

Cultural Adaptation: Study Abroad in Costa Rica



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Introduction

- Higher education must strive to prepare students to thrive in a global society (Longview Foundation, 2008)
- Study abroad programs globalize the undergraduate curricula (Zhai & Scheer, 2002)
- Agricultural study abroad should incorporate cultural learning (NRC, 2009)



Purpose

- To explore how College of Agricultural and Life Sciences students at the University of Florida reacted to the culture during a short-term study abroad program



Methods

- CALS Leadership Institute
- 12 students
- 10 day program in Costa Rica
- Case study
 - Grounded theory analysis
 - Open coding
 - Axial coding
 - Selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990)



Data Collection

- Pre-travel questions
- Post-experience questions
- Reflective journaling
- Photographs/captions



Findings

- Eight stages and 25 sub-stages of cultural adaptation emerged:
 1. Initial feelings
 2. Cultural uncertainty
 3. Cultural barriers
 4. Cultural negativity
 5. Group dynamics
 6. Academic and career development
 7. Feelings throughout the program
 8. Cultural growth



Initial Feelings

- Initial Concerns

- “I’m a little scared, mostly because it’s a new experience and there are a lot of unknown elements in this trip. . . .” (6).

- Initial Excitement

- “I think there is a lot to be gained by visiting another country, because it gives us a more global perspective on society and the relationships between people”(10).

- Need for Personal Growth and Cultural Growth

- “I believe that seeing the differences between the culture in Costa Rica and the culture in the US will help me understand that there are many different ways of thinking in the world”(6).

- Expects Culture Shock

- “I’ll be in a state of shock when I get off of the plane” (3).



Initial Feelings

- Expects Discomfort
 - No technology (3)
 - Pushed to the limits (10)
- Anticipation of Cultural Acceptance and Integration
 - “In general, the overall culture will probably allow me to open up, relax, and really just enjoy the experience and soak everything up” (10).



Cultural Uncertainty

- Cultural Surprises
 - No formal address system (4).
 - Lack of safety precautions (6;8;10).
- Comparisons
 - “ Although I enjoyed the food in Costa Rica, having rice and beans was starting to get old, so I can’t imagine having to eat it as much as Costa Ricans do. I was definitely more appreciative of my Chick-Fil-A sandwich and fries when I returned” (1).



Cultural Barriers

- Language Barrier
 - Communication challenges (3:5:12).
 - Participant 12 stated “Hard to understand the culture without being able to speak Spanish because there is limited communication- which is such an important part of learning culture.”



Group Dynamics

- Relationship Growth
 - Building meaningful relationships (4;5;6;7;10)
 - Participant 6 stated “this activity allowed us to come closer together as a group while experiencing the beauty of the rainforest and the element of adventure seen in Costa Rican culture.”



Academic and Career Development

- Academic focus
 - Sustainable agriculture (8)
 - Wildlife conservation (6;10)
- Professional growth
 - “I want to be an exotic animal veterinarian in the future, so this experience was extremely helpful to me” (6)



Feelings Throughout the Program

- Excitement
 - Landscape (5;6;8)
 - Exhilarating adventures (2)
- Discomfort
 - Horseback riding (4)
 - Zipline (1;8;10)
- Safety Concerns
 - Driving practices (8;9)
 - Lack of sanitation practices (12)
- Thankfulness for the United States
 - Educational opportunities (12)
 - Government (12)



Cultural Growth

- Overcoming language barriers
 - Attempted to speak Spanish (4;9;12)
- Cultural respect and acceptance
- Positive Cultural Experiences
 - Interactions with the locals (11)
 - Coffee plantation (7)
- Cultural Identification and Recognition
 - Eating habits (5)
 - Lack of stress (7)



Cultural Growth

- Cultural learning
 - Participant 12 learned about “the indigenous tribe and how they balance traditions with modern society.”
- Personal growth
 - Importance of people (1)
 - Different way of accomplishing a goal (6)
- Increased interest in future experiences abroad
- Cultural integration
 - Slow down and be considerate of others (4)
 - Continue to the Spanish language (12)



Conclusions/Implications

- Unique experiences for each participant
- Cultural adaptation is non-linear
- Study abroad facilitators should help students adapt to the culture
- Academic and cultural learning
- Time for reflection
- Learning activities prior, during, and after
 - Language skills
 - Cultural Traditions
 - Cultural acceptance



Future Research

- Replication
- Depth and breadth of reflective journaling
- Instructor differences/program differences



Thank You!

