the Key to Becoming an Intercultural Leader

Although this study did not begin with a grounded theory approach, one theory did emerge from the data collected to answer Research Questions 3, 4, and 5. This theory is that a reflective experience, where the participant actively works through their own intercultural experiences with an attitude of growth, is most likely to yield a future leader of intercultural competence. RQ 3 revealed several instances where participants credited their IC growth on classes that specifically taught about IC. Both RQs 4 and 5 asked participants to share ways that they used intercultural competence in their communities. Data collected from the survey showed that 79% (n=37) of 47 participants somewhat or strongly agreed that they teach others about IC. The data from the interviews suggested that both deliberate teaching of intercultural skills during their studies in the U.S. and self-reflection—what I am terming "intentionality"—were critical components of moving to what could

be considered the most influential stage of intercultural competence—that of being able to facilitate the growth of others, aka an intercultural leader.

Guided Learning. The data gathered to answer RQ 5 showed that the most dramatic changes in participants from the study came in situations where intentional instruction in intercultural competence was taught. Ali, Nina, and Muhammad were three participants that specifically credited the training they received in intercultural competence as the catalyst that moved them further along in their journey. The teaching of global issues and its direct influence on developing global skills has been proven through data collected from years of results from the Global Perspectives Inventory (GPI) test—one of the best-known instruments for measuring intercultural competence. One report from analysis of the GPI states:

> Pedagogical strategies that intentionally incorporate diversity content and opportunities for dialogue were significantly related to all three dimensions of the GPI. Students who more frequently enroll and participate in courses that include "materials/readings on race and ethnicity issues" and "opportunities for intensive dialogue among students with different backgrounds and beliefs" showed preferences for higher levels of complexity in their understanding of the world around them and their acceptance of multiple perspectives in their thinking and knowing. They also appeared more knowledgeable in their understanding of differing cultural backgrounds and values, and demonstrated stronger preferences toward cross-cultural interaction and making a difference in society. (Braskamp & Engberg, 2011)

Another study also found that "on-site intervention is important to reinvigorate or sustain the intercultural learning process for [study abroad participants]" (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). In this study, participants who actively engaged in learning about intercultural competence demonstrated higher levels of achieved intercultural competence.

Self-Reflection. Going hand-in-hand with guided instruction is self-reflection. In this study, participants who spent a lot of time reflecting on their own intercultural journey and working through their misconceptions and stereotypes, especially in a guided setting like a class, were most likely to become intercultural leaders in their community. The benefits of reflection, and especially guided reflection, are well-researched in the field (Braskamp, 2008; Perez & Barber, 2018; Sobkowiak, 2019). Bennett (1993) also notes self-reflection as an important step toward achieving ethnorelativism.

Ali and Nina were two participants whose experiences in classes that focused on intercultural learning and whose ability to reflect on themselves honestly as intercultural learners led them to make tangible strides toward becoming more interculturally competent. Nina said, "I'm in international relations and foreign affairs, so I have to interact with different people from different backgrounds every single day, and the U.S. helped me a lot to become more open and become even more curious about others." Ali also—who would later establish a social media cultural diversity series—credits classroom instruction with his development of IC.

Beyouo is another example of a participant who spent extensive time reflecting on his cultural beliefs and stereotypes, his new perspectives on intercultural topics, and his role as an intercultural mediator. His dedication to this pursuit was so strong, in fact, that he published a book of his reflections. Finally, Muhammad, with his experience participating in cultural exchanges in Japan, both as a learner and as a teacher of intercultural competence, acknowledged the importance of evaluating his own learning in order to be an effective leader.

These participants—namely Ali, Beyouo, Muhammad, and Nina—stood out in this study as ones who took their learning of intercultural competence seriously and who demonstrated intentionality in their personal journey from intercultural learner to leader. While many participants

in the study shared ways that they used IC, the experiences of these four participants suggests that a next level of intercultural competence use—that of being an intercultural leader—is possible through dedicated study and self-reflection.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings from this study, it can be concluded that the fulfillment of university missions when it comes to global impact can be at least partially achieved by the proper training and equipping of international students. However, in many cases, more intentional training is necessary, including required courses on intercultural and global topics and guided self-reflection exercises.

This study also provides evidence that intercultural competence skills are transferable to other situations, which suggests that intentional training of domestic students would also likely have a positive impact on current societal issues if more students gained skills in appropriate communication and respect for cultural diversity. However, this would perhaps require a re-envisioning of intercultural training—such as more virtual exchanges, increased participation in study abroad, and more pedagogical attention paid to areas of intercultural skills development.

In his discussion of where study abroad and the recruitment of international students will go in the post-COVID world, Hoff says, “In most institutions, international education in its broadest sense is still not seen as central to the institutional mission” (Hoff, 2021, p. 11). This leads to another important step that universities must take, and that essentially is to buy into the importance of increasing the global learning opportunities of its students both by bringing cultural diversity to the campus in the form of international students and by promoting participation in study abroad and global learning activities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several questions were raised during the examination of the data for this study. There were areas where the data fell short of providing convincing evidence to make claims or where it hinted at ideas that required more research.

Future Research Area 1. The study data indicates that online platforms have the potential to be effective at facilitating cultural exchange both informally and institutionally. While this study cannot make any assumptions about the effectiveness of these cultural exchanges at helping participants develop some aspects of IC due to the lack of data from recipients of the social media exchanges, it is an area that warrants further exploration. So the first question for further research would be: How can online platforms be utilized to increase intercultural exposure and help participants develop IC skills?

Future Research Area 2. Second, the emerging theory discussed in Theme 6 requires more examination, so an important topic for future study would be: Is a stage of self-reflection and intentional learning necessary to move someone from user to leader of intercultural competence?

Future Research Area 3. The next logical progression from that question is to examine the impact that these intercultural leaders have on their communities—in other words: Do leaders of intercultural competence make meaningful reverberations in their communities, leading to impactful changes in areas such as social justice, equity for marginalized groups, philanthropy, and global issues? This question contains a complexity far beyond the design of this study and would likely require a longitudinal or ethnographic approach.

Future Research Area 4. Finally, because this study is concerned with how universities fulfill the global aspects of their mission statements, a final question for future research is: How can university missions of attaining global impact be achieved through the more intentional training of intercultural competence—for both international and domestic students?

The answers to these questions represent the next logical steps from this study and would fill a large gap in the present literature about the impact that international students have in their communities after completing their studies in the U.S.

Conclusion

This study explores the ways that international students learned intercultural competence during their time studying in the U.S. and found that the vast majority of participants reported gains in traits related to intercultural competence, primarily learned through interactions and periods of self-evaluation. The participants in the study reported significant gains in skills related to intercultural competence and were able to transfer those skills in meaningful ways into their later careers and community activities. This study did align with many findings that have been previously identified through studies of American study abroad participants and provided evidence that international students in the U.S. had similar experiences in their development of intercultural competence. The study also called attention to a need for more intentional discussion of intercultural training and the importance of our international students in becoming community leaders.

Our world today has seen increasing attention paid to issues of equity, diversity, and global awareness, so much so that U.S. universities have begun incorporating these ideas into numerous aspects of their mission, curriculum, and campus culture. However, without investigating the extent to which our international students develop and internalize these traits, we are ignoring a vital piece of the puzzle. International students, more than perhaps anyone in the university, are in a unique position to enact positive global change. Their position as intercultural experts allows them to become the catalyst for change in their community by modeling global attitudes. But in order to ensure their success, U.S. universities need to be more intentional about cultivating development of intercultural skills and identifying methods to cause enduring impact. Universities also need to

increase their efforts to keep track of these students and see the impact that they are making through organizations such international alumni networks or through longitudinal studies. By taking these steps, universities can truly identify their global impact.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey

Survey excluding demographic section:

1.	To what extent did you develop intercultural competence during your time studying in the U.S.: • A great deal • A moderate amount • A little • None at all
2.	To what extent did you develop or improve upon these traits while studying in the U.S.:
	a. Curiosity to learn about other cultures o A great deal o A moderate amount o A little o None at all
	b. Open-mindedness toward customs and beliefs from other countries o A great deal o A moderate amount o A little o None at all
	c. Respect for the cultural / behavioral differences in other people o A great deal o A moderate amount o A little o None at all
	d. Ability to understand / value different viewpoints o A great deal o A moderate amount o A little o None at all
	e. Willingness to change previous stereotypes o A great deal o A moderate amount o A little o None at all
	f. Adapting to cultural differences in the U.S. o A great deal o A moderate amount o A little o None at all

	g. Communicating effectively with people who are different from me o A great deal o A moderate amount o A little o None at all
3.	I feel that becoming an interculturally competent individual is an important part of my personal identity: • Strongly agree • Somewhat agree • Neither agree nor disagree • Somewhat disagree • Strongly disagree
4.	What aspects of life in the U.S. most helped you develop intercultural competence? (choose all that apply) • Living with international students • Living with U.S. students • Interactions with professors • Interactions with staff or administrators at the university • Classes—content • Class-related activities such as service learning, community engagement, campus events, or projects • Classes—interactions with other students • Interactions with other international students • Interactions with friends from different cultural backgrounds • Social activities • Involvement with campus organizations • Leadership opportunities • Job • Travel in the U.S. • Community interactions (religious affiliations, friendships, etc.) • Other _____
5.	I use the intercultural competence skills that I learned during my time studying in the U.S. in my career: • Strongly agree • Somewhat agree • Neither agree nor disagree • Somewhat disagree • Strongly disagree

6.	(If agree or strongly agree are selected) Please give an example of how you use intercultural competence skills in your career. _____
7.	I believe that developing my intercultural competence skills while studying in the U.S. has helped me to make positive contributions to my local community: • Strongly agree • Somewhat agree • Neither agree nor disagree • Somewhat disagree • Strongly disagree
8.	(If agree or strongly agree are selected) Please give an example of how you use intercultural competence skills in your community. _____
9.	I use intercultural competence when interacting on social media: • Strongly agree • Somewhat agree • Neither agree nor disagree • Somewhat disagree • Strongly disagree
10.	(If agree or strongly agree are selected) Please give an example of how you use intercultural competence skills on social media. _____
11.	I have helped other people in my social network become more interculturally competent: • Strongly agree • Somewhat agree • Neither agree nor disagree • Somewhat disagree • Strongly disagree
12.	(If agree or strongly agree are selected) Can you give an example?

Interview Questions

1.	Many theorists talk about a disorienting or uncomfortable situation or some moment of misunderstanding or frustration as an important catalyst to developing intercultural competence. Please think about your time studying in the U.S. Can you remember a specific interaction or situation that caused you to develop some intercultural competence skill? Describe the situation and explain how it helped you to develop some aspect of intercultural competence.
2.	Improving understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds through intercultural competence is one way that we can make the world more peaceful. Thinking

	about the skills that you learned and the activities that you've engaged in since finishing your time studying in the U.S., can you give some examples of how you have used intercultural competence in daily interactions with your community, coworkers, or contacts?

Appendix B: Research Question 3

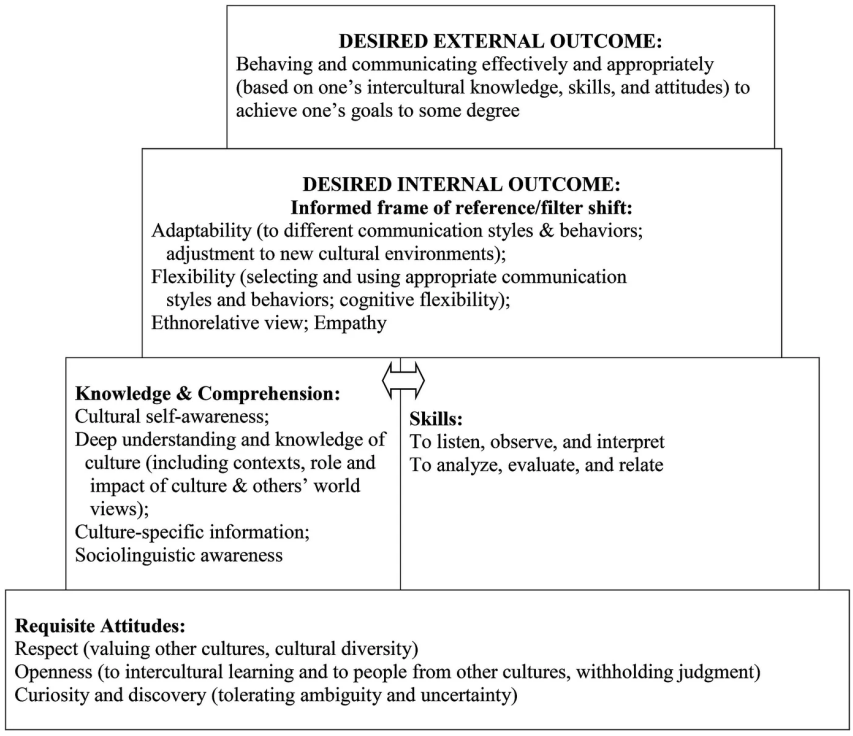
An alternate way to explore the individual development of intercultural competence is framing it through the levels of IC growth developed from the work of Deardorff (2006). Because the work of Deardorff (2006) was used to provide the definition of intercultural competence that was used in this study, both in the survey and interviews, it is helpful to explore these stories through the lens of the definition. The aspects of intercultural competence identified in Deardorff's study logically move through stages of IC development, from gaining knowledge to developing skills and finally to valuing cultural differences and learning to position oneself within the context of intercultural experiences through self-reflection. This definition was determined to be the most widely accepted through a survey of experts in the field of intercultural competence: "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role" (Byram, 1997, p. 34, as cited in Deardorff, 2006, p. 247).

Knowledge of Others and Self

The first steps that many people take in developing intercultural competence have to do with gaining knowledge about aspects of daily life and existence. According to Deardorff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence, one must possess requisite attitudes of respect, openness, and curiosity in order to move to the next level of developing knowledge and comprehension. The Knowledge & Comprehension stage includes cultural self-awareness, understanding of cultural contexts, culture-specific information, and sociolinguistic awareness (Deardorff, 2006). The participants who moved into the area of developing knowledge also demonstrated the requisite attitude to learn intercultural competence.

Figure 4.3

Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence



NOTES:

- *Move from personal level (attitude) to interpersonal/interactive level (outcomes)*
- *Degree of intercultural competence depends on acquired degree of underlying elements*

The participants who possessed these requisite attitudes demonstrated their ability to move into the next stage of IC development—developing knowledge of others and self.

Khan. One participant from Pakistan who studied in the U.S. for one semester on an exchange program, recounted his experience adapting to bathrooms in the U.S..

You know the restrooms in the U.S.…. In my country people use water in their restrooms. Americans don't, and they don't even have the option to do that. Like we have the option of

> tissue paper, but they don't have the option of water. So the first time that I encountered this situation, it was heavy, like it was burdensome, right, and I was thinking, how do I spend the whole semester here? So initially, in the first few weeks, this was a heavy burden on my mind. I was going to the public restroom as little as I could. I would only go to my apartment and stuff like that. But then I was like, wait a minute…everyone in America does it, so it's not a big deal, right? So as soon as I thought like that it was a moment of breaking free from what I had constructed myself in the initial few weeks. It was nothing by the end of the semester.

This participant demonstrates the requisite attitudes of openness and discovery—after moving past a resistant stage—in order to acquire knowledge about the role and impact of culture, even in areas as sensitive as restroom protocol.

Josef. Another participant, who had been an international student from Austria, recounts difficulty adjusting to eating practices in the U.S.:

> I think when it comes to intercultural competence, an example would be just eating and having dinner. Back home, I wouldn't say it's an occasion to have dinner, but you'd always just sit together and talk about your day. And you'd kinda just recap the whole day. And obviously these are all 18-19 year old kids [referring to his roommates]. You're not gonna expect them to come together and like talk about your days and stuff. But it was just eating at all times whenever you wanted to—random times. Sometimes you would just sit by yourself at the desk, on the table, and just eat by yourself kinda like lonesome. Play on your phone. I thought, okay maybe personal interaction like that was not something that was very high value the same way that I have from back home.

Dining customs in every country are very cultural, and this participant was able to move to this stage of understanding the cultural difference by first practicing openness and withholding judgment.

Arshad. As students in the U.S., the participants also had to gain knowledge about educational differences. One participant from Pakistan recounts surprise at the use of electronic communication and different perceptions of time:

> I was expecting that I can just walk in and talk to my professor, but they politely told me like it's good if I can write them, shoot them an email, and I can then ask them the time which they have. So indirectly this kind of thing you can say, I learned. So I would interpret this intercultural competence in terms of something electronic. Because I think this electronic life is a big part of U.S. culture.

He demonstrated knowledge of both culture-specific information and sociolinguistic awareness by demonstrating curiosity and respect about differences related to professional communication.

Skills to Interpret, Relate, Discover, and Interact

Beyond acquiring knowledge of cultural differences—essentially just recognizing them—is developing skills that can be used in intercultural interactions. According to the Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006), knowledge/comprehension and skills have a somewhat symbiotic relationship. With knowledge comes the skills needed to begin effective communication.

Noori. One participant in the study, a female from Pakistan on a one-semester exchange program, recounts her experience using skills to relate and interact to deal with a potential conflict with roommates. As a Muslim, she was troubled by the presence of pork products in their shared refrigerator, but unsure of how to deal with it. She says:

> I didn't want it to go to the long procedures to university to provide me a different kind of resources, because I personally felt like I am in a different country and, like, I am more than grateful to them that they are like letting me be in their country, and like they're treating me

> very nicely, and everything is so going well. I should not like ask for something extra, just because I have some religious thing that makes me different from them.

She decided to discuss the matter with her roommates directly:

> When I talked to them, we decided to keep a portion separated. So what I did I used to like, take the eggs in my part of fridge, and they don't use that one side. They use the right. That was the one solution, and what was the best thing about all this entire experience that I get chance to interact with my American roommates. They were pretty nice and pretty sensitive to understand the issue rather than exaggerate or just like making a thing. They understood what my culture is, and what are the specifications. And after that we actually became good friends, and we started to watch movies together… like before that we don't even interact like, just not even a hi. But after that we actually like understand each other's perspective and we became more close friends.

By utilizing skills to communicate her cultural differences in a sensitive but open manner, she was able not only to solve the problem, but also to develop an intercultural relationship that had not been present before. Her ability to effectively interact most likely contributed to gains in intercultural competence on the part of her roommates as well.

Yuri. Another participant discussed an interaction with a fellow student that caused her, a female from Japan, to react poorly. However, through this poorly-handled cultural interaction, she learned skills to interpret and discover cultural differences:

> When I was at the IEP, there is many student who came from other countries and I had a friend who use thing like that [does motion of pointing with finger]. Who used to point out using finger. "You are not. You are. You will." [Imitating other student and pointing.] I hate, I don't like it, this gesture, and I was patient. I didn't say anything, but one day I got annoyed,

> so I told her to stop. “Stop! I don't like this. Please stop. [angrily] At least in front of me. Don't do that.” So I ask her. She said, “Oh, I'm sorry,” she apologized, and she looked very sad. After that I regret [that] I didn't try to accept her gesture. But at that time my first reaction was explosion [imitates bomb]. But that time I should tell her, this is my culture, but how about her culture? I didn't discuss about this gesture. So this is a negative, my regret point.

She goes on to talk about how she now tries to be more conscientious about cultural differences and not let them bother her. She said, “So it's okay, it doesn't matter. Here is not my own country culture.” Now she understands that gestures are a cultural difference and is not bothered by it.

Valuing Others' Values, Beliefs, Behaviors

Valuing cultural differences—a crucial trait of an interculturally competent individual—is an important step toward ethnorelativism, which according to Bennett (1993) is the concept that a person can move past the idea that their culture is the only “right” one and into a place of adapting and appreciating cultural diversity.

Josef. One student from Austria recounts the first interaction with his American roommate as a situation that, without his ability to see value in the culture of his roommate, might have led to strife. He says:

> I think day one when I first met my roommate—his brother served overseas and he had a huge American flag that was from the base I guess—and he coming in knowing that I was gonna be an international student, he was going to hang it up regardless and he was like ‘deal with it.’ And I was like you know, this is the U.S. I was really excited to see the flag and I was like ‘Hang it up! I really like the idea. Let’s hang it up.’ And he really liked that. I think we started bonding over that a little bit. That first interactions was very important. Yeah that was a good example I think of intercultural competence. Me kinda accommodating a little bit.

This situation is one of stark differences—a roommate with an extremely ethnocentric worldview, with a goal only of proving that his culture is the "right" one, and an international student demonstrating patience, acceptance, and tolerance. Because of this crucial first interaction, both parties took the first step to becoming lifelong friends. Josef even mentioned that his roommates all became much more culturally tolerant and later demonstrated skills of valuing diversity in their own careers and lives.

Nina. One participant, who had grown up in Kazakhstan with Russian and Georgian parents before moving to Georgia as a teenager and later to the U.S., recounts her experience interacting with other students from different cultural backgrounds and the new understanding and value that she placed on people from African countries:

> Before coming to the U.S., I didn't have much interaction with Africans. And we had such a great community of students from Africa from various countries [at USI]. It was very eye-opening for me to see that- Oh, my gosh! These people! They are not only very intelligent… they are, they are just like change-makers in this world! We had students who were from the refugee camps in Zimbabwe, for example. And there would be students from families of 12 people, and they were the ones that made it, and they would be speaking like six languages. And it was so great to see that and just to be, you know, open to that, to the information and to the interactions like that. And most of the interactions would be just positive, very positive. And eye-opening. U.S. gave me an opportunity to even more develop myself, and to make me more curious about every single other thing that is happening out in this world or every other single person who is very different or very, very different from me.

This participant was one who came to the U.S. with many years of intercultural experience and whose adaptability to new environments and situations was quite high. However, because of her

openness to new experiences and the high value she placed on other cultures, she was able to expand her cultural understanding and make strong connections with people she had never interacted with before.

Beyouo. Similar to the situation above, one student from Burkina Faso shared his truly perspective-changing experience meeting a classmate whose diversity was unlike any he had encountered before:

> The first thing I would like to share is like a shock, this sort of big shock that I had. Studying in U.S.… it was the first time ever I met somebody who wouldn't hide their identity, and who plainly told me that they were gay. Coming from a country where it is culturally sensitive for them to express their sexual identity, I had never really met somebody who revealed that sexual identity. So it was the first time I ever sat next to somebody who affirmed their sexual identity. First it was a very big shock, and then it made me also reflect, you know, on I myself being a sort of minority coming from a majority group and then being a minority in the U.S.. That kind of really, I mean, that was very tough at the beginning, you know. Getting to accept, knowing the context is different. So, then, this was like a first battle to change my perceptions of the different thing, that I will find a new context that might be different from what is going on in my country. So little by little, I was able to maybe shift my understanding of gender. And then we became very good friends. But again that was the first time I ever actually experienced it. And so this up to now had a sort of big change in my perceptions of gay or lesbian people.

He goes on to recount how this friendship led him to pursue career opportunities that he wouldn't have pursued prior to this experience:

> And back home when I went back to Burkina Faso, I was in an NGO working for a minority group promoting the minority group access to health services. And you know, I did not really know that there were [gay people] in Burkina Faso. But integrating in that NGO and working really with those specific groups, I was really at ease interacting with them being in Burkina Faso. But yeah, before this experience, if I was to be recruited to work with [gay people], knowing the different social pressure that would be linked to it if ever people knew that I was working in such an organization, I wouldn't accept it, you know. But then, with that experience… to me, I mean, it is their body, and they can do everything they want with their body. So like I have my cultural norm, they have theirs. So what they are doing with the body shouldn't be my business.

This participant is a great example of a person who came to the U.S. with cultural biases, but after confronting those biases through interactions with people of diverse cultural backgrounds, went back to his country and changed the way he behaved. He did not revert to his previous cultural biases, but instead took an active role promoting the well-being of a group that he might have previously discriminated against.

Relativizing One's Self: Cultural Self-Awareness and Capacity for Self-Assessment

Research Question 3 also, beyond just recounting stories of IC learning, seeks to identify those instances where participants learned to reflect on the value of acquiring IC. This ability to not only grow but recognize and reflect on the growth is an important step in Deardorff's (2006) Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence and Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity.

Sana. One participant who was student from Japan studying at USI for both English language and a bachelor's degree was one of several that mentioned trying to take inventory of her cultural influences and adapt to the new cultural situation of living and studying in the U.S.:

> There were a lot of situations that I had to adapt to a new culture, new environment. In my culture, it's good to be shy or like just wait, be passive. But I just realized when I started studying in bachelor level that you have to be more independent, especially during courses. So in the beginning I was so shy to ask questions during courses and I tried to solve some problem by myself, like just Googling, or read some textbook. But I realized sometimes it didn't work, and I had to actively communicate with other classmates—they were all American—and also to communicate with my course leader, teachers. And at that moment, I gave up being shy, and I just tried to actively communicate with others and ask help.
>
> There were a lot of misunderstanding, miscommunication. But mainly, I think it was due to my language skills. But I just try to talk as much as possible, and don't give up, was the key while I was staying the United States. Because once you give up, then you will not understand each other especially with everybody has different backgrounds, different culture, like different way of solving this communication problem. So I just open up myself and try to communicate.

Sana went on, after completing her bachelor's degree at USI, to study a master's degree and PhD outside of her home country. Her experience adapting to different educational environments from this early moment made a lasting impact on her educational path. She is now studying with a cohort of individuals from multiple countries and continues using these same skills in her communication with them.

Beyouo and Kittipong. Two participants recounted having to re-evaluate their own cultures and their understanding of them through the lens of their experience as an international student in the U.S. Both Beyouo, from Burkina Faso, and Kittipong, from Thailand, talk about their struggles representing themselves and their cultures during cultural presentations, introductions, and conversations. Kittipong says:

> Being in the U.S. was the first time that I felt that I was not a majority of people. There [in the U.S.] I was like oh, now I'm the minority. And I never had to learn so much about my own culture or what it meant to be a Thai person or think very much about Thai culture. But there, one of the things that could be topic of conversation is what it is like in your country. So I really had to learn, and totally understand my culture to explain that to people. And with that I learned to appreciate little things of other people too. And it feels good for people to kind of recognize small things about your country.

Kittipong, who goes by the nickname Beer in his own country, also shared some realizations he had about his perception of his own culture. Talking about the tradition of using nicknames, he said:

> For Thai people, we have very long, complicated names. The full official name would be used like at the bank, for legal reasons only. Other than that, we have a nickname that our parents gave to us at birth. Beer was my father's only alcoholic drink of choice, so I think that's how my mother decided on that.

However, when asked about how people reacted to his nickname and whether or not it helped to break the ice in conversations, he said:

> I was once one of those people who were not really proud of their culture. So when I was in the U.S., I went by the name Ben. One, to avoid having to explain all this [referring to the cultural tradition of going by a nickname] to every person I encountered. But two, it was

> because I wanted to blend in. So I wanted to have a name that people would remember easily. But coming back from the U.S. to Thailand I realized how much Thailand and the Thai culture meant to me and I regret using another name for myself. And also the name Beer, it's not that hard, right? Some are way harder.

Beyouo, like Kittipong, went through the experience of having to evaluate his own culture. He also encountered difficulty figuring out how to represent those things to others. He says:

> When I came here, there were many, many occasions where as international students, we were called to talk about ourselves. And I wouldn't even at the time know what is important thing to show. But people will be expecting me to say something. And so this really get me to self-reflection on some of the thing that I might be taking for granted that might have important meaning to others. I had to really think about anything about me that might be a source of information that others might need. So I started writing about…this is how my childhood was, this is where I went to my second primary school, this is how this school look like… I just started writing them, so that whenever people ask questions I would then already have that information to share. And so when I finish my studies, I decided, hey, what am I going to do with all this information because I really wrote a lot of things about myself. Okay, I will maybe put some reflection, draw some lesson for every step of my stories and see how those lessons could be useful to other children who might be on my path. And so I turned those stories into a book, and then the book was published in Burkina Faso in 2021.

He goes on to explain that the last chapter of the book is titled “A Letter to My Son,” in which he talks about his cultural, religious, and societal world views:

> So I told my son clearly that I am not against him becoming a Buddhist, or becoming an atheist, or becoming whatever he want to become. But the only thing I will be against is

> forcing somebody to be seeing the world the way he is seeing it. So yeah, the experience [studying at USI] actually contributed a lot to what I share.

Both Beyouo and Kittipong went through the experience of having to place themselves in the context of their own cultures. Through that, they were able to see an increased value not only in their own cultures, but in the stories and diversity of others.

Ali. One of the biggest challenges that any person who moves between cultures faces is overcoming misconceptions, both about themselves and the culture that they are moving into. The most dramatic example from this study came from a participant from Pakistan. Like many of the other Pakistani participants from this study, Ali came to the U.S. as part of a one-semester exchange program. However, by his own admission, his intercultural skills prior to coming were quite low. He had never traveled outside of his country before and unfortunately carried a lot of stereotypes with him when he came. He says:

> Before coming to the U.S., I had a lot of stereotypes about the culture, about the people, about the system and how people would behave with me. And I was thinking they might not be very accepting of people like me. I'm from Pakistan. I'm a Muslim. For the first 15 days I was like bounded in my shell, not interacting with people because I had that misconception in my head because of all those things.

Ali's experience is not an uncommon one among international students. Many often never move away from this stage, preferring to spend time with other internationals from their home country or a neighboring culture. This tendency to stay within a homogeneous group is one of the main inhibitors to intercultural learning (Sobkowiak, 2019). Ali, however, was able to reflect honestly on his misconceptions and adopt an attitude of openness and curiosity to learn. By adopting these

requisite attitudes, he was able to move quickly to more advanced stages of intercultural competence, and in the end had one of the most inspiring stories. He recounts:

> But then I had a chance to talk with other internationals who were living in my LLC (Living, Learning Community). So that was like a small mini world kind of thing where you are living with U.S. citizens, internationals, every part of the world. And during those times we had one course where we were talking about how we can settle in the U.S. classroom, how we can better know the different cultures, how we can have open intercultural conversations, how we can express our needs, how we can be tolerant or accepting. I also took a course in cultural anthropology where I was learning about this terminology ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, and all those things, and the instructor was really open to having difficult conversations. So during those conversations, during those interactions, those activities, I was opening up a little bit, and I got to know—I felt it actually—all those misconceptions that I had, all the stereotypes I had, that people might not be accepting… this was not the case. So this was a very positive shift in my perspective where I was kind of adapting and getting to know and unlearning bad stereotypes that I had previously and relearning new things. And it also made me understand the real culture, the real information, the real people as compared to what I had before coming to the U.S. When I got back to my country after this exchange program, I could see in myself that I'd grown a lot personally, emotionally, and mentally. I'm more open now. I don't judge people at first sight. Now I'm trying to understand their perspective. Now, I practice these competencies of listening, patience, and tolerance.

Ali's experience confronting his personal biases and being open to new cultural experiences demonstrates many important aspects of becoming interculturally competent. His shift in perspective

was, in fact, so impactful that he went on to become one of the best teachers of intercultural competence after returning home.

Nina. Like Ali, one other participant recounted the incredible impact that intentional learning of intercultural competence had on her personal development. Nina, whose intercultural experience began at a young age growing up in a third-culture environment, recounts an experience she had immediately after USI that helped her evaluate her IC learning. She was given the opportunity as part of her Fulbright scholarship to attend a brief internship in Washington, DC at George Washington University. The program also included a class on intercultural competence:

> I would be working with them but as much as we were learning about other cultures and learning how to interact with others, we also learned a lot about ourselves in that process. I had assessment included [referring to a test such as the IDI or GPI], but it had in the end kind of a graph of the intercultural competence. So the graph would show you your progress. They made us do one of the assessments in the beginning and the other one in the end. Mine was somewhere in the middle and the middle result meant that, yes, I am aware and I'm pretty open to everything, but maybe some stereotypes or some certain conditions may hinder me from having my intercultural competence at the higher level. And after the course and understanding of it—and it also included not only nations or countries or nationalities or ethnicities, it also includes a lot of information on the inclusion of race issues, minority issues, LGBTQI community understanding—and in the end this graph somehow went higher. And I was very happy about that.

Nina and Ali both demonstrated the effectiveness of intentional teaching of intercultural competence in moving people into higher levels of intercultural competence. More than that, they represent a position of willingness to learn, grow, and accept personal shortcomings.