

# Holistic Assessment and the Study Abroad Experience

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The whole experience for me has been hard to put into words. This is the biggest thing I've ever done. I can describe the experience as amazing, but I don't think this even begins to describe what I've experienced these past few months. Studying abroad was not just an adventure that happened in my past. It is also something that I see as influencing my future and the way I see things today.

In the quotation above, Susan expresses the life-changing promise study abroad holds for a growing number of American college students. Indeed, Bolen (2006) states, "Study abroad has shifted from a marginal opportunity originally confined to an elite group of students to a cornerstone of US higher education" (p. 23). Accompanying this popularity is an increased skepticism regarding the academic validity of this kind of educational experience (Kehl & Morris, 2007; Santanello & Wolff, 2007). For example, Bolen wonders "do students really learn anything by studying classical rhetoric in Athens, Greece, for a month that they would not have internalized in the same course back in Athens, Georgia?" (p. 24) Similarly, Steinberg (2002) calls for greater accountability by study abroad educators when he states, "One of the central ambiguities of assessment in study abroad programs is that success cannot always be measured with grades and credits and that students who may derive the greatest benefit from study abroad programs are not necessarily those whose grades are the highest, since their learning has taken place in less academically structured settings. The study abroad field needs to develop instruments to measure students' overall growth holistically" (p. 215).

While many educators who work closely with study abroad programs could conjure up a litany of testimonials about the dramatic impact of study abroad, it is often difficult to move beyond vaguely descriptive accounts to reliable data showing how this experience influenced a student's growth in intercultural sensitivity and awareness. In recognizing this paucity of informed data, King and Baxter Magolda (2005) observe that "unfortunately, theory development

on multicultural competence has been limited by heavy reliance on the assessment of attitudes as a proxy for competence” (p. 572). The campus community rarely gets a good sense about how students grow and change during their semester(s) studying abroad. By the time students reenter the flow of campus life their distinct memories have faded or they have processed the experience to the point where it is not in the foreground of their life any more. When asked to put their experiences studying abroad into words, students usually can only respond with such unsatisfying phrases as “it was great, life-changing,” or the truly vacuous “it was awesome.” King and Baxter Magolda argue for a more holistic approach to assessing the study abroad experience that can move beyond the vague, attitudinal responses and delve more deeply into student progress toward intercultural maturity.

The research study reported here is a response to the call for more comprehensive data from which to assess student growth and development during the semester studying abroad. First, the research design is explained to clarify the integrated approach that employs both qualitative and quantitative methods. Second, the specific project is described, as well as the holistic, interpretive framework for assessing the collected data. Third, the representative data gathered from the Global Perspectives Inventory (Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill 2007) and in-depth interviews is shared with commentary identifying how the data may assist in a more complete understanding of the study abroad experience. Finally, a summary of this project is offered with some ideas for further research.

## **Researching Study Abroad: An Integrated Approach**

This research project focused on the study abroad programs offered at Central College, a private, four-year liberal arts institution located in Pella, Iowa. Central College has more than forty years of experience providing students with international study opportunities. Currently, over fifty percent of Central students participate in at least one study abroad program during their academic career. Additionally, approximately 90 institutions have a formal arrangement with Central College Abroad for placing their students at one of eight international programs. Given this rich history of commitment to international education, Central College and the Central College Abroad staff has identified a goal in its strategic plan (*Student Learning Goals for Study Abroad Programs*, Spring 2007) to “initiate the development of the Central College Abroad Model that identifies developmental milestones and means for assessing student progress” (p.11). With this goal in mind, the college launched an

ambitious project during the 2007-08 academic year to develop a more comprehensive and holistic approach to measuring student growth toward cultural awareness and sensitivity. To this end, the college administered the Global Perspectives Inventory (GPI) to all students studying abroad.

### **The Global Perspectives Inventory**

The GPI (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2007) is an assessment tool designed to measure a student's growth in global learning and development. Influenced by King and Baxter Magolda's (2005) adaptation of Kegan's (1994) lifespan developmental model, the inventory assumes the college years are a journey in which students acquire valuable experience, knowledge, and understanding related to three "big questions": (1) How do I know? (2) Who am I? (3) How do I relate to others? In completing the inventory, students respond to a series of statements within three distinct learning dimensions. These inter-related statements are designed to reveal more comprehensive and reliable patterns for examining the student's development of intercultural maturity. Using a Likert Scale design to identify degrees of agreement, the inventory measures development along three dimensions: the *cognitive* dimension is "centered on one's knowledge and understanding of what is true and important to know"; the *intrapersonal* dimension "focuses on one becoming more aware of and integrating one's personal values and self-identity into one's personhood"; and the *interpersonal* dimension explores "one's willingness to interact with persons with different social norms and cultural backgrounds, acceptance of others, and being comfortable when relating to others" ([www.gpiv.org](http://www.gpiv.org)). Central College is administering the GPI with a goal of assisting the institution in gathering more comprehensive data regarding a student's overall growth in intercultural competence and maturity as a result of the study abroad experience.

### **The In-depth Interview Method**

The GPI is a quantitative instrument that integrates effectively with qualitative approaches to data collection. With regard to this project, the in-depth interview method complements the statistical analysis available through the GPI as it allows for expanded responses within the GPI categories. Interviews allow individuals to express personal feelings more fully, to expand on perceptions and experiences and give them meaning. To provide the most comprehensive data possible, interviews with participants were conducted at pre-departure, mid-point immersion, and re-entry stages of the study abroad experience. Interview questions were constructed to complement and explore

the statements found in the GPI survey (see Appendix). One researcher conducted all the interviews, transcribed the recordings and analyzed them to uncover emergent and repetitive themes illuminating student perceptions of growth along the three dimensions (cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal) explored through the GPI.

Central College's language immersion program in Vienna, Austria was selected for this study. To create the most controlled set of data, only students from Central College itself were invited to participate in the study with six of the seven Central students agreeing to be interviewed. The following section discusses the results of the GPI surveys related to the Vienna program students with relevant themes emerging from the in-depth interviews conducted with the Central College students. Fictional names are used to protect the identities of the participants.

## **Examining the Three Dimensions of Student Growth**

### **Cognitive Dimension**

The cognitive dimension of the GPI consists of two scales: *knowing*, which reflects the complexity of one's view of the importance of cultural context in judging what is important to know and value, and *knowledge*, which explores the degree of understanding and awareness of various cultures and their impact on our global society. The *knowledge* area also takes into account how language proficiency enhances these understandings. The specific interview subjects relevant to this dimension can be found within questions related to cultural adaptation, proficiency in language acquisition, coursework performance, internship experiences, and program sponsored excursions.

An example of practical change within the *knowing* scale is found in the respondent's answer to the statement: *The role of the student is to receive knowledge from authority figures* (GPI, statement 28). An increase of .25 in disagreement with this statement was identified between pre/post-study surveys. This difference is considered both statistically and practically significant based on the results from over 3,000 students who took the GPI during 2007-2008 (See Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2008). In the on-site interview, John explains how his initial skepticism of the immersion approach to language acquisition led to a deeper realization of its benefits. Ultimately, he assumed more responsibility for his own learning:

At first I thought, okay, how are we going to be able to learn German if the teacher speaks only in German and never speaks in our language? But after about a week of class or so it just made sense. Everything made sense.

I mean the words are basically very similar so even if you don't understand the entire sentence you could still understand what they were saying just by how things sound together. But before I came I had no idea how we would ever learn, but we just learned so fast...Um, but, yeah, you're forced to learn the language. It's really, really cool.

A statement exploring the *knowledge* scale states: *I am proficient in more than one language* (GPI, statement 2). The growth in perspective related to this statement reveals perhaps the largest single area of change for respondents with a 1.57-point shift toward agreement. The students in Vienna came to see the immersion approach as an invaluable method for learning a foreign language. Repeatedly, students identified how much quicker the acquisition process was and how much more proficient they felt they became by immersing themselves in reading, speaking, writing, and listening to German. There are numerous quotes from the interviews supporting the changes identified in GPI. Amy's story, for example, illustrates in a dramatic way that the immersion approach translates into measurable success with language acquisition:

Coming back after my first break in London I was very frustrated at how I switched back to English. But after I had a couple of conversations it started coming back and realizing [sic] just any time I have a conversation and the words flow out. It was just so exciting. And, um, when I got here and I had a conversation with my roommate; like, our first conversation was all in German and it was decently long and it was real exciting. And then just last Monday I hung out with a girl from Michigan and we spoke the entire afternoon in German.

Both pre-departure and re-entry interviews reinforced the results found in the GPI data, that students felt a great degree of accomplishment within the cognitive dimension of growth and development. All respondents placed high value on gaining greater understanding of the Austrian culture and increasing their skill level related to writing, speaking, and reading in German.

### **Intrapersonal Dimension**

The intrapersonal dimension of the GPI examines the opportunities provided to students in order for them to develop more complex views of themselves, their cultural background and core belief system. Specific interview subjects relevant to this dimension include decision-making, independence,

and awareness of cultural identity. The *identity* scale within this dimension examines the respondent's sense of self from a global perspective. An increase in agreement of .61 was found related to the statement: *I have pride in my ethnic and cultural roots* (GPI, statement 23). In Vienna, Jacob became more aware of how his Midwestern upbringing influenced his general orientation to interacting with others. In the re-entry interview he comments:

People here are a lot more friendly [sic], or at least seem to be friendly. Um, not that many people would smile at you in Germany. And that's kind of hard, especially coming from Iowa or the Midwest, you know. A lot of those small town communities, you say hi to everyone even if you don't know who they are. Or even just like, smile at them when you walk by. But in Germany everybody is pretty much just kinda straight forward, or would never really acknowledge you and people do that more here, I think. I like that.

The *affect* scale reveals how the respondent expresses levels of respect and understanding regarding cultural differences. One statement showing a practical significance with a .64-point increase in agreement is: *My moral and ethical values closely reflect my family traditions* (GPI, statement 41). The following quote from Christine illustrates how studying abroad helped her reflect on the importance of family:

Um, it's very... you're just on your own a lot even though there are people here that you know, you are still on your own about dealing with your own struggles and what not. I mean we all came here with different things. My thing is that I am very close with my family ...

Christine's observations reveal how the separation from family allows the student an opportunity to reflect on their important role in managing personal stress and challenges.

Another *affect* statement of interest is: *I can explain my personal values to people who are different from me* (GPI, statement 4). Responses to this statement produced a .50 increase in these levels. In the re-entry interview, Jacob discussed how he often encountered Austrians who wanted to discuss American politics. These conversations lead him to sort through personal feelings and attitudes regarding political issues. The following extended quote offers a good example of how the interview context can reinforce the data gathered by the GPI *affect* scale:

I was blown away, like, the first time I started talking politics with people. And ... even got to the point where I had to keep looking and keep brushing up on stuff with mine [sic] because I would have felt bad especially me being an American and them knowing more about my country, my country's politics than I do. And then the fact that that is what I study; I couldn't let that happen. Um, they're very interested in it. And they are also very non-objective about them. That was one of the things I was worried about is, like, people finding out I'm from America and we start talking about politics and all of a sudden we all get lumped in with what Bush is doing. If they don't like them, they don't like us. I don't think I found anyone like that there. They are very open; they want to see what I thought, um, as much as I wanted to see what they thought. And a lot of times they were, like, "you know, I feel bad for you because a lot of people will clump you in with what the president does. But he's only one person; that doesn't mean everyone is like that."

In a similar way John commented during the on-site interview about how study abroad led him to reevaluate the value he placed on structured personal time and a carefully maintained daily routine. He came to understand the value in a slower paced lifestyle with fewer personal demands:

It's definitely helping me to, um, relax a lot more. I mean, I'm not in so much of a rush to get from Point A to Point B anymore because I'm just not so busy here. And at home my ... I have my day planned out. A week in advance I know exactly what I am going to be doing every day; what time, what hour. But here it's just, like, okay, I wake up. I know what I'm going to be doing; relax a bit and read the news, have my breakfast. Maybe talk to a few people in my dorm. But when I got here I was, like, "okay, summer vacation is really over. I need some more schedule back in my life." It didn't come. And I'm like, "this is very strange." So, it's interesting. It's taken a while to get used to, especially the last two weeks.

The on-site interviews consistently revealed the personally liberating nature of study abroad for Central College students who mostly grew up in rural communities before living in a large, international city such as Vienna. A statement posed on the GPI declares a confidence that: *I can take care of myself in a completely new situation* (GPI, statement 17). Amy clearly illustrates the degree of self-reflection that can foster intrapersonal growth:

Um, I've been wrestling with myself on how I live my life. Um, let's see ... mostly at school I always put school first. Um, my academics .... I'm just always stressed out at Central. I say I love it and I do, but it really, really takes a toll on me living there... I'm having to kind of take a step back and say, okay, what is really important to me? Why am I living this way? Why am I still really stressed out when I have barely anything going on? Why am I doing this to myself?

The growth in developing a global perspective is illuminated through both the GPI and the in-depth interview process. As the quoted passages above illustrate, students can articulate significant insight into how the study abroad experience offers them the opportunity to assess their life situation personally, empowering them with self-confidence and the understanding that they have matured in meaningful ways.

### Interpersonal Dimension

The *interpersonal* dimension of the GPI explores questions related to how the study abroad experience assists students in becoming more comfortable and competent especially in cross-cultural interactions where traditions, practices, and customs may be unfamiliar or markedly different. Interview subjects of relevance to this dimension include dorm life, mealtime, and negotiating personal and professional relationships. More specifically, the *social interaction* scale seeks to ascertain the degree of sensitivity the respondent holds for living in diverse settings. One statement showing practical statistical change with a .46-point increase is: *People from other cultures tell me that I am successful at navigating their cultures* (GPI, statement 18). During the re-entry interview, Jacob commented with pride how far his language instructor felt he had come: "The teacher even complimented me, like how much it had improved since the first two weeks." He explained further, "When I took my exit speaking exam over there they were just impressed that I didn't know any German before I came over there and just how far I came along. And how easily, I mean, it turned from kind of Q & A to just a conversation just between us. So, I think it came along really well."

The *social responsibility* scale is the second measurement area of the *interpersonal* dimension. This scale identifies degrees to which students develop an acceptance and appreciation for interdependent living and a greater sense of community. The topic of internship experiences often was the means for bringing out this theme within the on-site interviews. Amy's internship at Green Peace opened her eyes to the interrelationship between work and social/politi-



cal activism. She explains, “The internship has gotten me thinking about it more than anything . . . I really enjoy that I’m in a place where I’m doing something that really matters to me.” In a similar way, living in international dormitories created opportunities for broadening perspectives about interdependency. This is especially revealed in student comments about the influential role mealtime has for relationship development. Whether it is planning and shopping for meals, negotiating the sharing of cooking space and supplies, or actually eating together, mealtime is a highly significant form of interaction. Christine’s story emphasizes the role cooking and mealtime can have in building a sense of community:

Cooking-wise, I mean, it was fine. We realized more, you know, they definitely don’t put preservatives in their foods, so our food would go bad. So we had to start planning better. . . We started to converse a little bit more with people. Um, one of them, one of the Austrians thought we were really good cooks so they would always come in when we were cooking. They really seemed. . . they liked that a lot.

Finally, the on-site interviews revealed the students’ attempts to achieve balance between developing relationships with Austrians on the one hand, and managing relationships with the cohort of American students with whom they studied and traveled on the other. Jacob expresses this challenge when he says, “A lot of Austrians in general, especially the students in the dorms, um, once they find out I’m an American or I do speak English, like, just try to speak as much as I would like to speak German. And so it’s hard sometimes to find that balance.” Similarly, Amy comments on managing the interpersonal tensions when she explains, “It’s been really difficult sometimes wanting to get to know the other American students and, um, form friendships with them because I can connect to them in a way I can’t connect to the other people. But also, to really wanting to just push them all away [sic] because I really want to focus on my German and I want to get to know the people.”

In this whole assessment process, students gain invaluable understandings of such important interpersonal skills as careful listening, patience, mutual respect, and empathy. The inventory responses and the in-depth interviews reinforce the manner in which the study abroad experience guides students to realize their personal strides toward maturity and social awareness. They come to recognize that at every turn there are important interpersonal episodes that can be used for building community across cultural and social boundaries.

## Concluding Thoughts and Reflections

The discussion above demonstrates how a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews can complement and further illuminate the quantitative analysis of data gathered through an inventory instrument such as the GPI. Together, the two sets of information provide a more comprehensive approach to holistic assessment regarding how Central College's study abroad program in Vienna is shaping student growth within cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions. Further refinement of the interview questions can improve this process, however, and perhaps uncover other themes which help measure a program's impact. Bringing the interview questions more into alignment with the specific statements on the GPI could create a more direct connection between the two sets of data. It would also be valuable to conduct a similar study to compare experiences between language-based immersion programs such as in Vienna and an English-based program such as one in London.

Employing holistic evaluative strategies can also provide more insight into the re-entry process that is often given short shrift in the overall examination of a student's study abroad experience. While they receive some guidance during the final stages of study abroad, students are often left to manage much of the re-entry process alone. This is especially true for students who return home during the breaks between semesters when support services are not immediately available to them. While many students adjust effectively, there is certainly a need to gather better information about re-entry coping strategies. If academic institutions are able to more accurately and completely understand how the cultural immersion has possibly reshaped a student's attitudes about self and home, perhaps they can better assist students who encounter feelings of what Storti (1997) refers to as "temporary homelessness" (p. 34). He explains, "Back home you melt into the crowd; you are ordinary and anonymous again. Life isn't as exciting as it used to be" (p. 34). Christine is one student who offers a clear sense of this reentry problem as she describes her return to campus and dorm life:

It's very loud and it's driving me nuts right now because I can't sleep at night and they're all accustomed to it. I just, I can't. I can't sleep at all. And one of my friends is, like, "wow, that really bothers you." And I'm speaking my mind more about it and they were shocked to kind of see that. And just, um, how I've kept myself organized; just little things that especially my roommate never saw before. Maybe how I dress...more of my routine has changed. But that is also coming back to Central, too. I've got to adapt to what Central has.

Other students comment in the re-entry interview about the challenges

of returning to the structure of college life when they had come to enjoy more independence and freedom in personal decision-making. A closer examination of the re-entry data could prove quite valuable in assisting study abroad educators in developing a more comprehensive re-entry strategy.

Storti (1997) also observes that when abroad “there is always something striking or unusual happening, and you seem to feel everything with an intensity absent in normal life. You can feel yourself growing” (p. 327). Indeed, the themes identified in this study reveal how students sense their own growth and development. Within the cognitive dimension, students understand how they become more aware and respectful of cultural differences. Through the intrapersonal dimension, student gains in self-confidence, independence, and maturity is emphasized. And the interpersonal dimension reflects how students learn to more effectively negotiate the nuances of relationship development.

Collaborative use of both qualitative and quantitative assessment measures should provide the most complete set of data for determining degrees of student growth and development. Kehl and Morris (2007) agree that more focused and specific assessment of study abroad must be completed when they say “if educators and administrators determine that a study abroad experience is a vital part of a college education, leaders must be ready to justify this importance with research which can provide increased transparency in the promotion and design of programs ... regular assessment ... is needed to help measure and document the changes occurring as a result of these experiences” (p. 77). A holistic approach such as the one described here, one which assesses student growth within these dimensions, will surely assist academic institutions in making a case for the value-added nature of study abroad.

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## **Appendix**

Sample interview questions that complement the three dimensions of the Global Perspectives Inventory, indicating at which point they would be asked:

### **Cognitive Dimension**

*Pre-departure:* What is your background with the German language? How do you feel with this skill level as you prepare to study in Vienna?

*On-site Immersion:* How is your study of German going? Are you making progress? If so, how?

*Re-entry:* How would you describe your proficiency with German? Having gone through the semester, what kind of ways do you see you've grown in the language?

### **Intrapersonal Dimension**

*Pre-departure:* What do you think will be the main challenges for you in studying abroad? What concerns you most?

*On-site Immersion:* Is there a specific time where you've thought, "Yeah. I've been successful. It's all come together and I've able to communicate well with people in Vienna"?

*Re-entry:* As you think about it now, are there ways you see that this was a challenging or a life-changing time for you? I mean, are there specific ways you're seeing changes?

### **Interpersonal Dimension**

*Pre-departure:* How are your close friends and family reacting to you being abroad next semester?

*On-site Immersion:* How is it to live with an Austrian roommate? Can you describe how that relationship is going?

*Re-entry:* I know several students talked about the kitchen as a place where they congregated and got a chance to talk German. And people cooked together and things . . . did that happen with you?

