

**A Mixed Methods Study: Do Ethnic Minority Students Experience a Change in their Sense of Cultural Sensitivity After a Study Abroad Program?**

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**ABSTRACT.** Study abroad programs are becoming increasingly popular in the United States and in other countries. The present study used a mixed-methods approach to examine cultural sensitivity in 18 ethnically diverse college students who participated in a study abroad program. Participants completed pre-and-post study questionnaires including open-ended questions targeting students' shifts in their levels of cultural sensitivity and their most memorable activities during the short-term study abroad experience. Quantitative results suggest significant growth in students' "cultural sensitivity" after participation in the study abroad program. Four major themes emerged from the qualitative data, including appreciation for cultural immersion and the novel, rewarding experiences students had while participating in the study abroad program. Implications of findings for educators and administrators are examined.

*Keywords:* Study Abroad, Cultural Sensitivity, Student Experiences, Ethnic Minorities Students, and College Students Abroad

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### **A Mixed Methods Study: Do Ethnic Minority Students Experience a Change in their Sense of Cultural Sensitivity After a Study Abroad Program?**

As the U.S. population becomes more ethnically diverse and we see an increase in the numbers of foreign-born Americans (Colby & Ortman, 2015), it is of paramount importance that students who become professionals in the field of social services or who plan to work with children and parents learn to understand, communicate, and collaborate with clients across cultures. Likewise, increased trends of globalization, technology, travel, migration, and labor mobility contribute to the need for globally competent students. Therefore, educational experiences must provide opportunities for students to acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will help them understand, communicate, and work effectively outside their own cultural environments with people from different cultural backgrounds (Krishnan, Masters, Holgate, Wong, & Calahan, 2017).

The influx of immigrants has major implications for the workplace, institutions, schools, universities, and government. Experts believe these sites need restructuring to accommodate needs of people from other countries who will work in and be served by them. (Anderson, 2010; Banks, 2019). Greater migration in the U.S. necessitates producing practitioners who are comfortable working with and knowledgeable about cultures different from their own. Many universities across the country now require courses with global and international content. Done correctly, these courses offer the possibility of educating students about countries other than their own in a manner that promotes the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) and Family Life Education's (NCFR) core values and principles. The mission statement of AAFCS is to

provide support for professionals whose work assists individuals, families, and communities in making informed decisions about their well-being, relationships, and resources to achieve optimal quality of life, enhance the quality of life for children and families within the context of their environment.  
([http://bing.com/search?q=aafc+mission+statement & form](http://bing.com/search?q=aafc+mission+statement+form))

While the mission of the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR)

is to provide an educational forum for family researchers, educators, and practitioners to share in the development and dissemination of knowledge about families and family relationships, family within the context of international diversity, establish professional standards, and work to promote family well-being within the context of the environment. (<https://www.ncfr.org/about/mission-and-identity>).

To achieve the goals of these mission statements, students must be culturally aware when working with ethnically diverse families in their communities (Sue, 2001; Tucker et al., 2005). Cultural sensitivity is defined as the knowledge, awareness, and acceptance of people from other cultures ([https://small business chron.com/cultural sensitivity-skills-workplace-20375.html](https://smallbusinesschron.com/cultural-sensitivity-skills-workplace-20375.html); Bennett, 2017). Individuals who are culturally sensitive respond to people from different cultures in a respectful, appropriate manner; they recognize, respect, affirm, and accept differences (Goff

& Kauper, 2013; Seth, Updhyaya, Ahmad, & Kumar, 2010). Chen and Starosta (2000) stated that the term *intercultural sensitivity* includes six affective elements: self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and suspending judgement. Cultural sensitivity is critical because it allows an individual to function in other cultures, to respect and value other cultures, and reduces cultural barriers between them and persons who live in other parts of the world. All of this results in deeper interpersonal connections.

Zhai and Scheer (2004, p. 40) remarked that “we are living in an interdependent world, and a citizen in any one country is compelled to learn about other cultures.” The popular adage, “The world has become a global village” is an apt way of explaining the world today. Global education and being culturally sensitive can empower youth to participate in shaping a better, shared future for the world (Open Doors, 2014; Wang, Peyvandi, & Coffey, 2014). Global education emphasizes unity, interconnectedness, and interdependence of human society, appreciates cultural diversity, and understands and promotes human rights and social justice in different parts of the world. Take and Shoraku (2017) posited that institutions can no longer afford consequences of failing to prepare their students for participation in international affairs. Several researchers (Geyer, Putz, & Misra, 2017; Medora & Roy, 2017; Nguyen, Jefferies, & Rojas, 2018; Zhai & Scheer, 2004) concluded that an overseas experience tends to have positive influence on U.S. students.

According to the Open Doors report (2017), 325,339 American students participated in a study abroad program and received academic credit for the course during the 2015-2016 academic year. This was an increase of four percent from the previous year (Open Doors, 2017). In the last two decades, the numbers of students participating in study abroad programs have tripled (Open Doors, 2017). It should be mentioned that U.S. students studying abroad include very small numbers of students from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds by a ratio of 4:1 (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009; Stallman, Woodruff, Kasravi, & Comp, 2010; Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, & Klute, 2012). Consequently, there few empirical investigations include experiences of ethnic minority students participating in study abroad programs.

There are different types of study abroad programs ranging from two weeks to a year. All study abroad programs are educational programs that take place outside the geographical boundaries of the students’ home countries. Most study abroad programs involve a combination of course work, visits to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other government organizations, social service agencies, orphanages, museums, schools, cultural activities and cultural demonstrations, experiential activities and tours (Medora & Roy, 2017). Professional partnerships and lifelong friendships created through international education and study abroad experiences are important for a secure, prosperous future, not just for the U.S. but also for the world (NAFSA, 2003).

There are many different ways to teach students course content. The lecture method is the most commonly used. (Goff & Kauper, 2013; Seth, Upadyaya, Ahmed, Kumar, 2010). More recently, online classes, hybrid classes, and flipped courses have been introduced as teaching modalities on university campuses. A relatively new method in teaching is “experiential

learning.” In this type of learning, students are culturally immersed in the learning experience and hands-on learning occurs. Experiential learning has been integrated into some study abroad programs, giving students opportunities to connect more deeply with their learning while abroad.

The present study is based on results of a short-term, one-month study abroad program in Australia and New Zealand. Students were exposed to multiple cultural experiential activities and cultural immersion experiences. It should be noted that not all study abroad experiences use experiential exercises (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Qualitative responses in this study highlight students’ experiences regarding experiential learning during the short-term study abroad program; quantitative survey results documented their cultural immersion experiences.

Based on a survey of existing scholarship, the authors of the present study could not identify any empirical investigations examining how ethnic minority students from a minority serving institution are affected by participation in a short-term faculty led study abroad course. As indicated above, the numbers of ethnic minority students participating in these kinds of programs are low. Even in the sample for the present study, many students reported that this was the first time they had left home; others indicated they had never traveled outside of their home states.

### **Program**

Before the group departed for the abroad experience, they attended nine 3-hour classes in the US and their home university. Course requirements included attendance, completing an international general knowledge quiz, a short 4-5 page term paper, and one mid-term exam. Requirements were completed before students left the US. At the end of the program, on the last day, the students must complete Reflection Papers and final exams. Questions on the final exam were based on readings from the Course Packet, speaker presentations, lectures, and simple questions based on places of interest we visited.

The current 1-month study abroad program introduced students to issues relating to children and families in contemporary Australia and in New Zealand. From California, students flew to Sydney, Australia. They spent a week in Sydney and two days on the Gold Coast. In Sydney, they visited the University of Australia, where a family studies professor studies gave a presentation on “The Current Status of Australian Families: Comparison with the Past Trends.” Another guest speaker from Cook University discussed educational similarities and differences between American and Australian educational systems from preschool to completion of a four-year university degree. Students visited an aboriginal enclave where a health care worker delivered a lecture on health issues and family challenges of the aborigines. Finally, the group visited a former orphanage for Australian aborigine children that had been converted into a museum.

From Australia, the group flew to Auckland, New Zealand, and got a first glance of indigenous Maori culture, which for many students was the highlight of the program. They spent the entire day at the local “marae” (a social gathering house). Three experts on Maori culture explained the history, culture, beliefs, child-rearing methods, and life cycle stages that Maori

people have practiced for over 1,000 years. Four guest speakers discussed different issues related to children and family life. From Auckland, we visited Rotorua, the heartland of Maori culture. The students spent a week in this city. They engaged in unique recreational activities, i.e., Zorbing, Ogo, black water rafting, and white water rafting. They also visited the renowned Waitomo caves, saw millions of glow worms and zip-lined. Half a day was spent at the Tamaki Village where students saw how Maori people lived before colonization occurred. Students participated in the world-famous “haka” (warrior dance), ate a dinner cooked in a “hangi” (under-earth oven), and saw Maori men and women dressed in their traditional garb with gender-specific tattoos signifying their tribes. Students also learned how Maori people used weapons in the past and were instructed about different uses of whales and sharks. Another highlight that many students enjoyed was a visit to the “*Maori All Boys High School*” and “*Kaharoa Elementary School*” in Rotorua. In these schools, students had opportunities to mingle with local students, play rugby, and ask many questions.

From Rotorua, the group flew to Queenstown. Here, students visited three different preschools and a university. Three guest speakers from various social service agencies who worked in some capacity with children and families guest lectured. From Queenstown, we visited Te Anau and took a cruise on the spectacular Milford Sound fjord, experienced the wild and pristine beauty of dozens of thunderous waterfalls, lush green vegetation, and clear blue waters.

Christchurch was our last destination. We toured the city and were surprised and heartbroken to see the devastation the 2011 earthquake had caused in this peaceful but vibrant city. Students completed their final exams and Reflection Papers here and caught a flight back to their homeland.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Framing of the current study is rooted in transformative learning theory. Transformative learning theory generally refers to processes that facilitate shifts in one’s values, conditioned responses, and frames of reference about the world in which they live (Mezirow, 1997). Moreover, scholars argue that this type of learning occurs through processes that allow students to examine current assumptions about themselves and others while experimenting with alternatives ways of framing the world (Mezirow, 1997). A transformative learning context includes space for discourse that encourages critical examination of assumptions, explaining and supporting one’s point of view, and openness to synthesizing ideas from multiple perspectives. For transformative learning to occur, it is most important that instructors provide experiences that support critical reflection and discussions about one’s perceptions about those experiences (Mezirow, 1997). At times, learners may need support from others (i.e., a professor, classmates/peers) to transform their frames of reference in order to fully integrate the new experiences into existing ways of thinking (Mezirow, 1997). Ultimately, the most profound outcome associated with transformative learning includes “autonomous thinking within a collaborative context” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 8). Study abroad programs like the one included in the present study offer students opportunities to engage in transformative learning activities that support shifts in their cognitive structures to allow for more flexible ways of thinking. The

structure of the study abroad program examined here immersed students in cultural experiences that encouraged them to think differently about their own cultures, and about the culture of the country in which they were studying. This study abroad program also included space for students to engage in critical dialog regarding their cultural immersion experiences and to integrate perspectives of their classmates and instructor to create new frames of reference.

### **Objectives**

The pedagogy of the class was steeped in transformative learning principles, and aimed to increase cultural sensitivity during a short-term study abroad program. The goals of transformative learning theory also influenced the development of the objectives of the present study. First, the researchers of this study sought to investigate whether there were significant differences in the pre-departure and post-departure scores on cultural sensitivity for a group of students who visited Australia and New Zealand during a one-month faculty-led study abroad experience. Second, the authors of this study sought to understand how the study abroad experience affected students academically and personally through qualitative analyses of written data collected from participants at the conclusion of their study abroad experience. The third objective for the study was to identify which aspect(s) of the study abroad program, had the greatest impact on the students. Overall, the researchers endeavored to uncover whether the experiences of this short-term study abroad program contributed to shifts in students' frame of reference, critical assessments of themselves and others, and a broadening of their worldview, all of which are key tenants of transformative learning theory.

### **Method**

A mixed method approach was used to explore the experiences of students enrolled in a faculty-led study abroad program to visit Australia and New Zealand. Quantitative measures used in the study included demographics questions and Stanley's (1996) *Attitudes towards Cultural Diversity Scale*, an established standardized scale on cultural sensitivity. Four open-ended questions were included to examine more specific student perceptions and experiences to capture rich, qualitative data. This study was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) before data collection.

### **Participants**

A group of 26 ethnically diverse undergraduate students from a large urban university on the west coast of the US were enrolled in the short-term study abroad program to Australia and New Zealand in 2016. The students were enrolled in an upper level special topics course to study contemporary issues affecting children and families in Australia, New Zealand, and the US. Of the 26 students who completed pre-departure survey, 18 students also completed the post-departure survey. Student demographics for those who participated in the study are illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Participant Sample*

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Latino/Hispanic	15	60.0
White	4	16.0
Asian	4	16.0
Two or more races	2	8.0
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	25	96.3
Male	1	3.8
<b>Age</b>		
18-20 yrs.	3	11.5
21-22 yrs.	16	61.6
23-24 yrs.	4	15.4
25-26 yrs.	2	7.6
30 yrs.	1	3.8
<b>Academic Standing</b>		
Junior	3	11.5
Senior	17	65.4
Other	6	23.1
<b>Major</b>		
Child Development & Family Studies (CDFS)	10	38.5
Family Life Education (FLE)	2	7.7
Double Major in CDFS & FLE	6	23.1
Psychology	2	7.7
Sociology	1	3.8
Other	5	19.2
<b>GPA</b>		
2.00-2.49	2	7.7
2.50-2.99	2	7.7
3.00-3.49	12	46.2
3.50-4.00	10	38.5

\*Note: One participant did not identify their race/ethnicity

### **Instruments**

Along with the demographic information questionnaire given during pre- and post-departures, the survey instrument consisted of one standardized scale to assess cultural sensitivity. Stanley's (1996) *Attitudes towards Cultural Diversity and Scale* was used for measuring students' cultural diversity attitudes. This was a 19-item scale with  $\alpha = 0.95$  and had a 6-point Likert-type response category ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree).

The post-departure questionnaire also consisted of four open-ended questions (listed below) meant to assess breadth and depth of student experiences during this faculty-led short-term study abroad experience.

1. How do you think that participating in the study abroad program influenced you and your life? Has it changed you in any way? If so, how?
2. If you were asked to write a letter to the Study Abroad Office at your current University or to Study Abroad Provider and tell them three to five highlights about the program, what would you tell them?
3. Did you feel that you were adequately prepared to visit Australia and New Zealand after the pre-departure classes that you had? If you were not prepared, which components did you think were missing?
4. We spent 24 days outside the U.S., as part of the study abroad program. Describe the specific day that you thought was most memorable and meaningful day for you. Specify why it was so memorable for you?

### **Procedure**

All 26 students enrolled in the faculty led short-term study abroad program had to complete nine consecutive days of course work before the study abroad departure. During the second day of course work, students were asked to complete pre-departure questionnaires. On the last day of the study abroad experience before returning to the United States, students were asked to complete post-departure questionnaires. Student participation in completing and returning surveys to the instructor was voluntary. Students received numerically coded surveys so researchers could link their pre- and post-surveys for later analyses. Participation in completing these two surveys was done on a voluntary basis, so not all of the 26 students submitted post-surveys. Of the 26 participants who completed demographics questionnaires, 18 completed both pre- and post-departure surveys.

### **Data Analyses**

Quantitative analyses for the present study consisted of an initial descriptive analysis of participant characteristics followed by a paired sample *t*-test on the pre-departure and post-departure scale on cultural sensitivity. Since the same population was being assessed at Time 1 and Time 2 periods during the study abroad process, a paired sample *t*-test was the most appropriate measure to test for whether or not there were differences in the Time-1 and Time-2 mean difference scores. Qualitative data were analyzed with an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The IPA aims to identify patterns of meaning in the data collected (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The research team consisted of three individuals who independently analyzed student responses to the four open-ended questions to identify and provide evidence for themes that emerged from data. According to Larkin and Thompson (2012), in IPA, researchers should identify emerging patterns in a single case and then evaluate subsequent cases for common



patterns. The three researchers came together after initial review of participant responses and found commonalities in their identified themes. Once these initial themes were confirmed and agreed on by all three researchers, data from the qualitative responses were analyzed and it was found that the same themes emerged from participants' experiences.

### Results

Initially, investigators ran descriptive statistics and correlations on all key variables and demographic variables. Since several demographic variables were categorical, dummy variables were created for each category before running a correlation matrix. A paired t-test was conducted to examine mean differences between Time-1 and Time-2, measuring cultural sensitivity. Associations between key variables and demographics such as race/ethnicity, year in school, and GPA were also examined. Descriptive statistics computed on Time-1 and Time-2 measures on cultural sensitivity indicated that students in the sample showed high overall levels of cultural sensitivity before the study abroad program started. However, pre-test cultural sensitivity scores for the overall sample indicated a lower mean (5.24) when compared to the post-test cultural sensitivity score mean (5.45) (Table 2). Six of the scale items were worded negatively, so responses were reverse coded.

Table 2

*Mean Scores for the Attitudes towards Cultural Diversity Scale among Students (n = 16)*

Attitudes towards Cultural Diversity Statements	Mean T <sub>1</sub> (SD)	Mean T <sub>2</sub> (SD)
In education, it does not matter if a student is rich or poor, everyone should have the same chance to succeed.	5.50 (0.82)	5.31 (1.08)
Each student should have an equal opportunity to learn and succeed in education.	5.75 (0.45)	5.81 (0.40)
Education should help students develop respect for themselves and others.	5.81 (0.40)	5.75 (0.45)
Students should be taught to respect those who are different from themselves.	5.69 (0.79)	5.69 (0.48)
Students should feel pride in their heritage.	5.81 (0.40)	5.81 (0.40)
All students should learn about cultural differences.	5.75 (0.45)	5.81 (0.40)
Each minority culture has something positive to contribute to U.S. society.	5.63 (0.50)	5.63 (0.62)
Education activities should be representative of a wide variety of cultures.	5.37 (0.72)	5.69 (0.48)
I enjoy being around people who are different from me.	5.38 (0.81)	5.63 (0.62)

Educators are responsible for teaching student about the way in which various cultures have influenced this country.	4.88 (0.72)	5.25 (0.93)
Educators should plan activities that meet the diverse needs and develop the unique abilities of students from different ethnic backgrounds.	4.93 (0.70)	5.56 (0.51)
The perspectives of a wide range of ethnic groups should be included in the curriculum.	4.81 (0.66)	5.44 (0.73)
Minority individuals should adopt the values and lifestyles of the dominant culture.*	4.13 (1.36)	4.13 (1.46)
I am uncomfortable around students whose ethnic heritage is different from my own.*	4.38 (1.67)	5.00 (1.41)
Minority students are hard to work with.*	4.56 (1.03)	4.75 (1.29)
Cultural diversity is a valuable resource and should be preserved.	5.31 (0.60)	5.75 (0.45)
Cultural diversity is a negative force in the development of the U.S. society.*	5.19 (0.91)	5.37 (0.81)
There is really nothing that educational systems can do for students who come from lower socioeconomic groups.*	5.00 (1.03)	5.44 (0.89)
Students should give up their cultural beliefs and practices to fit in with other students.*	5.69 (0.70)	5.69 (0.79)

\*Negatively worded items that were reverse coded when calculating the overall mean

To examine whether a short-term faculty led study abroad experience influenced students' cultural sensitivity scores a dependent sample t-test was performed. The pre-test cultural sensitivity mean ( $M = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 0.3947$ ) and post-test cultural sensitivity mean ( $M = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ) were significantly correlated at  $r = .81$ ,  $p < .001$ . Before conducting the analysis, the assumption of normally distributed difference score was examined, and the assumption was considered "satisfying." A paired sample t-test comparing cultural sensitivity means from Time-1 to Time-2 indicated significant change in cultural sensitivity scores such that  $t(15) = -2.98$ ,  $p < .01$ . Thus, the Time-2 cultural sensitivity mean was significantly higher statistically than the Time-1 mean. Cohan's  $d$  was estimated at  $-0.74$ , which indicates a moderate effect based on Cohen's (1992) guidelines.

Qualitative analysis for the present study included 18 respondents who answered the four open-ended questions. Overall, four themes emerged from the data: (a) the study abroad experience as one that is novel and rewarding, (b) appreciation for cultural immersion, (c)

importance of pre-departure preparations, and (d) experiences associated with the most meaningful and memorable day.

### **Theme 1: The Study Abroad Experience was a Novel and Rewarding Experience**

Participants shared that the study abroad experience for them was a novel and rewarding experience. The students participated in many different types of cultural, educational, and recreational activities that were unique to Australia and New Zealand. Qualitative responses indicated that the entire program from start to finish was a new and invigorating experience for the students. Many of the students commented that this was their first time in an airplane. Participants also stated that they were leaving their families and going to a foreign country for the first time, as well. Participating in the excursions was a memorable and unique experience for the students. They reported bonding well with their fellow classmates, and they specified that they will continue to keep in touch with them. Participating in the program was a life-altering experience for many students and they also stated that they felt a sense of achievement by participating in the program.

One participant commented,

I never imagined that taking one class could make such a difference in my life. I have made life-long friends. The program was truly a life-altering experience for me. I realized how sheltered I was. I also found out that there is so much that I did not know about.

Another student mentioned,

I had traveled overseas once with my church but this program was absolutely awesome and made me think about my values and priorities. I am now more open-minded, flexible, more tolerant. I loved the culture of New Zealand and plan to go and volunteer there after I graduate. Being part of this program was a transformative experience for me.

### **Theme 2: Appreciation for Cultural Immersion**

Based on students' open-ended responses, the one aspect of the study abroad program they liked the most was the cultural immersion component. There were many occasions when students were immersed in local culture, but they highlighted a few immersion components that stood out and were memorable. Qualitative responses indicated that in Australia, doing artwork at the Aboriginal Center, throwing the boomerang, dancing with aboriginal people, and talking with indigenous people about medicinal plants meant a lot to students.

As soon as students landed in Auckland, New Zealand, they spent half a day at a Maori "marae," a social gathering house, where they learned the basics of Maori culture along with fundamentals and significance of the "marae." Students sang Maori folk songs and played Maori games with the hosts. Another cultural immersion day in New Zealand that was meaningful to students was the half-day they spent at the Tamaki Village. This is a large lot of land that was

converted into a Maori village that displays to tourists the ways in which Maori people lived, sang, danced, hunted, cooked, and fought before colonization occurred in the 1800s.

One student stated:

Loved the hands-on experience and cultural immersion experiences that we had at the Maori marae.

While another student commented,

Everything that we learned and discussed in class, we got to see and actually participate in.

Furthermore, another student remarked,

What I liked most about the program was to interact with the Maori people, spend time with them and learn Maori words, and songs. This gave me a sense of spirituality, and a closeness to God.

### **Theme 3: The Importance of a Pre-departure Preparation**

The third question that we asked the students was, “*Do you think you were adequately prepared for the program? At the completion of the pre-departure meetings and classes, do you think that you were adequately prepared for the program before you got to Australia and New Zealand?*” A large majority of the students specified that they felt prepared for the study abroad program. The pre-departure classes helped them a lot to know what to expect.

One student commented:

Ha! Ha! All the handouts and bold lettering on [Author’s] handouts helped me to know what to expect”. Before the pre-departure classes, I knew nothing about these two countries.

Another student said

The DVDs on the introduction to the two islands in New Zealand and the DVD on the Maori culture, helped me to know ahead of time that what is embarrassing to us in the western world, is an integral part of the Maori culture.

Finally, a student remarked,

[Author] informed us that we will be seeing spectacular beauty but to see the blue lakes and hundreds of twinkling stars in the sky was a totally different issue. I never imagined that any country in the world could be so beautiful.

In response to the question on what they were not prepared for, one student said she wished she had been better prepared to cope with the cold on the South Island in New Zealand. Another student reported that she felt she spent more money on buying souvenirs than expected. Finally, one student commented that she thought the drinks offered in Australia and New Zealand were good but far too expensive.

#### **Theme 4: Most Meaningful and Memorable Day**

The fourth question that students were asked was, “*As part of the study abroad program, we spent 24 days outside the U.S. Describe the specific day that you thought was the most memorable and meaningful day for you. Specify why it was so memorable?*”

A large majority of students specified that the half-day cultural immersion experience they had at the Maori “marae” (social gathering house) in Auckland, New Zealand will always be memorable because it was so meaningful. The excursion took place immediately after landing in New Zealand. This was their first introduction to Maori culture. As part of this cultural immersion, students learned several Maori words, played games in which they had to speak only in Te Reo Maori, the Maori language, sang songs in the Maori language, were welcomed, and greeted in the traditional Maori way “hongi.” They also prayed with the Maori hosts, the way the Maori people pray.

In accordance with this theme, a few students mentioned that the most impactful day (approximately 5 hours) for them was the cultural experience they shared at the Tamaki Village in Rotorua, North Island in New Zealand. When the students spent time at the Tamaki Village they saw how Maori people lived, cooked, fought, and stored grain for the winter months before colonization.

Regarding this experience, one student indicated,

“At Tamaki Village, the hands-on experiences with the use of “poi”, practicing the haka, taking photographs with the Maori warriors, and learning about the “moko” (use of tattoos),” was the most memorable for her.

Finally, many students commented that the visit to the *All Boy’s Immersion High School* was an exciting day for them. The experience left a lasting impression on them because they spent so much time with the Maori boys and got to know more about Maori culture and lifestyle.

### **Discussion**

Using a transformative learning theoretical lens, the researchers of the present study sought to examine shifts in cultural sensitivity and personal/academic growth and to identify aspects of the study abroad program that were most impactful for students. There were statistically significant differences between students’ scores for cultural sensitivity before and after the study abroad program, such that students’ cultural sensitivity scores increased at the end of the study abroad program. From the perspective of transformative learning theory, a possible

explanation for these differences may be that when one has lived in only one cultural environment, the likelihood is that they tend to be ethnocentric and only appreciate their own culture. This framework also argues that without experiences that encourage critical reflection and broaden one's sense of self and the world, people may tend to believe that their lived experience is the benchmark for how other cultures should operate and be judged (Mezirow, 1997). Most students in this sample were probably not as aware of how people in other cultures lived before participating in the study abroad program. Exposure to cultures different from their own culture seems to indicate, at least for this sample, that the study abroad experience helped them be more aware and culturally sensitive. The results of this study are in agreement with those of other researchers (Evanson & Zust, 2006; Hadis, 2005; Lindsey, 2005; Williams, 2005). These researchers also found that cultural sensitivity scores increased after students had participated in short-term study abroad programs.

Students' open-ended responses indicated that they viewed the program in a very positive light. As demonstrated in quotes included in the results section, students used terms like "life-altering" and "transformative" to describe their study abroad experiences. For most students, this program was their first major travel experience outside the U.S.; for some, it was their first travel sojourn on an airplane outside California. According to student responses, being exposed to two new cultures in such a short period of time, listening to speakers, attending class, meeting new people, being introduced to new foods, getting used to new weather, and hearing new words represented novel yet positive experiences for most of them. Fortunately, they had the safety net of being with classmates, their instructor from the U.S., and had a detailed hour-by-hour schedule of their activities. Based on transformative learning theory, being able to process these new experiences in the context of others (i.e., professors, classmates) helps in the process of transforming one's frame of reference and fully integrating new experiences into existing ways of thinking (Mezirow, 1997). Moreover, qualitative data indicated shifts in students' "values and priorities," expanding sense of cultural norms and frames of reference, and experiencing things beyond what they imagined was possible, all of which indicated transformative learning.

The cultural immersion experience(s) that students indicated as being their most valued was the time they spent on the North Island at the Maori "marae." Visiting the Maori "marae" was the students' first introduction to the Maori culture. They walked up to the Maori marae at the "Auckland University of Technology." This visit included a brief introductory discussion about etiquette at the "marae." Participants were instructed about protocols and customs of the "marae," relevance of the "marae" within Māori culture, and the significance of "pōwhiri" – a formal welcome to visitors from afar. This was followed by a "Pōwhiri," a traditional Māori welcome to the "marae," or the meeting house. A "Pōwhiri" is a sacred ceremony still practiced today in modern Māori society that inducts participants into the "marae," the community, and the family. During the chanting, the Maori people remember their forefathers and ancestors. The ceremony itself brings together elements of physical and metaphysical principles of Māori culture that remain relevant to modern day Māori people in New Zealand. Findings of the present study are consistent with extant research on short-term study abroad programs (Conroy & Taggart, 2016; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Larson, 2014; Stewart, 2013), which demonstrate *cultural immersion experiences* and being "part of the culture" as most beneficial to students in the learning process, with positive long-term consequences for their lives and potential careers.

The time that students spent at the Maori Tamaki Village was also identified as a cultural immersion activity students will remember for a long time. The Tamaki Village had native trees and shrubs covering the entire area. In the middle of this dense forestation there were “shacks” in which the Maori people lived for hundreds of years before colonization. There were fires at many places to keep dwellers warm. At the back of most shacks there were elevated huts used by several families to store grain for the winter months.

Before the guests entered the village, several ceremonies described above were performed and songs were sung before guests were asked to go and sit in an open-air auditorium where the Maori people sang their folk songs, danced, and performed their most famous “haka,” the war dance. After this event, guests were told how the Maori people cook their food in underground earthen ovens for about 8-9 hours. Then guests were taken to a traditional Maori village where different handicrafts were sold, tattoos were given to people who desired them, and several Maori games were taught. Guests were encouraged to participate in these games. Finally, dinner was served and students were once again entertained by music and dance in the dining hall.

The visit to the Karahoa Middle School was identified as a cultural immersion activity that the students greatly valued. This was a Decile 9 school. In New Zealand, schools are given Decile rankings. Decile 9 ranking suggests that the children in this school had parents that belonged to the upper socio-economic class. The school grounds were beautiful and neatly manicured. These children had many amenities in the school. The study abroad students received the opportunity to spend a lot of time in the classes with the elementary and middle school children and to teach them under the supervision of the head teacher. During lunch recess, the study abroad students had lunch together with the children from the middle school and then they played rugby together.

The third question for students addressed whether they were adequately prepared for the short-term study abroad program. All students indicated in some way that they were prepared and knew what to expect ahead of time. During pre-departure meetings, students received very detailed instructions on what to expect in Australia and in New Zealand. Detailed lists of things that students should carry with them had been prepared. The students were told about weather conditions being very different in the two countries. They were informed to expect cold, wind, and snow in New Zealand, and heat, humidity, and dry weather in Australia. Cultural and social differences and expectations in the two countries were also defined. As part of pre-departure meetings, students also watched DVDs depicting places they would be visiting and instructed on cultural norms as well as potential dangers. For these reasons, it appears that students were well-prepared and knew what to expect before departing the United States. Based on these findings, we concluded it is important that all faculty leaders conducting short-term study abroad programs share with their students information about what to expect in the host countries. In this way, the students can be well-prepared so as to help minimize effects of culture shock.

When the students were asked to specify one single day that was most memorable and meaningful to them during the 24-day short-term study abroad program, most selected one of the

two excursions as possible options: 1. The “*All Boys School*” in Rotorua discussed above; 2. the visit to the Maori “*marae*” experience in Auckland, New Zealand. These two excursions were selected as highlights of the program.

### **Importance of Instructor-Led Study Abroad Programs**

Findings of the present study also support the importance of instructor-led study abroad programs. This was evident in qualitative data indicating the positive impact of the pre-departure curriculum the instructor provided. Several learning theories also support the important role that faculty can provide during these kinds of new learning experience. According to transformation learning theory, the critical reflection and discourse needed to bring about change in one’s worldview requires that an instructor help students integrate new information in existing frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997). This resembles Vygotsky’s concept of the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) where having a more skilled other helps move students beyond current levels of knowledge or functioning (Wass & Golding, 2014). Specifically, based on ZPD, a faculty-led study program can help students make sense of new cultural experiences in ways they could not have independently.

Pedagogical literature on high impact practices and student success also supports the critical role faculty play in structuring experiences students have in short-term study abroad programs by helping them make connections between theoretical information and complex, real life experiences (Yuksel & Nascimento, 2018). Exploring new cultures with assistance from faculty with whom students are familiar helps alleviate fears and addresses other “dispositional barriers” that may interfere with student learning (Yuksel & Nascimento, 2018). Without an instructor to support critical reflection and integration of multiple perspectives, students may return from a study abroad experience with increased levels of ethnocentrism and may be more judgmental than they were before leaving.

### **Limitations**

Although data from the present study provided key insights into the positive impact of short term faculty-led study abroad programs, there are limitations. The most fundamental are connected to the study’s small sample size. With such a small number of participants, achieving response variability is difficult. Small sample sizes also limit the kinds of statistical analysis that can be performed. Along with the sample being small, it was also relatively homogenous even though it included ethnic minority students, a population that is understudied in the area of study abroad. Sample size is a problem with many faculty-led study abroad investigations because the numbers of students traveling abroad can be limited by several factors. There are also limitations related to the data being self-reported. According to Howard & Dailey (1979), self-reported data are subject to “response shift bias,” which can compromise validity of findings. Specifically, it is argued that in pre- and post-test evaluations the intervention (or the study abroad experience, in this case) can alter perceptions and/or awareness of variables being measured (Howard & Dailey, 1979) and result in measurement of two distinct constructs at the pre- versus post-test assessment. In other words, the post-test might be measuring the shift in the students’ understanding of the concept of cultural sensitivity as well as the impact of study abroad experiences. Regarding self-reported data, there is also the potential issue of “social desirability”



and the inability of researchers to separate this from the conclusions. Furthermore, since data were collected before and immediately following the trip, there is no way of knowing whether increased levels of cultural sensitivity and other positive outcomes persisted over time. Lastly, the sample was homogeneous in terms of gender. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain how gender might influence appraisal of experiences that students have in study abroad programs.

### **Implications**

In light of the limitations of this study, it is also important to note unique features of the study abroad program. Although the study had a relatively small sample, this study abroad program was unique in choice of destinations and the fact that most students in the study were first-generation college students from ethnic minority groups. Another unique feature of this short-term study abroad program is that most study abroad programs are conducted only in one specific locale. However, for this study abroad program, students studied in multiple locations (5 to 6 locations) within one country. They also visited two separate countries, Australia and New Zealand. The reason for doing this was to allow the students the opportunity to have a good basis for comparisons within one country, between the two countries, and with the US. Furthermore, to the researchers' knowledge, there is no published research on students' cultural sensitivity outcomes after a short-term study abroad program after visiting Australia and New Zealand. Both countries are rich in cultural differences because of their indigenous populations. Additionally, both countries were colonized by the British. Overall, findings suggest that these unique features contributed to the students' positive learning outcomes. Therefore, other study abroad programs should consider the benefits of visiting destinations that are less traveled and of including multiple locations on their itineraries.

Another important takeaway from findings of the present study was the impact of the pre-departure meetings and classes. Students indicated that information acquired during these sessions was extremely beneficial for them. Based on these findings, other faculty leaders who plan to organize and conduct study-abroad courses should consider incorporating a robust pre-departure curriculum that goes beyond one pre-departure orientation meeting for students. A series of meetings and classes gives students the opportunity to get to know each other, know more about the program structure (including day-to-day activities), learn about the cultural mores and norms of destination countries, and to develop rapport with the faculty leader.

Along with instruction received during pre-departure, study findings demonstrated the impact of cultural immersion exercises and experiences on students. This finding suggests that although learning information about other cultures in a classroom setting can be beneficial, adding cultural immersion experiences is a powerful tool for transformational learning and increasing cross-cultural competency. Cultural immersion experiences and talks with native people, interacting with locals and seeing how they live, eat, and spend their recreational and family time, expands upon what is taught through traditional lectures and reading materials. Such activities can be immensely meaningful to students. Similarly, inviting local experts in the field as guest speakers, visiting schools, social service agencies, and NGOs, as well as involving students in meaningful service-learning activities that help local natives, can broaden students' perspectives and expand their frames of reference. By engaging in these ways with the culture,

students can feel proud of contributing to the local community and feel a tremendous sense of self-worth and accomplishment. In light of these examples, study abroad programming should be mindful of the experiences they include in their itineraries to ensure that students' activities reflect true cultural immersion.

Results of this study support the importance of study abroad experiences in development of cultural sensitivity and transformational learning. These findings are of particular importance to university administrators, professors, funding agencies, funding organizations, and scholarship distributors for developing ways to make study abroad programs more accessible to students, especially those from underrepresented ethnic minority groups. For the sample used in the present study, financial resources of the students were limited; most students paid for their own program from their savings, while others took out loans. Students were also strongly encouraged to fundraise and collect monies for their recreational excursions to alleviate the financial burden. However, the economic costs of such programs may deter some students; therefore, finding ways to circumvent these challenges should be on the agendas of stakeholders aiming to support cultural sensitivity and global mindedness in our next generations of leaders. This is an especially important goal for child development and family studies students, who will be charged with serving a more culturally linguistically diverse population of families in the years to come.

In conclusion, study abroad programs can be an effective and very worthwhile alternative method to teach and educate students, and among this sample, child development and family studies students, about different world cultures. Such programs can also help students become increasingly more competent as global citizens, culturally sensitive, and knowledgeable. As demonstrated by the quantitative and qualitative data in this study, this faculty-led short-term study abroad experience facilitated transformative learning for the students.

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