

# A Qualitative Case Study of the Cultural Experiences of Undergraduates on a Study Abroad Program in Costa Rica

**Nathan W. Conner<sup>1</sup>**  
**University of Nebraska-Lincoln**  
**Lincoln, NE**

**T. Grady Roberts<sup>2</sup>**  
**University of Florida**  
**Gainesville, FL**



## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs) Leadership Institute participants experienced cultural adaptation during a seven-day short-term study abroad experience in Costa Rica. The CALs Leadership Institute is a 17-month program focusing on leadership development through, leadership modules, mentor relationships, service learnings, and international travel. The service learning experience took place in Costa Rica and provided the participants an opportunity to help with wildlife rehabilitation. Participants' experienced the following stages of cultural adaptation: Initial feelings, cultural uncertainty, cultural barriers, cultural negativity, academic and career development, feelings throughout the program, and cultural growth. As participants navigated various stages of cultural adaptation, cultural integration occurred. Participants who focused on cultural integration took cultural adaptation a step further. Their actions fit into the culture while visiting the country, and they planned to incorporate portions of the host country's culture into their everyday lives. The anticipation of integrating a different culture into their life signifies that the participant has moved beyond the adaption stage and into the integration or assimilation stage of cultural adaptation.

## Introduction/Conceptual Framework

The U.S. agriculture industry operates within a global marketplace and relies on inputs from around the world, and in turn, sells outputs worldwide (National Research Council, 2009). Today's globalized marketplace has changed the way business is conducted and has altered the way people interact with other countries. To help people adapt and function within a globalized community and world, an emphasis on globalization and cultural

awareness must be recognized and examined at the university level (Longview Foundation, 2008).

Globalization of undergraduate curricula "typically focus[es] on three key areas: integration of international examples and activities in the curriculum, short and long-term student travel including internships, and a broad range of international experiences for professors" (Bruening and Frick, 2004, p. 90). However, one of the most popular methods of globalizing undergraduate curricula has been study abroad programs (Zhai and Scheer, 2002). Bruening and Frick (2004) found that agriculture students on a study abroad experience enhanced their knowledge of agriculture production as well as their appreciation for other cultures. Similarly, Zhai and Scheer (2002) found that agriculture students experienced positive change in their global perspective. A recent focus on the importance of culture led the National Research Council (NRC) (2009) to urge facilitators of agriculture study abroad programs to focus on cultural infusion.

As a conceptual framework for this study, two theories of cultural adaptation were used: Oberg's (1960) U-curve of culture shock, and Hottola's (2004) dynamic model of cultural confusion. Oberg's (1960) U-curve of culture shock has been heavily used to explain intercultural adaptation of tourists (Hottola, 2004; Molinsky, 2009), as well as the intercultural adaptation in relation to academic study abroad experiences (Conner and Roberts, 2015; Hottola, 2004). In this study, cultural adaptation was operationalized as when individuals' "experience of another culture yields perception and behavior appropriate to that culture" (Bennett, 2004, p. 7).

Oberg's (1960) U-curve of culture shock depicts intercultural experiences from "depression to recovery through the stages of euphoria, disillusionment, hostility,

<sup>1</sup>236 Filley Hall, Lincoln, NE 68583, (402) 472-3938, nconner2@unl.edu

<sup>2</sup>117C Bryant Hall, Gainesville, FL 32611, (352) 273-2568, groberts@ufl.edu

## A Qualitative Case Study

*adaptation, and assimilation*" (Hottola, 2004, p. 448). According to Ward et al., (1998), tourists typically make it through the first three stages and begin to experience the upswing of the U-Curve of Culture Shock Model.

Hottola (2004) modified the U-Curve of Culture Shock (Oberg, 1960) and developed two models to show cultural confusion and adaptation. The models focused on the emotions as well as learning and confusion people experience when exposed to cultural differences (Hottola, 2004). Hottola's model includes the following stages: Metaworld, overload shock, euphoria, confusion, culture shock, disillusionment, integration, adaptation, opposition, and escape home.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs) Leadership Institute participants experienced cultural adaptation during a seven-day short-term study abroad experience in Costa Rica. The specific objectives for this study were as follows: (1) to describe how CALs Leadership Institute participants experienced culture during a seven-day short-term study abroad program, and (2) to assess how the CALs Leadership Institute participants were affected by their cultural surroundings during the seven-day short-term study abroad experience. The University of Florida Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and all participants signed informed consent forms prior to participating in this study.

### Methods

The case study allowed for a holistic depiction and analysis of one or more bounded systems (Merriam, 1998). According to Creswell (1998), a bounded system is required for a case study and signifies a specific "time and place" (p. 61). The bounded system of interest for this study was the CALs Leadership Institute short-term study abroad experience in Costa Rica.

The CALs Leadership Institute consisted of 12 (nine females and three males) undergraduate agriculture students that participated in a seven-day short-term study abroad program to Costa Rica. Many study abroad programs have gone through a metamorphosis over the years and evolved from the traditional year-long programs, to short-term study abroad programs (Bennett, 2009; Vande Berg, 2007). Short-term study abroad programs allow for an affordable experience that provides opportunity for active learning and skill development (Vande Berg, 2009). In order to become part of the CALs Leadership Institute, students had to be nominated, interviewed, and selected to participate in the 17-month program. Members of this group developed leadership skills through exposure to leadership modules, mentor relationships, service learning, and international travel.

The CALs Leadership Institute short-term study abroad program included a service learning project. The

participants worked with an organization in Costa Rica called Kids Saving the Rainforest to assist in rehabilitating wild animals. Participants spent time maintaining trails, preparing food for animals, cleaning the grounds and animal cages, and preparing educational material. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to meet with a veterinarian, a board member, and the volunteer coordinator.

Data collection began at the pre-session meetings and continued to the post-session meetings. Data were collected through pre-travel questions, Post questions, reflective journaling, and photographs. All data were collected by the facilitator of the program. The pre-travel questions were modified from questions originally developed by Wingenbach et al., (2006); Edgar et al., (2006); and later modified by Dooley et al., (2008). The pre-travel questions allowed participants to take time to think about what they might learn during the short-term study abroad experience (Jones and Bjelland, 2004). Participants were emailed four pre-travel questions and electronically submitted their responses to the program facilitator. The questions were as follows:

1. What are your initial attitudes/beliefs about visiting Costa Rica? Please describe your pre-trip thoughts about Costa Rica, while concentrating on and describing your top five attitudes/beliefs.
2. What are your initial attitudes/beliefs about Costa Rican culture? Please describe your thoughts in terms of your top five attitudes/beliefs about Latin American cultural (language, customs, etc.), social, economic, or political issues.
3. How do you expect the culture in Costa Rica to affect you during your experience?
4. How do you think the culture in Costa Rica will influence your thinking both personally and professionally?

Upon returning to the United States, participants completed a set of four Post questions that were almost identical to the Post questions. The only difference was that the Post questions were designed to encourage reflection after completion of the study abroad program. All 12 participants emailed their responses to the facilitator, and then the facilitator compiled and sent the responses to the researchers.

Reflective journaling was used to allow participants to document and critically analyze their feelings and experiences (Russell and Vallade, 2010). The participants were given two questions to use as prompts to guide them through the reflective journaling process. The questions were as follows:

1. What were your observations about the culture in Costa Rica?
2. What activities of the day had the greatest significance to you and did your perceptions of Cost Rican culture change today? Why or why not?

Additionally, the short-term study abroad facilitator provided participants with additional reflective journaling

questions. The additional questions were collected from participants and analyzed. The questions were as follows:

1. What were your first impressions of Cost Rica? (What amused, frustrated, bewildered, delighted you, etc.?)
2. What are the top 5 things you learned about sustainable agriculture today?
3. What did you learn about yourself through our adventure experience? About at least two of your peers specifically?
4. What is one thing you have learned about two different peers?
5. How long do you think it takes to understand the culture of Costa Rica?
6. What is one thing you have learned about two of your peers not previously mentioned?
7. What did you learn through our service experience today?
8. What assets might this experience yield in the workplace/your future career?
9. What was the most significant thing you learned about yourself through your stay in Costa Rica?
10. What is one thing you learned about each of your peers through the trip?

Participants were instructed to write in their reflective journals each day and to use Microsoft Word to create their journals. All 12 participants emailed their journals to the facilitator.

Participants were asked to take photographs throughout the short-term study abroad program in Costa Rica. Upon returning to the United States, all 12 participants submitted five photographs representing their cultural experience and emotions. Each participant provided captions for each photograph. Collecting photographs allowed the researchers to view the experience through the lens of the participant (Grbich, 2007). However, only the captions were analyzed.

The grounded theory analysis method was used for this case study (Koro-Ljungberg Yendol-Hoppey et al, 2009). The researchers used a process that involved open-coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). A line-by-line coding process (Glaser, 1978) was used during the open-coding stage. Quickly coding each line of the data allowed codes to emerge that were directly tied to the data (Charmaz, 2006). The researchers proceeded with axial coding and categorized the codes that were established during the open-coding stage (Grbich, 2007). Axial coding was used to further breakdown the codes that initially emerged and allowed for the identification of subcategories that supported the broader category or code (Grbich, 2007). However, for the purposes of this study, categories and subcategories were labeled stages and sub-stages. The findings from axial coding were then used to identify selective codes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

To ensure that study findings were actual representations of the participants and their context, the research-

ers addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility allows for the representation of multiple realities that are associated with qualitative research (Dooley, 2007). Using multiple sources of data allowed the researchers to triangulate the findings and make sure the theory that emerged was representative of the data. In addition, participants used reflective journals that served as referential adequacy materials and helped to establish credibility (Dooley, 2007). Transferability was defined as shared characteristics that can be applied to different scenarios (Dooley, 2007). The use of thick description of this case study allows readers to vicariously enter the short-term study abroad program and decide for themselves whether the findings are transferable to a similar context (Dooley, 2007). Lincoln and Guba (1985) characterized thick description as a way of providing detailed evidence that allows the readers to determine if the data can be applied to different situations. Dependability is the qualitative version of reliability that attempts to “*track the process by providing an audit trail with documentation on methodological decisions and reflections*” (Dooley, 2007, p. 39). Additionally, confirmability allows the data to be traced back to the original raw data in an effort to link the findings to the raw data and remove researcher bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researchers kept a methodological journal to record why methodological decisions were made. This served as the dependability audit and the confirmability audit (Dooley, 2007).

## Results and Discussion

The results have been organized based on the identified stages and sub-stages. The identified stages include: Initial feelings, cultural uncertainty, cultural barriers, cultural negativity, academic and career development, feelings throughout the program, and cultural growth. Participants were each assigned a number to protect them. Data collected prior to the experience was labeled pre, data collected during the experience was identified by the day of data collection, and data collected after the experience was identified as post.

### Initial Feelings

#### Initial Concerns

Participants in this study abroad program were initially concerned about their anticipated experience in another country. P-10 (Post) said, “*I’m a little scared, mostly because it’s a new experience and there are a lot of unknown elements in this trip. . . .*” Concern raised by P-10 (Post) was the issue of safety. She was concerned that the group may be visiting areas of Costa Rica not considered safe and she was praying for safety throughout the entire program. Similarly, P-13 (Post) believed Costa Rica would be a safe place to travel, but her nerves caused her to over think and become concerned with safety.

Participants were also concerned about the service learning project that was part of the program. They were uncertain what the project would entail, which led to



## A Qualitative Case Study

anxiety (P-12, Post). P-4 (Post) was concerned with the risk involved in the service learning project. He said, *“I tend to be a risk-adverse person and it will be interesting to see how the group interacts in the field”* (P-4, Post). P-7 (Post) expressed concern about working with small animals, especially monkeys. She did not want to interact with animals during the service learning project (P-7, Post).

### Initial Excitement

Despite initial concerns, participants showed excitement about upcoming program. They were excited about the travel experience and the opportunity to learn about a different country and culture (P-7, Post). The opportunity to explore Costa Rican food stirred excitement (P-9, Post) and the thought of touring a coffee plantation excited P-12 (Post) because coffee is a product of Costa Rican agriculture.

P-6 (Post) said, *“I am extremely excited about our upcoming trip to Costa Rica. 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.”* The opportunity to visit Costa Rica and observe a different culture would be an eye-opening experience and would allow for new experiences (P-1; P-5, Post). P-3 (Post) said, *“I am not sure what features Costa Ricans share, but I am excited to see what the population looks like.”* Participants were excited to meet and interact with the people of Costa Rica (P-3; P-8, Post). Additionally, participants looked forward to adventure (P-3, Post), the service learning project (P-7, Post), and the unknown (P-10, Post).

### Need for Personal Growth and Cultural Growth

Before participating in the study abroad program, participants felt a need for personal growth and cultural growth. P-2 (Post) expected the program to provide an opportunity for her to observe the culture of Costa Rica and compare it to the United States. Cultural exposure was anticipated and expected throughout the program (P-3, Post). Potential immersion in the culture would help P-3 (Post) to experience the culture around her and to increase her understanding of how other people live. Interactions with people in Costa Rica were expected to help participants improve their lives (P-8, Post) and expand their world view (P-6, Post). P-6 (Post) said, *“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 ways of thinking in the world.”*

Additionally, P-8 (Post) wanted this study abroad experience to enhance her leadership skills making her better able to help people in her future career. Increased patience was another product expected from this program (P-5, Post). P-5 (Post) thought increased patience would make her more tolerant of other cultures. Similarly, P-9 (Post) believed it would be beneficial to be around another culture and the experience would help him learn to interact with different types of people.

### Expects Culture Shock

Before leaving the United States, several participants anticipated experiencing culture shock upon entering Costa Rica (P-3; P-8; P-11, Post). P-3 (Post) said, *“My first belief about visiting Costa Rica is that I’ll be in a state of shock when I get off of the plane.”* She fully expected to experience something vastly different than what she was used to in the United States (P-3, Post). Another participant (P-8, Post) had past international travel experiences and fully expected to be overwhelmed by the culture of Costa Rica. Participant P-8 (Post) said, *“I think I will probably go through an adjusting period and then by day five I will be comfortable with the Costa Rican culture.”* Additionally, P-11 (Post) expected to experience some level of culture shock, but not as great as if he were visiting Brazil or Honduras.

### Expects Discomfort

Many of the participants expected to initially experience a feeling of discomfort. Participant P-3 (Post) said, *“I [expect] to feel a little uncomfortable in the beginning because of the unfamiliar atmosphere, but I hope that I can let go of the discomfort and enjoy everything and everyone around me.”* The study abroad experience forced participants out of their comfort zone by removing them from constant access to technology (P-4, Post). P-10 (Post) expected the study abroad experience to push her to new limits, by removing her from her comfort zone and helping her find her limits.

### Anticipation of Cultural Acceptance and Integration

One initial expectation of participants was to accept the culture present in Costa Rica and integrate it into their lives. P-4 (Post) anticipated bringing home a new perspective on life. *“In general, the overall culture will probably allow me to open-up, relax, and really just enjoy the experience and soak everything up”* (P-10, Post). Immersion in the culture would allow participants to experience Costa Rica and to continue Costa Rican customs after returning to the United States (P-10, Post). P-7 (Post) said, *“I have always imagined the Costa Rican culture to be very laid back and relaxed, I think this will run off on me. I tend to worry a great deal about schedules and timelines, and I am looking forward to simply enjoying the experience. I hope to be open minded about the things I can learn while in Costa Rica.”*

Additionally, Participant P-12 (Post) expected to be affected by the food culture and to incorporate Costa Rican cooking into her life in the United States. To fully experience the culture of Costa Rica, participant P-11 (Post) said that he would “go native” in an effort to learn about and respect the culture that surrounds him.

### Cultural Uncertainty Cultural Surprises

During the program, participants experienced cultural surprises that made it a challenge to fit in with the culture around them. P-4 (Day 1) was surprised by Costa Ricans’ responses and actions when trying to arrive at

a particular location. There is no formal address system in Costa Rica and when a person gets lost they simply stop at someone's house and ask for directions, which are based on landmarks (P-4, Day 1).

The horseback riding experience surprised participants P-6 and P-12 (Day 5) because the concern for safety during the ride. Similarly, the driving in Costa Rica surprised some participants (P-6; P-10, Day 1). P-10 (Day 1) said, *"Driving in Costa Rica is an act of faith."* Driving habits in Costa Rica seemed to be accepted by locals and were common practice (P-10, Day 1).

Participants were also surprised by the eating habits of the people in Costa Rica (P-4; P-10, Day 2). P-10 (Day 2) did not expect to be served rice and beans for almost every meal of the trip.

Poverty was another surprise for some participants (P-3; P-9, Day 1). P-3 (Day 1) said, *"I truly did not realize the extent of the poverty present in Costa Rica."* P-9 (Day 1) was also surprised by the amount of poverty and the stray dogs that roamed the roads. Upon learning of the average wage for a coffee picker, P-3 (Day 9) was surprised by the low wages and had trouble understanding how a person could live on that wage. Additionally, Participant P-12 (Day 9) was surprised to learn how some Costa Ricans view Nicaraguans. She was not expecting Nicaraguans to be treated like second-class citizens.

### **Comparisons**

Comparisons to the United States and the cultures within the United States were made throughout the study abroad program. The food in Costa Rica was appreciated, but compared to the food in the United States. P-1 (Post) said,

*"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."*

Differences in the type of food were also pointed out. Additionally, the food in Costa Rica is much less processed than the food in the United States (P-12, Post). Comparisons were also made about the different interpretations of food items and how food items may share names but look and taste different in Costa Rica (P-3, Day 1). It was also noted that there were no food courts in shopping malls or play areas for children (P-3, Day 6).

Participants also compared the pace of life in the two countries. Americans rush to complete tasks. Costa Ricans are more relaxed about completing tasks, but it is the rushed lifestyle that "encourages innovation in America" (P-7, Post). The lifestyle in Costa Rica seemed to accept socializing with friends during the middle of the week (P-10, Post). There is not as much focus on completing tasks (P-10, Post).

The people in Costa Rica were less safety-minded than people in the United States (P-10, Day 4). Children in Costa Rica had much more freedom to roam around

and do as they please (P-10, Day 4). Similarly, the people in Costa Rica were not concerned with the safety of clients when they were riding horses (P-2; P-8, Day 5). One participant came close to falling off a cliff while riding on a horse and the employees laughed at her (P-8, Day 5). Additionally, there was a huge difference in the treatment of animals. The horses were overworked and did not receive water during the day hike (P-8, Day 5). Participants also noticed that the Costa Ricans negatively viewed Nicaraguans and hired them to complete jobs they did not want to complete themselves (P-7; P-8; P-11, Day 7). P-7 (Day 7) said, *"Costa Ricans treat Nicaraguans like Americans treat Mexicans."* P-1 (Day 7) found similarities in the way Costa Rica and the United States treat people who enter the country looking for employment.

### **Cultural Barriers**

#### **Language barrier**

The language barrier prevented many of the participants from fully communicating with the locals and made it a challenge to fully engage in the culture of Costa Rica. It was difficult to communicate with people because of the language barrier (P-12, Post). Apprehension about attempting the Spanish language was caused by fear of messing up the language and offending someone (P-12, Day 1). The language barrier made checking into the hotel challenging, because of the confusion with room numbers (P-12, Day 1). Additionally, P-12 (Day 5) felt it was *"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."* Upon arriving in Costa Rica, P-3 and P-10 (Post) regretted not learning Spanish before this program.

### **Cultural Negativity**

#### **Frustration**

Frustration was experienced at different points throughout the study abroad program. The laid-back atmosphere in Costa Rica was frustrating at times (P-12, Post). Participant P-12 (Post) said, *"In the beginning of the trip I liked having loose meeting times and impromptu bus rides here and there. As the trip continued I found myself over thinking everything-arrival times, sanitation, schedules, food services and handling, etc. I think I was worrying more than normal because the culture around me was less structured than what I was used to."*

The relaxed culture and time schedules were challenging for Participant P-12 (Post) to adjust to, and she realized that she would not be able to live in Costa Rica.

The service learning project focused on care and rehabilitation of monkeys (P-1, Post) and induced frustration about the money being spent to rehabilitate wild animals. Participants P-1, P-7, and P-12 (Post) felt resources were being wasted on animals when they could be used to directly benefit the people of Costa Rica. P-7 (Post) said, *"I can't understand why people with extra money would spend it on dangerous animals*

## A Qualitative Case Study

when there are children starving around the world.” Similarly, participant P-1 (Post) felt there were better organizations to choose for the service learning project.

Additionally, frustration was experienced about the lack of an army in Costa Rica. P-7 (Post) said, *“I think it is reckless for Costa Rica, or any country for that matter not to have an army. They may be fine now, but we live in a volatile world and each country should be prepared.”* However, the Costa Ricans had intense security at the airport which was frustrating because of the general laid-back nature of the country (P-2, Day 10).

### Group Dynamics

#### Relationship growth

Participants were focused on building meaningful relationships with the other group members. To get to know one another better, participants spent time playing games that allowed them to learn about each other (P-7, Post). Conversations about cultural differences also helped the group to build relationships with their peers (P-7, Post). The act of experiencing a new country with other people helped solidify friendships and helped participants learn about their peers. P-4 (Post) said, *“By day five I really knew everyone in the group much better, and it was an incredible opportunity to explore a new country together.”* The program allowed participants to bond with their peers as they participated in a life-changing experience (P-5, Post).

Additionally, this program incorporated relationship growth into the daily activities and participants were expected to learn about their peers. The zip-line experience was an excellent team-building experience (P-6, Day 3). P-6 (Post) said, *“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.”* Similarly, P-10 (Day 3) appreciated the support she received from her peers during the zip-line experience. This study abroad program brought the participants closer together and that was expressed by participant P-5 (Post), *“By the end of the trip, everyone was a lot closer and we were much better friends.”*

### Academic and Career Development

#### Academic Focus

During this study abroad program, the participants focused on academic content. The academic content for this program was in the form of leadership development through service learning and agriculture tours. Participants focused on learning about sustainable agriculture and how to conserve soil (P-8, Day 2). Learning how sustainable agriculture is used in Costa Rica and how it can be used elsewhere was a focus of the agriculture tours (P-1; P-6, Day 2). P-9 (Day 7) was happy to learn about wildlife and conservation because it was a part of the Costa Rican culture.

#### Professional Growth

Some of the participants experienced professional growth by participating in the program’s activities. P-6

(Day 8) aspires to become a veterinarian and the experience of preparing food for the monkeys aligned with her career goals and helped her to grow professionally. Participant P-6 (Day 8) said, *“I want to be an exotic animal veterinarian in the future, so this experience was extremely helpful to me.”* Similarly, P-12 (Day 8) felt working with food preparation for the monkeys helped her grow professionally. Additionally, P-5 (Day 8) felt the experience of working with people from a different culture was beneficial because it would allow her to effectively work with people from around the world in the future.

### Feelings throughout the Program

#### Excitement

The feeling of excitement was experienced throughout this study abroad program. *“Upon landing in San Jose, I was extremely excited at what was to come in the next days”* and *“the most prominent emotion I felt upon arriving is excitement for the adventures to come”* (P-1, Day 1). Participants immediately felt excitement because the opportunity to view the landscapes of Costa Rica (P-5; P-6; P-8, Post). P-7 (Post) said, *“The countryside was beautiful, and many of the places were amazing.”* Additionally, the activities scheduled for the program stirred excitement among the participants (P-2; P-5; P-8, Post).

#### Discomfort

During the program, a certain level of discomfort was experienced by many of the participants. Some of the activities experienced during the program pulled the participants out of their comfort zones. The horseback riding activity was uncomfortable for Participant P-4 (Day 5). He described the experience as scary, because the horse could not speak to him (P-4, Day 5). The zip-line experience also stirred discomfort (P-1; P-8; P-10, Day 3). P-8 (Day 3) said, *“I remember thinking that I would have to quit after the practice lines, numbers 1-5.”* The zip-line also removed Participant P-1 (Day 3) from her comfort zone.

#### Safety Concerns

There were a few safety concerns while visiting Costa Rica. The commonly accepted driving practices made P-8 and P-9 (Day 1) concerned about safety, while traveling in Costa Rica. P-10 (Day 1) said, *“I was just in my seat, praying for our safety.”* Safety concerns were also expressed during the hot springs tour, because of the weather and the people they met along the way (P-12, Day 2). Similarly, P-8 (Day 8) felt unsafe hiking in the forest because there were spiders and tour guides using machetes. The tour guides during the horseback riding experience were a concern for P-10 (Day 5). The guides did not seem concerned about potential accidents nor did they actively seek to prevent accidents (P-10, Day 5). Lack of sanitation practices was a safety concern for Participant P-12 (Day 1). Costa Ricans prepared food for customers in open-air kitchens and allowed dogs to roam around inside the kitchen (P-12, Day 1).



**Thankfulness for the United States**

Throughout this study abroad program, some of the participants felt thankfulness for the United States. The program allowed P-1 and P-8 (Post) to confirm that they are grateful to be citizens of the United States. Educational opportunities available in the United States were one reason to be thankful (P-8; P-12, Post). The government system and safety the United States provides were also reasons to be thankful (P-12, Post). The program affected P-8 (Post) *“on a personal level by making me a much more grateful citizen of America.”* P-12 (Post) realized she is thankful for grocery stores, nice housing, and educational options prevalent in the United States.

**Cultural Growth**

**Overcoming Language Barriers**

During this study abroad program, many of the participants attempted to overcome the language barrier, P-3 (Day 10) made sure to attempt Spanish when speaking to the staff at each location they visited. The language barrier was a challenge, but participants tried out newly learned words and phrases (P-12, Post). P-9 (Day 5) attempted Spanish when communicating with the horse-back riding instructors. She also laughed at herself each time she attempted to speak Spanish, but her lack of fluency did not prevent her from attempting the language. P-4 (Post) said, *“I was really surprised at how much we could communicate without language.”* Similarly, P-4 (Post) said, *“We were able to overcome communication barriers and become a team very quickly.”*

**Cultural Respect and Acceptance**

Throughout the study abroad experience, the participants increased their cultural respect and acceptance of the people of Costa Rica. P-4 (Post) said, *“I think the group did very well adapting to the Costa Rican culture. After we got over the bright, early mornings and the lack of hot water we began to really appreciate the world around us.”* P-7 (Day 7) learned to respect the people of Costa Rica because of their attitude, acceptance, and contentment living without hot water, access to modern grocery stores, and other modern conveniences. Despite the lack of modern grocery stores, P-12 (Day 3) was impressed with the fresh produce was available at roadside markets.

Another experience that helped P-8 (Day 4) respect and accept the culture of Costa Rica took place in a souvenir shop. P-8 (Day 4) broke a magnet that she was attempting to purchase and when she offered to pay for the broken magnet, the shop owner did not make her pay because he said that he appreciated her honesty. P-8 (Day 4) said, *“This, again, affirmed my perception that Costa Ricans are very kind hearted people, valuing relationships more than business.”* This experience helped the participant accept the kind nature of the Costa Rican culture.

Additionally, the rainforest hike helped P-6 and P-12 (Day 6) learn to respect the Costa Rican’s connection

with and understanding of the land. P-12 (Day 5) gained a respect for people who live off of the land. Another quickly realized having a *“carefree attitude towards me and the caring attitude towards friends were important customs to me”* (P-9, Post). The presence of the Costa Rican culture made the program a wonderful experience (P-9, Post).

**Positive Cultural Experiences**

Experiences throughout the program allowed participants to positively experience the culture around them. Trips to the grocery store allowed participants to see different types of food that are part of the Costa Rican culture (P-5, Day 2). Interactions with the locals led P-11(Day 4) to realize Costa Ricans were friendly people who appreciated the presence of tourists. The waitress at the first restaurant was very friendly to the study abroad group and brought each participant a free piece of flan (P-6; P-8, Day 1). When visiting a coffee plantation, P-7 (Day 9) was amazed by how large an industry coffee productions is for Costa Rica. Similarly, Participant P-11 (Day 9) was impressed with the tour guide at the coffee plantation and was happy with the experience. Positive experiences took place throughout the program and contributed to the cultural growth of the participants.

**Cultural Identification and Recognition**

Throughout the study abroad program, participants were continually observing, identifying, and recognizing the culture around them. First, participants realized the people of Costa Rica were friendly, caring people (P-1; P-2; P-11, Day 1). P-1 (Day 3) also realized open-air restaurants are acceptable in Costa Rica and they did not seem concerned when dogs walked into restaurants. While eating in restaurants, P-5 (Day 2) noticed that the people of Costa Rica eat everything on their plate. She quickly realized it was important for her to eat all her food, to not offend anyone (P-5, Day 2). Additionally, P-5 (Day 3) noticed that the culture accepts eating the same meals repeatedly. There is not much variety in the Costa Rican diet (P-5, Day 3).

The people in Costa Rica value a culture that respects and encourages human relationships (P-3, Day 1). P-5 and P-7 (Post) felt the country of Costa Rica valued personal relationships. The people were very friendly and exhibited a carefree attitude (P-2, Day 2). The carefree, laid-back attitude stayed with the people even when they were working (P-12, Day 2). P-7 stated (Day 1), *“The workers at the restaurant seemed eager to help us, but did not seem to be as stressed as waiters in the US do.”* Similarly, the lifeguards at the beach seemed very calm even though there could be a deadly situation (P-12, Day 5).

**Cultural Learning**

During the study abroad program, participants had the opportunity to interact with Costa Ricans. Interactions with Costa Ricans allowed participants to learn about

## A Qualitative Case Study

the Costa Rican culture. P-12 (Post) learned about *“the indigenous tribe and how they balance traditions with modern society.”* Conversations with the tribe showed how the tribe has incorporated tourism into their lives, to provide for their families, and altered their traditional dress, because it was endangering trees (P-12, Post). Additionally, P-1 (Post) learned that the culture changes depending on the geographic region of Costa Rica.

### Personal Growth

Experiences throughout the program allowed many of the participants to experience personal growth. P-1 (Post) said, *“My cultural experiences in Costa Rica did influence my thinking, personally and professionally, in the way that I had anticipated.”* The experience in Costa Rica helped P-1 (Post) realize people are important and time should be taken to build quality relationships. Interacting with the people of Costa Rica allowed P-6 (Post) to realize there are different ways of doing things and there is not necessarily a right or wrong way. This program helped P-9 (Day 8) to become more open-minded to other cultures. P-7 (Post) discovered her attitude played a large part in whether she was going to enjoy an experience. Additionally, the zip-line experience made many of the participants more adventurous (P-3; P-5; P-10; P-12, Day 3).

### Increased Interest in Future Experiences Abroad

The experiences during this study abroad program helped the participants to look forward to future international travel experiences. P-5 (Post) said the cultural experience during the program made her realize she was interested in future travel. She said, *“I was very tolerant and respectful of their cultures which I think will translate to future trips abroad”* (P-5, Post). Similarly, P-9 (Post) was impressed with the relaxed culture of Costa Rica and will be looking for opportunities to travel abroad in the future. P-11 (Post) plans to return to Costa Rica, to travel on his own time schedule, to become immersed in the culture.

### Cultural Integration

Participants showed evidence of cultural integration during the program as well as aspirations to integrate particular aspects of the Costa Rican culture into their everyday lives. During the program, P-8 (day 3) learned to be more relaxed than normal. Upon returning to the United States, P-8 (Post) indicated that when she gets stressed, she will pause to reflect upon her time in Costa Rica in an attempt to remember how to live a carefree relaxed lifestyle. The relaxed time schedule taught P-4 (Post) to slow down and be more understanding of other people's feelings. Increased flexibility and understanding of other people's feelings was something that P-4 (Day 7) wants to take back with him.

Additionally, the Costa Ricans taught P-3 (Post) to live life to the fullest and to make sure she fully immerses herself in the experience. Based on her time in Costa Rica, P-3 (Post) said, *“I will always immerse myself as*

*much as possible and experience all that is put before me.”* Similarly, P-9 (Post) would like to continue to be more social upon returning home. The friendly people of Costa Rica helped him stop being shy and work on building relationships (P-9, Post). P-12 (Post) realized Costa Ricans are extremely thankful for what they have. Exhibiting thankfulness is something P-12 (Post) planned to incorporate into her life in the United States.

## Summary

Participants expected to experience culture shock on entering and when traveling in the destination country. This anticipation goes against Oberg's (1960) assertion that travelers would initially experience euphoria on entering the country. However, the anticipation of culture shock when entering the country is similar to Hottola's (2004) initial stage of cultural confusion on entering the country. It is important to remember that, at this stage in the study abroad program, it is only anticipation of culture shock and not necessarily what happened. According to Hottola (2004), a traveler that experiencing cultural confusion on entering the country may need to visit a metaworld that serves as a temporary break from the new culture. Hottola described a metaworld has a safe retreat that provides the individual with familiar cultural surroundings. The cultural surprises did not fit into Hottola's (2004) Dynamic Model of Cultural Confusion. None of the participants seemed confused by the cultural surprises. The cultural surprises were simply small observations of what they did not expect to observe or experience. Participants immediately began to observe, identify, and recognize cultural traditions and customs in their respective host country. Cultural identification and recognition of culture seemed to reduce the time spent in Hottola's (2004) cultural confusion stage and direct the participants toward cultural adaptation. However, it is not cultural identification and recognition alone that guides participants toward positive cultural growth and adaptation. It is a combination of all the positive growth sub-stages identified in this study.

Cultural integration was evident in this study. Participants who focused on cultural integration took cultural adaptation a step further. Their actions fit into the culture while visiting the country, and they planned to incorporate portions of the host country's culture into their everyday lives once the program ended. The anticipation of integrating a different culture into their life signifies that the participant has moved beyond the adaptation stage and into the integration or assimilation stage (Hottola, 2004; Oberg, 1960).

Short-term study abroad facilitators are encouraged to introduce participants to cultural adaptation models to help the participants understand what they may experience during the international experience. The cultural adaptation models may also serve as a point of reflection to achieve cultural acceptance and integration.

Due to facilitator differences, participant differences, and geographic/cultural differences, this study should



be replicated to see if the findings are similar to the findings of this case study. Additional research in the area of reflective journaling is needed in order to determine whether or not reflective journaling influences the cultural adaptation process the participants undergo.

### **Literature Cited**

- Bennett, M.J. 2004. Becoming interculturally competent. In Wurzel, J. (eds.), *Toward multiculturalism: A reader in multicultural education* (2nd ed., pp. 62-77). Newton, MA: Intercultural Resource Corporation.
- Bennett, M.J. 2009. Defining, measuring, and facilitating intercultural learning: A conceptual introduction to the Intercultural Education double supplement. *Intercultural Education* 20(S1-2): S1-13. DOI: 10.1080/14675980903370763.
- Bruening, T.H. and M. Frick. 2004. Globalizing the U.S. undergraduate experience: A case study of the benefits of an international agriculture field-based course. *Journal of International Agriculture and Extension Education* 11(1): 89-96.
- Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage Publications Limited. Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Conner, N.W. and T.G. Roberts. 2015. The cultural adaptation process during a short-term study abroad experience in Swaziland. *Journal of Agriculture Education* 56(1): 155-171.
- Corbin, J. and A. Strauss. 1990. Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology* 13(1): 3-21.
- Creswell, J.W. 1998. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dooley, K.E. 2007. Viewing agriculture education research through a qualitative lens. *Journal of Agriculture Education* 48(4): 32-42. DOI: 10.5032/jae.2007.04032.
- Edgar, L.D., D.W. Edgar, G.E. Briers and D.L. Lawver. 2006. Perceptions and attitudes regarding Mexico and agricultural practices. *Proceedings of the Western Regional Agricultural Education Research Conference*, Boise, ID.
- Glaser, B.G. 1978. *Theoretical sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Grbich, C. 2007. *Qualitative data analysis: An introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gudykunst, W.B. and M.R. Hammer. 1988. Strangers and hosts: An extension of uncertainty reduction theory to intercultural adaptation. In Y.Y. Kim and W.B. Gudykunst (eds.). *Cross-cultural adaptation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Hottola, P. 2004. Culture confusion: Intercultural adaptation in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research* (31)2: 447-466. DOI: 10.1016/j.annals.2004.01.003.
- Jones, B.L. and D. Bjelland. 2004. International experiential learning in agriculture. *AIAEE 2004: Proceedings of the 20th Annual Conference* 20: 963-964.
- Koro-Ljungberg, M., D. Yendol-Hoppey, J.J. Smith and S.B. Hayes. 2009. Epistemological awareness, instantiation of methods, and uniformed methodological ambiguity in qualitative research projects. *Educational Researcher* 38(9): 687-699. DOI: 10.31021/0013189X09351980.
- Lincoln, Y.S. and E.G. Guba. 1985. *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Longview Foundation. 2008. *Teacher preparation for the global age: The imperative for change*. Retrieved from <http://www.longviewfdn.org/122/teacher-preparation-for-the-global-age.html>.
- Merriam, S.B. 1998. *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Molinsky, A. 2009. A situational approach for assessing and teaching acculturation. *Journal of Management Education* 34(5): 723-745. DOI: 10.1177/1052562909337713.
- National Research Council. 2009. *Transforming agriculture education for a changing world*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Oberg, K. 1960. Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology* 7: 177-182.
- Russell, M. and L. Vallade. 2010. Guided reflective journaling. Assessing the international study and volunteering experience. In E. Jones (ed.), *Internationalisation and the student voice*. Higher Education Perspectives (p. 98-109). London: Routledge.
- Strauss, A. and J. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Vande Berg, M. 2007. Intervening in the learning of U.S. students abroad. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 11(3/4): 392-399. DOI: 10.1177/1028315307303924.
- Ward, C., Y. Okura, A. Kennedy and T. Kojima. 1998. The U-curve on trial: A longitudinal study of psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transition. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 22(3): 277-291.
- Zhai, L. and S.D. Scheer. 2002. Influence of international study-abroad programs on agriculture college student. *Journal of International Agriculture and Extension Education* 9(3): 23-29.