

# A Qualitative Investigation of U.S. Students' Experiences in an International Peer Program

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*This qualitative study was designed to gather information, using focus groups, about U.S. host students' experiences in a U.S.–international peer program and about how the program influenced their cross-cultural awareness. Researchers of this study noticed host students' unconscious need for guidance to become interculturally competent and heard their suggestions to maximize their experiences in a cross-cultural peer program.*

Pickert (1992) strongly encouraged colleges and universities to be proactive in integrating an international focus in education. One objective in education has been to increase opportunities to study abroad (Talbot & Stewart, 1999), and as a result, the numbers of students studying abroad has increased rapidly in recent years (Ryan & Twibell, 2000). Several studies have documented students' experiences abroad, revealing positive gains such as foreign language proficiency (Pickert, 1992), development of cultural knowledge and cultural sensitivity (McCabe, 1994; Sachdev, 1997), interpersonal maturity (Stitsworth, 1989), and increased international interest and concern (Carlson & Widaman, 1988). Studies have also suggested that students may experience difficulty with cross-cultural adaptation, including culture shock (Church, 1982; Ryan & Twibell) and problems with adjust-

ment upon returning home (Raschio, 1987; Uehara, 1986).

Understanding that study abroad is not possible for many students, another option some colleges and universities have offered is participation in cross-cultural peer programs. These programs pair international students with U.S. host students to assist international student adjustment. Research has documented positive effects on international students' academic achievement, social adjustment, and use of campus resources as a result of these programs (Quintrell & Westwood, 1994; Westwood & Barker, 1990); however, the literature lacks an examination of the influence of the peer programs on the U.S. host students who participate.

Research exists that supports the benefit of interpersonal contact with other cultural groups. Nesdale and Todd (2000) implemented an intervention in a residence hall at an Australian university that promoted intercultural contact among Australian students and international students living in the hall. When compared with a control group, encouraging intercultural interaction significantly influenced the level of intercultural acceptance and cross-cultural knowledge and openness of the Australian students. These students were also more likely to interact with other cultural groups within the larger campus community. In

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another study, the instructor of a graduate cross-cultural course paired students with immigrant and refugee students and found that the depth of interpersonal contact with individuals from other cultures was key in enriching the participants' cross-cultural sensitivity (Mio, 1989).

In Fall 1997, the Office of Residence Life (ORL) and the Office of International Student Services (OISS) at a large public Midwestern university implemented an ongoing, semester-long international peer program (IPP). This program continued to be implemented until April 2000. The IPP paired U.S. host students, recruited mostly from the university's residence halls, with incoming international students to assist the international students' adjustment to the U.S. and campus life. Before the program began, host students received brief training and typically corresponded with their partners by E-mail at least once. Students were introduced to their partners at a kickoff event. Throughout the semester, organized campus activities were planned on a monthly basis for students and their partners to interact. The pairs of students were also encouraged to plan activities on their own. Although the peer program's primary purpose was to help the international students become familiar with the university, its resources, and U.S. culture, it was anticipated that the international students would help the host students increase their knowledge and awareness of foreign cultures, traditions, and customs.

As part of the design of the IPP, a protocol was developed to provide both research on the effects of the intercultural experience, as well as provide program evaluation for future enhancement of the IPP. The research component had two prongs. The first study (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed,

1998) investigated the effect of the IPP on the adjustment of the international students who participated in the program. The results revealed that the IPP significantly increased the social adjustment of the international students as compared to a matched control group of nonparticipants of the program, indicating that the social environment of the program affected the interpersonal skills of the international students in a positive way.

The purpose of this, the second, study was to explore how the U.S. host students were influenced by the interpersonal contact they had with their international partners in the program. Given the complexity of the social interactions being studied, the researchers felt that a qualitative research approach would help the researchers "to avoid simplifying the social phenomena and instead explore the range of behavior and expand their understanding of the resulting interactions" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 7). Using a modified grounded theory methodology with a phenomenological approach, the study was designed to investigate how participation (i.e., the "lived experience" of participants) in the IPP affected, if any, the cross-cultural awareness of the U.S. host students. The study also served as an evaluation of the peer program from the host students' point of view and addressed how student affairs administrators could modify the program to be more beneficial for the host students involved.

## METHOD

### Participants

Sixteen host students from the peer program, approximately half of the participating U.S. students, volunteered to participate in one of four focus group sessions. One student participated in two focus groups, one at the

end of fall semester and one at the end of winter semester. Thirteen participants were female and three were male. They were all U.S. citizens and were freshmen, sophomores, and juniors with an average age of 19 years. Overall, individuals included students who were new to the program, as well as returning participants. Some individuals had significant contact with their partners while others had very little. According to participants, their experiences ranged from “transforming” to “indifferent.”

## **Procedure**

Initially, during the 1997 data collection, U.S. host students were asked to keep journals about their experiences in the IPP. Unfortunately, the researchers found that the journal entries were more like activity logs rather than meaningful reflections. Therefore, there was not enough substance to do any content analysis, which resulted in the researchers’ considering alternative data collection methods. Focus groups have proven to be well-suited for gathering information on college students’ attitudes and experiences about particular programs, services, or relevant issues (Jacobi, 1991; Kaase & Harshbarger, 1993). In this study, focus groups were used to explore the participants’ experiences, perceptions, and feelings about their interactions with their international partners and about the peer program. Additionally, the interactive environment of the focus group discussions promoted participants’ self-disclosure and the sharing and comparing of their experiences in the peer program (Krueger, 1994). The researchers’ thinking about the semi-structured questions used for the focus groups was informed by the few substantive journal entries from the original data gathering process.

U.S. host students were recruited at the IPP opening kickoff event, since it generally had the highest attendance rate of the planned activities for the peer program. The researchers recruited additional participants at a midsemester activity. Interested participants were asked to provide their names, phone numbers, and E-mail addresses and were contacted near the end of the semester to arrange the focus groups with the researchers. Any identifying information was destroyed after the focus groups took place.

All of the focus groups were facilitated by two researchers: a White American female doctoral student in counseling psychology who has lived abroad and has experience conducting focus group interviews; and a Japanese male, a program coordinator from the OISS who was largely responsible for creating and implementing the IPP. Originally, the research team planned to conduct six focus groups, three midsemester and three at the end of the program. Conceptually, the goal was to capture changes that occurred during one semester’s implementation of the IPP. During the first midsemester focus group, participants indicated that they had not had enough time or contact with their international partners to engage in discussions. Based on this feedback, the research plan was modified by discontinuing midsemester focus groups and including an additional semester of data collection. Four focus groups were conducted, ranging in size from three to six participants. Two groups were administered at the end of fall and two at the end of winter, covering approximately 50% of participating IPP host students for those semesters. By the end of the last two focus group meetings, researchers began to hear consistency in some of the stories and examples shared.

The focus groups began with an introductory protocol script, as suggested by Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996), which (a) explained informed consent, (b) welcomed and thanked participants for their time, (c) introduced the facilitators, (d) described confidentiality, (e) explained the purpose of the audiotape recording, and (f) stressed the importance of respecting other's opinions. Each participant was asked to make an introduction, including first name only, year in school, and number of semesters participating in the peer program. Each person was also asked to describe any previous exposure to other foreign cultures.

In conducting the focus groups, the facilitators used the following semistructured interview questions:

1. Why did you decide to participate in the peer program?
2. What were your initial expectations as you began the program?
3. What did you hope to gain from your participation in the program?
4. What were your initial beliefs and attitudes toward your international partner?
5. What surprised you about the experience?
6. What did you learn from the experience?
7. How has participation in the peer program changed your perspectives about international students?
8. What would you change about the program?

Additionally, participants were asked to share examples of their interactions with their partners in the peer program. The facilitators probed throughout the interview

to help clarify participants' responses and concluded the discussion with a summary of the main points presented in the group (Vaughn et al., 1996).

An audiotape recording was made of the focus groups, which lasted approximately 90 minutes. Afterwards refreshments were shared and time was offered for debriefing. Immediately after the debriefing time, the facilitators processed the sessions together, summarizing the discussion and sharing their observations about the participants' responses (Krueger, 1994). The facilitators also briefed a faculty member, who was an advisor for the study, about the groups to obtain additional reactions and comments about the focus group process.

The focus group audiotapes were transcribed verbatim by one of the facilitators and analyzed by both facilitators. NUD\*IST, a systematic computer program for analyzing qualitative data, was used to assist in the analysis process. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), an inductive analysis was conducted. The first step involved two researchers reading the transcripts individually and assigning broad and general coding categories to the transcript text. Then, the researchers came together to discuss the categories, identify points of agreement and disagreement, and reach a consensus about a list of coding categories (Lincoln & Guba).

After an initial list of codes was generated, the researchers analyzed the transcript text, assigned text to coding categories, and developed and modified the coding categories. To refine and revise the coding scheme, the researchers recoded two additional times (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Finally, the faculty advisor, who was not involved in the analysis process, reviewed the data and interpretations for clarity and consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## RESULTS

The host students' experiences, perceptions, and feelings about their interactions with their partners and the program revealed in the focus groups were categorized into 4 time periods, or phases, in which they occurred. These phases were (a) preprogram, (b) initial contact with their partner, (c) interactions throughout the semester, and (d) reflections at the close of the program. Within each time period, the host students experienced different feelings related to their expectations about the program and interactions with their partners, ranging from feeling affirmed to feeling discouraged about participating. In addition to the 4 phases defined above, participants offered a substantial number of programming suggestions; these suggestions appear in a fifth category, programming suggestions. The following results represent common experiences discussed by many of the participants as well as those experiences mentioned by only a few of the participants.

### Preprogram

Before the program began, most of the U.S. host students who volunteered for the program felt positively about the program, excited about meeting their partners, and highly motivated to get involved. Many of the students expressed confidence in their ability to relate to international students. The primary concerns they had initially were about the logistics of the program and not about the cultural differences between them and their partners.

Many of the host students had previous exposure to international cultural groups. Twelve participants reported they had lived abroad as foreign exchange students or traveled abroad on vacation. Three of the remaining four participants had plans to travel abroad. Most of the participants

reported they already had friends from other countries and, as a result, expressed a high level of comfort with individuals from foreign cultures. Only one student articulated some apprehension about meeting international students.

For several participants, making friends was the primary motivation for volunteering for the program. One participant said, "It's an exciting opportunity to share my life with somebody and have them share their life with me. It's a different perspective." Another participant said she would feel rewarded by putting herself in the position of getting to know someone she would not likely talk to otherwise.

Some participants were interested in learning about different cultures and gaining new perspectives on how others in the world live. These students suggested that as they talked and engaged in activities with their partners, learning about their culture would be inevitable. One participant said she wanted to learn the "little things" about her partner's culture, things that would not be taught in a formal class. Two participants mentioned they were majoring in international business and politics, and thought participation in the program would be helpful in their career. Another participant was in a language exchange with his partner: he helped her with English, and she helped him with his Japanese proficiency.

A few participants mentioned their motivation was to help their international partners adjust to the university and U.S. culture. Having had a negative experience as a foreign exchange student, one participant disclosed that she volunteered for the program because she was sensitive to the difficulties international students might encounter. Another student was anticipating a trip to study abroad and thought she might



gain some insight from her international partner about what the adjustment might be like. Two host students wanted to share their enthusiasm for the university with their international partners by helping them get connected with campus resources, while two other participants saw the program as an opportunity to get more involved in the university.

The host students reported a variety of concerns about meeting their partners. For example, some wondered if they would even get paired up with a partner, some whether they would be able work out meeting times with their partners because of their busy schedules, and others whether their partners would want to participate in program activities. One host student feared her partner would be “clinging” and “dependent” on her to take him or her out; while another student worried she would not get along with her partner. Surprisingly, only two students mentioned concerns about being uncomfortable with their partner for cultural reasons. One said, “I wasn’t exactly sure about what, with her culture and her background, what kinds of things she would be comfortable doing.” The other student suggested she anticipated difficulty interpreting her partner’s reactions as they interacted.

### Initial Contact With Partner

The initial contact host students had with their partners proved to be the most difficult period of the program. For most, difficulty in establishing a relationship with their partner exceeded their expectations, and so did the amount of effort required to feel connected with their partner. This difficulty decreased their excitement and positive feelings about participating in the program. As a result, a few students expressed regret

about their lack of involvement with their partners. For other students, initial contact with their partner exposed them to a new culture, resulting in an awareness of the assumptions and stereotypes they had about their partners.

During the initial meeting with their partners, most host students had difficulty finding common ground. They struggled to keep conversation flowing and found it difficult to plan activities. One student said, “We talked a lot about where we were from. . . . You can only talk about your hometown so much; so, it was kind of difficult to find something to talk about beyond that.” Another student said,

I think because they are from a different culture, you don’t know what they expect. You don’t know what’s normal for them. Like, my partner came over to my room, and we were just sitting there, and I’m like, “Okay, is this, do they do this there? Is this, do they just hang out or sit around?” I don’t know, it’s just, you don’t really know what to expect.

Most of the host students did not expect their initial contact to be so awkward. One student said, “I didn’t expect it to be hard. Like, ‘Oh yeah, I’m gonna go eat pizza with international people and it will be cool.’ Then I sat there and I was kind of like, ‘Oh!’ Maybe if I had been warned.” One host student mentioned she had a hard time understanding her partner’s accent and had trouble pronouncing her partner’s name. Another participant reported she was paired with her partner along with another host student, which made it a little easier to converse during the initial meeting.

During this initial period of the program, some of the host students exerted a lot of effort to get to know and help their partners

— much more than they would normally to accommodate a U.S. newcomer. These students reported that they made many phone calls, made an effort to identify their partners' interests, and were willing to "put themselves out" for their partner. One student picked up her partner from the airport and her partner stayed with her initially. Another host student read a portion of her partner's master's thesis. One host student practiced his Japanese language skills with his Japanese partner and "felt like a big brother to her."

A few host students seemed to be deterred by the level of difficulty in establishing a relationship with their partners. One student felt, "I should call [her] up, but I just never do. I think it's just the, the nature of a relationship that you're not really into." Other reasons stated by individual students for their lack of effort included believing her partner did not need help, not having a car to take her partner places, and being too busy for the program.

After meeting and spending some time with their partners, many of the host students' assumptions and stereotypes about international students were challenged. One student learned that his partner's country was urbanized complete with shopping malls and popular culture. This type of thinking was best exemplified when another student shared,

When I think of India, I think of like a whole bunch of people living in this really small house and whole bunch of open wide space. . . . I have met other people from India and Singapore and UAE and Pakistan, and I know it's not like that now.

Some host students had preconceived notions that international students were

studious, reserved, and only interested in doing "small, calm things." They were surprised at how much their partners socialized and enjoyed going places. Another host student was surprised to learn that English was the primary language of her partner's country of origin, and others were surprised that their partners spoke fluent English. A few students were surprised that their partners did not appear to struggle with culture shock. Another student's belief that international students were "open-minded" allowed her to be "more herself" around them.

## Interactions Throughout the Semester

The amount of contact host students had with their partners throughout the program varied. As mentioned above, a few host students had very little contact with their partners; however, those students who were not discouraged in the initial phase of the program met more frequently with their partners. They hung out together, attended the program's structured activities, went to movies, ate dinner together, and talked over the phone or communicated via E-mail. Two students reported becoming close friends with their partners.

The host students' ongoing interactions with their partners tended to increase their confidence and decrease the apprehension they felt during the initial phase of the program. Most of the students reported fun and meaningful times while interacting with their partners despite periods of discomfort and frustration. Some students gained new cultural perspectives, developed empathy, influenced their family and friends' attitudes toward international students, and became more competent with intercultural interactions. One participant said, "He laughs at

me, with my Japanese. He'll ask me something like, 'Ask me where I'm from,' and I'll ask him and he'll laugh. And then I, on the flip side, I help him with his English." Another student said,

I just have a lot of good memories from this semester. . . . The thing that sticks out in my mind from this semester [is] how my partner and I talked about a lot of things that are common and things that we understood about each other.

In addition to their positive feelings and experiences, several students experienced periods of discomfort with their partners. A few students were uncomfortable being partnered with a person of the opposite sex. They were concerned that their partners would misinterpret their helpful behavior for romantic gestures. This influenced another student's decision about inviting her partner home for Thanksgiving.

A few students expressed frustration that their partners were too "agreeable." These students suggested that they were looking forward to debating about current issues and hearing different perspectives. They thought their conversations lacked depth because their partners did not speak their minds. "[My partner] kind of wanted to go with the flow, make things easy . . . but, I kind of would have liked something maybe a little bit more aggressive."

After they got to know their partners, some host students reported gaining new cultural perspectives. They described situations in which they wondered if their partners' behavior could be attributed to individual characteristics or attributed to cultural characteristics. For instance, one student said she and her roommates were telling jokes of a sexual nature when her partner closed up and seemed uncomfortable.

She wondered if the discomfort was due to her partner's cultural background or individual personality style.

In addition to their new cultural perspectives, some of the host students developed empathy toward their partners. Relating with international students caused them to imagine what it would be like to move to an unfamiliar culture. They speculated that their partners might have felt anxious, nervous, and hesitant to interact. One student was concerned about what it would be like for his partner to meet his friends, most of whom had never interacted with international students. Another student thought her partner might be lonely on campus during Christmas break and invited her home for the holidays.

As a result of their participation in the program, a few students thought they positively influenced their family and friends' attitudes toward international students. One student said, "You can feel influential to other people, because if they're not comfortable with one culture and they see me interacting with them, then they can say, 'Oh, I can do that'." A few students also suggested that the program helped them feel more competent in interacting with people from other nations. Quoting one student, "I think it's going to help us . . . in the workforce . . . going to open up our minds, and give us the ability to express, to communicate to all people from different places."

### Reflections at the Close of the Program

At the conclusion of the program many of the participants reported that they were glad they participated and valued their experience in the program. Several host students thought the program was meaningful for them, whereas a few others were not impressed with their experience in the program. Host



participants made comments and suggestions to help improve the program, some of which pertained to enhancing the experiences of the U.S. students.

When asked during the focus groups how the experience in the IPP had changed them, several students said that they became aware of their biases and stereotypes and that their cultural assumptions were challenged. For example, one participant said she had stereotypes about how men treat women in some cultures and was afraid to approach some male international students. Participation in the program helped her alleviate this fear. Another student became aware of how she viewed things from an American perspective.

Some of the host students reported that they learned to interact more effectively with someone from a different culture. Others learned that their broad assumptions about other cultures could not be trusted. Interacting with her partner helped one student realize that she was not as knowledgeable as she thought about her partner's culture. Another student said that the program helped her develop stronger ties and feel more comfortable with foreigners because she learned how to interact on a "more personal level."

In contrast, a few host students reported that participation in the program did not have much impact on their cultural views. These participants suggested that they enjoyed the experience of getting to know their partners, but their cultural learning was limited. Perhaps one participant said it best: "It's been fun, but it hasn't been a big revelation in my life. I have really close international friends already."

Some participants commented about the benefits of the program for them as host students. A few suggested that the program

was primarily for the advantage of the international students who had to adjust to a new culture and build all new friendships. One student believed the amount of time spent with partners made a difference in how much the host students gained from their participation. Another student said, "I think you make [the program] what you want it to be; so if you want to gain something out of it then you will, but if you're not going to try, you're not going to learn as much." One student reflected upon what he learned in the program:

It would always be like, . . . when I was little and my dad would get home, and [say], "So, what did you learn [in school] today?" "I don't know." But I know year to year there would be more stuff I would know.

## Program Suggestions

The 16 U.S. participants proposed several suggestions for improving the administration of the program. Some of these suggestions resulted from their need for more support and guidance in interacting more effectively with their partners, such as more structure in the initial phase of the program. They recommended that program administrators offer more training about what to expect and how to communicate with their partners. Some of the specific activities they suggested were: (a) talking to host students who already had participated in the program for a semester, (b) participating in ice-breaking activities to help partners get acquainted, and (c) engaging in large group activities instead of splitting off exclusively with their partners. The participants also indicated they needed more assistance throughout the semester in communicating with their partners. One participant commented that one semester was too short a period for

developing a strong relationship and recommended extending the program for the whole academic year.

A few host students thought the program could have addressed their partners' transition more effectively if they could have met them before the first event (which occurred two weeks into the semester). One student said, "Finding some way to acquaint us with our partner right at the start would, I think, [perhaps] help them a lot; because when they first get here, they don't know anybody." Others also suggested that the program's training sessions should focus more on how the host students can prepare their partners for the initial transition to the new environment.

Many host students, most of whom were undergraduates, expressed or implied their preferences for undergraduate international partners. Some host students reported feeling awkward because of the age difference between partners, particularly those paired with international graduate students who were quite a bit older. Another student said that because her partner was married, it was uncomfortable organizing social activities. These host students had expected younger partners whom they could "hang out with" in the residence halls.

Finally, a few participants recommended that advertising the International Peer Program more widely could enhance participation. They suggested advertising in other departments, e.g., foreign language, study abroad. Some students believed that administrators could generate more interest in the program by promoting the benefits for host students, such as practicing language skills and developing intercultural communication skills.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how

the U.S. host students were influenced by the interpersonal contact they had with their international partners in the program. As with previous research (Mio, 1989; Nesdale & Todd, 2000), the study revealed the program had some cognitive influence on the host students' cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity. Several students learned about their partners' culture, confronted their cultural stereotypes, and became more aware of their cultural biases and perspectives. Furthermore, as they interacted with their partners, some host students came to realize their partners had unique individual characteristics, which served to decrease their tendency to make cultural assumptions about their partners. Drews, Meyer, and Peregrine (1996) also found that students who studied abroad developed more complex personal references, realizing that members of other nations had similar pleasant and unpleasant attributes that members of their own nation possessed.

Beyond the cognitive development, however, the influence of the program seemed to vary, having both benefits and challenges. The host students initially were excited and felt positive about their participation in the program. These positive feelings decreased significantly during the initial phase of the program. They felt uncomfortable with their partners and became frustrated at the level of difficulty interacting, deterring several host students from pursuing further interactions with their partners. For those who overcame their initial discomfort, their confidence eventually increased as they interacted with their partners throughout the semester, and by the end of the program, they felt more competent in cross-cultural situations. This pattern of feelings the host students encountered in the IPP was found to be partially congruent with

the experiences of those who study abroad. The study abroad literature describes a similar adjustment pattern called the *U-curve hypothesis* or the culture shock phenomenon (Church, 1982). As students begin their sojourn, they experience a honeymoon phase in which they are excited about studying abroad. Their well-being decreases as they realize the difficulty of living in a foreign culture. After some time spent adjusting, they learn to cope and negotiate their surroundings more effectively (Nash, 1991; Ryan & Twibell, 2000).

The varying impact of the IPP on the host students then became the topic of interest to the researchers. As we worked on codifying the transcripts several times to make meaning of students' experience beyond the spoken word, we recognized three related, but not necessarily sequential, attributes that affected a student's ability to have a successful or positive experience in the IPP: the student's (a) fulfilling or not fulfilling expectations of and motivation for participating in the program; (b) ability or inability to get past the initial discomfort associated with an intercultural interaction; and (c) having or not having the willingness and commitment to invest in the relationship.

We paid particularly close attention to the initial discomfort expressed, for a majority of the host students reported having a problem getting past this stage. After meeting their partners at a kickoff event, the host students started to discern some benefits and challenges associated with participating in the program. They seemed to be able to articulate the areas in which they experienced growth, but could not identify why they were struggling. As a result, the host students repeatedly asked for more structure, more training, and more guidance in communicating with their partners. Initially, the

researchers heard these requests as concerns about shortcomings in the IPP. Eventually, we labeled this phenomenon: students' flirting with *readiness* to engage in meaningful intercultural relationships. In other words, the students seemed to have the desire to be effective in their intercultural relationships, but actually taking the necessary risks without more guidance seemed too daunting for them. This view is consistent with a notion that motivation, knowledge, skills are all necessary conditions of competent intercultural communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

While one-on-one exchange of ideas with an individual is shown to be effective in gaining cross-cultural awareness (Mio, 1989), this approach may not have benefited the host students as much as it did for the newly arrived international students. The host students, unlike their partners who had to meet and make friends in a new cultural setting, were living where they already had an established social network. For most host students, academic learning about a different culture was manageable; however, being one-on-one and engaging in the act of interpersonal and intercultural communication was uncomfortable for many, and as a result, some began to withdraw their participation.

## IMPLICATIONS

The evaluation of the International Peer Program in this study revealed that host students' experiences could be enhanced in key ways. First, a more accurate assessment of host students' expectations and intercultural competency must be implemented; students' self-reported openness and exposure to different cultures through travel and study abroad cannot be equated to having

intercultural sensitivity. Second, the pre-program training must address the needs of the participants revealed through this assessment. Based on the current study, potential topics may include: (a) assisting students in self-assessment of their own motivations and goals for participating in the program; (b) preparing students for the initial discomfort that often occurs when meeting their partners for the first time; and (c) helping students build better interpersonal skills, especially in intercultural relationships. Research suggests that cross-cultural interactions may be unsuccessful in the absence of any prior cross-cultural training (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Gannon & Poon, 1997; Goldstein & Smith, 1999). Adding cross-cultural training components could enhance host students' potential to interact more effectively with their international partners.

This study also highlights the importance of research and evaluation of programs

intended to strengthen cross-cultural experiences. Student affairs professionals must assess such services and programs. Formative and summative evaluations can point to strengths that can contribute to future successful program outcomes (Kemmis & Walker, 2000). In this case, the ongoing qualitative research informed administrators about the unspoken or unconscious needs that existed with regard to participants' experiences in a newly developing program. This method also assisted administrators in identifying some of the potential needs and criteria for assessing the success of an international peer program.

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