

The Impact of Short-Term Study Abroad on Graduate Students' Cultural Proficiency

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This study examines the impact of a short-term study abroad program in China on the cultural proficiency of graduate students enrolled in a Higher Education Leadership Ph.D. program at a research university in the U.S. Midwest. Seventeen students participated in the program during spring break as part of an optional international component embedded in their coursework. To evaluate changes in cultural proficiency, the instructors employed a range of assessment tools, including a pre-trip questionnaire, reflective journal prompts during the trip, and a post-trip reflection essay. Findings indicate increased global awareness, a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and education systems, and enhanced self-awareness regarding the students' own cultural backgrounds. The study highlights the value of intentional instructional strategies in maximizing the impact of short-term international experiences.

Keywords: short-term study abroad, experiential learning, global competence, cultural proficiency

INTRODUCTION

Short-term study abroad (STSA) is defined as a higher education program lasting eight weeks or less, conducted outside the geographical boundaries of the student's home country (Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022). STSA programs represent the fastest-growing segment of experiential learning in higher education and are increasingly recognized as an effective strategy for preparing students for future international professional engagement and for enhancing their cultural intelligence (Holtbrügge & Engelhard, 2016).

As STSA becomes an integral component of American higher education in the 21st century, faculty are increasingly tasked with understanding the cross-cultural learning outcomes that such programs can facilitate. However, there is limited empirical research outlining best practices for short-term study abroad or the types of learning outcomes it may yield (Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022; Kehl & Morris, 2007). The literature is particularly sparse regarding the impacts of STSA on graduate students (see, for example, Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018). This study addresses that gap by examining how STSA programs may contribute to cultural proficiency among graduate students—both master's and doctoral—through the lens of a faculty-led short-term program in China.

The Short-Term Study Abroad (STSA) program examined in this study was designed as a one-week international component embedded within a 16-week graduate course, *HESA 6163: International Issues in Higher Education*, offered during the spring semester. As part of the program, students traveled to China

over spring break, where they explored higher education institutions and cultural sites. During the trip, participants engaged in discussions with students, faculty, and administrators at two leading Chinese universities. In addition, they visited major cultural landmarks—including the Forbidden City and the Great Wall in Beijing, as well as the Canton Tower and several museums in Guangzhou—providing them with broader contextual insights into Chinese higher education, history, and culture.

The course was guided by two central objectives: (1) to introduce students to significant global issues shaping higher education, and (2) to examine the history and organizational structures of selected higher education systems internationally. The STSA to China was offered as an optional enhancement to the course. Students electing this option traveled with the course instructor, a faculty colleague, and a university staff member. For these participants, additional goals included cultivating a deeper understanding of Chinese history and culture, developing firsthand insights into the Chinese higher education system, and reflecting on their own cultural proficiency. To support these aims, participants attended two supplementary sessions: a pre-departure orientation and a post-return reflection seminar.

The program was facilitated through long-standing partnerships between the U.S. institution and two Chinese universities in Beijing and Guangzhou. Over the past decade, these partnerships had involved faculty and student exchanges, joint symposia, and professional development programs centered on student affairs. The course instructor played a central role in building and sustaining these institutional collaborations, which served as the foundation for the embedded study abroad experience.

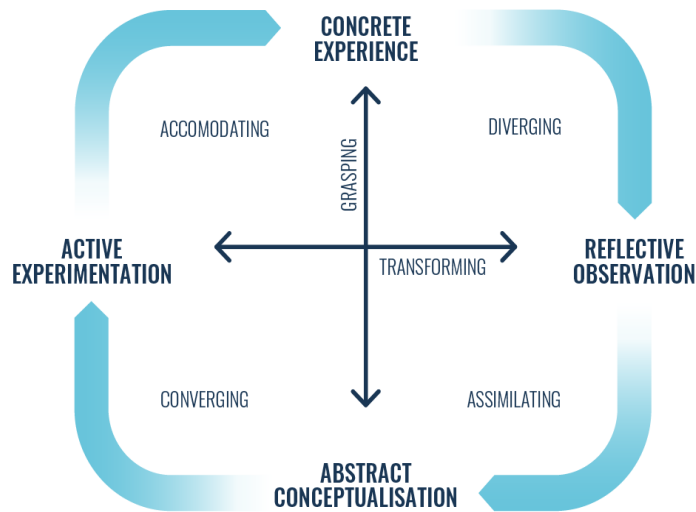
Overall, the STSA option was designed to make cultural learning both authentic and personal, with a primary emphasis on enhancing students' cultural proficiency, a focus to which the analysis now turns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Study abroad has emerged as a powerful vehicle for cultivating cultural proficiency and global awareness in higher education. Cultural Proficiency, as defined by The Center for Culturally Proficient Educational Practice (<https://ccpep.org/home/what-is-cultural-proficiency/>), involves the ability to value, understand, and effectively engage with diverse cultural backgrounds in educational contexts. A foundational principle of this framework is that meaningful change begins internally, with individuals critically examining their own cultural assumptions and biases.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (2015) provides a useful model for understanding how cultural learning unfolds during study abroad experiences. The learning cycle—comprising concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—illustrates how learners transform real-world encounters into new knowledge. For study abroad participants, immersion in an unfamiliar cultural setting serves as the concrete experience. Through guided reflection and engagement, students develop new cultural insights and test these understandings in ongoing interactions abroad.

FIGURE 1
KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE



Cloke, 2024

Short-term, faculty-led programs are the fastest-growing segment of study abroad (Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022). While traditionally seen as less immersive than semester-long programs, STSA opportunities can still offer significant cultural learning when structured with intentional pedagogical supports, such as pre-departure preparation, reflective journaling, and post-return synthesis (Lutterman-Aguila & Gingerich, 2002). These components allow students to process cross-cultural encounters and connect them to broader academic and professional goals.

Empirical research supports the value of STSA for developing intercultural competence. Studies show that students participating in well-designed programs report increased emotional and cultural intelligence (Dwyer & Peters, 2004), especially when programs involve deeper engagement—such as language immersion, homestays, or internships. While pre- and post-test methods using cultural competence instruments are commonly used (Ballestas & Roller, 2013), there is still limited research exploring outcomes specific to graduate student populations.

The demand for study abroad opportunities has grown significantly in the U.S., with participation rising from approximately 130,000 students in 1998–99 to over 347,000 in 2018–19 (Open Doors Report, 2021). This growth is attributed to the documented benefits of international education, including enhanced adaptability, communication skills, self-awareness, and long-term career readiness (IES Abroad; Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship, 2005). National organizations and educational leaders continue to advocate for global learning as an essential component of higher education (American Council on Education, 2016).

Despite this growth, the unique impacts of short-term study abroad on graduate students remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by investigating how a one-week program embedded in a graduate-level course influences students' cultural proficiency and global understanding.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this short-term study abroad (STSA) program was to guide students through personal experiences, observation, documentation, reflection, and interaction with a different culture. The intended outcome was for students to affirm or disaffirm their inherited interpretations and assumptions about the host culture, discover new meanings that connect former and emerging mental frameworks, and ultimately gain a deeper understanding of their own cultural identity.

METHODS

The STSA program to China was led by two tenure-track faculty members and a staff member who coordinated international programs for the college. The group visited two universities in distinct urban regions: Beijing and Guangzhou. Participants were required to attend both a mandatory Pre-Departure Seminar and a Post-Return Seminar. During these sessions, students completed pre- and post-trip surveys designed specifically for this study. The surveys consisted of open-ended questions intended to elicit students' reflections on their cultural perceptions before and after the trip (see Appendix for survey instruments).

Throughout the program, students were also required to keep reflective journals. Faculty provided structured prompts to encourage students to document and analyze their cross-cultural experiences while abroad.

Participants

This study included 17 students enrolled in a graduate program in Higher Education Administration at a midwestern U.S. university. Of the participants, 12 identified as female and 5 as male. Fifteen were U.S. citizens, and two were international students. The participants ranged in age from their mid-20s to mid-40s. Most had prior international experience; four had lived abroad for more than a year, and thirteen had previously traveled internationally for shorter periods.

The study was bounded by time, institution, geographic context, and participants' enrollment in the academic program. It was guided by the following research question: *How, if at all, does an intentionally designed short-term study abroad course impact the cultural proficiency of graduate students?*

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS SUMMARY

Category	Details
Gender	12 Female, 5 Male
Citizenship	15 U.S. Citizens, 2 International Students
Graduate Classification	13 Doctoral, 4 Master's
Age Range	Mid-20s to Mid-40s
Prior International Experience	4 with >1 year abroad, 13 with <1 year abroad

Measures

To support reflective learning and assess changes in cultural proficiency, all students were required to participate in the following components outside of official class time:

Mandatory Pre-Departure Seminar

Prior to departure, students attended a required seminar session during which they completed the *Pre-Trip Survey*. Pre-trip survey collected students' demographic information and included a cultural proficiency questionnaire. This open-ended instrument was designed to capture participants' initial perspectives and assumptions regarding cross-cultural engagement.

Ongoing Reflective Journaling During Travel

While abroad, students documented their experiences through structured journal entries. Faculty provided a journal book with guiding questions to prompt critical reflection on intercultural observations, challenges, and insights encountered throughout the trip.

Mandatory Post-Trip Seminar

Upon returning, students participated in a required debrief session where they completed the *Post-Trip Survey*. This survey mirrored the pre-trip instrument and aimed to capture shifts in cultural understanding and self-awareness following the study abroad experience.

Procedure

All students were required to participate in both pre- and post-study abroad seminars; these seminars were held outside of official class meeting times. The pre-departure component consisted of four 60-minute seminar sessions focused on introducing Chinese language and culture. These sessions provided historical and cultural context for the locations to be visited, guidance on rules of conduct in public settings, strategies for effective communication with Chinese citizens, and limited language instruction. Additionally, students engaged in readings and discussions on contemporary Chinese society and were introduced to methods for observing and documenting cultural encounters.

While in China, students were required to maintain a reflective journal to record and analyze their personal cultural encounters. Faculty provided a set of five prompts to guide the journaling process. Students were encouraged to respond to each prompt with as much detail and specificity as possible. The time required for each written reflection ranged from two to ten minutes, depending on the depth of the student's response. Instructions read: "*Please respond while in China to each of the following questions. Be sure to include as much detail and as many specific examples as possible.*" The five journal prompts were:

1. Within 24 hours of your arrival in China, describe your initial thoughts, excitement, or apprehension about being in a new culture. What did you see, hear, smell, or touch that induced these responses?
2. Describe one or more moments during the trip when you felt a sense of unease or unfamiliarity with how or why things "work" the way they do in China.
3. Describe a moment during the trip when you felt you were becoming more familiar with daily life in China.
4. Describe any thoughts during the trip of homesickness, frustration with accomplishing everyday tasks in a different culture, or missing social cues.
5. Describe a moment during the trip when you felt better able to navigate the new culture, understand the habits, customs, and food, or establish ties with the community.

Following their return, students attended a mandatory post-trip seminar, which provided space for structured reflection and the opportunity to share their experiences with peers. In both the pre- and post-trip seminars, students completed surveys specifically developed for this short-term study abroad program. These surveys included open-ended questions designed to capture their evolving perspectives.

After the completion of the program, the researchers conducted a document analysis of all materials submitted by the students. This included journal entries and responses to the pre- and post-trip surveys. Student responses to the open-ended prompts were examined individually and then collectively to identify potential changes in cultural proficiency, particularly regarding students' understandings of Chinese culture and their perceptions of China and the Chinese people.

DATA ANALYSIS

A graduate assistant manually entered the pre-post survey and journal reflection data into a Word document. NVivo was used to analyze participants' responses to the five journal reflection questions, as

well as survey responses. To ensure the credibility of the findings and that they accurately reflect participants' experiences, several validation strategies were employed.

Triangulation was used by drawing upon multiple data sources—including pre- and post-surveys and journal reflections—to corroborate emerging themes. Additionally, involving more than one researcher in the coding process helped to ensure consistency and reduce individual bias.

Member checking was conducted by sharing thematic summaries and interpretations with participants, allowing them to confirm the accuracy of the analysis and whether the findings resonated with their experiences.

Step 1. The Inductive Analysis of Pre-Departure Data

An inductive analysis was conducted to explore participants' cultural knowledge and lived experiences prior to engaging in study abroad programs. Responses were coded and grouped into emergent themes that reflect both their direct encounters with cultural diversity and their self-perceived readiness for cross-cultural engagement. Three core themes emerged: (a) Limited but Aspirational Cultural Knowledge, (b) Prior Exposure through Education or Local Encounters, and (c) Anticipatory Awareness of Cultural Differences.

Limited but Aspirational Cultural Knowledge

Many participants acknowledged a limited depth of cultural knowledge before studying abroad, often describing their understanding as superficial or “basic.” Some indicated that they were aware of general differences between cultures but lacked nuanced comprehension or meaningful intercultural engagement. Phrases such as “not very extensive,” “basic knowledge,” and “I had never been outside the U.S.” were recurrent. Despite this, participants consistently expressed curiosity and eagerness to learn, demonstrating a growth mindset toward cultural exploration.

“I had some basic knowledge about cultural norms in Europe, but I wouldn't say I was culturally competent.”

Prior Exposure Through Education or Local Encounters

A few participants reported previous cultural exposure through coursework, international peers, or community-level interactions. For example, educational experiences such as language classes, global studies, or diversity-related seminars provided foundational understanding. Others mentioned working with or befriending individuals from different cultural backgrounds, which offered them informal but meaningful insights into other ways of life.

“I had taken a few classes about world cultures, and I have friends from different ethnic backgrounds.”

“I worked at a local refugee center, which gave me some idea about how cultural values differ.”

These instances, while not widespread across the entire sample group, reveal how localized or academic exposures can seed initial intercultural competence.

Anticipatory Awareness of Cultural Differences

Participants commonly expressed an awareness that they would encounter cultural norms and practices different from their own. While many had not yet experienced these differences firsthand, they anticipated cultural adjustment challenges, language barriers, and new social etiquettes. This anticipatory awareness reflects a level of cultural humility and openness to learning.

“I knew it would be different, but I didn't know exactly how until I got there.”

“I expected some culture shock but didn’t fully grasp what that would feel like.”

This theme highlights a transitional space between pre-awareness and actual intercultural adaptation. To recapitulate, prior to studying abroad, participants possessed varied but generally limited cultural knowledge, shaped by formal education, local intercultural interactions, or global media. Despite these limitations, they expressed strong motivation to learn and an awareness of the challenges that lay ahead. Their pre-departure perspectives reveal both a readiness for growth and the importance of structured intercultural preparation before international immersion.

Step 2. Thematic Analysis of Journal Reflections

Through thematic analysis of participants’ reflective journals, several cross-cutting themes emerged regarding their cultural experiences, identity negotiation, and personal growth during the short-term study abroad program. The reflections illuminated students’ evolving cultural competence, emotional responses, and critical awareness as they engaged with the host environment. Key themes identified include: (a) Navigating Cultural Discomfort and Homesickness, (b) Moments of Cultural Fluency and Confidence, (c) Food as a Cultural Connector, (d) Relational and Emotional Connections, and (e) Shifting Perspectives and Reflexive Insight.

Navigating Cultural Discomfort and Homesickness

Early journal entries reflected initial culture shock and the emotional toll of being in an unfamiliar environment. Although most participants did not experience immediate homesickness, they noted heightened awareness of their connections to home. One participant stated:

“While I didn’t feel homesick, I was very aware that I needed to communicate with my friends and family more than I anticipated. I think I talked to my mom more in that week than I have in a long time.”

Others described a growing sense of isolation, especially when feeling socially or physically unwell. One journal revealed:

“I started feeling homesick today after coming back from Guangzhou... I was very sick today and having stomach issues on the squatty potty with tissue as TP is absolutely not fun.”

The perceived social exclusion, communication difficulties, and physical discomfort all contributed to moments of vulnerability, illuminating the role of emotional and bodily experiences in cultural adaptation.

Moments of Cultural Fluency and Confidence

Despite early challenges, many participants described key turning points when they began to feel more competent in navigating the cultural environment. These moments often occurred during mundane activities such as ordering food, navigating public transport, or using local language. As one student noted:

“The subway system made sense to me and I could tell how to navigate back to the hotel... I actually liked being all crammed in as people kept getting into the car... I just felt like that would be a cultural difference that would be easy to adjust to.”

Others highlighted the comfort that grew through repetition and familiarity:

“By the end of our trip, I had chosen favorites from our breakfast buffet. I love the soy boiled eggs, the noodles, the dumplings.”

This sense of routine and growing knowledge of cultural norms contributed to participants' increased confidence and enjoyment in engaging with the host context.

Food as a Cultural Connector

Food emerged as a prominent theme across nearly all journal entries. Shared meals served as both cultural learning opportunities and moments of joy. The lazy Susan format in restaurants was repeatedly cited as a site of comfort and connection:

"This was the greatest part of the trip... learning and sharing food is always a moment of understanding and comfort."

Participants also developed preferences and rituals around food, which helped build a sense of belonging:

"I always seemed to get the same things because I became comfortable with them... At the 7/11 the workers started to recognize me."

Additionally, eating with locals or host families offered insight into values and customs beyond tourist settings:

"These families were open about customs and norms at restaurants and around the city... They were able to compare it to Stillwater."

Relational and Emotional Connections

Journals revealed the deep emotional and relational dimensions of the study abroad experience. Participants described relationships formed with local guides, university students, and even strangers as moments of human connection and empathy. For instance, one participant recounted helping a fellow passenger on a flight:

"I was glad to be able to help her figure out how to use the screen and ask for an immigration form in Chinese... It made me feel like part of a little team whose mission was to get this woman to her destination."

Other students developed friendships with local students and expressed eagerness to maintain these relationships:

"I got to know a few of the students too and we shared contact info. I'm looking forward to continuing those relationships."

These interpersonal connections appeared to foster not only a sense of belonging but also cross-cultural empathy and solidarity.

Shifting Perspectives and Reflexive Insight

As participants gained experience and insight, their reflections shifted from surface-level observations to deeper cultural awareness and self-examination. Several students articulated a newfound critical lens regarding American cultural norms, privilege, and communication:

"I see even more evidence now of the ways Americans expect everyone to adapt to us and give very little thought to what that can mean... I really want to spend more time talking to people my age and younger..."

Others expressed a commitment to future cultural engagement and learning:

“Even though I’m coming out with questions instead of answers, they’re still representative of a better grasp of Chinese culture than I had before.”

This growth in intercultural humility (evident in both self-reflection and a desire to understand others more deeply) suggests the potential for transformative learning through short-term immersion.

The thematic findings underscore the value of structured reflection in facilitating students’ intercultural development during study abroad. While initial emotional strain and cultural dissonance were common, participants progressed toward greater cultural fluency, empathy, and self-awareness. Food, language, and interpersonal relationships played critical roles in shaping both challenge and comfort. Furthermore, students’ evolving questions and reflexive insights suggest that even short-term programs can spark long-term intercultural curiosity and commitment.

Step 3. The Analysis of Post-Trip Data

Cultural Impact

Tables 2 & 3 showed that the majority of participants perceived their experiences abroad as significantly more valuable than equivalent domestic experiences. An overwhelming 81% rated the trip as “excellent,” and all participants recommended the experience to peers.

TABLE 2
CULTURAL IMPACT OF STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE ON PERSONAL AND CULTURAL GROWTH

Impact Statement	Mode	Strong Responses (3–4)	Moderate (2)	Low (0–1)
I gained better insight into myself.	1	3	3	10
I have a greater sense of independence and self-confidence.	1	3	3	10
My ability to make friends and adapt to new situations increased.	1	3	3	10
I am more receptive to different ideas and ways of seeing the world.	1	2	5	9
I gained a new perspective on my own culture.	1	0	2	14
My interest in language learning increased.	1	4	4	8
I am more interested in cultural studies.	1	2	4	10
I plan to change my Plan of Study to include international/cultural components.	2	5	6	5
My career plans changed or are more focused.	2	4	7	5

Note: Ratings were based on a 0–4 scale, where 0 = no impact and 4 = very strong impact. “Mode” reflects the most frequent individual rating.

TABLE 3
CULTURAL IMPACT OF STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE-OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Assessment Item	Response Summary
Comparison to home campus experience	A (Much more valuable): 12 B (More valuable): 3 C (About the same): 1
Overall experience rating (1 = Excellent; 5 = Terrible)	1 (Excellent): 13 2 (Good): 3 3–5 (Average to Poor): 0
Would recommend to a friend	Yes: 16 No: 0

Thematic Analysis of Post-Trip Survey: Growth From Pre-Departure

Theme 1: Deepened Self-Awareness and Confidence

Participants consistently reported greater self-insight and personal empowerment after their time abroad. While pre-departure data reflected limited international exposure and mostly domestic frames of reference, post-trip reflections suggest a marked increase in self-confidence, independence, and clarity of personal identity.

Illustrative Insight: Students who had previously traveled only within the U.S. noted how living abroad, even for a short time, forced them to “rely on [themselves] in unfamiliar environments,” which fostered a deeper trust in their own judgment.

Theme 2: Shift From Passive to Active Cultural Engagement

Pre-departure responses indicated awareness of cultural difference but limited interaction. After the program, students described becoming actively receptive to diverse worldviews, reporting an enhanced ability to listen, observe, and challenge ethnocentric assumptions.

Growth Marker: Most participants moved from observing culture as “interesting” or “different” to seeing it as complex, valid, and interconnected with their own beliefs. This marks a shift from surface-level cultural curiosity to a more critical cultural consciousness.

Theme 3: Development of Interpersonal Adaptability

Post-trip data show increased social agility and intercultural communication skills, especially in forming relationships with locals and peers from other cultural backgrounds. Compared to pre-trip data showing nervousness or hesitation about language and social barriers, students reported feeling more adaptable and confident navigating diverse social situations.

Example Quote (composite): “I used to worry about making mistakes when talking to people in English or a second language, but I realized connection matters more than perfection.”

Theme 4: Reframing of Academic and Career Goals

Several students reported a realignment of academic pathways to include more globally focused coursework, language learning, or international internships. While pre-trip motivations often centered on general exposure or credit accumulation, post-trip reflections emphasize intentional future planning involving cross-cultural elements.

Notable Insight: Participants who had no prior interest in cultural studies or international careers before the program noted wanting to add international dimensions to their academic majors or capstone projects.

Theme 5: Emergent Critical Reflection on One's Own Culture

Students expressed gaining a new lens through which to examine their own culture—recognizing assumptions they had taken for granted. This introspective turn was absent or underdeveloped in pre-departure responses but became more pronounced post-trip.

Reflection: “I didn’t realize how individualistic our culture was until I saw how communities abroad value interdependence.”

TABLE 4
SUMMARY OF GROWTH TRAJECTORY (PRE-VS POST-DEPARTURE)

Dimension	Pre-Departure	Post-Trip Growth
Self-awareness	General confidence	Deep personal insight, independent decision-making
Cultural curiosity	Interest in differences	Critical openness and intercultural sensitivity
Social comfort	Concern about fitting in	Confidence in cross-cultural interactions
Academic intention	Course credits, program requirement	Integration of global focus into plan of study
Career perspective	Unclear or locally framed	International pathways and expanded professional interests
Reflection on own culture	Minimal or external focus	Self-critical perspective and cultural humility

The study abroad experience led to measurable affective, cognitive, and behavioral transformations. When contrasted with pre-departure data, participants demonstrated significant movement along a developmental continuum—from cultural observation to cultural engagement, from personal interest to critical global citizenship. These findings reinforce the importance of structured reflective components within short-term study abroad programs to maximize transformative potential.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated the impact of a carefully designed Short-Term Study Abroad (STSA) program on graduate students’ cultural awareness, academic engagement, and personal growth. While short in duration, the program was intensive in structure and intentional in design. The findings across pre- and post-surveys and reflective journal responses consistently demonstrate the value of structured short-term international experiences, particularly when scaffolded with strong pre-departure preparation and post-trip reflection.

To analyze the program's effectiveness, we organized its characteristics into three categories: process, nature, and structure. *Process* refers to the sequencing of activities before and after travel; *nature* encompasses the program's purpose and faculty oversight; and *structure* captures the specific activities, assessments, and expectations embedded throughout the experience. The STSA program featured group-based travel to two Chinese universities, faculty supervision, hotel accommodations, and a strong emphasis on cultural immersion and academic engagement. Students bore most program costs, partially offset by scholarships. The program was credit-bearing and included required post-trip reflections, though no formal post-assessments were integrated.

TABLE 5
KEY COMPONENTS OF THE STSA

STSA Component	Characteristic
Length	One week and a weekend
Structure	Daily structured
Group/Individual	Group
Location	China
Faculty supervision level	Two faculty and one staff member
Type of hosting organization	Two universities in China (Beijing and Guangzhou)
Program content	Extensive within and beyond academic course
Accommodation	Hotels
Costs	Born by students, supplemented with scholarship funding
Purposes	Cultural immersion
Program initiation	University/course work
Pre-departure preparation	High level
Level of post-program engagements	High
Level of cultural immersion	High
Integrated Post assessments	None
Integrated reflections	Required short paper
Host country language required	Not required
Academic standards	For credit

Analysis of journal reflections and survey responses revealed consistent themes of increased self-awareness, openness to cultural difference, and notable shifts in both academic and career trajectories. Many students described their experiences as transformative, highlighting enhanced intercultural sensitivity, an improved ability to navigate unfamiliar environments, and the development of a more critical perspective on their own cultural norms (Mezirow, 1991; Bennett, 2013). Quantitative survey data reinforced these qualitative findings, with 94% of students reporting greater receptiveness to alternative perspectives and 100% indicating a deepened understanding of their own cultural identity. These findings suggest that short-term study abroad (STSA) experiences possess significant potential to spark meaningful personal and academic transformation, even within a limited timeframe (Anderson et al., 2016; Jones, 2017).

The findings also suggest that cultural growth is not an automatic outcome of study abroad participation but instead depends on intentional program design. Cultural proficiency emerges less from the amount of time spent abroad and more from structured engagement before, during, and after the international experience (Sobkowiak, 2019). Program effectiveness, therefore, appears to be shaped by several pedagogical and structural components: pre-departure preparation that establishes both cultural and academic foundations, faculty supervision that provides real-time guidance and fosters reflection, post-program reflection assignments that encourage the integration of learning, and a cohesive group dynamic that creates social support and opportunities for collaborative meaning-making (Brown, 2020; Vanden Berg & Schwander, 2019).

Triangulating data across pre- and post-surveys with reflective journals enhanced the trustworthiness of the study's findings. The convergence of quantitative self-ratings and qualitative themes provided a more nuanced and credible understanding of program impact. Future iterations of the program could be strengthened by incorporating additional post-program assessments and conducting more sustained follow-ups to examine the long-term influence on students' academic and professional development trajectories.

Overall, the results align with growing scholarship emphasizing the pedagogical value of short-term study abroad (STSA) programs. When designed with attention to process, structure, and purpose, even brief international experiences can result in profound learning outcomes. Importantly, the findings underscore that fostering intercultural competence among graduate students—who will become future educators, scholars, and professionals—requires more than exposure alone. It demands intentional educational design, guided opportunities for reflection, and critical engagement with difference. Together, these elements enable short-term programs to act as catalysts for meaningful and lasting intercultural development.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the present study offers valuable insights into the potential of short-term study abroad (STSA) experiences for fostering cultural awareness and personal development, several avenues for further investigation remain. Future iterations of the program could be strengthened by the inclusion of follow-up assessments designed to evaluate the long-term academic, civic, and professional outcomes of participation. Such extensions would contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways short-term programs influence the sustained trajectory of intercultural development.

A critical direction for future research lies in the implementation of longitudinal studies to evaluate the enduring impact of STSA programs. By tracking participants over extended periods, researchers may examine how initial gains in cultural awareness, shifts in career aspirations, and changes in academic interests evolve months or even years after program completion. This approach would provide a more comprehensive perspective on the role of STSA experiences in shaping personal and professional identity formation.

Another promising avenue concerns the comparative analysis of program design features. Investigations that consider variations in program duration, levels of faculty involvement, housing arrangements, and degrees of linguistic immersion could help isolate the programmatic elements most influential in promoting intercultural learning and development. Results from such analyses would offer practical guidance for designing future initiatives across disciplines and institutional contexts.

The incorporation of control or comparison groups into future study designs would also serve to strengthen the evidence base regarding the distinctive contributions of STSA participation. For example, the inclusion of a matched group of graduate students engaged in alternative forms of global or intercultural learning—such as virtual exchanges or domestic diversity initiatives—would allow for a more rigorous examination of the added value of international immersion.

Expanding the scope of inquiry to include the perspectives of faculty leaders, host institutions, and community partners likewise represents an important area for future work. Doing so would enable a more holistic understanding of the intercultural exchange process, illuminating how reciprocal relationships, institutional priorities, and ethical considerations shape meaningful engagement and mutual learning.

By engaging with these directions, future research can build upon the present study to improve the design, implementation, and evaluation of short-term study abroad programs. Such efforts are crucial for advancing the broader objective of cultivating culturally responsive and globally engaged professionals.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing the pedagogical potential of well-designed STSA initiatives. When guided by clearly articulated goals, supported by intentional engagement, and anchored in reflective practice, short-term study abroad can serve as a powerful mechanism for strengthening intercultural competence and global awareness among graduate students in an increasingly interconnected world.

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APPENDIX 1: PRE-DEPARTURE SURVEY

Demographic Information

Please check all that apply.

Gender

- ☐ Male
☐ Female

Age

- ☐ 18-22
☐ 23-26
☐ 27-30
☐ 30-40
☐ 40-50
☐ 50-60

Graduate Classification

- ☐ Master's
☐ Doctoral

Ethnicity

- ☐ African American
☐ Native American
☐ Caucasian
☐ Hispanic
☐ Asian
☐ Other
☐ Multiple Ethnicities

Citizenship

- ☐ U. S.
☐ Non-U. S.

Length of Any Previous International Travel

- _____ 1-2 weeks
- _____ 3-4 weeks
- _____ 5-16 weeks
- _____ 17-52 weeks
- _____ > 1 year

Work Experience

- _____ 1-3 years
- _____ 4-6 years
- _____ 7-10 years
- _____ > 10 years

Your profession: _____

Cultural Proficiency Questionnaire

1. Please list the countries to which you have traveled:
2. Please list the countries in which you have studied abroad:
3. Please list the countries to which a family member or friend has traveled:
4. What cultural celebrations or holidays do you know?
5. What tradition(s) from another culture do you know?
6. What foods have you eaten from other cultures?
7. What is your favorite food from another culture?
8. What song or type of music do you know from another culture?
9. What type(s) of music from other culture(s) do you enjoy, and why?
10. What clothing or jewelry do you wear that is influenced by another culture? Please describe the materials, colors, etc.
11. If you have a friend(s) from a different cultural background(s) than your own, please indicate where they are from and how you met them.
12. What foreign language(s) do you speak or are you learning?
13. What foreign languages do your family members speak?
14. How difficult is it to learn to speak or write a foreign language?
15. What is your favorite way(s) to learn about other cultures?
16. On a scale of 1 to 10—with 1 representing minimal cultural proficiency and 10 representing maximum cultural proficiency—how do you rate your cultural proficiency today? Please briefly describe why you chose this number.

APPENDIX 2: POST-TRIP SURVEY

Please rate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements.

AS A RESULT OF STUDYING ABROAD...	N/A	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree
I gained better insight into myself.	0	1	2 3 4
I have a greater sense of independence and self-confidence.	0	1	2 3 4
My ability to make friends and adapt to new situations increased.	0	1	2 3 4
I am more receptive to different ideas and ways of seeing the world.	0	1	2 3 4
I gained a new perspective on my own culture.	0	1	2 3 4
My interest in language learning increased.	0	1	2 3 4
I am more interested in cultural studies.	0	1	2 3 4
I plan to change my Plan of Study to incorporate more international or cultural components.	0	1	2 3 4
My career plans changed or are more focused.	0	1	2 3 4

- Overall, how would you compare what you gained abroad with what you would have gained in a comparable period of time on your home campus?
 _____ What I gained abroad was much more valuable
 _____ What I gained abroad was more valuable
 _____ What I gained abroad was about the same
 _____ What I gained abroad was much less valuable
- On a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 being excellent and 5 being terrible—I rate my overall study abroad experience as:

Excellent Terrible
 1 2 3 4 5
- I would recommend this study abroad experience to a friend:
 _____ Yes
 _____ No
- What were the most desirable aspects of your study abroad experience?
- What were the least desirable aspects of your study abroad experience?
- What were the primary benefits that you derived from your study abroad experience?
- Students have different motivations for studying abroad, so no single study abroad program is the best for every student. Based on your experience, what students would benefit the most from the type of study abroad trip that you took?
- Conversely, what students would benefit the least from the type of study abroad trip that you took?
- What did you not know before studying abroad that you wish you had known?
- What cultural celebrations, holidays, or traditions did you learn about while in China?
- What foods did you eat that you enjoyed?
- What foods did you eat that you did not enjoy?
- What song or type of music did you discover?
- What clothing or jewelry did you discover?
- On a scale of 1 to 10—with 1 representing minimum cultural proficiency and 10 representing maximum cultural proficiency—how do you rate your cultural proficiency after returning from the study abroad trip? Please briefly describe why you chose this number.