

# The Impact of Short-Term Study Abroad (STSA) Program on Intercultural Competence of Students at a Frontier/Rural Campus

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## Abstract

*This study evaluated the effectiveness of short-term study abroad programs on a frontier/rural campus, particularly in the light of promotion of internationalization efforts by educational institutions in the U.S. It measured students' intercultural competence and cultural adaptability before and after participating in a short-term study abroad program. A short instrument was used to collect data regarding knowledge, attitude, and skills (subscales) in the context of interacting (living) in another culture. Sixty-three students from various disciplines participated in the study. Significant changes were seen in all three subscales as well as in the total score. The greatest change was seen within the subscale 'knowledge' indicating the largest gains for students' increased awareness of cross-cultural competence and complexities. Additionally, qualitative data collected from students corroborated the above findings. This information may be used to further develop sustainable study abroad programs in promotion of internationalization efforts by higher education institutions.*

Keywords: Internationalization; short-term study abroad programs; intercultural competence; frontier/rural campus; university students

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## Introduction

This study investigated if knowledge, attitude, and skills as it pertains to intercultural competence improved for students at a rural campus after participating in a short-term study abroad program. A shared belief has emerged throughout multiple fields of literature that when students study in a country outside their country of origin, it leads to positive results. The increase in globalization has brought about the need for students from different backgrounds and different fields of study to enroll in study abroad programs (Schartner, 2015). Study abroad programs are likely to continue to increase as they are often seen as a way of marketing a student's education. However, not all students can afford to dedicate a whole year to an exhausting experience abroad. While the number of studies abroad programs has grown over the years, these programs

have changed considerably, with some programs offering alternatives that may range from one-week long to a month-long program. According to Gaia (2015), faculty led study abroad programs, which are 3 weeks or less are more practical and can help to increase student understanding of other cultures and their own identity.

Niendorf and Alberts (2017) describe classes of STSA programs being between 1 and 8 weeks long. Gonsalvez (2013) adds that almost all institutions describe short-term programs as no longer than a semester or a quarter but can range from a week-long program over spring break to longer periods of up to 8 weeks. Gonsalvez (2013), also notes that most short-term programs include home stays and visits to multiple sites and service experiences. STSA programs have seen an increase in popularity among most universities as there is much more willingness from students to take part in programs that do not require an entire academic year (Donnelly-Smith, 2009).

Study abroad programs not only encourage learning but also increase students' appreciation for diversity and problems that are related to different cultures and increases the students' ability to communicate with individuals from diverse cultures (Kuhn, 2008). Various authors agree that study abroad programs also enhance the interaction between faculty in institutions of higher learning and individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Biraimah & Jotia, 2013; Goode, 2007). Additionally, these study abroad programs are able to incorporate high impact learning practices (HIPs) into their structure to facilitate applied learning, project-based learning, and cultural learning among students (Luxton et al., 2022). The authors in their study of students in a mid-west university on a study abroad program found HIP incorporated study abroad programs shaped student learning outcomes, including increased cultural awareness (Luxton et al., 2022). Additionally, Doerr (2022) emphasizes the rigor of these study abroad programs by including specific focus, immersion with connection to wider structural arrangements, theoretical engagement, and academic vocabulary. Few studies on the impact of STSA programs at rural universities also have shown to be effective in increasing intercultural competencies of students and sustainability of such programs with structural support from rural community colleges (Gow-Hogge, 2020; Lieberman, 2019). Therefore, the current study explored if knowledge, attitude, and skills related to intercultural competence improved for students at a rural campus after participating in a short-term study abroad program.

## **Literature Review**

### **Intercultural Competence**

Deardorff (2006a) defines intercultural competence as “the ability to effectively and appropriately communicate in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (p.248). Deardorff (2006a) brought together top intercultural scholars and academic administrators from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to establish what constitutes intercultural competence. From this study, she established that the definition of intercultural competence continues to evolve over time and definitions need to be reassessed on an ongoing basis (Deardorff, 2006a). She also explains that intercultural competence is a multidimensional concept that involves more than one component, so internationalization strategies need to address the development of these components (world knowledge, language proficiency, cultural empathy, approval of foreign people, and international practice) in different ways. The consensus between the gathered scholars was that study abroad programs and campus interactions are some of the most efficient methods in addressing intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006a).

According to Gleditsch and others (2016), some of the common terms used for intercultural competence are "multiculturalism, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, international communication, transcultural communication, global competence, cross-cultural awareness, and global citizenship”(p.105). Clarke et al. (2009) defined intercultural proficiency as “the awareness, skills, and attitudes/beliefs that enable people to work well with, respond effectively to, and be supportive of people in cross-cultural settings” (p. 174). ‘Cross-cultural sensitivity’ is described as an individual’s response to individuals from other cultures, which changes over time due to personal experiences (Anderson et al., 2006). Others have also defined ‘intercultural competence’ as "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts”

(Bennett, 2008, p. 97). Several studies indicate increased in overall intercultural competence after completion of a study abroad program among students, and in the areas of knowledge (Gaia, 2015), attitudes (Inglis et al., 2000; Paris et al., 2014) and skills (Nyunt et al., 2022). Additionally, these programs have also contributed to increase in cultural knowledge (Niehaus & Nyunt, 2022), self-awareness, for example, related to personal world views, global mindset related to learning about other cultures and relationship interest related making effort to maintaining relationship with people from other cultures (Nguyen, 2017), intercultural development of students through self-analyzing of own cultural identity (Sobkowiak, 2019), and global citizenship identities of students (Kishino & Takahashi, 2019).

Nguyen (2017) in her study of effectiveness of STSA programs on students' overall intercultural competency and the connections between those measured areas and programmatic content with data from fifty-five students across eight different short-term programs at three institutions in Texas found that students gained overall intercultural competency. Student changes were particularly seen in three areas of competencies (self-awareness, global mindset, and relationship interest --degree of effort someone was willing to put into maintaining relationships with people from other cultures). Chieffo and Griffith (2004) conducted a study that compared 1,509 students who had completed a short-term study abroad program with 847 students who had not. Major differences were found when it came to intercultural mindfulness, individual growth and development, practical knowledge, and communication and language skills, with the study abroad students scoring higher in all categories. In another study involving 16 Master of Social Work (MSW) students during a two-week program to Italy, Gilin and Young (2009) found that there was increased awareness of connection between social policies and practices, new ideas for practice, deepened empathy and respect for other cultural groups, and an expansion and consolidation of their professional identity.

Vandermaas-Peeler and others (2018) measured the experiences of 60 students with a Child Development and Diversity program (CDD). Within the program, students from Elon University in the United States traveled to Denmark, Istanbul, Helsinki, and Warsaw to gain a well-rounded experience of childhood and education by visiting community organizations and schools. Students were also required to take a practicum course to further reflect upon their experiences in different cultural contexts. Qualitative responses demonstrated that during study students developed knowledge about themselves and others in multiple contexts, made meanings of their observations, and established healthy relationships with host communities (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2018). More recently, in a qualitative case study investigation of experiences of five STSA participants in Israel, Chiocca (2021) found participants in their written reflections exhibited a pattern of progression, beginning with cognitive change (knowledge and understanding), moving to affective change (sensitivity and attitudes), and finally adjusting their interpersonal behavior while adapting to cultural differences. The above reviewed literature appears to show that students from different disciplines and geographical areas gained some level of positive cultural experience, including intercultural competence within study abroad programs, including STSA programs.

### **Short-term Study Abroad Programs**

Several studies in the past decade have highlighted various positive outcomes/benefits of STSA programs. For example, Bano and Xia (2020) in their study of Chinese undergraduates who participated in STSA program in public health at an American university stressed on the importance of cross-cultural competencies and their development as global professionals. Though the students did not see any behavioral changes in them, but they reflected on their development of global professional identity by utilizing the opportunity to learn spoken English and about the American healthcare system and the differences between the two countries regarding policies and practices (Bano & Xia, 2020). Similarly, other studies have emphasized on the popularity of STSA programs as they contribute to the development of global perspective of the participants (Whatley et al., 2020), gaining global leadership mindset (Bongila, 2022), and growth in intercultural sensitivity of participants (Engle & Engle, 2003). STSA programs are also popular with students because of their affordability, non-interference with course work for graduation and course credit towards major or interruption from work (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Interis et al., 2018).

Brenner (2016) have also found students having excellent educational experience, benefited from friendships and bonds across borders while learning another language through experiential learning which they thought was more impactful compared to traditional academic learning. Most importantly, the study abroad experience allowed them to reflect on themselves and their lives in their country of origin to gain deeper awareness of themselves leading to the value of transformative capability of STSA programs (Brenner, 2016). Students were able to learn about the host culture through everyday habits, attitudes, and lifestyle along with sensemaking which was gradual from simple everyday behaviors to complex thinking and understanding of another culture, for example, understanding social justice issues and equity in the field of public health (Bano et al., 2022).

### ***Rural Community Colleges and STSA Programs***

Furthermore, data from studies conducted at rural community colleges also support positive outcomes of STSA programs. Researchers using both quantitative and qualitative methods indicate students participating in STSA programs were able to focus on similarities rather than differences in cultures and witnessed personal growth in appreciating diversity (Wood & Raby, 2022a & b). If not all, community colleges are increasingly making efforts to provide education abroad to a diverse group of students, including underrepresented minorities, lower income, and non-traditional students. Some even make crucial policy changes to welcome students on a study abroad programs by reducing barriers including relaxing GPA requirements, participation regardless of discipline, and offering these programs multiple times in a year (Whatley & Raby, 2021).

### ***Additional Information on STSA Programs***

There has been some criticism of STSA programs as well, for example they are not long enough to see changes in attitudes related to cultural competence for students (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004), and do not have enough time to experience meaningful changes (Engle & Engle, 2003). Interestingly, others have disagreed with the above. In contrast, faculty leading these programs have shared that they have more control over the content of the program and are able to model for the students how to continually process what they are learning (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Whereas in longer programs, students sometimes do not utilize their time well academically and choose to, for example, travel for fun with their own cohort (Donnelly-Smith, 2009).

### **Study Abroad Data**

According to the Open Doors Annual Data 2024 (2024), in the 2022/23 academic year, 280,716 U.S students studied abroad, which is an increase of 49% from the prior year indicating an upward growth after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Frontier University where data were collected follows this current trend (S. Robinson, personal communication, December 6, 2024). The university plans on expanding participation, and there appears to be a new-found emphasis on cultural exposure for the sake of a better equipped workforce.

Study abroad programs help future leaders obtain international experiences so that they can put a global perspective into their chosen professions (Institute of International Education, 2019). The programs go beyond exposure to other cultures and can help those who graduate find job placements in an evolving, global workforce. A report from the Association of International Educators reported nearly 40% of major companies in the United States surveyed missed international business opportunities due to a lack of employees that were culturally competent (U.S. Department of State, 2020). While the focus of this study is not on international business, it is important to note that the current American workforce is missing out on multiple opportunities based solely on a lack of exposure to other cultures.

For Mountain West, Frontier University with approximately 13,000 students, having a study abroad program is very beneficial to diversifying student experiences. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2024, most of the state is classified as a Level 1 Frontier and Remote (FAR) area, defined by living 60 minutes or more from an urban center of 50,000 or more people (Cromartie et al., 2013). Therefore, as per Level 1 FAR definition, the percentage of [state] as frontier

population is 61% and the state is top on the list among other states (Wakefield, 2012). The university touts itself in providing not only financial support but administrative support as well to faculty leading study abroad programs. The university saw both a record high of 502 students participating in these programs and an increase in number of STSA programs (34) in 2018-2019. After the pandemic, the numbers are now on an upward trend since the past year (351 students in 2021-2022; 24 & 27 STSA programs in 2022 and 2023 respectively). Additionally, the vast majority of the students that study abroad does so through short-term faculty-led programs. It averages from 70-89% at the university. These percentages are higher than national data on study abroad programs where STSA programs were most popular, especially during summer (40%) in 2020/21 (Open Doors, 2023).

By studying abroad, students could learn about a foreign nation and experience the culture of a different region, which most of the time is in stark contrast in terms of difference and diversity. Studying abroad in this institution of higher learning is seen as a chance for personal growth, a chance to develop leadership skills, and a chance to develop a broader worldview. Few studies with rural universities also have emphasized the effectiveness of study abroad programs in improving intercultural competences (Gow-Hogge, 2020). All these components help to provide wide-ranging exposure to students who are more than likely from a much smaller university in a rural, frontier state.

The authors believe traveling outside the country has many benefits; even casual tourism may increase someone's cultural competence. Therefore, the research question was: Does knowledge, attitude, and skills as it pertains to intercultural competence improve for students at a rural campus after participating in a short-term study abroad program? The significance of the study included assessment of intercultural competence of students on a frontier/rural campus. The study results aim to inform development of sustainable study abroad programs that continue to provide students an opportunity to develop new perspectives and a worldview.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Intercultural competence framework was developed to understand international education and how to interact effectively with those from different cultures (Deardorff, 2006b). The framework consists of knowledge, attitude, and skills. Knowledge is related to understanding other world views and therefore understanding the world from others' perspectives. Attitudes are related to openness, curiosity, respect and value others. Finally, skills include attainment and processing of knowledge through observation, listening, interpreting, analyzing and relating (Deardorff, 2006b, p. 4). There are several desired internal outcomes (e.g., adaptability and flexibility related to communication styles and behaviors, ethnocentric view and empathy) and external outcomes (e.g., behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately (based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes) to achieve one's goals to some extent (Deardorff, 2006b, p. 5). The above framework aligns with Fantini's (2007) instrument on intercultural instrument with the same three categories, knowledge, attitude, and skills.

### **Methodology**

**Design** A mixed-method design was used to collect data. Participants completed a pre-test before the start of the program, and a post-test after the completion of a STSA program. The questionnaires had questions with a Likert-type rating scale and an additional open-ended question on the post-test. The quantitative questionnaire was used to measure intercultural competence (knowledge, attitude, and skills) on a scale to determine if students felt they were at a higher level than at the beginning of the program. Additionally, participants answered open-ended questions. Triangulation of data sources corroborates between two or more sources of data and interpretations as suggested by the research methodology literature (Rubin & Babbie, 2017, p. 451). Informed consent was gathered from all participants before conducting the study, and students were informed that there were no benefits to participating and no consequences for refusal to participate except that their participation will contribute to the knowledge base of understanding the impact of short-term study abroad programs and effective programming.

**Data Collection** Data were collected over three years from 63 students and 8 faculty-led short-term study abroad programs (2–3 weeks in Europe, Asia and Central America) using a pretest posttest design. Disciplines included engineering, nursing, religious studies, English, Chinese language, and social work. Data was collected using a questionnaire on intercultural competence before and after the completion of the trips.

**Participants** Participants were purposively chosen as they were part of a class/course/program on campus. They were enrolled in a study abroad program on campus and were reached through their instructor to take part in the research study. They were recruited through emails to instructors of study abroad programs. There were eight different study abroad classes representing different majors, and 63 participants completed the pretest and posttest questionnaire. The data were gathered anonymously, as only a letter assignment was given to each participant within the measured instrument testing to compare the pretest and posttest questionnaires.

Participant ages ranged from 18 years to forty and greater with 50% of them belonging to the age group between 18 and 21 years. 50% of the participants were females, 40% males and rest of the 10% did not specify their gender. Their education level varied from being a freshman to graduate level of education. Please see Appendix A (Table 1) for detailed demographic information of the participants.

**Measures** For this study, Byram's (1997) three factors model of intercultural competence was considered as aligning with Fantini's (2007) instrument on intercultural model with three categories including knowledge, attitude and skills. Knowledge refers to knowing oneself and others through social interaction. It entails knowing social groups and their practices, both in one's one culture and in the other culture. Attitude in this paper refers to the ability to update oneself and embrace "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (Byram, 1997, p. 91, as cited in Sinicrope et al., 2007). Finally, skills include the skills of discovery and interaction that allows the individual to acquire "new knowledge of culture and cultural practices," including the ability to use existing knowledge, attitudes, and skills in cross-cultural interactions (Byram, 1997, as cited in Sinicrope et al., 2007, p. 6). The short instrument that was used measures skills, awareness, knowledge, and attitude as it pertains to intercultural competence (Fantini, 2007). The Fantini scale has 43 questions on a Likert scale within the categories of skills, awareness, knowledge, and attitude. The authors used a revised scale adapted from Fantini to measure knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The questionnaire was condensed down to 14 Likert scale questions (0= not at all, 1= extremely low, 2= low, 3= average, 4= high, 5= extremely high). Knowledge and skill subscales had a possible total score of 25 each, and attitude had a possible score of 20.

Within the adapted scale, paired t-tests and Cronbach's alpha were used to determine statistical significance and internal consistency. T-tests are used as a measurement tool between compared means to find a value to determine statistical significance. Within the realm of social sciences, having a p-score read as  $p \leq .05$  deems the score statistically significant (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Paired t-tests were used within the study, as this type of test is most appropriate in two samples that are paired in a certain way (Skaik, 2015). In this case, the pairs consisted of before and after measurements (pretest and posttest) of the same group of students. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure correlations between similar items. It is used to measure the similarities between attributes to determine if a scale used within a study accurately assesses reliability. As defined within statistical analysis, Cronbach's alpha score of 0.70 to 0.80 is regarded as satisfactory (Bland & Altman, 1997). Standard deviation was also calculated, which is a statistic that portrays dispersed values around the mean score (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

**Open-Ended Questions** All participants answered an open-ended question involving their experiences while studying abroad. They answered questions on how their experience changed their perspective about how they viewed the world. They also answered a series of questions involving helpful learning tools and knowledge gained (for example, guided tours, visits to historical and significant places (such as, relating to the genesis of social welfare), the textbooks,

journals/reflection paper, the visit forms, interaction with your fellow classmates, discussion in class, teachers, guest speakers, or anything else).

## Results

### Quantitative Findings

Paired sample t-tests were used to assess statistical change within the revised Fantini scale. Significant changes were seen on all three subscales (knowledge, attitudes, and skills) as well as the total score (Table 2). All post tests mean scores showed that improvements were made within all measurements of intercultural competence in the revised scale. The greatest change within the subscales was seen in knowledge, where the posttest mean score varied 5.71 from the pretest score. The large increase in knowledge scores indicates that the largest gains for students included knowledge of participant behaviors compared to host behaviors, and increased awareness of cultural components and complexities. Standard deviation was measured as smaller within the posttests, indicating that the smaller variance from the mean score was a result of consistently higher scores of intercultural competences.

Also shown within the analysis was the statistical significance that was present for all three subscales and total scores. Within knowledge, attitude, and total scores, the calculated p value through paired t-test was  $p = .000$ . Under the subscale of skills, the calculated p value was  $p = .003$  (see Table 2). ANOVA analysis conducted to determine Cronbach's alpha found that all subscales and total scores were above satisfactory ( $>0.70$ ). Cronbach's alpha for each subscale found knowledge at .798, attitude at .787, skills at .884, and total scores at .890. There were no significant differences between individual variables measured within students (previous study abroad travel, previous travel outside the United States, and previously lived outside of the United States), indicating that levels of competence rose for all classes of students due to most recent study abroad exposure.

**Table 2**

*Paired Sample t-Test Results*

<b>Subscale</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Pretest Mean</b>	<b>Posttest Mean</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD (Pretest)</b>	<b>SD (Posttest)</b>	<b>t</b>
<b>Knowledge</b>	63	15.86	21.57	5.71	4.28	2.71	-9.79*
<b>Attitude</b>	63	17.48	18.79	-1.31	2.28	1.59	-4.13*
<b>Skills</b>	63	21.71	22.83	-1.12	2.92	2.68	-2.86**
<b>Total Score</b>	63	55.05	63.19	-8.14	7.58	5.84	-7.59*

Note. Exploring and Assessing Intercultural Competence Scale

\* $p = .000$ . \*\* $p = .003$ .

### Qualitative Findings

Qualitative data constituted answers to open-ended questions. Since the data was relatively small-scale, the data were collated and was read a few times for initial coding, especially that was relevant and helped in answering the research question (Brooks & King, 2014). Using template analysis method, priori themes were identified particularly those significant to the research question. Later these themes defined the final template that was applied to the entire qualitative data (Brooks & King, 2014). The final template encompassed three major themes discussed throughout the article (knowledge, attitude, and skills). It is important to note that students in all the courses answered a single open-ended question involving how study abroad has changed personal perspectives and worldviews. Only one class answered three questions involving helpful tools for learning abroad, and the impact on personal knowledge regarding social welfare. And one other class answered six questions involving helpful tools for learning, personal experiences, shifts in perspective, comfortability around different cultures, and responsibility as a global citizen.

### ***Knowledge***

Many participants stated that study abroad programs helped in obtaining knowledge about cultural history, behaviors, and similarities/differences between nations. One participant stated, "Going on this trip really opened my mind on my perspective of culture...Overall, it was one of the best experiences of my life." Within responses involving knowledge, students also explained how the most helpful tools for learning within different study abroad programs are class readings, peer discussion, and tours within diverse communities. One participant explained that study abroad has contributed to a wide range of knowledge on social welfare compared to taking a course on campus. Many participants also voiced that a better understanding of diverse history and cultural awareness was a result of study abroad classes. For example, one student participant shared:

In general, I believe this course has impacted my knowledge regarding social welfare very greatly. I didn't know about any other countries social welfare policies, and I believe now having a point of reference will be super helpful in further work and in being able to understand history and why politics are the way they are today.

Similarly, another participant reflecting on London's East End's history of immigration and its recent hip reputation within the context of current social welfare systems shared, "Learning about the monarchy changed my perspective about how I view government in the modern world. Physically seeing the dynamics between the East end and the city of London really opened my eyes to the distribution of wealth." In-line with quantitative responses, students reported gaining knowledge and awareness of behavioral patterns and factors that shape their understanding of diverse cultures.

### ***Attitude***

Most responses involving attitudes of participants included changing worldviews, learning from host cultures, and gaining outsider perspective from other cultures. One participant stated, "I learned that it is important to view culture as both modern and past, through different lenses." Participants also reported adapting to different cultures and perspectives while studying abroad. There were also multiple responses involving personal identity and being more willing to learn about different religious ideologies. One participant stated, "I'm gaining a better understanding of my identity as an American-something I never thought much about." Participants also reported being more willing to become immersed in a different culture during their program and attempting to gain a better understanding of others. As was seen in the Likert scale responses, study abroad participants displayed a greater willingness to learn and understand differences between their culture and host cultures. One participant shared:

The one thing that changed my perspective about how I viewed the world was being able to see a different view of healthcare. It was great to see how advanced we are in the United States, but also to see the negative effects of western medicine on our society. This includes showing how much our society is based on medication and not prevention methods.

Similarly, others shared their changed perspectives:

One thing that changed my perspective about how I view the world included learning more about different cultures and religions. Prior to this trip, I felt very isolated in the U.S from different cultures and religions. I didn't know anyone with a different culture/religion and therefore I didn't understand and was unable to relate to them. Having the opportunity to emerge myself in the new beliefs helped me grow as a person and professional. I am less ethnocentric, and I am now able to personally relate and identify with other cultures and religions besides my own. I have new ideas for future policy implementation and believe this experience has helped me become a better advocate for minority populations within the U.S.

I would say the biggest change in my values and beliefs would have been after visiting the Mosque. Our guide/speaker really helped me take a different perspective on the Islamic Faith. I think people tend to fear things they don't understand, and he really helped change that.



## ***Skills***

Most participants described gaining higher levels of acceptance and flexibility in different nations, cultural humility, and integration into host cultures. One participant stated, “Seeing all different nationalities coalesced in one city made me realize the possibility of integration in society.” Monitoring personal behaviors was also seen in responses, as one participant explained that they have become more aware of managing internal bias towards different cultures. For example, one of the participants shared, “Biases haven’t changed necessarily, but I’m more aware of where they are and how they show up.” Participants also showed flexibility in differing ideologies and cultural interactions. Multiple participants explained how their study abroad experiences have led them to become more comfortable about members of different cultures. One participant stated, “I am very comfortable with people who are culturally different. This trip has provided an environment that has so many different cultures at one time.” Another participant explained that their perspective on the world has changed, and that different countries and people should be celebrated. Participants showed a willingness to be flexible in their interactions with members of other cultures and adjusted/monitored behavior for the sake of meaningful interaction. One participant demonstrating flexibility said:

I think this program/trip increased my cultural humility. When I was in Honduras, it was eye-opening to hear from a physician who had lived in Africa for many years. She talked about how it’s best to come to a developing country with the view that I am not coming to help, but first to learn and build relationship with the host culture. This opened my eyes to international health, and what our role as people coming into a foreign country needs to be.

Another participant exhibiting capacity to understand cultural-specific information shared:

I think if anything, it really opened my eyes to the diversity of the world has to offer. We spend out days in Academia learning about diversity; it’s pros and cons, how to deal with it, but it’s whole level when you get the chance to experience it firsthand. By being able to experience this I feel like I will be better prepared in my professional career when forced with issues about diversity and different cultures.

## **Discussion**

The study used survey data from a diverse range of students attending a rural/frontier state. Students who participated in STSA programs were a variety of declared college majors at different education levels. The study examined pre-test and post-test responses and determined that students within these STSA programs showed gains in knowledge, attitude, and skills in line with measured intercultural competence. Gains were shown for all courses even with a diverse background of prior travel, prior study abroad participation, and prior experiences of living abroad.

## **Knowledge**

In line with quantitative responses, students reported gaining knowledge and awareness of behavioral patterns and factors that shape diverse cultures. Student participants showed improvement in discussing and contrasting their behaviors in their own culture with those in host culture, referring to important historical and socio-political factors that shaped their own culture and that of visiting country’s culture, besides an understanding of interactional behaviors common among the host country in social and professional areas (e.g., family roles, teamwork, problem solving, etc.). The first step to master intercultural competence is to gain practical knowledge about other cultures (Gaia, 2015). Study abroad participants displayed high levels of willingness to learn from host cultures, were flexible within their interactions with different cultures, and were able to adjust/monitor behaviors for the sake of meaningful interaction.

Qualitative responses from participants showed that students felt study abroad programs helped them gain knowledge about other cultures. This might aid them in future interactions in an evolving global environment. This is in line with prior research that explains that students in study abroad programs gain a better understanding of development and education in a changing global market (Trygged & Eriksson, 2012). Higher self-rate scores in three categories (knowledge,

attitude, and skills) were also seen within responses from participants. Greenfield et al. (2012) found similar results when measuring study abroad participants and explained that higher scores were due to interactions and proximity to residents from a different cultural background. Students in the study also showed a willingness to adapt to other cultures when studying abroad. Mapp's study (2012) found similar results, as students in STSA programs reported more flexibility/openness in interacting with other cultures in post-test results. It is also noteworthy to mention that our results are very similar to previous studies on exploration of effects of STSA programs on intercultural competence of students, particularly in the light of promotion of internationalization efforts by educational institutions in the US (Brenner, 2016; Chieffo & Griffith, 2004; Mapp, 2012; Schartner, 2015; Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2018).

STSA courses are usually intensive and, if prepared comprehensively well, particularly during the preparatory phase, are successful. After recruitment into the program, students in the current study participated in a number of pre-departure meetings where they were not only introduced to the course, readings, and expectations, but were given plenty of information about the history and culture of the visiting country.

Moreover, some of the courses were taught through cultural immersion in ethnic neighborhoods, site visits, classroom exchanges, and seminars. The goal is to promote cross-cultural learning for students who will visit various sites including historical landmarks related to the course or topical knowledge. The students received the opportunity, for example, to explore neighborhoods with rich historical roots and cultural immersion by living with host families. STSA faculty-led courses allow students to increase their awareness of diverse cultures (Wood & Raby, 2022a) that form the integral multiethnic tapestry of the area and challenge them to move beyond their own ethnocentric perspectives. This is necessary for them to perform in an increasingly globalized society, and it will further contribute to their own transformation as global citizens with a broader worldview.

### **Attitude**

Students in the study showed improvement in learning from their hosts, for example, about their culture; dealing with their emotions and frustrations with the host culture (in addition to the pleasures it offered); trying to understand differences in the behaviors, values, attitudes, and styles of host members (e.g. homes stays, guides, other members, etc.), and; in suspending judgment and appreciating the complexities of communicating and interacting interculturally. Students' pre-existing attitude, besides the length of stay and degree of immersion in the host country have an effect on participant's attitudes about the host country (Kauffman, as cited in Inglis et al., 2000). The courses should be designed so that the students also learn about the historical roots, which might clarify their subject-related professions, for example social work as a profession. As mentioned earlier, the courses included in the current study were taught through cultural immersion in ethnic neighborhoods, site visits, classroom exchanges, seminars, and guest presentations. Cross-cultural learning was promoted by students visiting various sites including historical landmarks related to their profession. For example, in one of the trips related to historical development of social work, students in the course visited Toynbee Hall, a working settlement house, which is located in the East End of London (Authors, 2014). This neighborhood has a rich history as it has been home to many immigrant groups who came in search of economic opportunities and has also been a witness to social reforms in the mid-18th century that culminated information of unions and workers associations. STSA trips such as these, allowed students to increase their awareness of diverse cultures that form the integral multiethnic tapestry of the area and challenge them to move beyond their own ethnocentric perspectives which is necessary for their profession who have to perform in an increasingly globalized society.

Additionally, students were provided with downtime over the weekends that allowed them to explore the place independently or in groups. Students visited local attractions and markets, theater, food festivals, and traveled to nearby towns where they freely interacted with the locals. Some of the programs include homestays, which provides additional cultural experience. Homestays provide day-to-day life experiences in a foreign country and depending on the involvement of both parties, the experience could be a holistic one where a student could have a hands-on experience of living life and interacting with the locals. Some of the host families have been inviting students into their house for years so they provide

an encouraging and welcoming experience that aids students in the cultural immersion process. While pre-trip preparations contribute to the development of attitudes, perceptions and knowledge about the host country, the combination of the above-mentioned activities, including homestays subsequently helps in expansion of this knowledge and could also change their pre-formed attitudes.

According to Paris et al. (2014), a study abroad program's outcomes can be better assessed by comparing students' attitudes and expected outcomes before and after the trip. As per the confirmation/disconfirmation methodological paradigm related to consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, attitudes can vary from prior to a study abroad trip and after. Students develop attitudes and expectations regarding the trip and after the trip and they compare their expected experiences with their actual experiences. A discrepancy in attitudes and expectations can either be positive (when the actual experiences fall below the anticipated expectations) or negative (when the actual experiences exceed the anticipated expectations) (Woodfuff et al., 1983, as cited in, Paris, et al., 2014). As per the results, there was a positive outcome related to differences in attitudes before and after the study abroad trip for all student participants. For example, one of the student participants indicated his/her view of different cultures: "I am very comfortable with people who are culturally different. This trip has provided an environment that has so many different cultures at one time." Students shared their willingness to learn about cultural differences through cultural immersion while studying abroad.

Nyaupane (2008) states that change in attitude related to visiting a host country could depend on various factors, including social distancing (similarities between cultures or groups), prior expectations, and experiences during the trip. Social distance within the context of the current study will be the difference between cultures of the visiting country and that of the student participants. As per Social distance theory, host members are more receptive and tolerant of people who are from similar cultures as theirs (Thyne, et al., 2006). In contrast, a study conducted of Americans visiting Europe by Martin et al., (1995), found that the participants were displeased with their trip to England as they shared similar culture and language and therefore their expectations were no different compared to the US. This is the stark opposite of student participants in the current study, particularly those on trips to England. Students in the current study showed positive changes in their attitudes while and after completing the study abroad program. For example, they demonstrated flexibility when interacting with people from the host culture and various social situations in the host culture, monitored their behavior and its impact on their hosts and employed appropriate strategies for adapting to their own culture after returning home.

Studies including both long-term stay and short-term stay abroad (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Litvin, 2003) examined the effects of study abroad programs on attitudes and perceptions of students towards host countries and other cultures. The results reveal an increase in cross-cultural interests and a more positive attitude towards the host countries. The results therefore indicated the efficacy of study abroad programs in general, including STSA programs in not only increased international mindfulness, but also encourages the refinement of attitudes for better international understanding and interacting interculturally. This was true for the students in the current study where qualitative responses involved willingness to learn about cultural differences through cultural immersion, besides showing improvements in attitudes at the posttest.

## **Skills**

Improvements were found at posttest in the areas: demonstrate flexibility when interacting with persons from the host culture; show flexibility when interacting with persons from the host culture; able to monitor behavior and its impact on one's learning, growth and particularly on my hosts, and use appropriate strategies for adapting to their own culture after returning home. Students shared about learning cultural humility. They talked about acceptance and flexibility in different nations, integration into host cultures, and consciously trying not to put judgment on anyone and therefore improvement in helpful cross-cultural interaction (Nyunt et al., 2022).

Wear (2008) has proposed a more cultural humility approach as opposed to a competency-based approach to culture and diversity in medical education. She believed that it was important to move beyond skills and knowledge and to cultivate 'cultural humility', which is, "...a simultaneous and ongoing process of humble reflection on how one's knowledge is

always partial, incomplete, and inevitably biased” (p. 626). Humility is: (a) ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, gaps in knowledge, and limitations, and (b) open to new ideas and advice that could be contradictory (Tangney, 2000). In the context of global engagement, it is therefore important that both students and faculty continue to engage in an ongoing process of self-analysis, critique, and assessment of their own cultural background to not only understand how it affects their thought process and practice but also respect other cultures (Hockett et al., 2013). ‘Cultural humility was evident when one of the students shared:

I think this program/trip increased my cultural humility. When I was in Honduras, it was eye-opening to hear from a physician who had lived in Africa for many years. She talked about how it's best to come to a developing country with the views that I am not coming to help, but first to learn and build relationship with the host culture. This opened my eyes to international health, and what our role as people coming into a foreign country needs to be.

When asked to share one or anything about the study abroad program that changed their perspective about how they viewed the world after the trip, another student added, “Increased cultural humility, I consciously try to not put judgement on anyone.” Overall, a well-designed study abroad irrespective of its length should connect with course-related learning outcomes, sensibly designed culturally engagement activities, and recruit students who would benefit the most from these travels besides academic rigor (Bain & Yaklin, 2019; Doerr, 2022).

Participants emphasized academic rigor as well that formed strong foundation for them to enhance their knowledge and develop attitude and skills that facilitated growth of their intercultural competence. Students shared:

The lecture and readings have been great in helping me make academic connections while having a cultural experience. I've really enjoyed the walking tours because it gets us out of the classroom, yet I still learn a lot. Discussion is always valuable to help me process and to hear different perspectives. Self-guided tours have also been great because we can go at our own pace.

The most helpful thing to me was most certainly the relationships between class lectures/readings and activities, relationships and conversations made with fellow classmates, and the hands-on experiences we've done. Walking tours have proven to be the least impactful/helpful on the trip this far.

Another participant corroborated the above:

I believe many modes of learning have helped further facilitate my learning in this course. For one, I found it very helpful that class lectures and readings related so much to our activities. This gave us a very good foundation to work from. I thought the group that we came with was very helpful. We all came in with so many diverse views/opinions, but this really seemed to help strengthen discussions and relationships formed especially enjoyed our trip to the workhouse.

Even though this current study did not explore the long-term effects of these short-term study abroad programs, research (Jon & Fry, 2021; Vanden Berg & Schwander, 2019) indicate these trips help develop global citizenship identity in its students, and many chose to involve in global engagement, including civic engagement, philanthropic activities, and social entrepreneurship and voluntary simplicity activities for the common good.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of the current study is that data was not collected to measure in-state and out-of-state participation. Without knowing participant data about in-state residents, it can only be reported that those who participated reside in a frontier state. Programs with and without a service component were also not measured, along with information about students who lived with and without host families. Measuring levels of intercultural competence in relation to a service component and those who lived with host families is beneficial information to be followed-up and reported on. It is also important to note is that 84% of all participants had previously traveled outside of US, which is a possible indication that higher levels of intercultural competency could be expected from this group of students. Additionally, most students were females and white, therefore the study results may not be generalizable to a broader university student population even on

a rural/frontier campus. Post tests were collected immediately after in most of the cases and therefore it cannot be stated with confidence the changes or improvements that were seen at posttest in relationship to knowledge, skills and attitudes among the participants will be sustained over time. Follow-up observations using a longitudinal study could help us understand the long-term effects of short-term study abroad trips.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

The significance of the proposed study included assessment of intercultural competence of students on a rural campus. The results are in tandem with the growing body of literature on exploration of effects of STSA programs on intercultural competence of students, particularly in the light of promotion of internationalization efforts by educational institutions in the US. The study also collected information about the experiences of the students that might be used to develop sustainable study abroad programs that continue to provide students with an opportunity to develop new perspectives and a worldview. There is an immensely demonstrated need for short-term study abroad courses. Based on the results and analysis of information gathered from this study, these courses will help students broaden their perspective of world problems from a global perspective and their role as professionals in understanding and addressing these issues.

To enhance student's learning and knowledge, faculty can utilize the pre-departure sessions for not just as information sessions, but provide structured lectures that connects to the course, assign book readings including written by authors from the host country, encourage students to educate themselves with current political views of host country, watch movies, documentaries, and listen to podcasts to understand how views on important issues are different or similar to their own country. Faculty can set up panels consisting of returned study abroad students to share their experiences and create opportunities for students to meet international students from the host country at their institution to exchange thoughts or even practice the host country language.

Attitude is interacting and communicating with host culture and learning from the host culture, displaying interest, and understanding the similarities and differences between cultures, and most importantly, adapting by changing behaviors and reflecting on the impact of your interactions and consequences of your decisions and choices (Fantini, 2007). Therefore, attitude can be cultivated by moving beyond being a tourist and establishing meaningful relationships. This can be done by encouraging students to engage with the local community, attend neighborhood/social events (e.g., festivals and farmer's markets), explore the neighborhood (e.g., eateries and pubs) with the help of locals, take public transport, visit historical and cultural sites and museums, get outdoors in parks, take advantage of popular walking tours in the city, most importantly, capture reflections of your experiences in journals and/or make short vlogs (either as part of assignments for the course and/or personal diaries).

Acquiring skills involves using culturally specific information, adjusting behaviors, and appropriate strategies to improve interactions with the host culture, learning the host language, and adapting to it. It also involves showing flexibility when interacting with people from the host culture (Fantini, 2007). Opportunities like opting for homestays, conducting a service-learning project, volunteering at a local agency or doing an internship, participating in a pal program or joining a student group from a local university, class exchanges, or listening to local guest presenters (e.g., representatives of local social service agencies or social workers) would immensely help students to gain skills that can be useful cross-culturally.

Furthermore, faculty teaching STSA courses can also aid students' experiences through cultural mentoring. According to Paige and Goode (2009), cultural mentoring is defined as "the role of international professionals in facilitating the development of intercultural competence among their students" (p. 333). Cultural mentoring includes "engaging learners in ongoing discourse about their experiences, helping them better understand the intercultural nature of those encounters, and providing them with feedback relevant to their level of intercultural development" (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012, p. 53). Paige and Goode (2009) have suggested behaviors under "cultural mentoring", and they include faculty members address intercultural competence by asking student's expectations from the study abroad, discuss student's culture and their cultural assumptions with them, guide them regarding how to explore the host culture, aide them with reflections on any cultural

differences and navigating cultural issues in the host culture while trying to understand their level of intercultural sensitivity (as cited in Niehaus et al., 2018).

### **Implications for the Frontier/Rural University**

Current study's findings have important implications for not just the students at this frontier/rural university but for the faculty who lead the STSA programs and the university as well. Students, for example, in the areas of social work, agriculture, health, business and technology can gain global skills through exchanges while studying abroad. Students at rural institutions also offer unique perspectives and therefore when exposed to global cultures can greatly enhance their knowledge and attitudes and ultimately their worldview. STSA programs have also opens doors for students to other STSA programs, forging friendships and travelling back to meet them, travelling to new countries to either teach English or learn a language especially those who never travelled internationally before.

STSA programs/courses are an excellent supplement for students from various disciplines, particularly the health and helping professions (e.g., social work and nursing) and other service-related fields to understand their roles in the broader international arena contributing towards promoting social justice, strengthening their commitment to basic human rights. These courses are also conduits to exploration of future international travels, international volunteering and service opportunities, and higher education and employment opportunities for the students. This is particularly important for students on a frontier/rural campus, who can start at one place and go anywhere, as the slogan goes for the 'Global Engagement Office' on the frontier campus.

Our results are in alignment with the goals of the university's Global Engagement office where data collection took place. Shelley Jewell, Director of the Global Engagement office at the frontier university, believes that one of the main benefits of study abroad programs is that students can gain a new lens of cultural understanding through the process (S. Jewell, personal communication, September 26, 2019). The three objectives that education abroad is focused on emphasizing at the frontier university are academic (knowledge), professional (skills), and intercultural competency (Education Abroad Learning Objectives, 2019). While these three categories have shown some promise within the current study, the growth of these factors needs to be measured longitudinally to understand long-term program impact.

According to data collected from the frontier university Global Engagement office, a disproportionate number of out-of-state students (41%) participate in study abroad programs (Education Abroad Enrollment Report, 2019). Of all students that participate in these programs, nearly 70% of enrollers take part in STSA (Education Abroad Enrollment Report, 2019). The reason for students taking part in STSA is clear, due to the cost and commitment of the students. Another area to be explored is why more in-state students do not participate in these programs. In future, measuring the impact of these programs on students born in rural/frontier states is truly uncharted, and increasing the engagement of in-state students in study abroad programs will help in understanding the growth of intercultural competence within these populations.

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Appendix A

**Study Abroad Demographic Information**

**Table 1.**

*Participants' Demographic Characteristics (N=63)*

Categories	Previous Study Abroad Participation (N=10)	Previous Travel Outside USA (N=53)	Lived Outside USA
<b>Participant Age</b>			
18-21	50.0	45.28	20.0
22-25	30.0	33.96	20.0
26-30	0.0	1.88	20.0
31-35	0.0	3.77	20.0
36-40	10.0	3.77	20.0
40+	0.0	7.54	0.0
Age N/A	10.0	3.77	0.0
<b>Participant Gender</b>			
Male	40.0	24.53	20.0
Female	50.0	71.70	80.0
Gender N/A	10.0	3.77	0.0
<b>Education Level</b>			
Freshman	0.0	0.0	0.0
Sophomore	0.0	0.0	0.0
Junior	60.0	24.53	0.0
Senior	20.0	56.60	80.0
Graduate	10.0	15.09	20.0
Education N/A	10.0	3.77	0.0