

The Effect of Cultural Immersion Experiences on College Students' Professional Development Skills

Luis Abraham Martinez Jr., *West Texas A&M University*

Dr. Leslie Ramos Salazar, *West Texas A&M University*

This study examined the effect of cultural immersion experiences during study abroad programs on students' professional career development skills. A survey was conducted among 78 participants from a Texan university, exploring the relationship between various aspects of cultural immersion and career skill development. Results showed that confidence in career pre-immersion and incorporating cultural experiences into professional networking positively affect skill acquisition. However, the number of cultural immersion experiences and belief in their career impact from their experience did not significantly predict outcomes. These findings highlight the value of cultural immersion in enhancing students' global competency and career readiness among college students.

Key words: cultural immersion, study abroad, college students, professional skills, career readiness

Studying abroad is a way that U.S. students in college can obtain tangible skills that prove durable in their specific professional career (U.S. Department of State, 2024). According to the U.S. Department of State (2024), more than 300,000 students study, intern, or volunteer in a different culture per year, aiding in their navigation of a new environment, collaboration with diverse peers, and learning other languages. This cultural participation is occurring regardless of the major or duration of the trip. Study Abroad Programs (SAPs) provide deliberate cultural immersion opportunities for students to reside and study in foreign countries, exposing them to environments distinct from their local communities over a specified time (Goldoni, 2013). SAPs, whether credit-bearing or not, are categorized into three primary types: short-term, instructor-led study abroad; community engagement study abroad; and semester-long immersion programs (Onosu, 2021). Despite their unique structures, all SAP variants blend academic coursework with cultural engagement to significantly enhance students' cultural awareness and learning experiences (Onosu, 2021). For instance, research examined how a semester-long immersive experience in China was widely effective in heightening motivation for New Zealand students wanting to learn Chinese and the cultural lifestyle for their area of study (Gong et al., 2020). In 2015, Antigua et al. conducted a short-term SAP with nursing students from the United States and the Philippines. They found that nursing students who participated abroad integrated their theories of learning into real-world scenarios, which made them more globally employable (Antigua et al., 2015).

Previous research studies explored the benefits of studying abroad and the effects of work skills. The main objective of this study is to examine the effects of SAPs on students' developmental work skills. The literature review examines the importance of studying abroad and how career occupation skills correlate with education abroad.

Literature Review

IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL IMMERSION

Much evidence supports that participating in an SAP has positive attributes and supports the conclusion that an SAP is needed as the world becomes more globalized. Today's work environments require employees to be more diversified in skills through foreign classes, faculty exchanges, specialized courses, and, most notably, study abroad (Orahod et al., 2008). Moreover, cultural sensitivity within different occupations requires specific adaptability as more complex problems arise in the workforce (Green et al., 2008). One study found that after studying abroad, participants explained how skills of emotional resilience, flexibility/openness, and cross-cultural competence were developed and applied to individuals' specific careers, demonstrating that the participants gained a global understanding (Kitsantas, 2004).

EMPLOYEE CANDIDACY DIFFERENTIATION

Students aim for successful careers during and after their college completion, with the anticipation of gaining lifelong skills that will prove durable in their specific professional career. Many employers seek employees who are “internationally competent” and able to work well with other cultures. Not only is competency in students’ specializations required, but Fox and McIntyre (2019) illustrated how there is a correlation between studying abroad and the soft skills obtained after completing an SAP experience and how studying abroad is beneficial in a work environment. Fox and McIntyre’s research found that while abroad, students developed communication, teamwork, punctuality, intercultural skills, flexibility, adaptability, self-awareness, curiosity, confidence, interpersonal, communication, and problem-solving skills.

Presidential administrations have emphasized the need for students to have an international experience. In 2011, the Obama administration argued for the need for SAPs as important to students’ experiences to enhance the work across borders (Vargo, 2012). This prompted the launch of the “100,000 Strong in the Americas Initiative” in 2011 to advocate for college students studying abroad in the United States (Rausch, 2017). Most recently, the Biden administration renewed its commitment to SAPs for students. Simultaneously, the U.S. Department of State and the former U.S. Department of Education argued that “all Americans need to be equipped with global and cultural competencies to navigate the ever-changing landscapes of education, international business, scientific discovery and innovation, and the global economy” (Butler, 2025, para. 3). Research has shown that participants achieve outcomes such as interdependence, increased confidence, and personal growth—themes that overlap with studies mentioned previously (Fox & McIntyre, 2019; Kitsantas, 2004).

EMPLOYEE FAVORABILITY WITH CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Employers are seeking international experience as the world is becoming more interdependent among cultures. Technological advancements provide for greater interconnectedness on global scales like never before (Harder et al., 2015). Consequently, research indicates that some businesses sought candidates with prior international experience because future employees should be able to effectively communicate the skills acquired while traveling and learning about other cultures in such a way that enhances their contributions as potential employees, with a noted emphasis on how a study abroad experience has specifically led to the development of relevant soft skills. (Harder et al., 2015, p. 46)

Additional research shows that alumni of SAPs reported long-term benefits after their study abroad trip, and those benefits correlated with their professional career (DeGraaf et al., 2013). By studying abroad, respondents shared a clearer direction

in their career path, increased language learning skills, increased volunteer work, increased employment/educational opportunities, deepened relationships with peers, and increased cynicism about the world (DeGraaf et al., 2013). Further research outlines how alumni(a) reported positive attributes with the skills they gained while abroad and how it affected their involvement within the workplace. In Franklin's (2010) study, 71% of participants stated that studying abroad helped them understand work situations in a cultural context, 42% of participants stated that studying abroad affected their career choices, and 73% of participants stated that SAP participation made them a more competitive candidate in the job market.

Research indicates that Kiely's (2005) transformation theory, also known as the transformative service-learning model, offers valuable frameworks for examining how cultural immersion, through Global Service Learning (GSL) or SAPs, shapes individuals' self-perceptions and their understanding of others. Mezirow's (2000) theory suggests that when individuals encounter unfamiliar environments, they are prompted to reassess their established beliefs and perspectives, potentially leading to profound shifts in self-identity and worldview. On the other hand, Mezirow's (2000) model identifies five dimensions—contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalizing, processing, and connecting—that elucidate how immersive learning experiences foster transformative learning by challenging assumptions and facilitating reflective engagement with cultural differences (Onosu, 2021). Studies indicate that such experiences often provoke students to reevaluate their personal identities and perception of others, though the extent of transformation varies on the basis of the intensity and duration of cultural immersion (Onosu, 2021). This study aims to delve deeper into how GSL/SAP experiences specifically impact the process of identity transformation and the development of intercultural understanding among participants (Onosu, 2021).

IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE

A variety of evidence shows that studying abroad has positive attributes and is greatly needed as the world becomes more globalized and requires employees to stand out through foreign classes, faculty exchanges, specialized courses, and, most notably, study abroad (DeGraaf et al., 2013; Franklin, 2010; Orahod et al., 2008). Moreover, cultural sensitivity is necessary, as different occupations require specific adaptability as more complex problems arise in the workforce (Green et al., 2008). One study found that after studying abroad, college students from various majors developed emotional resilience, flexibility/openness, cross-cultural competence, which then applied to individuals' specific careers to ensure that students have a global understanding (Kitsantas, 2004). Then students applied these skills in their specific careers, which gave them a global understanding (Kitsantas, 2004).

THE PRESENT STUDY

Research demonstrates the importance of studying abroad and the benefits associated with students who take advantage of their study abroad experiences. The world is growing with more international complexities, which requires staff to be intellectually competent when it comes to international matters for any type of career occupation (Bender & Fish, 2000). This research seeks to elaborate more of the effects of cultural immersion experiences on various college majors and how cultural experiences aid in guiding other students in higher education using Mezirow's (2000) learning theory and Kiely's (2005) transformative service-learning framework. The literature does well in demonstrating the importance of studying abroad; however, it partially lacks emphasis on the effects of career skill outcomes that occur after students' excursions.

This study seeks to explore career outcomes and the effects after students' excursions and to highlight skills attained in a foreign country. Through a study abroad experience, this study contributes to prior literature by surveying college students' cultural experience and reporting the skills attained.

The following research question is examined: How do cultural immersion experiences in foreign countries impact professional career development skills?

Methods

PARTICIPANTS

This study invited 233 student participants from the on-campus SAP at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas. A total of 78 individuals completed the survey, for a 33.47% rate of completion. The inclusion criteria consisted of undergraduate and graduate students who are 18 years of age or older from all years in school (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior) and currently enrolled in a higher education institution in Texas. The length of time that participants had to study abroad was 1 week at a minimum.

INSTRUMENTALS

A survey was administered through Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com/>), with 25 custom-designed questions that assessed students' cultural immersion experiences and how they relate to their professional development. Participants accessed the survey through an online link.

PROCEDURE

The initial request for participants was sent to the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects and was approved at the Graduate School of West Texas A&M University. Students' email addresses were requested from the study abroad office to recruit students who studied abroad through the West Texas A&M institution. We

asked students from the institution so that the data sample size would be sufficient to report in the research. To ensure the confidentiality of students and that all rules of FERPA were followed, an Open Public Records request was sent to the institution and approved on June 20, 2024. A merged email to ask for volunteers' participation was sent out to the email addresses provided by the study abroad office. Student volunteers were also recruited through a survey link on social media to gain high data collection.

A consent form was provided in the survey before the questions. Instructions and explanations were provided in the consent form. Surveys were completely anonymous and untraceable. Each survey took approximately 5–10 min. Moreover, additional precautions were implemented to ensure confidentiality and protection of students, such as anonymizing data so that responses are not linked to individual participants and deleting all data analysis. After 6 months, the raw survey data from participants is deleted. Student participants did not experience any potential risk associated with the questions.

DATA COLLECTION

Responses were recorded using Qualtrics through the entire research process through a cross-sectional, convenience-sampling approach. The 2024 timeline of the data collection started in May and ended in August. Responses were exported to Microsoft Excel, then aggregated and exported via a multiple regression model on IBM SPSS 29.00.

DATA ANALYSIS

We ran a multiple regression model, which consisted of descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and a regression model to test the correlation between cultural immersion experiences (independent variable) and professional career development skills (dependent variable). Correlations consisted of a four-factor multiple regression model that was based on the cultural immersion questions in the survey:

- IV1: Number of cultural immersion experiences participating abroad
- IV2: Confidence in career before visiting or living in the country abroad
- IV3: Belief in cultural immersion experiences influencing career trajectory
- IV4: Number of cultural immersion experiences incorporated in job interviews or professional network interactions
- DV: Number of professional career skills gained

The following multiple regression equation was tested:

$$y = b_0 + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + b_3x_3 + b_4x_4$$

This study aimed to assess the impact of the number of cultural immersion experiences participating abroad, confidence in career before visiting or living in the country abroad, belief of cultural immersion experiences influencing career trajectory, and the number of cultural immersion experiences incorporated in the job interviews or professional network interactions on the number of professional career skills gained. With 78 participants, we ensure sufficient correlation between the number of cultural immersion experiences and the skills students gained while abroad.

To examine the textual data of the sample involving open-ended responses involving cultural immersion experiences and skills gained via the study abroad program, a word cloud analysis was performed using Free Word Cloud Generator (<https://www.freewordcloudgenerator.com/>).

Results

TEXTUAL DATA SUMMARY

In the first word cloud analysis, the most common words that students expressed about their study abroad were “amazing,” “insightful,” “wonderful,” “impactful,” “life-changing,” and “transformative”, describing their cultural immersion experiences (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Word Cloud of Cultural Immersion Experiences



The second word cloud analysis revealed that the most common skills gained on students' cultural immersion experiences were communication, teamwork, language, leadership, and adaptability (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Word Cloud of Skills Gained From Cultural Immersion Experiences



CORRELATION

The correlations matrix table (Table 1) shows the statistical significance that correlates with the independent variables and the dependent variables that relate to cultural immersion experiences and professional career development skills. Positive correlation occurred on variables 4 and 5, showing that the effects of cultural immersion experiences aid in students' professional careers and help them obtain skills while abroad. Variables 2 and 3 have an inverse correlation, indicating that there was no relation between cultural immersion experiences and variables 2 and 3.

Table 1

Correlations Matrix Table

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Number of cultural immersion experiences participating abroad	1	-0.195	0.119	0.273	0.042
2. Confidence in career before visiting or living in the country abroad	-0.195	1	-0.319*	-0.125	-0.345*
3. Belief of cultural immersion experiences influencing career trajectory	0.119	-0.319*	1	0.283*	0.199

4. Number of cultural immersion experiences incorporated in job interviews or professional network interactions	0.273	-0.125	0.283*	1	0.320*
5. Number of professional career skills gained	0.042	-0.345*	0.199	0.320*	1

* $p < .05$, two-tailed.

MODEL SUMMARY

To test the hypothesis of cultural immersions experiences effects on careers while studying abroad, we conducted a multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between professional career skills (dependent variable) and cultural immersion experiences (four independent variables): (a) number of cultural immersion experiences abroad in which the student participated, (b) confidence in career before cultural immersion, (c) belief in cultural immersions' influence on career trajectory, and (d) incorporation of cultural immersion experiences into job interviews or professional networking interactions.

The model summary (Table 2) shows that the regression model explains 24.4% of the variance in professional skills gained ($R^2 = .244$), with an adjusted R^2 of .164, indicating a moderate fit. The standard error of the estimate is 1.29.

Table 2

Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	SE of the estimate	ΔR^2	F change	$df1$
1	.494	.244	.164	1.29	0.244	3.06	4

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

The analysis of variance table (Table 3) indicates that the regression model is statistically significant, $F(4, 38) = 3.06$, $p = .028$. This model suggest that the set of predictors reliably predicts the dependent variable.

Table 3

Analysis of Variance

Model	SS	df	MS	F	p
Regression	20.375	4	5.094	3.06	.028
Residual	63.252	38	1.665		
Total	83.628	42			

COEFFICIENTS

The coefficients (Table 4) provide detailed information on the contribution of each predictor to the model. The constant (intercept) is 4.323 ($p < .001$).

Table 4
Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		<i>p</i>	95% CI for B		Correlations	
	B	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	Zero order	Partial
(Constant)	4.323	1.089		3.968	< .001	2.117	6.528		
Cultural immersion experiences	-0.149	0.155	-0.144	-0.965	0.341	-0.463	0.164	0.024	-0.155
Confidence in your career before living abroad	-0.35	0.141	-0.377	-2.493	0.017	-0.635	-0.066	-0.379	-0.375
Believe cultural immersion experiences have influenced career trajectory	0.012	0.12	0.016	0.102	0.920	-0.231	0.255	0.192	0.016
Incorporation of cultural immersion experiences into job interviews or professional networking interactions	0.317	0.15	0.317	2.116	0.041	0.014	0.621	0.320	0.325

Note. CI = confidence interval.

The results indicate that two predictors are statistically significant:

1. Confidence in career before cultural immersion ($\beta = -0.377, p = .017$): This variable has a negative relationship with the dependent variable, suggesting that higher preimmersion career confidence is associated with fewer professional skills gained through cultural immersion.
2. Incorporation of cultural immersion experiences into job interviews or profes-

sional networking interactions ($\beta = 0.317, p = .041$): This variable has a positive relationship with the dependent variable, indicating that the greater incorporation of cultural immersion experiences into a professional context is associated with more professional skills gained.

Two predictors were not statistically significant:

1. Number of cultural immersion experiences participated abroad, $\beta = 0.144, p = .341, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.463, 0.164]$
2. Belief in cultural immersion's influence on career trajectory, $\beta = 0.016, p = .92, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.231, 0.255]$

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to show that the model significantly predicts professional skills gained through cultural immersion experiences by 24.4% of the variance. Cultural immersion experiences included (a) number of cultural immersion experiences abroad in which students participated, (b) confidence in career before cultural immersion, (c) belief in cultural immersion's influence on career trajectory, and (d) incorporation of cultural immersion experiences into job interviews or professional networking interactions after a cultural immersion experience. Confidence in career before cultural immersion experiences and incorporating cultural immersion experiences into job interviews or professional networking positively impacted the professional skills gained. The findings from this research connect to other previous studies (e.g., Kitsantas, 2004) of skills that students gained while abroad, with openness/flexibility and cultural competence having similar themes in our research. Also, these findings are consistent with prior research studies that have found a relationship between cultural immersion experiences and professional skills by emphasizing the importance of cultural immersion experiences in professional settings that set students apart from their peers when seeking employment (DeGraaf et al., 2013).

However, the number of immersion experiences and belief in their influence on career trajectory did not significantly predict the outcome. This may have been a result of not surveying students over longitudinal research, as the research conducted was too early to predict long-term career outcomes that would need more time to study. Unlike the literature that highlights the importance of studying abroad with skills gained (Franklin, 2010), our research connects with Mezirow's (2000) transformation theory as students realize themselves and apply their learning experiences to their desired job occupation. Additionally, our research was able to bridge long-term benefits and

skills gained abroad by analyzing students' incorporation of skills into job occupations immediately after returning from their trip and for months to follow.

A limitation of the research is the small sample size. Future researchers would need greater participation among individuals to capture the true variability of the data. Additionally, predictors such as cultural immersion experiences and the influence of career trajectory had mixed findings because the variable needed to be tested through longitudinal research to see long-term effects of students' careers from their study abroad trip days, months, and even years prior. Future research studies should incorporate long-term studies to gain a full understanding of students' experiences.

Conclusion

In summary, this study demonstrates how cultural immersion experiences affect college students' professional career development by providing evidence that students implement their experiences into their professions. This study implies that it can help other college students, universities, and study abroad offices better understand the importance of study abroad and how to better approach professional jobs with student experiences from cultural learning.

IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION

IRB#2024.05.001. Approval Date: May 30, 2024.

OPEN PUBLIC REQUEST RECORDS INFORMATION

Public Information Records Reference Number J002025-061324.

References

- Antigua, A. D., Gonzales, K., Lee, K., Razon, R., & Sacayanan, K. (2015). International student rotation: Comparing US and Philippine pharmacy education. *Pharmacy Education, 15*. <https://pharmacyeducation.fip.org/pharmacyeducation/article/view/361>
- Bender, S., & Fish, A. (2000). The transfer of knowledge and the retention of expertise: the continuing need for global assignments. *Journal of Knowledge Management, 4*(2), 125–137. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13673270010372251>
- Butler, S. (2025, May 19). Biden Administration renews commitment to international education. *Flywire*. <https://www.flywire.com/resources/biden-administration-renews-commitment-to-international-education>
- DeGraaf, D., Slagter, C., Larsen, K., & Ditta, E. (2013). The long-term personal and professional impacts of participating in study abroad programs. *Frontiers, 23*(1), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v23i1.328>

- Fox, P., & McIntyre, C. (2019, February). *Clear advantages to studying abroad: So why aren't students enrolling?* [Paper presentation]. Conference for Industry and Education Collaboration Annual Meeting, New Orleans, LA, United States. <https://scholarworks.indianapolis.iu.edu/items/aa6e2892-1713-46b8-8c2f-b14043ac39e8>
- Franklin, K. (2010). Long-term career impact and professional applicability of the study abroad experience. *Frontiers*, *19*(1), 169–191. <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v19i1.279>
- Goldoni, F. (2013). Students' immersion experiences in study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, *46*, 359–376. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12047>
- Gong, Y., Ma, M., Hsiang, T. P., & Wang, C. (2020). Sustaining international students' learning of Chinese in China: Shifting motivations among New Zealand students during study abroad. *Sustainability*, *12*(15), Article 6289. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12156289>
- Green, B. F., Johansson, I., Rosser, M., Tengnah, C., & Segrott, J. (2008). Studying abroad: A multiple case study of nursing students' international experiences. *Nurse Education Today*, *28*(8), 981–992. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2008.06.003>
- Harder, A., Andenoro, A., Roberts, T. G., Stedman, N., Newberry, M., Parker, S. J., & Rodriguez, M. T. (2015). Does study abroad increase employability? *NACTA Journal*, *59*(1), 41–48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/nactajournal.59.1.41>
- Kiely, R. (2005). A transformative learning model for service-learning: A longitudinal case study. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, *12*(1), 5–22. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mjcs/3239521.0012.101>
- Kitsantas, A. (2004). Studying abroad: The role of college students' goals on the development of cross-cultural skills and global understanding. *College Student Journal*, *38*(3), Article 441. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2004-19149-016>
- Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. Jossey-Bass.
- Onosu, G. (2021). The impact of cultural immersion experience on identity transformation process. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(5), Article 2680. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052680>
- Orahood, T., Woolf, J., & Kruze, L. (2008). Study abroad and career paths of business students. *Frontiers*, *17*, Article 133. <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v17i1.248>
- Rausch, K. (2017). *First-generation strength: Supporting first-generation college students in study abroad* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Arizona State University.
- U.S. Department of State. (2024). *Why study abroad?* USA Study Abroad. <https://studyabroad.state.gov/value-study-abroad/why-study-abroad>
- Vargo, T. Y. (2012, July 30). Obama administration must live up to its rhetoric on study abroad. *U.S. News and World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2012/07/30/obama-administration-must-live-up-to-its-rhetoric-on-study-abroad>

