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# Consulting Cultural Informants: A Look at the Extent to which Students Use Informants and Other Strategies to Learn from Their International Experiences

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**CONSULTING CULTURAL INFORMANTS: A look at the extent to which students use  
informants and other strategies to learn from their international experiences**

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Program in Intercultural Service, Leadership, and Management Group 68

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of  
International Education at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

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## ***ABSTRACT***

This study explores the extent to which students from the United States consult with cultural informants while abroad when experiencing what Taylor (1994a, 1994b) refers to as “cultural disequilibrium”. The study also explores how this strategy compares to other learning strategies and which informants students most frequently consult.

Two research methods were used: a survey of 85 students who recently returned from an international program and interviews with nine students from the same sample. The survey sought to explore strategies students employ when facing cultural disequilibrium while the interviews aimed at uncovering why students preferred some learning strategies over others.

Results showed that students use a variety of strategies when experiencing cultural disequilibrium and that consulting with cultural informants is a common practice employed on par with strategies like consulting with peers from the United States and observing local culture. It was also found that behavioral learning strategies tend to expand over the course of a program. Expatriates who were not from the United States and who lived extensively in the host country were identified as favored informants, and having a bi-cultural perspective was considered the most salient characteristic among informants. Social anxiety, on the other hand, was the biggest obstacle to more readily consulting with informants.

Findings support the implementation of a peer-matching program. They also support adding new content to existing on-site orientation activities to equip students with a theoretical framework for understanding the process of learning to become interculturally competent and the constructive role played by informants. Introducing students to basic ethnographic tools to better help them process data collected from informants is also recommended.

## ***Introduction***

It is no surprise that students who are immersed in a new culture may come to conclusions about what they observe and experience based on misperceptions and faulty assumptions. It is also not surprising that these types of conclusions can result in misunderstanding, reinforce stereotypes, hinder cultural adjustment and thwart more meaningful intercultural learning.

In my work facilitating international programs for students and other young adults—both at Princeton University in my current position as Associate Director of the Bridge Year Program and in other jobs I have had within the field of international education—I have found that one of the most effective ways for individuals to better test the validity of their assumptions and more effectively scrutinize conclusions drawn from their experiences is to consult with *cultural informants*. The term cultural informant (CI) is borrowed from the field of anthropology where it is used to describe partners from the culture that is being observed who are able to shed light on relevant ethnographic questions. They are often trusted friends and confidantes who know the culture well, are willing to talk to outsiders and are able to communicate in a non-analytic manner (Spradley and McCurdy, 1972, p. 47-48). For the purposes of this paper, and in the context of a typical study abroad program, a CI is anyone who knows more about host culture than the study abroad student. CI's are also capable of breaking down some of the differences between local culture and that of the student's home and have the time and interest to explain these differences to the visitor. CI's might include teachers, program administrators, homestay family members, as well as roommates and classmates who are from the host country, although a CI does not technically have to be from the host country. CI's might also include neighbors,

shopkeepers, waiters and waitresses and other host nationals with whom the international student has frequent interaction.

In spite of the seemingly invaluable role CI's can play in helping students more effectively learn from their intercultural experiences, it has also been my experience that consulting with CI's, generally speaking, is a strategy largely underutilized by students. Evidenced in regular conversations and by frequent blog posts, students consistently misinterpret their experiences—often, in the process, affirming cultural stereotypes—despite the homestay family members, language instructors, program administrators and various other CI's structured into their programs and at their immediate disposal. This underutilization results in something of a lost opportunity. It is this apparent lost opportunity and the corresponding potential that exists for empowering students to more effectively learn from their intercultural experiences that has fueled the present research.

This study will explore the extent to which students from the United States studying abroad typically consult with CI's to learn from their intercultural experiences. With whom students most typically consult and what defining characteristics these CI's possess, will also be investigated. Finally, this study will research how consulting with CI's compares with other strategies employed by students to learn from their experiences and some of the factors that influence why students use some strategies over others, including any obstacles that exist preventing students from more readily consulting with CI's.

The results of this research have important implications for how students can be supported both prior to and during international programs to more effectively engage with host nationals and other CI's and better learn from their intercultural experiences. Ultimately empowering students to more effectively process their experiences and better test the validity of



their assumptions about culture can reduce stereotyping, facilitate cultural adjustment and help students become more interculturally competent.

### ***Literature Review***

Before examining the available literature related to how students from the United States studying abroad have engaged CI's during international programs, it is important to note that the terms "cultural informant" and "host national" will be used synonymously in this section. While CI's, as mentioned above, can include individuals who are not host nationals, the term is largely absent from the literature on study abroad, intercultural learning, intercultural adaptation and other similar areas of study (the field of anthropology being the exception). There has, on the other hand, been substantial research relevant to the present study involving host nationals in which the term cultural informants, for all intents and purposes, could easily be interchanged.

Within study abroad literature there is limited available research on the role consulting CI's plays in intercultural learning, which has required casting a wider net into proximate fields of study. That said, there have been two large, relatively recent studies that have, among other things, examined the broad impact of engaging with host nationals on learning outcomes.

One of these studies was conducted by Vande Berg, Connor-Linton and Paige (2009) to test the language and cultural learning that occurs abroad against a control group remaining in the United States. Using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods in their large-scale, multi-year study, the authors examined the impact of a number of variables—including many related to interaction with host nationals—on improvement in language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity. Using the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), they found that students enrolled in study abroad programs tend to progress more in both language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity than their counterparts at

home; however, they discovered that certain independent variables related to characteristics of the learners and the structure of the study abroad program itself determine the extent to which language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity are gained (p. 2).

Regarding variables related to interaction with host nationals, Vande Berg et al. (2009) found that the IDI scores for students who spent more time with their host families showed the most gains (p. 23). This was particularly interesting because living with a host family was not necessarily a determinant of improved oral proficiency or intercultural sensitivity, meaning it is not enough to be in a homestay, one must actively engage with the family (p. 24). The authors also found that students who enrolled in content classes taught in the target language saw an increase in their intercultural sensitivity; however, students who took all of their courses at a host university, or more fully immersed in the local culture, saw almost no gain (p. 21). Similarly, they found that students who spent 26 to 50 percent of their free time with host nationals progressed the most in their intercultural learning (p. 24), while students who spent more than 50 percent tended to regress. To explain these seemingly counterintuitive results the authors cited Sanford's (1966) theory of optimal dissonance whereby a student who is overly challenged may have difficulty learning due to feeling overwhelmed while a student who is under challenged may lose interest in learning due to not feeling challenged enough.

These findings and others in the study led the authors to conclude that students from the United States, left to their own devices, may or may not gain oral proficiency or intercultural sensitivity and that certain interventions are required to assure that study abroad programs are effective. They go on to say that "the presence or absence of a well-trained cultural mentor who meets frequently with students may be the single most important intervention to improve student

intercultural learning abroad” (p. 25). Here the authors defined a cultural mentor as someone who, among other things, is able to offer personalized advice to help promote student learning.

Another large, comprehensive study examining the impact of engaging with host nationals on learning outcomes during study abroad programs was carried out by Cohen, Paige, Shively, Emert and Hoff (2005). The study investigated the impact of *The Students’ Guide to Maximizing Study Abroad*, a resource many of the authors were involved in developing, on a broad set of outcomes. Among several other things, the authors examined how study abroad students receiving certain language and culture learning interventions compared in terms of their language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity with students who did not receive such interventions. They also looked at the extent to which, and in what contexts, students employed certain learning strategies prescribed in the guide. Quantitative data collected through surveys suggested that the various interventions prescribed in the guide did not consistently lead to an improvement in intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI (p. 200); however, limited data did show statistically significant correlations between the use of certain cultural strategies and gains in the IDI. Students who enrolled in subject courses taught in the target language and primarily with host nationals, for example, had a significantly higher Acceptance-Adaptation gain score, suggesting that the greater the contact with host nationals through shared classes the greater the acceptance and adaptation to cultural differences (p.112-113). Likewise, the authors found positive IDI gains associated with frequency of speaking the target language at home and the frequency of speaking the target language outside of class—implying interaction with host nationals resulted in substantive cultural learning (p. 211).

There has been little research that has focused more explicitly on the extent to which students from the United States studying abroad consult CI's to learn from their intercultural experiences, though there is some literature that is closely related.

Taylor (1994b), who used in-depth interviews with a sample of interculturally competent adults (based on select criteria) to better understand the learning process of becoming interculturally competent, found that, among other strategies, developing long-term relationships with host nationals, or "friends" as he calls them, had a "significant impact" on developing intercultural competency (p. 166). Though he did not focus specifically on international students nor did he examine the extent to which these "friends" were consulted, he did develop a model containing a series of components that outline the long-term process adopted by adults to become interculturally competent, which includes engaging in discourse with hosts (1994a, p. 403). His model, based largely on adult learning theory developed by Mezirow (1991, 1994) called Transformation Theory, provides a useful theoretical framework for exploring the research questions presented above and will be elaborated on below.

In interviews with 30 students recently returning from extensive international experiences, Laubscher (1994) examined how out-of-class experience was used to enhance learning. He discovered that students unintentionally employed a number of ethnographic methods for learning about local culture outside of the classroom. Among these methods, he found "personal interaction", which consists of conversations between host and visitor, was commonly practiced (p. 100). Though personal interaction seemed to be prevalent among study abroad participants, Laubscher noted that the level of intimacy and depth of conversation tended to be largely superficial, which suggests that while students may consult CI's, they may not, in fact, learn anything from them.

Through questionnaires, interviews, systematic observations and the review of personal diaries, Schild (1962) looked at some of the different ways Jewish students from the United States who participated in a year-long program in Israel learned from their hosts. One of the three primary methods of learning, according to Schild, was through “explicit communication” with host nationals (p. 44). Schild found that explicit communication typically took place throughout the sojourn, though it was “most important during the first five months” of the program (p. 45).

Through interviews and a questionnaire, Shim and Paprock (2002) examined various factors affecting cultural learning among expatriate professionals living abroad. Among the instruments used to examine their research questions, the authors asked respondents to rate the effectiveness of several methods for learning about culture. Although the study did not measure the extent to which visitors consulted CI’s, it found that strategies like “working with host people”, “socializing with host people”, “developing long-term committed relationships with the host people”, “developing cultural mentors” and “traveling or visiting a place with the host people”, were perceived by expatriates as contributing positively to their cultural learning (p.22).

Research related to the kinds of learning strategies students use during their international experiences, the factors impacting why they choose some strategies over others, and obstacles preventing students from more readily consulting with CI’s, is also limited.

Noting American students often waited for Israelis—their hosts—to reach out to them to engage in explicit communication while Israeli’s, in turn, deferred to their “guests” to make the first move, Schild (1962) suggested that cultural factors may impact a student’s likelihood of consulting CI’s (p. 47). Schild also found that prestige and credibility of the source also factored into whether international students engaged in explicit communication with host nationals. If the

perception was that the exchange was unlikely to result in useful information, it was unlikely that visitors would bother engaging in explicit communication (p. 49).

In his research, Taylor (1994b) identified two distinct cognitive “orientations” adopted by individuals to respond to disorienting cultural situations: reflective and nonreflective.

Individuals adopting a reflective orientation were cognizant of the stressful emotions related to their cultural disequilibrium and able to identify learning strategies to help resolve the disorienting situation and bring about greater emotional balance (p. 164-5). These learning strategies, which will be explored further below, include *observation*, *participation* and—most relevant to the present study—engaging with *friends* (1994a, p. 403). Individuals who adopted a nonreflective orientation, on the other hand, tended to “plunge ahead” unaware of the connection between their own emotional state and any cultural disequilibrium nor consciously employing strategies to rectify the imbalance (1994b, p. 165).

In their study of the role personality and coping mechanisms play in the successful integration of Taiwanese studying in the United States, Ying and Han (2006) found a positive correlation between being extraverted and making friends with Americans, and successful adjustment. The implication here is that personal characteristics, including extraversion, have an impact on the likelihood that a student chooses to consult a CI when he or she has questions about culture.

Also looking at incoming students, in her yearlong ethnographic study of the adjustment experiences of international students in England, Brown (2009) found that host national friends were “the best source of information about host cultural norms” and that absence of host contact correlated with less success in cultural adaptation and conversational skills (p. 218). In examining why some students were less successful at engaging with host nationals, she identified

a number of obstacles facing the international students, including perceptions about inapproachability on the part of their hosts, perceptions about exclusivity and disinterest, fears of racism and concerns about being mistreated (p. 219).

Research by Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama & Barker (1999) also explored challenges facing foreigners attempting to consult CI's in a new culture. Their study identified a number of psychosocial barriers to integration among immigrants, including having limited coaching or practice opportunities to develop sociocultural competence; feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of living in a new environment; possessing a heightened need for self-validation—especially if there is perceived pressure to abandon customs and traditions; having the tendency to seek comfort through interaction with more familiar company (like other expatriates); feeling anxiety which can lead to minimal or awkward contact with hosts and, in turn, the reinforcement of negative stereotypes; and possessing one of many “dispositional, demographic, and other personal factors” that contribute to a more problematic adaptation process (p.80-81).

Shim and Paprock (2002) found a positive correlation between cross-cultural training and language training prior to arriving in the host country and expatriate learning (p. 22). Though it wasn't tested whether cross-cultural training resulted in an increased likelihood of consulting CI's, it is clearly a variable that impacts what strategies expatriates choose to employ during prolonged international experiences.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

As previously mentioned, Taylor's theoretical model explaining the process by which individuals learn to become interculturally competent is helpful for exploring the research questions posed above. The model is based largely on Jack Mezirow's adult learning theory called Transformation Theory, which, in turn, is guided by the premise that human beings

possess a fundamental impulse to understand their experiences. According to Mezirow, “we *have* to understand [our experiences] in order to act effectively” (1991, p.10). Learning, then, is about giving meaning to our experiences in order to guide future action. To learn from our experiences we rely on what Mezirow refers to as *meaning perspectives*, which he defines as “a habitual set of expectations that constitutes an orienting frame of reference that we use in projecting our symbolic models and that serves as a (usually tacit) belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience” (p.42). According to Taylor’s model (see Figure 1 on page 14), the process of learning to become interculturally competent is a recursive process containing six stages: *setting the stage*, *cultural disequilibrium*, *cognitive orientations*, *behavioral learning strategies*, and *evolving intercultural identity* (Taylor, 1994b, p. 162).

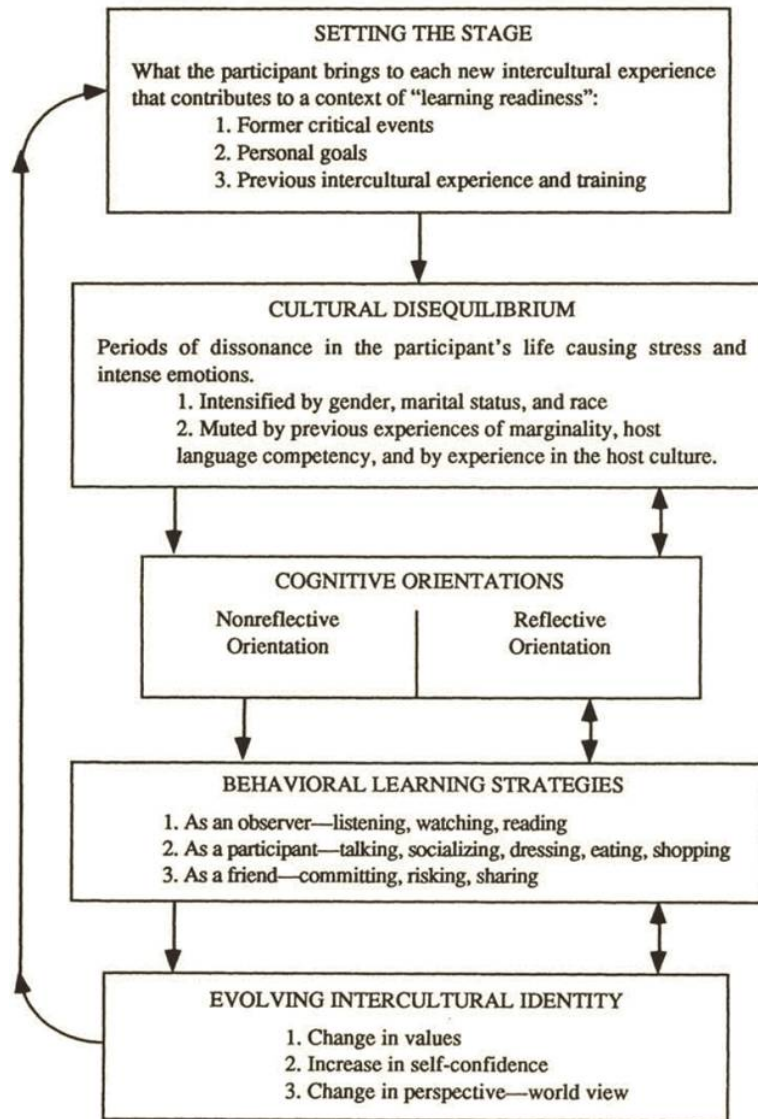
The first component of learning to become more interculturally competent, according to Taylor, is *setting the stage*. This component is based on the premise that everyone arrives at an intercultural experience from a unique place, shaped by previous critical events, personal goals, varying amounts of intercultural training, and previous intercultural experience. All of these things influence the learning process thereby “setting the stage” for how one responds to an intercultural experience (Taylor, 1994b, p. 160). This component has some grounding in Transformation Theory in that one’s meaning perspectives—which, according to Mezirow, “provide us with criteria for judging or evaluating right and wrong, bad and good, beautiful and ugly, true and false, appropriate and inappropriate” (1991, p.42)—are formed initially through the process of socialization that occurs during childhood and adolescence and what one brings to new experiences.

After the stage is set, Taylor’s next component is *cultural disequilibrium*, which he says, “illustrates the participant’s experience of incongruity during integration in the host culture”



**Figure 1** The Process of Learning to Become Interculturally Competent

(From Taylor, 1994b, p.162).



(1994b, p. 161). Emotional in nature, according to Taylor, cultural disequilibrium is the catalyst for change, or “the driving force that pushes the participant to become interculturally competent in the host culture” (1994b, p. 161). Taylor draws from Kim’s (1988, 2001) *stress-adaptation-growth* model, which holds that stress can push individuals to make adjustments during a prolonged intercultural experience and thereby adapt to external challenges so as to attain a new

equilibrium. In the process, according to the theory, the individual develops intercultural competence. In the language of Mezirow's Transformation Theory, this component is called the *disorienting dilemma*, which occurs when an individual is unable to make sense of an experience in a satisfying way due to distorted assumptions, (1994, 223). Mezirow holds that the disorienting dilemma results in stress or anxiety which triggers a critical reflection on the validity of the assumptions underlying our meaning perspectives.

Taylor also holds that unique characteristics possessed by individuals as well as prior experiences can have an intensifying or muting effect on cultural disequilibrium. In his own research he found that marital status, gender and race, for example, can exacerbate disequilibrium while things like language proficiency and prior experience with the host culture often have the opposite effect of muting the severity of disequilibrium.

Taylor refers to the next component in his model as *cognitive orientations*. As mentioned previously, cognitive orientations are what individuals use to respond to cultural disequilibrium and can be both reflective and nonreflective in nature (1994b, p. 164). A reflective orientation is similar to what Mezirow describes as *critical reflection* whereby individuals question preexisting meaning perspectives and regain balance or equilibrium through the re-evaluation and reinterpretation of distorted assumptions. A nonreflective orientation, on the other hand, does not involve questioning assumptions or preexisting meaning perspectives. Instead, when experiencing cultural disequilibrium, individuals who adopt a nonreflective orientation "plunge ahead, relying on prior learning and thoughtful action without critical reflection" (1994b, p. 164).

Through these cognitive orientations, according to Taylor, an individual will adopt *behavioral learning strategies*, the next component in his model. Behavioral learning strategies are actions or tools that "allow [individuals] access to the necessary knowledge and experiences

in order to bring a balance back to life” (1994b, p. 171). Taylor puts these learning strategies into three categories: those employed by the *observer*, those employed by the *participant*, and those employed by the *friend*. These behavioral learning strategies, in the language of Transformation Theory, allow individuals to explore new roles, relationships and actions; acquire knowledge and skills; and build competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.

*Observing*, in this context, encompasses the various types of learning that occur without communication, like watching others, listening to host nationals, or reading about local culture (1994b, p.166). *Participating*, meanwhile, describes learning strategies that involve actively engaging with the host culture, which, Taylor says, allows individuals “to take on the very skin of the culture [and become] competent at meeting basic needs, blending into culture through local dress and eating local food [brings] balance back into a life of disequilibrium” (1994b, p.166). Shopping at local markets, working with host nationals, eating local foods, and socializing with members of the local community are examples of participating cited by Taylor (1994b, p.166). Finally, having *friends*—or, developing long-term, committed relationships with host nationals—exposes individuals to what Taylor calls “tacit knowledge” about host culture<sup>1</sup>.

It is in this part of Taylor’s model that the role CI’s play in the process of learning to become interculturally competent becomes clear. Taylor states that, in conjunction with critical reflection, it is through discourse with CI’s that individuals are able to interpret the meaning of their experiences and develop intercultural competence (1994a, p. 403). He notes that CI’s

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the somewhat ambiguous and potentially misleading nature of the word “friend”, it will henceforth be replaced with the term CI. As previously mentioned, Taylor’s description of “friends” is nearly identical to the definition of cultural informant used above, referring to them as “confidantes, accepting participants for who they are”, who sojourners can go to “ask advice without fear of condemnation and shame, and receive support and concern” (1994, p. 167-168).

provide “tacit” or “taken-for-granted” knowledge about host culture that might otherwise go undetected or be misunderstood by the visitor (1994b, p. 166). These insights from CI’s, to return to Mezirow’s theory, help visitors re-evaluate and reinterpret meaning perspectives that are problematic due to distorted assumptions. Through discourse, CI’s help visitors actively test the validity of problematic assumptions and provide them with knowledge and skills related to local culture helping them to explore new roles and renegotiate relationships as well as to develop competence and self confidence in those new roles and relationships (1991, p.169) .

The final component of Taylor’s model is *evolving intercultural identity*. This component represents the outcomes of the process, reflecting the actual changes that take place among individuals in the process of becoming interculturally competent. In the model, this is an ongoing process whereby an individual’s “cultural identity is no longer linked to one culture, in that they are able to identify and understand the perspectives of the host culture” (1994b, p. 167). This process includes not only an openness to new perspectives, but also increased self-confidence and changed values. This component of Taylor’s model also embodies the ultimate outcome in Transformation Theory, which is “to make possible a more conclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, [to] mak[e] choices or otherwise act upon these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). According to Taylor, the process is something of a cycle; this evolving intercultural identity helps to set the stage for subsequent intercultural experiences. As figure 1 shows, the cyclical nature of the process is depicted in the form of an arrow looping back from the final component of his model back up to the initial, setting the stage, component (1994b, p. 162).

## ***Research Methodology***

This study was comprised of two research methods, the first of which was a survey of students who recently returned from a significant international experience. The survey was distributed via an e-mail containing a brief introduction to the research and invitation to participate. A copy of this e-mail can be seen in Appendix A. A list of students along with their e-mail addresses was procured from the Princeton University Office of International Programs.

The survey was designed to gather quantitative data related to the strategies United States students studying abroad typically employ while overseas when facing cultural disequilibrium. In particular, the survey aimed to gather data measuring the extent to which students opted to consult with CIs and other learning strategies, like consulting friends or family members from home, consulting fellow program participants from the United States, closely observing local culture, and actively participating in local culture. A number of variables related to the subject's personal background and interests and the nature of the international program in which the respondent participated were examined. See Appendix B for a copy of this survey.

The survey contained 15 questions. Questions one through 11 gathered personal information related to the student's background and interests along with details about the program in which they participated. Age, gender, class affiliation, language proficiency, previous international experience, interest in learning about local culture, interest in making friends with host nationals, program location, program duration, type of accommodations and extent of orientation were ascertained to determine the extent to which these factors correlated in any way with the likelihood that a student would consult with a CI or choose some alternate strategy when experiencing cultural disequilibrium.

Question 12 was designed to get a general understanding of how consulting with CI's as a strategy for cultural learning fit into the larger arsenal of strategies students employed when faced with a disorienting dilemma during their international experiences. Certain strategies based loosely on those outlined by Taylor (1994b) were listed and included reading about culture, reflecting on experiences, closely observing local culture, participating in local culture, talking to CI's, talking to other expatriate program participants, talking to people at home, or opting to do nothing at all.

Questions 13 and 14 were designed to further examine the extent to which students choose to consult CI's among other strategies when faced with a disorienting dilemma. Question 13 asked students the likelihood that they would adopt various strategies when they observed behaviors or attitudes among local people that didn't make sense to them. Question 14 asked students the likelihood that they would adopt various strategies when they weren't sure how to behave (or act) because they were not aware of a local rule or custom. These questions were also intended to help determine what impact, if any, the nature of a disorienting dilemma might have on the strategy that was eventually employed.

Question 15 asked students to rate various strategies in terms of their effectiveness for helping to resolve questions or issues related to cultural adjustment. The question was included in the survey to evaluate perceptions students had about the efficacy of various learning strategies. Schild's (1965) research suggests that perceptions about efficacy can have an effect on whether students choose to consult CI's (p. 49).

Cross tabulation was used to see if there were any significant correlations between participants' personal information and interests, and how they responded to questions 12 through

15. A comparison was made between how each sub-group<sup>2</sup>. Responses that deviated from the average by more than 10 percent were deemed as possibly being significant. In cases where categories within subgroups were comprised of fewer than twelve individuals, the data was ignored because small discrepancies resulted in large changes in percentages.

The second research method consisted of nine interviews. The nine students interviewed were selected randomly from a group of students who indicated in the survey that they were willing to be interviewed. Among those interviewed were five women and four men and though selected at random, the interviewees reflected a diversity of experiences in terms of program type, location and duration as well as previous international experience, language proficiency and other personal factors.

The purpose of the interviews was to get a better understanding of why students preferred some strategies over others when reckoning with cultural disequilibrium. Factors contributing to whether a student chose to consult a CI over another strategy were also explored, as were any defining characteristics among the CI's that were more commonly consulted.

### ***Presentation of Data – Surveys***

Survey participants were undergraduate men and women from Princeton University who had taken part in an international program during the summer and/or spring preceding the present study. They included sophomores, juniors and seniors and participated in programs in Europe, Africa, Asia, North America and South America. Program duration ranged from less than one semester to two semesters. Of the 535 students that received the survey, 85 students completed it for a return rate of 16 percent<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Age and location sub-groups were excluded due to the way data was collected, which prohibited cross tabulation.

<sup>3</sup> Ninety students began the survey; 85 responded to all of the questions, 86 responded to questions 1 through 13; and 90 responded to questions 1 through 12.

Thirty-one percent of the survey respondents were male while 69 percent were female. As of September 2011, 39 percent were sophomores, 24 percent were juniors and 37 percent were seniors. Four percent of survey participants studied in Africa; 19 percent studied in Asia; three percent studied in Oceania; 66 studied in Europe or the Eastern Mediterranean; and 8 percent studied in the Americas.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents participated in programs that were less than one semester. Thirty-nine percent were on programs lasting one semester, and 4 percent were on programs lasting longer than one semester. Eleven percent of respondents shared a dorm or apartment with host nationals; 38 percent shared a dorm or apartment with other expatriates; 10 percent shared a dorm or apartment with host nationals and other expatriates; 14 percent had a single room or apartment; 23 percent lived in a homestay; and 3 percent listed “other”. Thirty percent of respondents listed beginner as the level of their language proficiency; 32 percent listed intermediate; 20 percent listed advanced; and 18 percent listed fluent.

Thirty percent of respondents reported having no prior international experience; 36 percent said their total previous experience was equivalent to one semester or less; 18 percent said their total previous experience was equivalent to one to two semesters; and 17 percent said their total previous experience was equivalent to more than two semesters. Meanwhile 18 percent of respondents said that they received “considerable” information about cultural learning during a pre-departure and/or in-country orientation; 60 percent said they received “some” information; 13 percent participated in an orientation but it did not contain any information related to cultural learning; and 9 percent did not attend a pre-departure or in-country orientation of any kind.



Seventy-two percent of respondents said they were highly interested in learning about local culture at the start of their most recent international program. Twenty-four percent said they were moderately interested, and 3 percent said they were marginally interested. Meanwhile, 53 percent of respondents said they were highly interested in making friends with host nationals during their most recent international experience; 33 percent were moderately interested; 12 percent were marginally interested; and 1 percent had no interest.

In response to question 12, 30 percent of respondents said they would read about culture when faced with a disorienting cultural experience often or very often and 69 percent said they used this strategy at least sometimes. Forty percent reflected on their experience often or very often and 64 percent used this strategy at least sometimes. Seventy-five percent closely observed culture often or very often and 98 percent used this strategy at least sometimes. Forty-seven percent actively participated in local culture often or very often and 89 percent used this strategy at least sometimes. Seventy-eight percent opted to talk to a program participant who was not from the host culture often or very often and 95 percent used this strategy at least sometimes. Seventy-two percent talked to a cultural informant often or very often and 93 percent used this strategy at least sometimes. Thirty-six percent talked to a friend or family member at home often or very often and 66 percent used this strategy at least sometimes. Finally, 3 percent opted to take no deliberate action often or very often while 26 percent used this strategy at least sometimes. See Appendix C for more complete results for questions 12-15.

In response to question 13, 54 percent of respondents said they were very likely to try to better understand what they observed on their own while 45 percent said they were somewhat likely and 1 percent said they were unlikely. Forty-five percent of students said they were very likely to talk to another program participant who wasn't from the host country while 46 percent

said they were somewhat likely and 9 percent said they were unlikely. Sixty-four percent said they were very likely to talk to a cultural informant while 31 percent said they were somewhat likely and 6 percent said they were unlikely. Nine percent of students said they were very likely to talk to a friend or family member at home while 38 percent said they were somewhat likely and 53 percent said they were unlikely. One percent of students said they were very likely to take no deliberate action while 18 percent said they were somewhat likely and 81 percent said they were unlikely.

In response to question 14, 46 percent of respondents said they were very likely to try to better understand what they observed on their own while 46 percent said they were somewhat likely and 8 percent said they were unlikely. Fifty-four percent of students said they were very likely to talk to another program participant who wasn't from the host country while 35 percent said they were somewhat likely and 11 percent said they were unlikely. Sixty-eight percent of students said they were very likely to talk to a cultural informant while 29 percent said they were somewhat likely and 2 percent said they were unlikely. Nine percent of students said they were very likely to talk to a friend or family member at home while 40 percent said they were somewhat likely and 51 percent said they were unlikely. Zero percent of students said they were very likely to take no deliberate action while 16 percent said they were somewhat likely and 84 percent said they were unlikely.

In response to question 15, 24 percent of respondents said that reading about local culture was a highly effective strategy while 63 percent said it was somewhat effective and 13 percent said it was ineffective. Nine students indicated they did not use this strategy. Of 83 respondents, 83 percent said that closely observing local culture was highly effective while 17 percent said it was somewhat effective and 0 percent said it was ineffective. Two students did not use this

strategy. Of 67 respondents, 28 percent said that reflecting on their experience was highly effective while 60 percent said it was somewhat effective and 12 percent said it was ineffective. Eighteen students did not use this strategy. Of 78 respondents, 76 percent said that getting involved actively in local culture was highly effective while 24 percent said it was somewhat effective and 0 percent said it was ineffective. Seven students did not use this strategy. Of 83 respondents, 36 percent said that talking to another program participant who was not a host national was highly effective while 55 percent said it was somewhat effective and 8 percent said it was ineffective. Two students did not use this strategy. Of 82 respondents, 87 percent said that talking to a cultural informant was highly effective while 13 percent said it was somewhat effective. No students said it was ineffective and three students did not use this strategy. Of 71 respondents, 8 percent said that talking to a friend or family member at home was highly effective while 51 percent said it was somewhat effective and 41 percent said it was ineffective. Fourteen students did not use this strategy.

Further examination of question 12 revealed that in the category of gender, men were significantly less apt than average to reflect at least sometimes (minus 25 percent) whereas women were more apt (plus 12 percent). Men were also significantly less apt than average to talk to someone at home at least sometimes (minus 12 percent).

In the category of class affiliation, sophomores were more apt than average (plus 16 percent) to read at least sometimes.

In the category of program duration, students on programs of less than one semester were less apt than average to talk to someone at home as a strategy at least sometimes (minus 12 percent) while students on programs of one semester were more apt to choose this strategy at least sometimes (plus 17 percent).

In the category of accommodations, students who stayed in a single room or apartment were slightly less apt to take no action at least sometimes (minus 11 percent).

In the category of language proficiency, students who were fluent were less apt than average to reflect at least sometimes (minus 14 percent) and more apt to talk to someone at home (plus 28 percent). Meanwhile, students who were advanced were slightly more apt than average to participate and less apt to talk to someone at home (plus 11 percent and minus 19 percent, respectively).

In the category of prior experience, students whose prior experience was the equivalent of more than two semesters were more apt than average to read at least sometimes (plus 18 percent) and less apt to reflect (minus 18 percent). Students having the equivalent of between one to two semesters of prior experience were slightly more apt to participate at least sometimes (plus 11 percent) and more apt to talk to someone at home (plus 14 percent).

In the category of extent of orientation, students who participated in a pre-departure and/or in-country orientation with considerable information about culture were more apt than average to read and reflect at least sometimes (plus 12 percent and plus 18 percent respectively). Meanwhile students who attended an orientation that contained no information about culture were less apt than average to read (minus 27 percent), reflect (minus 22 percent), observe (minus 14 percent), participate (minus 14 percent) or talk to someone at home (minus 25 percent).

In the category of interest in learning about local culture, students who were only marginally or moderately interested were less apt than average to read (minus 21 percent), participate (minus 17 percent) and talk to someone at home (minus 14 percent).

Finally, in the category of interest in making friends with host nationals, students with only marginal or no interest were less apt than average to read (minus 11 percent), reflect (minus

22 percent), participate (minus 48 percent), talk to cultural informants (minus 18 percent) and talk to someone at home (minus 16 percent). This same group of students was more apt than average (plus 16 percent) to take no action. Meanwhile, students who had a moderate interest in making friends were more apt than average to reflect (plus 13 percent).

Further examination of question 13 revealed that men were less likely than average<sup>4</sup> to talk to a friend or family member at home (minus 17 percent).

In the category of accommodations, students who lived in a single room or apartment were less likely to consult a cultural informant (minus 17 percent).

In the category of language proficiency, students who were advanced and students who were fluent were less likely to take no deliberate action (minus 13 percent and 11 percent respectively).

In the category of prior international experience, students who had the equivalent of two semesters or more were less likely to talk to another program participant (minus 11 percent), talk to someone at home (minus 20 percent), and take no deliberate action (minus 11 percent).

In the category of extent of orientation, students who received considerable information about cultural learning were less likely to talk to someone at home (minus 28 percent), while students who attended orientations with no information about cultural learning were less likely to talk to cultural informants (minus 11 percent) and more likely to take no deliberate action (plus 39 percent).

In the category of interest in making friends with host nationals, students with marginal or zero interest in making friends were more likely to take no deliberate action (plus 14 percent).

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<sup>4</sup> Likelihood in the presentation of data for questions 13 and 14 was calculated by comparing the percent of respondents in each subgroup who selected somewhat likely and very likely to the average.

Further examination of question 14 revealed that men were less likely to talk to someone at home (minus 16 percent).

In the category of accommodations, students who lived with a homestay family were less likely to talk to someone at home (minus 15 percent).

In the category of language proficiency, students who were beginners were more likely to talk to another program participant (plus 11 percent). Meanwhile students who were advanced were less likely to talk to someone at home (minus 14 percent) and students who were fluent were more likely to use this strategy (plus 21 percent).

In the category of prior international experience, students who had no previous experience were more likely to take no deliberate action (plus 13 percent). Students with the equivalent of one to two semesters of previous international experience were less likely to talk to another program participant or take no action (minus 12 percent and 14 percent respectively), and more likely to talk to someone at home (plus 20 percent). Students with the equivalent of more than two semesters of prior experience were less likely to talk to another program participant (minus 16 percent).

In the category of extent of orientation, students who participated in a pre-departure and/or in-country orientation with considerable information on cultural learning were less likely to talk to someone at home (minus 12 percent). Meanwhile students who attended orientations without any information on cultural learning were less likely to talk to another program participant or talk to a cultural informant (minus 23 percent and 13 percent respectively), and more likely to take no deliberate action (plus 14 percent).

In the category of interest in making friends with host nationals, students who had marginal or zero interest were less likely to talk to a cultural informant (minus 14 percent) and more likely to take no deliberate action (plus 19 percent).

Further examination of question 15 revealed that men found reflection and talking to friends or family members at home to be less effective than average<sup>5</sup> (minus 13 percent and minus 16 percent respectively).

In the category of class affiliation, sophomores found reading to be more effective (plus 13 percent) while seniors found it less effective (minus 12 percent). Sophomores also found reflection to be less effective (minus 11 percent).

In the category of prior international experience, students who had the equivalent of more than two semesters of prior experience found talking to another program participant and talking to someone at home to be less effective than average (minus 18 percent and minus 26 percent respectively).

In the category of extent of orientation, students who participated in a pre-departure and/or in-country orientation with considerable information on cultural learning found talking to friends or family members at home to be less effective (minus 13 percent).

Finally, in the category of interest in local culture, students moderately interested in learning about the local culture found reading to be less effective (minus 13 percent).

## ***Presentation of Data – Interviews***

### *Preferred Strategies*

When asked about the strategies they most typically used when coping with cultural disequilibrium, all nine students interviewed cited consulting with CI's, and eight of nine said

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<sup>5</sup> Effectiveness in the presentation of data for question 15 was calculated by comparing the percent of respondents in each subgroup who selected somewhat effective and highly effective to the average.

they talked with fellow program participants from the United States. Participating in local culture—also referred to as “putting yourself out there”, “living it”, or “doing things and messing up”—was cited by six interviewees, while closely observing local culture was mentioned by eight. Three students talked about blogging and “sitting back and processing” as strategies they used that might fall under the category of personal reflection. Another three students also mentioned reading—particularly as a pre-emptive strategy for avoiding disorienting experiences. Two of these students mentioned reading blogs and orientation materials when they had specific questions about their cultural experiences as useful strategies. Talking to friends and family members at home was not generally cited as a strategy, though two students said they would occasionally use this strategy as a means for venting or, as one student put it, “amusement.”

Five students stated that they often employed multiple strategies in order to corroborate information. One student, for instance, said she found it helpful to consult with several people when enduring cultural disequilibrium, including her host mother, Spanish teacher and program administrators. Being able to compare responses, she said, resulted in more reliable information.

#### *Preferred CI's*

Every student who lived with a homestay indicated members of their host family were frequent informants. Program administrators were also frequently cited as were various categories of professors. There were professors who taught content courses from the host country; others who were prolonged visitors from the United States; and others still who were visiting specifically to lead the particular program that corresponded to the interviewee. Language professors were named by five students. Other program-sponsored informants identified by students included a hired guide, resident hall advisers (or the “local equivalent”), a “buddy” from a school-sponsored program that matched foreigners with local hosts, the contact



at a non-profit organization where one of the students worked, and a program alumna who had been invited back to support students.

Among CI's met outside of the programs in which the interviewees participated, six students identified expatriates who were not from the host country but who had spent extensive time there as frequent and preferred cultural informants. Two students said they consulted classmates from the host country with whom they had class and had befriended. One student identified his roommates and another, who spent a semester in Denmark, mentioned his girlfriend who was half Danish and half Swedish. Some students knew people in the local community prior to arriving: one student knew two local classmates because they had spent the previous school year at his school; another had friends of family in the same city; and another had an American cousin who happened to be living in Paris while he was studying there.

#### *Why students prefer some strategies over others*

One of the factors that came up most frequently among interviewees simply had to do with having access to cultural informants. Amanda<sup>6</sup> talked about how the people she was closest with and the informants she relied the most upon lived in her hall within her dorm. Comparing two programs she had participated in, Melissa observed that in Morocco, where she had limited access to local professors, administrators and community members, she relied more on blogging and consulting peers from the United States whereas in France, where she had access to professors, program administrators and lived with a host family, she relied more on CI's. Access determined not only what strategy a student might employ but also the category of CI they might consult. For Chris who spent a semester in Denmark, the half-Danish girlfriend he began dating became the person whom he would consult with most on his questions about local culture simply because she tended to be the most immediately accessible.

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<sup>6</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the interviewees referenced in this paper for their privacy.

Another factor driving what strategies students used had to do with the immediate circumstances in which a student found him or herself at the moment of a disorienting experience. Matthew, for example, said he preferred looking things up online when he had questions but if he was in the midst of a situation that demanded resolution, this strategy wasn't realistic. Bill, meanwhile, talked about how his strategies when surrounded by his roommates in the capital city where there was more of a shared cultural and linguistic background were different from when he was traveling on his own in more remote parts of the country where those similarities did not exist. One's mood at the moment of a disorienting experience seemed to be an important part of one's immediate circumstances for several students. Two students said if they were feeling happy or excited when something occurred, they were more likely to take concerted action to resolve the issues whereas if they were feeling depressed or having a bad day, they might not. Related to this, Amanda said fatigue made it easier and less exhausting to be with other Americans even though, she admitted, "it was kind of the easy way out" and probably resulted in poorer answers to her questions. One's immediate circumstances also played into which CI a student might choose to consult when faced with a disorienting cultural experience. Tabitha told a story of returning to Buenos Aires a year after living there and experiencing some confusion over changes in the way the city bus system worked. Though she could have consulted the "grumpy" bus driver, she said she preferred to wait to talk to her friend.

The moment at which a particular disorienting experience occurred along the timeline of the program was another oft-cited factor that determined what strategy a student might use. All but one student said that their preferred strategies changed over the course of their programs, which often meant relying more on peers at the start of the program before shifting to a reliance on consulting homestay family members and local friends. This shift seemed to have to do with a

number of things, including the development of language skills, an increase in overall confidence in navigating the local culture, the development of relationships with host families and local friends, and a growing realization that peers from the United States were less effective in resolving questions. Simon, who spent the year in Paris, found that the students from the United States he knew were the most vocally critical of local culture and the French academic system, which prompted him to look outward for resources that were more helpful, in his case expatriates from other countries who had been there long enough to know the system. The moment at which the disorienting experience occurred along the timeline of the program also affected what category of CI students said that they would consult with their questions about culture. Bill, for example, mentioned relying more on program administrators at the start of his program in Turkey before meeting people his age whom he could ask “more casually” for advice. Many students talked about their strategies “expanding”, or becoming more inclusive, rather than evolving. Amanda even said that while she saw a shift towards the beginning of her program from talking to peers to consulting more with “natives”, she discovered that by the end of her program she was interacting with her peers from the United States again because they had been in the country long enough to be able to answer some of her questions.

One of the underlying reasons that the timing of the incident seemed to be such an important factor in determining what strategy was used seemed to have to do with the development of confidence. Social anxiety was another factor that was frequently cited to explain why some students preferred certain strategies over others. Seven of nine interviewees said that if a question seemed too silly or caused them embarrassment, they would rather ask a peer from the United States than a CI. Another form social anxiety took was fear of being judged or rebuked. One student expressed concern of “coming across as ignorant or unworldly”

to her hosts. Another student spoke about being intimidated by hosts and fearing ridicule when trying to speak the language. Related to this was another widely expressed fear of being unable to successfully explain oneself. If a question seemed too difficult to articulate, some students found it easier to talk to a peer from the United States, to call home, or to simply look it up online than ask a host family member or someone else from the host community. Social anxiety also seemed to determine which CI's students would choose to consult. Several students indicated they sought out people they knew more intimately for more personal or potentially awkward issues.

This leads to another factor impacting which strategies students employed when experiencing cultural disequilibrium: the nature of the question. Four students noted that if a topic was potentially offensive, it was preferable to ask a peer from the United States or, perhaps, look it up online. On the other hand, if a question was impossible to answer by looking it up on the internet or talking to a classmate from the United States, students were more likely to consult a CI. The nature of the question also had a lot to do with what category of CI a student would choose to consult. If a question had to do with local bureaucracy or the academic culture, for example, a program administrator might be a better resource than, say, a host sibling. Amanda said that when she had questions about sexual orientation-based discrimination, she reached out to the local LGBT community rather than other potential CI's because of their affiliation. Simon said consulting French peers often resulted in hollow platitudes, like "you'll get used to it" or "that's just how it works here", which made them okay for boosting morale, but it was the non-French expatriates that had been living in France for an extensive period of time, who helped him figure out "how things worked". Six students also said that consulting long-term expatriates allowed them to commiserate, something that was hard to do with CI's from the host culture.

Commiseration—or a desire for empathy—was one of the biggest reasons students chose to consult peers from the United States over other strategies. Melissa said talking to peers was a good strategy because they were also coping with some of the challenges of adjusting to a new culture and, experiencing similar things. “I was just trying to figure out what was appropriate, [whether] I [was] doing something wrong, [and] what [was] going on here? And I think because most of the other students on my program lived with host families and were experiencing similar things [they were a good resource]”. Two other students noted that peers from the United States were good for venting frustration and for commiseration even if they were less effective for resolving questions.

Quality of information—or perceptions about quality of information—was another factor that impacted what strategies students would choose. Five students felt that consulting CI’s generally resulted in a higher quality of information, which made them more desirable resources. This had to do with perceptions about effectiveness and the authenticity of the source, which could be more easily verified than what a blogger might write online, say. According to some other students, talking to peers from America often led to bad information, which is why Courtney said she preferred “going directly to the source”. Matthew, meanwhile, noted that CI’s tend to provide insider information that can’t be found on the internet or in guidebooks.

Personality was another frequently cited factor playing into which strategies students chose to employ when faced with a disorienting dilemma. Students who described themselves as more outgoing said that they were more likely to ask someone when they had questions about culture whereas student who said they were shy said that they were more likely to talk to peers from the United States or try to figure things out on their own. These students also suggested that students who are more outgoing tend to have more friends who are from the host culture and

thus have greater access when they happen to have questions. They also suggested that, conversely, shyer students tend to have poorer access to CI's. Three students went so far as to say that personality was particularly important at their program location because they felt the cultures there were more closed, making it harder to befriend locals and requiring more aggressive efforts.

Having an ability to communicate effectively—more often than not, being able to speak the language—was another factor dictating what strategies were used in a given situation. As mentioned above, fear of an inability to articulate oneself effectively made it easier for some interviewees to consult a peer from the United States rather than consult a local informant. Beyond fear, Amanda said that in her program in Scotland she simply found it easier to converse with local people than in France where her language proficiency was not nearly as strong. Bill, meanwhile, said that, though he preferred consulting CI's, when he didn't have a shared language he was forced to rely on other strategies like observation and participation.

Five interviewees said that prior experience influenced the strategies they chose to employ when enduring cultural disequilibrium. Some of these students noted that their previous international and intercultural experience gave them skills and confidence to meet new people and to manage new disorienting experiences more effectively. Bill, for example, said he felt his prior experience had helped him develop concrete skills, stating, "...you learn how to problem solve a little better when you're put into conditions like that. And the more it happens the easier it becomes". Tabitha, who spent a gap year in Argentina prior to her semester in Chile, said that "having some primal understanding of the wavelength [the local person] is on helped a lot".

Similarly, three students commented on the role orientation sessions played in the strategies they used, noting that having an orientation provided them with a context for

understanding local culture and made it easier to approach CI's. Tabitha said the orientation for her yearlong high school exchange expressly discouraged certain strategies like calling home or conferring with other expatriates while strongly endorsing others, namely immersing in the local community and consulting CI's. Another student mentioned that the reading materials she received during orientation were helpful for consulting throughout her program when she had questions.

#### *Defining characteristics of good CI's*

Seven of nine interviewees said that having a shared language and an ability to communicate effectively was an important characteristic of a good CI. Even more than a shared language, possessing a bi-cultural perspective was probably the thing most highly valued by students among the CI's they consulted most frequently. Four students mentioned professors who were from the United States but had studied extensively in the local country or professors who were host nationals and had studied abroad as having this dual perspective and being particularly well-suited to answer their questions. Interestingly, students also frequently mentioned expatriates who weren't from the United States and who had spent extensive time in the host country. Melissa, for example, noted her Brazilian friend who had lived for many years in both the United States and France "was actually really helpful because she spoke perfect English and knew how our system worked but had really well adapted to French culture and could sort of understand what were the differences". Having previously spent a semester in Morocco, she also observed that French program administrators who had spent significant time in the United States and abroad were much more adept at explaining cultural issues than the Moroccan administrators who had never left Morocco. Courtney, meanwhile, noted the fact her host mother had hosted so many other Americans allowed her a special perspective on the challenges she faced as a visitor, allowing her to play a supportive role. This relationship was in

contrast to her classmates' who, not having that experience, "just did not understand at all where our disconnect was coming from".

As Courtney's experience indicates, one aspect of that bi-cultural perspective that seemed to resonate with students was an ability to empathize—something that came up time and again throughout the interviews. Amanda, who spent a semester in Scotland, talked about the important role the people on her hall played because they had been at the school a semester longer and thus knew what she was going through having just recently faced some of the same adjustment challenges. Tabitha, meanwhile, found that people with international experience in general were the best informants. She found that "they knew about being that other person and about not understanding particular things" and felt that "that perspective really helps a lot of the time".

Though articulated a number of different ways—including "friendliness", an "eagerness to get to know", or "taking an interest in", approachability was another characteristic frequently identified by the interviewees when describing good CI's. Tabitha described it as "open-mindedness", or "a willingness to sit down and listen to someone who occasionally stumbles over their words", or "interest in things beyond your bubble or world". Conversely, she noted, a local person taking no interest in you as a person makes it difficult to approach them. This approachability was particularly key for the students describing themselves as shy and who had a greater difficulty befriending local people. Three students said they believe that approachability was linked to culture and that some cultures were more open to foreigners than others.

While some students referred to it as "familiarity" and others alluded to the importance of "building trust", nearly every student suggested that intimacy was another critical element that made some CI's better than others. Intimacy was particularly important when the questions



students had were of a sensitive nature or the cause of embarrassment. Melissa, who brought many of her questions about culture to her host family, noted at first “I wasn’t sure how to approach them, but as time went on [...], the fact that we were living in close proximity and I got to know them and felt more comfortable [with them], was definitely important.” Matthew, meanwhile, who spent part of his summer program in Italy and part in Poland, said that for questions that seemed silly or embarrassing he preferred to ask his professors with whom he “had very good interactions” rather than the local guides or other CI’s.

Five students mentioned reliability as an important characteristic among good CI’s. For many of these students, the quality of information that a CI provided seemed to be an important determining factor as to whether or not they would be regularly consulted. Courtney, who spent a semester in Argentina, found that her friend’s host sister, though approachable, often provided information that wasn’t helpful, and so she preferred consulting her host mother. Chris, meanwhile, who spent the spring semester in Denmark, noted that though there were any number of students from the United States who had been at the program since the fall and who likely could provide helpful information as he adjusted, he preferred to get information from someone “who was really from there [who] is a bit more authentic.” Getting second hand experiences from other study abroad students, he felt, was akin to “reading the Cliff’s notes version”. As this last example suggests, in some cases perceptions about the reliability of a source were just as important as the reality.

Age and gender also played a role in whom students tended to consult most frequently. A CI’s age seemed to be related to access and intimacy. Six students stated that they most frequently consulted people their own age (or who were “relatively young”). “The closer they were to me, the more I would be willing to reach out to them, especially for certain issues”,

noted Chris. Melissa, meanwhile, said that she was more likely to approach a young person because she had “spent enough time with them to develop a close relationship [so that she] was comfortable asking them questions that might have seemed a little bit silly or off.” Gender, on the other hand, seemed to matter to some students more than others. Three students noted that gender was only an important characteristic in certain situations. For example, Chris, who spent the semester in Denmark and said he was taken aback by how aggressive women seemed to be in approaching him when out at night, commented that he found it easier to approach a male resident hall adviser with his questions than a local woman from his class. Bill, meanwhile, felt that gender was more important in certain cultural contexts. In Turkey, for example, he found it was much more likely culturally for men to approach him than women and that it might be less culturally appropriate for women to have foreign friends of the opposite sex.

#### *Obstacles to more readily consulting with CI’s*

Different forms of social anxiety were one of the more frequently cited obstacles to more readily consulting CI’s when students experienced cultural disequilibrium. Much of this social anxiety seemed to derive from a lack of cultural proficiency. As indicated above, when students felt that their question might be construed as rude or offensive they were often afraid to ask. The same was true for questions that seemed silly or embarrassing. Other students mentioned fear of being judged or rebuked. Melissa, for example, said that in her experience in France, “if you asked a question that came across as silly or stupid it could be responded to with a blunt response that could make you feel bad”. Feelings of intimidation also resulted in anxiety among some interviewees, as Simon, who also studied in France, noted, “I was slightly intimidated by approaching people in general because, contrary to what you see here in Princeton, [French students] dress very well [...] and they carry themselves very highly and have very tight groups.”

Five students mentioned language proficiency—or perceptions about language proficiency—as another obstacle to more readily consulting with CI’s. Some of these students felt that not having language skills thwarted their ability to form and develop relationships with host nationals while others indicated not being able to articulate themselves clearly in the contact language often resulted in their not even trying to raise questions when they had them. Others said that, despite their best efforts, they were often simply unable to communicate effectively, as Courtney admitted, “there would sometimes be this disconnect; [my host mother] couldn’t fully understand something I was describing or I couldn’t fully understand [...] some explanation she was giving me”. Some concerns about language proficiency were also related to social anxiety, as was the case for Simon in France: “Because [Parisians] place so much respect on people being able to speak French there, it’s really a precondition to becoming friends with a French person”.

The closed nature of some communities and “narrow-minded” attitudes also served as an obstacle, according to four of the students interviewed, making it harder to make friends in whom they could easily confide. Bill said he tended to look at people’s faces and if they were smiling he was more likely to approach them as compared to someone who quickly looked away. In an extreme case, Matthew said that overhearing racist comments and attitudes made him less motivated to consult local informants when he had questions about culture. Tabitha remarked that she often encountered apathetic or disinterested attitudes among local people which she found “off-putting”. Having spent time in Argentina and Chile, she also pointed out that the question of open versus closed cultures went beyond the surface: “Chileans, more than Argentines, are reserved people. Argentines always came up to me and were like, ‘where are you from?’, ‘welcome to our class’, and I didn’t know if they wanted to be friends but they

always wanted to talk to you. Chileans would not to talk to you until you talked to them [but] when you talked to them they would open up and it was great”.

Either due to this closed nature or something else, two students cited a lack of access to CI's as a major obstacle. Bill, for example, who spent half the year in Denmark and half the year in Turkey, contrasted the two education systems and found that in the former he was generally in small classes and knew his professors whom he could easily track down during office hours, while in the latter classes were huge, “office hours were a rare thing, [and] so you had to corner a professor to get to talk to them”. As a result, he found consulting his professors very often overly burdensome in Turkey even though they were a great resource for him in Denmark.

Three students noted the widespread prevalence of peers from the United States posed an obstacle to more readily consulting CI's when faced with disorienting experiences. Amanda noted that it was often easier to consult a fellow program participant from the United States than to try to track down or set up a meeting with a local informant. Hillary, meanwhile, talked about feeling “stuck in a bubble”, which made it hard to talk to locals.

There were a number of other obstacles mentioned only by a few students. Two interviewees, for example, said shyness posed something of an obstacle. Though self-identifying as outgoing and comfortable talking to her host family, Courtney noted that many of her shy friends tended not to raise questions with their host families when they had them. Another pair of students said their expectations thwarted more readily consulting CI's. Because of his previous experience and a false sense of confidence, for instance, Simon expected to integrate without any problems and commented that, looking back, he was in denial for a long time about some of the challenges he faced. Finally, Tabitha said that the advice she received during her orientation expressly discouraged her from more readily engaging with the local community.

## ***Findings***

Both quantitative and qualitative data show that students use a variety of strategies when experiencing what Taylor calls cultural disequilibrium. Data indicates that consulting with CI's is a common though not universal practice that is employed roughly on par with strategies like consulting with peers from the United States and closely observing local culture. Also clear from the data, students seem to understand the importance of taking action and are proactive about resolving disequilibrium either on their own or in consultation with their peers from the United States or CI's. Contacting a friend or family member at home is not a strategy typically employed or deemed particularly effective.

The research also sheds significant light on the factors that go into why students choose to employ certain behavioral learning strategies over others. Here, the interviews provide a more nuanced and conclusive picture than the survey. Access to CI's; one's immediate circumstances at the moment of a disorienting experience—including one's mood; when the disorienting experience occurred along the timeline of the program; social anxiety; the nature of the disorienting experience; desire for empathy; perceptions about the quality of information or what makes a good informant; personality; ability to communicate effectively; prior international or intercultural experience; and the extent of orientation, all factor into which strategy or strategies students tend to employ. Of particular interest here is the importance of the moment in which a disorienting experience occurs along the timeline of the program and the implication that strategies are not fixed but rather change over time as language skills develop, confidence increases, relationships strengthen and students are better able to evaluate the quality of resources. Also interesting is the finding that behavioral learning strategies tend to *expand* rather than evolve. An appropriate metaphor for this phenomenon might be a tool box: As time goes

on, students are able to fill their toolboxes with additional tools for making sense of their intercultural experiences. For example, though Bill relied mostly on local informants to answer his questions about culture while in Istanbul, during his travels to Eastern Turkey, he recalled relying more on non-verbal communication and observation to understand his experiences—skills he had honed during a previous experience in China. This finding is consistent with Taylor’s research, which suggests one’s evolving intercultural identity helps to set the stage for subsequent intercultural experiences, and is depicted in his theoretical model in the form of an arrow looping back from the final component of his model back up to the initial component (1994b, p. 162).

Crosstab analysis of the survey begins to identify factors related to a student’s personal background and interests along with program design that correlate to favored behavioral learning strategies. The relatively small number of survey respondents, however, especially when broken down and examined in subgroups, makes it difficult to identify trends with great certitude. Additional research with a larger sample could further reveal how some of these personal and programmatic factors impact student strategy selection and help administrators of international programs to more effectively design programs and support students.

Another interesting finding to come out of the data is the impact that one’s immediate circumstances at the moment of a disorienting intercultural experience have on what strategy is adopted by an individual. According to interviews, where one happens to be at the moment of a disorienting experience and with whom, and the urgency of the disorienting experience and the specific questions it happens to raise, for example, all directly impact the strategies that students decide to employ. This is particularly interesting because, unlike many of the other factors identified in this study as having an impact on the strategies adopted by students, these

circumstantial factors do not seem to be accounted for in Taylor's model. This is important when considering how to better support students before and during their international experiences. It is not enough to consider the factors that might correspond with Taylor's setting the stage component (e.g., prior international experience, extent of orientation, interest in learning about local culture, interest in making friends with locals, desire for empathy, and perceptions about the quality of information), or factors that Taylor might describe as having a muting or intensifying affect on disequilibrium (e.g., the gender of CI's, social anxiety, or the ability to communicate effectively); these circumstantial factors must also be taken into account.

Significantly, data collected through interviews reveals more about what kinds of CI's students tend to consult with most frequently, along with some of their most salient characteristics. Students consult with homestay family members, program administrators, professors and other CI's structured into their program the most. Students overwhelmingly identified expatriates who were not from the United States and who lived extensively in the host country as frequent and reliable CI's. To a lesser extent, students also consult with classmates, roommates and other people from the host country not directly associated with their program. Having a bi-cultural perspective is the characteristic that students deem most important among CI's—an unexpected finding but something nearly every interviewee mentioned. Other important characteristics include having an ability to empathize, being approachable—which seems linked to culture, the existence of intimacy, being reliable, being young and, in some cases, being of the same gender. The most interesting finding here is the extent to which students consult with expatriates who are not from the United States and who have lived extensively in the host country. Six of nine students interviewed talked about the important role this category of informant played in the development of their own cultural proficiency. While

unexpected, this is perhaps not terribly surprising given the fact expatriates who are not from the United States and who have spend extensive time at the program location tend to possess many of the characteristics regarded as most desirable by respondents described above.

Research collected in the interviews also sheds important light on some of the existing obstacles that prevent students from more readily consulting with CI's when they experience cultural disequilibrium. Consistent with Brown (2009) and Mak et al. (1999), social anxiety seems to be the biggest obstacle and comes as a result of a lack of language or cultural proficiency, fear of being judged or saying something embarrassing, and feelings of intimidation. Other obstacles include an inability to communicate effectively, the closed nature of some cultures, a lack of access to CI's, the widespread prevalence of peers from the United States, shyness, unrealistic expectations and poor advice.

Some additional interesting insights came out of the analysis of the data. Firstly, perception plays an equal role to reality in many cases when students are deciding whom to consult or, more broadly, what strategy to use. For example, if a student perceives his language skills are inadequate it may prevent him from consulting a CI even if those skills are objectively adequate. Likewise, if a student perceives that a fellow program participant from the United States has no valuable cultural information to share or, conversely, that a host national does, this perception is likely to be more salient than who is actually better able to resolve the question.

Another interesting finding—also related to perceptions—has to do with how students view the effectiveness of certain strategies as compared to how frequently they actually employ those strategies. Findings from the survey show that while students generally employ strategies consistent with their perceptions about their effectiveness, there are a few noteworthy exceptions. For example, in spite of predominantly talking to peers from the United States often or very



often when experiencing cultural disequilibrium, students rarely rated this as a highly effective strategy. Conversely, students tended to see participation as a highly effective strategy but tended not to choose this strategy often or very often. Reading and reflecting were also strategies deemed relatively more effective than they were actually employed. Social anxiety, easy access to peers from the United States, a desire for empathy and the relative ease of certain strategies over others—all factors identified by the interviewees as having an effect on which strategies they chose to use—likely explain these findings.

The validity and substance of these findings should be qualified to some extent by some limitations to the present study. Firstly, all of the survey participants as well as those students interviewed were undergraduates at Princeton University. While no undergraduate student body is uniform, it is fair to say the students involved in this research are highly motivated and high achieving. Furthermore it can be presumed that the students who chose to fill out the survey (16 percent of those invited), were among the more enthusiastic about their international experiences—and the subset of this group that volunteered to be interviewed, even more so. How well the findings from the survey and interviews can be applied to a broader population is an open question.

Another limitation of the present study relates to the unfamiliar nature of some of the concepts presented to students both in the survey and interviews, raising some question as to the extent to which students fully grasped what was being asked. Even though examples were provided in the phrasing of the survey questions and terms were clarified during the interviews, the lack of familiarity with concepts such as cultural disequilibrium and cultural informants opens the possibility to misinterpretation.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of the present study is that lack of attention paid to the *quality* of discourse between international students and CI's. Based on Taylor's model and adult learning theory, consulting with CI's helps individuals acquire skills and knowledge necessary to overcome cultural disequilibrium and bring balance back to life. It can empower individuals to explore new roles and relationships as well as build competence and develop confidence. Interviews revealed, however, that not all discourse with CI's is of the same quality and, in fact, the value of any exchange between student and CI can vary significantly. This is consistent with Vande Berg et al. (2009) and their finding that the IDI scores for students who spent more time with their host families showed the most gains despite the fact living with a host family did not necessarily result in improved oral proficiency or intercultural sensitivity—implying that the quality of the homestay experience is more important than simply living with a host family (p. 2). Similarly, Laubscher (1994) found that the depth of conversation students had with hosts tended to be largely superficial and that informal conversations rarely resulted in data suitable for making informed judgments (p. 100). It is clear an assumption is being made that consulting with CI's—without any additional qualifiers—is an effective strategy for helping students to test the validity of their assumptions about culture and develop skills to become interculturally competent. Managing quality of discourse will be addressed below.

### ***Recommendations***

Research in this study resulted in a wide array of data with implications for multiple constituencies. Bearing in mind the scope of this paper, the recommendations below focus on what administrators working in international education can do to increase the extent to which international students consult CI's when experiencing cultural disequilibrium and to better ensure that the resulting discourse is processed effectively.

Consistent with the call for the presence of a “well-trained cultural mentor” from Vande Berg et al. (2009), evidence from this study suggests that program design should allow for greater access to CI’s. This increased access should be carried out in a thoughtful, creative manner that takes into account some of the obstacles that prevent students from more readily consulting with CI’s. One way to do this is to implement a program that matches international students with local hosts. This type of program has been shown to result in more effective cultural integration (Westwood and Barker; 1990; Abe, Talbot & Geelhoed, 1998; Lassegard, 2008). The present study also suggests that certain considerations should be made in the creation of such a program. CI’s selected to participate, for example, should be roughly the same age as the visiting student. Preferably, the international student should be able to choose if he or she is matched with someone of the same or opposite sex. More important than whether CI’s selected to participate in a program of this nature are from the host country or simply extended visitors is whether they possess a bi-cultural perspective and ability to empathize with the international student’s somewhat intimidating and awkward situation. Participating CI’s should also receive an introduction to United States culture as well as training related to the types of challenges these students typically face when adjusting to the host culture. Administrators of this peer matching program should evaluate each visiting student’s personality prior to making a match so as to provide extra support to those students who appear more shy or lacking in self confidence.

Evidence from this study also underlines the important roles that language and cultural competency as well as confidence play in an individual’s willingness to reach out to a CI. Findings suggest—and it may go without saying—that students should be encouraged to enroll in language classes even if content courses are taught in English, to live with a host family, and to partake in cultural enrichment activities that might increase language and cultural competence.

Helping students to build confidence is also important. Providing students with positive feedback along with benchmarks allowing them to more easily trace their progress can help students build confidence. Keeping journals or making recordings of language skills in intervals throughout the program are simple ways that can demonstrate to students the progress they are making and help build confidence.

Findings in this study also highlight the importance of adding new content to existing on-site orientation activities. An introduction to Taylor's model, for example, is necessary in order to equip students with a theoretical framework for understanding the process for learning to become interculturally competent. Students should also be provided a basic introduction to adult learning theory along with some key concepts to be able to return to throughout the program—especially during more challenging moments. These concepts should include the disorienting dilemma, cultural disequilibrium, distorted assumptions, critical reflection, meaning perspectives, and behavioral learning strategies. Here, the meaning of the term cultural informant should be introduced to students along with a clear understanding of what makes a good CI. Likewise, students should be introduced to some of the CI's on their program and, if relevant, the rationale behind any existing peer-matching programs or activities. Making students aware of the expansive nature of behavioral learning strategies and introducing them to the toolbox metaphor could also be very useful.

One of the primary benefits of introducing students to Taylor's model and adult learning theory during the on-site orientation students is to equip them with an ability to reflect on their experiences critically. One of the more interesting aspects of Taylor's research was his finding that individuals, when experiencing cultural disequilibrium, tend to “muddle through” the experience, reacting in something of a non-reflective, improvisational way. Taylor believes that

this type of non-reflective reaction can still result in learning (1994b, p.165), though this seems somewhat controversial. Mezirow, for example, holds that planning a course of action is an integral step of transformative learning, implying the necessity of some sort of critical reflection (1991, p.168). The evidence in this research underscores the extent to which circumstances are important. Where an individual happens to be, whom he or she might be with, and how he or she happens to be feeling at the moment of a disorienting cultural experience all appear to be important factors guiding which strategy is ultimately used. It is safe to say that while it may be possible for individuals to “muddle through”, “figure out”, or otherwise make meaning of their experiences without the benefit of critical reflection, they are far more likely to process their experiences successfully and resolve cultural disequilibrium if they possess the tools and theory to reflect critically. This may be easier said than done, as research and experience show that some students simply are not ready to think at this level. Still, devoting time and energy during orientation to equip students with resources to help them think critically seems likely to pay dividends in terms of cultural learning and adjustment.

During the onsite orientation, students should also be introduced to some of the obstacles that exist to interacting with CI's, including social anxiety, and provided with some tools for resolving these obstacles. The onsite orientation also provides program administrators with a good opportunity to inform students of any aspects of local cultural that might complicate interacting with host nationals or, more generally, their immersion. For example, if a culture is relatively closed making it difficult to make friends, students can be coached to be more aggressive about meeting new people. Students should also be clued in to the role their perceptions play—both in terms of their own language and cultural competence as well as their

perceptions about the efficacy of the various learning strategies at their disposal. Here, some introduction to social psychology and the existence of cognitive biases might be useful.

Finally, to address the varying quality of discourse between international students and CI's, a short course or project introducing students to some basic ethnographic tools should be implemented in order to help students more effectively engage with CI's and better process the information they provide. This course or project should include background on the nature of ethnography as well as training in skills that help students more effectively listen, observe and process the resulting information. This recommendation is consistent with Laubscher (1994) whose research found that students are poorly equipped to process or learn from the empirical data they gather as "amateur ethnographers" (p. 23). He identified a number of prerequisites for "personal interaction" to be effective, including building rapport, asking relevant or revealing questions, and being able to remain distant and objective from the informant (p. 101-2). Such an introduction to basic ethnographic tools has proven successful. A study by Jurasek, Lamson and O'Maley (1996), for example, found that student ethnographic projects during study abroad programs resulted in "an enriched language experience, insight into the complexity of cultures and societies, involvement and investment in the cultural learning process, meaningful interactions with members of other cultures, and increased flexibility of thought, reflection, and self-reflection" (p. n/a). Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) and Bateman (2002), meanwhile, found that teaching students ethnographic interviewing techniques resulted in improved intercultural communication between language learners and native speakers as well as improved attitudes toward members of the target language community. It should be noted that in the creation of any such program, it would be important to make clear to students that their experience should not be treated as some kind of anthropological experiment but rather that the

tools of the ethnographer are assets to the sojourner in his or her attempt to better understand and learn from intercultural experiences.

This study confirms the hypothesis that students from the United States often underutilize the resources at their disposal during their international programs—particularly the opportunity to consult with cultural informants to resolve cultural disequilibrium. This results in something of a lost opportunity. This research has identified obstacles that impede students from more readily consulting CI's as well as the characteristics possessed by favored informants. By introducing students to some of the theory and concepts underlying the process by which adults learn to become interculturally competent and designing programs to include carefully selected peer mentors and instruction in basic ethnographic tools, administrators of international programs can help reconcile this lost opportunity and empower students to more effectively utilize the resources around them. The end result will be students who are better equipped to process their disorienting cultural experiences and more adept at developing a mature intercultural identity.

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## *Appendix A – E-mail to prospective survey participants*

Hello,

My name is Scott Leroy, and I am Associate Director of Princeton University's Bridge Year Program. I am writing to invite you to take part in a research study about the intercultural learning that occurs on international programs. This research is being conducted to complete the requirements for an advanced degree at the SIT Graduate Institute, where I am currently a student. I received your email address from the Office of International Programs because of your recent participation in the Study Abroad Program and/or a Princeton summer program abroad.

If you would like to participate in this research, you will be asked to fill out an online survey that will take ten to fifteen minutes to complete. Your name will not appear on the survey, but you will be asked to list your age, class affiliation, gender and to answer some questions related to your most recent international experience. Your name will not be linked with the survey in any way.

As part of my research, I will also be interviewing a small number of students. At the end of the survey you will have the option to indicate your willingness to be interviewed. If you select this option, you will be asked to provide your email address to facilitate the possible scheduling of an interview. Interviews will be conducted on campus between November 7 and November 21 and will last approximately 30 minutes. All data collected through interviews will be anonymous.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact me at (609) 258-2821 or [sleroy@princeton.edu](mailto:sleroy@princeton.edu).

To participate in the online survey, please click here. You may also copy the following URL and paste it in your browser.

[https://princetonsurvey.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_6JPh4oWafalSsEQ](https://princetonsurvey.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_6JPh4oWafalSsEQ)

Best regards,

Scott

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## ***Appendix B – Copy of Research Survey***

1 Questions 1 - 11 1. Age

2. Gender

- Male
- Female

3. Class as of September 2011

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

4. Location(s) of most recent international program.

5. Duration of most recent international program.

- Less than one semester
- One semester
- Two semesters
- More than two semesters

6. Type of accommodations during most recent international program.

- Shared dorm or apartment with host nationals
- Shared dorm or apartment with other expatriates
- Shared dorm or apartment with host nationals and other expatriates
- Single room or apartment
- Homestay
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

7. Language proficiency at the start of most recent international program.

- Beginner
- Intermediate
- Advanced
- Fluent

8. International experience prior to most recent international program (in high school or college).

- No previous international experience
- Total previous international experience equivalent to one semester or less
- Total previous international experience equivalent to one to two semesters
- Total previous international experience equivalent to more than two semesters

9. Extent of orientation or training prior to most recent international program.

- Either for my most recent international program or a previous program in which I participated, I have attended a pre-departure and/or in-country orientation that included considerable information about how individuals learn from their intercultural experiences
- Either for my most recent international program or a previous program in which I participated, I have attended a pre-departure and/or in-country orientation that included some information about how individuals learn from their intercultural experiences
- Either for my most recent international program or a previous program in which I participated, I have attended a pre-departure and/or in-country orientation but no information about how individuals learn from their intercultural experiences was provided
- I have not attended any pre-departure and/or in-country orientations

10. Interest in learning about local culture at the start of most recent international program.

- Highly interested and motivated to learn about local culture
- Moderately interested and motivated to learn about local culture
- Marginally interested and motivated to learn about local culture
- Not interested or motivated to learn about local culture at all

11. Interest in making friends with host nationals during your most recent international program.

- I was highly interested in making friends with host nationals during my most recent international program.
- I was moderately interested in making friends with host nationals during my most recent international program.
- I was marginally interested in making friends with host nationals during my most recent international program.
- I had no interest in making friends with host nationals during my most recent international program.

Question 12 Instructions: Select Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, or Very Often to complete the following sentence in a manner that best describes your experience during your most recent international program. You must select an option for each sentence fragment listed in the left-hand column.

12. When I felt uneasy as a result of questions or issues that arose related to my cultural adjustment (for example, figuring out how to use public transportation for the first time, or figuring out how to greet someone in a manner that was culturally appropriate), I [never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often]...

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
...read about local culture.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...reflected on my experiences (through journaling or some other form of personal discovery or introspection).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...closely observed local culture.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...got involved and experimented actively in the local culture.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...talked to another program participant who wasn't from the host country.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...talked to someone who had a more intimate understanding of local culture than I, like a teacher, homestay family member, program administrator, or a friend, classmate, roommate or co-worker from the host country.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...talked to a friend or family member at home via telephone, e-mail, Facebook, Skype or some other technology.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...opted not to take any deliberate action.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Questions 13 - 14 Instructions: Select Unlikely, Somewhat Likely or Very Likely to complete the following sentences in a manner that best describes your experience during your most recent international program. You must select an option for each sentence fragment listed in the left-hand column.

13. When I observed behaviors or attitudes among local people that didn't make sense to me and no one was immediately available to ask (for example, observing more aggressive driving and different traffic patterns, or noticing people display affection more openly in public), sooner or later I was [unlikely, somewhat likely, very likely] to...

	Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Very likely
...try to better understand what I observed on my own.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...talk to another program participant who wasn't from the host country to see if they could help me better understand what I observed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...talk to someone who had a more intimate understanding of local culture than I, like a teacher, homestay family member, program administrator, or a friend, classmate, roommate or co-worker from the host country, to see if they could help me better understand what I observed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...talk to a friend or family member at home via telephone, e-mail, Facebook, Skype or some other technology to see if they could help me better understand what I observed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...take no deliberate action to better understand what I observed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. When I wasn't sure how to behave (or act) because I was not aware of a local rule or custom and no one was immediately available to ask (for example, not knowing the appropriate way to dress for a formal occasion, or not knowing how to negotiate prices in a market), sooner or later I was [unlikely, somewhat likely, very likely] to...

	Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Very likely
...try to better understand the rule or custom on my own.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...talk to another program participant who wasn't from the host country to see if they could help me better understand the rule or custom.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...talk to someone who had a more intimate understanding of local culture than I, like a teacher, homestay family member, program administrator, or a friend, classmate, roommate or co-worker from the host country, to see if they could help me better understand the rule or custom.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...talk to a friend or family member at home via telephone, e-mail, Facebook, Skype or some other technology to see if they could help me better understand the rule or custom.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...take no deliberate action to better understand the rule or custom.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Question 15. Please rate the following strategies in terms of their effectiveness for helping you resolve questions or issues that arose related to your cultural adjustment during your most recent international program. If you did not use a particular strategy, select N/A for not applicable.

	Ineffective	Somewhat Effective	Highly Effective	N/A
Reading about local culture.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Closely observing local culture.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reflecting on my experiences (through journaling or some other form of personal discovery or introspection).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Getting involved and experimenting actively in the local culture.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Talking to another program participant who wasn't from the host country.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Talking to someone who had a more intimate understanding of local culture than I, like a teacher, homestay family member, program administrator, or a friend, classmate, roommate or co-worker from the host country.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Talking to a friend or family member at home via telephone, e-mail, Facebook, Skype or some other technology.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16 Are you willing to be contacted to set up an interview?

- Yes
- No

17 Provide your Princeton email address in the space below. Please note, you may or may not be contacted to set up an interview.

## Appendix C – Survey Results: Questions 12-15

**12. Instructions: Select Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, or Very Often to complete the following sentence in a manner that best describes your experience during your most recent international program. You must select an option for each sentence fragment listed in the left-hand column. 12. When I felt uneasy as a result of questions or issues that arose related to my cultural adjustment (for example, figuring out how to use public transportation for the first time, or figuring out how to greet someone in a manner that was culturally appropriate), I [never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often]...**

Strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
...read about local culture.	8%	22%	39%	24%	7%
...reflected on my experiences (through journaling or some other form of personal discovery or introspection).	12%	24%	24%	27%	13%
...closely observed local culture.	0%	2%	22%	39%	36%
...got involved and experimented actively in the local culture.	1%	10%	42%	26%	21%
...talked to another program participant who wasn't from the host country.	0%	6%	17%	30%	47%
...talked to someone who had a more intimate understanding of local culture than I, like a teacher, homestay family member, program administrator, or a friend, classmate, roommate or co-worker from the host country.	2%	4%	21%	26%	46%
...talked to a friend or family member at home via telephone, e-mail, Facebook, Skype or some other technology.	10%	24%	30%	17%	19%
...opted not to take any deliberate action.	22%	52%	22%	3%	0%



**13. When I observed behaviors or attitudes among local people that didn't make sense to me and no one was immediately available to ask (for example, observing more aggressive driving and different traffic patterns, or noticing people display affection more openly in public), sooner or later I was [unlikely, somewhat likely, very likely] to...**

Strategy	Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Very likely
...try to better understand what I observed on my own.	1%	45%	54%
...talk to another program participant who wasn't from the host country to see if they could help me better understand what I observed.	9%	46%	45%
...talk to someone who had a more intimate understanding of local culture than I, like a teacher, homestay family member, program administrator, or a friend, classmate, roommate or co-worker from the host country, to see if they could help me better understand what I observed.	6%	31%	64%
...talk to a friend or family member at home via telephone, e-mail, Facebook, Skype or some other technology to see if they could help me better understand what I observed.	53%	38%	9%
...take no deliberate action to better understand what I observed.	81%	18%	1%

**14. When I wasn't sure how to behave (or act) because I was not aware of a local rule or custom and no one was immediately available to ask (for example, not knowing the appropriate way to dress for a formal occasion, or not knowing how to negotiate prices in a market), sooner or later I was [unlikely, somewhat likely, very likely] to...**

Strategy	Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Very likely
...try to better understand the rule or custom on my own.	8%	46%	46%
...talk to another program participant who wasn't from the host country to see if they could help me better understand the rule or custom.	11%	35%	54%
...talk to someone who had a more intimate understanding of local culture than I, like a teacher, homestay family member, program administrator, or a friend, classmate, roommate or co-worker from the host country, to see if they could help me better understand the rule or custom.	2%	29%	68%
...talk to a friend or family member at home via telephone, e-mail, Facebook, Skype or some other technology to see if they could help me better understand the rule or custom.	51%	40%	9%
...take no deliberate action to better understand the rule or custom.	84%	16%	0%

**15. Please rate the following strategies in terms of their effectiveness for helping you resolve questions or issues that arose related to your cultural adjustment during your most recent international program. If you did not use a particular strategy, select N/A for not applicable.**

Strategy	Ineffective	Somewhat Effective	Highly Effective	Responses
Reading about local culture.	13%	63%	24%	76
Closely observing local culture.	0%	17%	83%	83
Reflecting on my experiences (through journaling or some other form of personal discovery or introspection).	12%	60%	28%	67
Getting involved and experimenting actively in the local culture.	0%	24%	76%	78
Talking to another program participant who wasn't from the host country.	8%	55%	36%	83
Talking to someone who had a more intimate understanding of local culture than I, like a teacher, homestay family member, program administrator, or a friend, classmate, roommate or co-worker from the host country.	0%	13%	87%	82
Talking to a friend or family member at home via telephone, e-mail, Facebook, Skype or some other technology.	41%	51%	8%	71