

Evaluating United World College Students' Study Abroad Experiences and Intercultural Competency Growth

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Introduction

Study abroad is considered a transformative experience for developing cultural competence and global awareness among students [1], [2], [3]. At the same time, the intentions and challenges of students with respect to study abroad activities remain different based on their cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds [4], [5]. This study centers on alumni of United World Colleges (hereafter referred to as UWC students, but not to be confused with current UWC students). These students form a unique group in higher education institutions, as they start their higher education with more exposure to various cultures and a passion for global identity.

United World Colleges: A Synopsis

United World Colleges are internationally renowned educational organizations that aim to gather students of various cultural, national, and socio-economic backgrounds before college. According to the UWC website, "the UWC Movement comprises 18 schools and colleges on four continents, mainly catering to students aged 16 to 19" [6]. The website insinuates that every UWC is established to "turn students' idealism and energy into a lifelong commitment to responsibility, empathy, and service" [6]. While most international schools are focused on mere exposure to other cultures, UWCs are designed to immerse students in an environment that exposes them to people of drastically different backgrounds.

Entry to UWC is done in two major ways: direct application to a particular school or through a country committee. UWC national committees exist in more than 150 countries and territories. They are usually made up of UWC alumni, educators, parents, and community members. The academic potential of applicants is assessed together with the alignment of the applicants' values with those of UWC: international and intercultural understanding, personal responsibility and integrity, compassion and service, idealism, personal challenge, celebration of difference, mutual respect, environmental responsibility, and action through personal example [7].

Academically, UWC schools offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme; UWC helped to develop the International Baccalaureate. The IB Diploma Programme differs from other secondary education pathways, such as A-levels or GED programs; it is presently taught in around 5,800 schools around the world. There are six subject groups and a core comprising Theory of Knowledge (TOK), Creativity, Activity, and Service (CAS), and the Extended Essay [8]. Students usually take three subjects at higher level and three at standard level; the former requires more knowledge and analytical skill than the latter. The core of IB further places emphasis on critical thinking, independent research, and experiential learning-by far, community engagement and service.

Besides academic rigor, UWC students are supported by the Davis United World College Scholars Program, founded by the philanthropists Shelby Davis and Philip Geier [9]. Realizing the multidimensionality of global issues that UWC students were confronted with, Davis joined forces with certain universities in the United States to offer full tuition scholarships. This program allows graduates of all 18 UWC schools to apply to institutions in the United States to further their education based on their merit [10].

Today, the Davis UWC Scholars Program supports more than 4,000 scholars at nearly 100 American colleges and universities, having helped more than 14,000 scholars in its entire history [7], [10]. Although UWC students receive a considerable amount of intercultural preparation and educational opportunities globally, very little research has been conducted to assess their engagement with study abroad opportunities after being accepted into American universities [11], [12]. This is particularly surprising in the context that most UWC students receive their first experience with cultural immersion at a young age, compared to the first experience most American students receive in study abroad opportunities at university.

Literature Review/Prior Work

Although a good number of studies have explored study abroad engagement and/or intangible cultural competency in students on a college campus, to date, there has not been any published literature specifically investigating United World College scholars' experiences in studying abroad in a U.S. college campus setting involving much pre-collegiate cultural immersion.

Given the expectations that students gain intercultural competence, the capability to interact and communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations [13], [14], this study aims to investigate the motivations, perceived barriers, and development of intercultural competency among UWC student participants for study abroad programs at the University of Oklahoma. It encompasses certain skills, attitudes, and knowledge that allow one to understand different cultural backgrounds, adjust to new settings, and deal with different points of view [5].

History of UWC Participation at OU

In October 2007, the University of Oklahoma became a partner university with the Davis UWC Scholars Program [15]. The first class of Davis Scholars enrolled in Fall 2008 and included only four UWC students. Over a decade later, over 300 Davis UWC Scholars are enrolled at OU [15]. From the Admission and Recruitment records in Fall 2025, the incoming class of Davis UWC Scholars consisted of 84 students, making the total number of current Davis UWC Scholars attending The University of Oklahoma to be 300+, coming from 108 different countries. The University of Oklahoma has been honored with the award of the Davis Cup for having enrolled 10 consecutive times out of 11 years as Davis UWC freshmen, meaning over the years the university

has been consistently enrolling the highest number of UWC scholars amongst the other universities partners.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Process Model of Intercultural Competence proposed by Deardorff [16]. According to this model, intercultural competence is a developmental process where attitudes, knowledge, and skills combine to produce competent communication between people from different cultures. The attitude component of this model includes basic attitudes like openness, respect, and curiosity that facilitate the acquisition of cultural knowledge and skills like listening, observing, and interpreting. These factors enable internal processes like adaptability, flexibility, and empathy, which result in intercultural effectiveness. The importance of this research lies in examining the motivations, perceived challenges, and development of intercultural competence among UWC students who choose to study abroad at the University of Oklahoma. Through this distinct group, this research aims to contribute to general knowledge on the study abroad participation phenomenon as well as to shed some light on how global education influences students' participation in international academic opportunities.

Methodology

For this research, a mixed-methods design is used whereby a survey study is conducted in conjunction with an interview to gain an understanding of the study abroad experience from the perspective of United World College students at the University of Oklahoma. The data is gathered from a survey administered to the students (see Table 1), in addition to an interview with the director of the United World College Program at the University of Oklahoma.

Table 1: Description and Categorization of Variables

Categorization	Name of Variable	Classification of Variable	Descriptions (Selected Items/ Measures)
Demographics	Gender	Categorical	Male, Female, Non-binary, Prefer not to say
	Race/Ethnicity	Categorical	White, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic or Latino, Prefer not to say
	Residence Status	Categorical	U.S citizen, Resident Alien, Non Resident Alien
	Class Standing	Categorical	Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Fifth year senior, Other
	Academic Department	Categorical	Dodge Family College of Arts and Sciences (with departments like Psychology, English, Math), Price College of Business (Accounting, Finance, Marketing), Gallogly College of Engineering (with specific schools/departments like Biomedical Engineering), and specialized colleges like Architecture, Education, Law, Medicine, and Atmospheric & Geographic Sciences
	UWC School Attended	Categorical	From Europe (Atlantic, Red Cross Nordic, Adriatic, etc.) to Asia (Li Po Chun, Mahindra, Changshu, ISAK Japan, South East Asia), the Americas (Pearson, UWC-USA, Costa Rica), and Africa (Waterford Kamhlaba, East Africa),
Rationale for picking School		Likert-scale ordinal scale	Participants rated the importance of each factor on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Extremely important): Participants rated the importance of each factor on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Extremely important): Social/economic conditions in home country; Previous schooling motivation; Scholarship availability; Reputable certification supporting future endeavors; Diverse community

Notes: All these demographics were considered for the study

Previous literature illustrates how the underlying reasons for studying abroad choices, including the availability of study abroad scholarships, immersion experiences, educational preparedness, and perceptions of job relevance, have played a pivotal part in facilitating the experiential learning process and the acquisition of global competency skills for the students which deploy aligns with this [17], [18].

The study participants are current students within the UWC community attending the University of Oklahoma at various levels of education, from first-year students to upperclassmen. This captures a range of viewpoints from students entering their first year at college straight from UWC educational institutions as well as those who are more advanced in their college career. Students in UWC are enrolled in a variety of colleges within the University of Oklahoma, which includes but is not limited to:

- The Gallogly College of Engineering
- The Dodge Family College of Arts and Sciences
- The Price College of Business
- The University of OK Health Sciences Center (includes medicine, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, allied health, and public health).

The data was gathered using an online survey conducted using Qualtrics, an online survey service that is reputable and widely used [19]. The online survey gathered demographic and used a mix of Likert scale and open-ended questions in four main areas:

1. Reasons for taking part in study abroad programs
2. Barriers to engagement based on perceptions regarding finances and time requirements
3. Self-assessment of intercultural competency
4. Perceptions of institutional support for study abroad at the University of Oklahoma

Further questions assessed students' views about how well UWC prepared them for life at University of Oklahoma, their cultural adjustment when arriving in the United States, and whether or not they took the option to continue studying abroad while attending the University of Oklahoma.

Data Collection

Survey

The online survey was disseminated through the United World College office located at the University of Oklahoma. Directors of the programs distributed the survey via email to interested students, in addition to other student networking platforms. In terms of recruiting participants, the use of mass emails was considered. The researcher communicated with the heads of programs at the UWC office by sending an email, where they requested permission to send his survey through

a mass email and added to the mass emails sent bi-weekly regarding happenings in the UWC community. Another means used for getting participation for the survey involved communicating on social media, such as WhatsApp. The students admitted into the University of Oklahoma are placed in WhatsApp chats based on the year they are expected to graduate, for the main purpose of ensuring ease in communication among members of the year group. The survey link was thus distributed to various year groups through WhatsApp. To prevent any form of bias from appearing in the results, the survey was anonymized so as to ensure honest responses. The study received approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) and followed all ethical considerations in carrying out this research.

The number of responses collected was $n=29$. This response rate occurred mainly because there was no need for mandatory participation. The primary purpose of conducting the survey was to communicate themes about individuals' motivation to choose the university, their desire to continue education abroad, and showcase the variety of benefits available through studying at United World Colleges, which contribute to the development of intercultural growth and academic excellence. Furthermore, it would help students understand how studying at a United World College would prepare them better for university, as they would be well-acquainted with different circumstances.

Qualitative Interview:

In order to gather additional information to complement the data obtained from the survey, a semi-structured interview was conducted with Neira Kadic, the director of the UWC program at the University of Oklahoma. Neira Kadic is a unique interviewee in that she is both an employee of the University of Oklahoma in a leadership capacity as the director of the UWC program, as well as a graduate of the UWC program at University of Oklahoma.

In particular, two examples of interview questions that brought out key insights were:

- When UWC students come to OU do you believe they have a certain pressure that is exerted onto them (what may it be?) and how do they mostly handle it?
- Given the array of challenges students from different backgrounds may encounter, what strategies or support systems do you believe would be most effective in encouraging and facilitating their engagement in Study Abroad opportunities?

Data Triangulation:

Both the survey and the interview result in a body of data upon which the study is based. The survey enables policy-makers to determine the trends in motivations, barriers, and intercultural

development, whereas the interview is an essential component simply for its institutional input. Analysis of the survey data was done using descriptive statistical techniques such as frequency, percentage, and mean to give a quantitative depiction of the responses provided by the participants, as well as to reveal patterns that emerge from the set of data collected. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, whereby interviews were transcribed and themes emerging from the transcripts were identified.

In terms of relevance, the survey and interview highlight how the research is congruent with the model proposed by Deardorff because of its ability to capture various aspects of intercultural competence. For instance:

- The indicators of self-awareness and cultural awareness represent the knowledge or understanding aspect of the model.
- Adaptability and adjustment questions represent the internal aspects of flexibility.
- Empathy questions represent the attitudes and skills aspect of the model.

Results and Findings

Prior to data collection, it was expected that UWC students would report strong intrinsic motivations for engaging in study abroad, such as immersion in other cultures, personal growth, and global engagement. Anticipated barriers included financial constraints, a limited awareness of programs, and logistical challenges which are some of the many barriers for international students [18]. It was further expected that UWC students with prior international educational experiences would demonstrate high levels of self-awareness, adaptability, and empathy - key indicators of intercultural competence.

The individuals willingly took part in a research study instead of being randomly selected to do so. Self-selection participation can be prone to self-selection bias as participants tend to vary in some important aspects from non-participants.

Survey responses were reflective of a diverse participant pool. Of the respondents, 71% identified as female and 29% as male. In terms of residency status, 71% identified as non-resident aliens, 24% identified as resident aliens, and 6% as U.S. citizens. Students also differed in racial and ethnic backgrounds and academic standing, ranging from underclassmen to upperclassmen at the University of Oklahoma.

Academically, most of the respondents (59%) were from the Gallogly College of Engineering. Dodge Family College of Arts and Sciences and Price College of Business were represented by 24% of the respondents each, while 12% were from the David L. Boren College of International Studies. This distribution makes sense considering that the UWC community has a strong inclination towards fields such as engineering and STEM-related ones based on the respondents' motivation for seeking to advance their education to its highest levels because most of them were attracted by the need to maximize the benefits that can be gained from the Davis UWC scholarship.

As for reasons why respondents chose to attend the University of Oklahoma for higher education in the United States, it can be seen that the primary reason given by respondents was related to the opportunity of the Davis UWC Scholarship. It can also be assumed that many people felt that furthering their education in the US offered a future advantage over staying in their home countries.

However, the results of the survey are largely in line with the expected outcome in terms of intercultural competency. The respondents showed a high degree of confidence in dealing with the intercultural setting. For instance, on a scale of 10, the mean responses to the statements "I am confident that I can adjust to living in different cultural contexts," "I am confident that I can adjust to the stress of culture shock," and other similar statements were to a great extent between 8 and 9. These indicate that UWC students arrive at the University of Oklahoma having a high degree of self-confidence in their ability to cope in an intercultural setting, which may be as a result of their pre-university immersion experiences.

Moreover, when asked about the level of their agreement towards the statements regarding self-efficacy in intercultural encounters as a consequence of their participation in UWC and the following study at University of Oklahoma, the vast majority were strongly agreeable. This clears the perspective that the pre-existing influence of UWC impacts students positively even when surrounded by the university setup.

Although the confidence in intercultural interactions was strong, participants pointed to some challenges at the institutional level. One of these challenges was the sense that students' opinions are perhaps not being considered at the institutional level. This item resulted in a moderate level for barriers, with an average score of 7 for a 10-point question. Although UWC students felt comfortable and informed themselves, this result indicates a discrepancy between individual and institutional levels, particularly in a setting where the international student body is a minority in the student community.

Another question from the survey focused on whether the student felt comfortable being the sole international student in a classroom. Defying popular perceptions that students would feel awkward or alone being the lone representative from their culture in a classroom setting, nearly 80% were comfortable with this dynamic. Several individuals ascribed their comfort to the UWC experience that promoted self-esteem, interactions with different cultures, and developing strength. Several individuals ascribed their engagement in university life to the difficulty of the coursework at UWC as well as the fulfillment of the Creativity Activity Service (CAS) component.

The survey also examined whether students from UWC took advantage of other opportunities to study abroad while at University of Oklahoma. Roughly 47% of the respondents said that they took advantage of a program to study abroad at University of Oklahoma. They said that it was because of their continued interests in traveling and exploring cultures, as well as the ability to

take advantage of the program. A major anticipated benefit of study abroad is enhanced intercultural understanding and communication skill [20].

Students who did not pursue further study abroad also provided reasons for not undertaking this educational journey. Some of the reasons reported by students were the absence of study abroad programs fitting their programs in the field of STEM, graduating late, and cost issues. Some students also indicated that, while the Davis UWC Scholarship provides students with funding for four years of their undergraduate programs, any further study would require them to pay out of pocket.

When asked if they would recommend studying abroad to others, they strongly encouraged its pursuit. One of the respondents told us: (note this is paraphrased for confidentiality reasons) "It helps a lot because learning and immersing oneself in other people's cultures can develop critical thinking skills, not to mention learning to appreciate life as well. It's perfect for a student who needs a break and would like to regain enthusiasm for life once again."

Such a view also reflects a continued aspiration for students at UWC to participate in worldwide learning, even after gaining considerable pre-university exposure to the intercultural experience. Nonetheless, a lack of finance continued to be the key cited constraint, especially given the lack of work opportunities for students who participate in programs for studying abroad.

The results matter as they directly convey the diverse pool of participants of those 29 respondents have been able to identify how education abroad has helped with cultural understanding, diverse backgrounds and generally have a better sense of self especially in a higher education context.

Conclusion

This paper adds to the understanding of globally engaged students and their continued development in intercultural competence from participating in study abroad programs in higher education in the U.S. The paper will focus on analyzing motivation factors, perceived barriers, and intercultural self-efficacy beliefs of students from United World College who attended the University of Oklahoma to understand what roles previous global education experience plays in students' interactions with international programs in higher education settings.

The data indicate that even though the UWC subgroup has high intrinsic motivation, adaptability, and confidence in cross-cultural contexts, there remain structural and institutional impediments, such as funding issues, that restrict these individuals from pursuing further educational opportunities abroad. Ironically, these barriers also apply to those who are best equipped and motivated to study in an international environment. The institutions need to adopt a more flexible and inclusive policy in this context.

This study provides critical implications for higher education institutions that are attempting to provide fair access to study abroad programs. Institutions can make improvements in cooperating with scholarship programs, departments, and international education services in an attempt to support globally engaged students more effectively. More specifically, there might be an opportunity to pursue study abroad programs without having to delay graduation or go beyond scholarship awards by providing structures and models that are in tune with what an educational program in a STEM field entails. This will ensure that students are not faced with limitations in their educational and professional paths based on structures in place.

Ultimately, in addressing the issues, institutions of higher education also have the opportunity to increase the accessibility, inclusiveness, and cultural responsiveness of study abroad initiatives so that the transformative power of international education may be available to many.

Limitations

As the researcher is also part of the UWC community, there are key insights and areas that the researcher can observe, and notably also overlook, as their experiences may inherently also be included, which presents an addition to the potential bias. The research has been conducted at a single institution out of the current partner UWC and American Institutions. By only being conducted at a single institution, it does not portray the full perspective of the study across the nation. The study can be further explored by other partner institutions to convey reliability and the differences between institutions of the UWC community. This will also give other institutions insights into onboarding the UWC program at their institutions to diversify the population, giving more opportunities to international and local students to be as successful as possible and make the student body grow their intercultural competency. Additionally, by not having an explicit control group of non-UWC students, there is no comparison of intercultural competence, just general assumptions on conversing with non-UWC students on their perspective, especially in the various education systems they have been in. Lastly, having self-selecting participants and self-selecting data. Self-selection of the sample participants is likely to lead to the existence of self-selection bias since those selected to take part in the study might be more interested in the research subject than those not involved in the study. Furthermore, self-selection data will reflect the features of the larger population under study.

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