Cultural Adaptation: Study Abroad in Swaziland

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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

- African Savannah Wildlife Ecology
- 15 students
- 19 day program in Swaziland
- Case study
  - Grounded theory analysis
    - Open coding
    - Axial coding
    - Selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990)
Data Collection

- Pre-travel questions
- Post-experience questions
- Participant observation
- Reflective journaling
- Photographs/captions
Findings

• Eight stages and 20 sub-stages of cultural adaptation emerged:
  1. Initial feelings
  2. Cultural uncertainty
  3. Cultural negativity
  4. Cultural growth
  5. Cultural barriers
  6. Feelings throughout the program
  7. Academic and career development
Initial Feelings

• Initial Concerns
• Initial Excitement
  – “I’m very excited to experience a new culture and country” (5).
• Need for Personal Growth and Cultural Growth
  – “I think the culture in Swaziland will help bring me out of my American bubble and it will help me be aware that different cultures have different customs” (9).
• Expects Culture Shock
  – “I believe it may be a bit of a cultural shock for me and I’m actually really excited about that” (14).
Cultural Uncertainty

• Comparisons
  – Friendliness and standard of living (1; 9; 13).
  – “It was hard for me to not look Swazis in the eye while talking to them because it is the complete opposite for our American culture” (9).

• Cultural Surprises
  – Traditional culture- clothes, ceremonies, and dances(4; 5; 7).
Cultural Negativity

• Frustration
  – Difficult to interpret body language (12)
  – Polygamist lifestyle (8)
  – Charitable organizations (1)
Cultural Barriers

• Language Barrier
  – Communication challenges (5; 13).
  
  – Participant 14 stated, “today I finally felt the awkwardness that comes with lack of a common language.”
Feelings Throughout the Program

• Excitement
  – Human interactions (2; 6)
  – “I’m excited to meet more Swazis, and lean about more of their culture” (6).

• Negative attitude towards the United States
  – Felt people in Swaziland were better than people from the United States (1; 7)

• Discomfort
  – Visiting villages (4)
  – Treatment of women (2)
  – Trash (2)
  – Bodily fluids (2)
Academic and Career Development

• Academic focus
  – Conducted wildlife research
  – Discussed poaching (6)
  – Conservation (2; 4)

• Professional growth
  – People influence wildlife conservation (6; 11)
Cultural Growth

• Overcoming language barriers
• Cultural respect and acceptance
  – “They are very traditional people that don’t seem to be open to changing to a “western” civilization, not that they should” (4).
  – Danced with Swazi women (8)
• Positive Cultural Experiences
  – Visiting Villages (2; 3; 4; 9)
  – Visiting markets (2)
  – Interaction with Swazi college students (6; 12)
Cultural Growth

• Cultural Identification and Recognition of culture
  – “Swazi people might be poor and the age of death is very low but they are very happy people with a real sense of community and family values” (4).

• Cultural learning
  – Purpose of children and food consumption (4; 10)

• Personal growth
  – Listening skills and appreciation for the U. S.

• Increased interest in future experiences abroad
  – “I love the warmth of the people and the beautiful mountains and I can’t wait to come back” (6).
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!