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## Surviving the Journey Home: Social Support and Student Sojourner

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# Surviving the Journey Home: Social Support and Student Sojourner

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## **Surviving the Journey Home: Social Support and Student Sojourner**

*Juliana McGraw, Lauren Brooks, Megan Myers, Andrew Vizcarra, Daphni Edwards, Eduardo Arroyo, & Alberto Hernandez*

**Abstract:** A small, southeastern Christian university has two independent programs for students studying abroad or serving as missionaries for an academic year. This study examines the correlation between perceived support students felt from their university and their academic success in their first returning semester. Because of the differences in these programs our research sought to examine student perceived support before, during and after their year abroad with GPA before and after their experience. No correlation was found between perceived support and academic success, but findings showed that neither group of student sojourners felt significantly supported during the year abroad. Study abroad students' GPA drop significantly in their first return semester while student missionaries' GPA dropped only marginally. Further research should identify effective means to increase perceived support of students while abroad and to determine if learning shock may explain the significant drop in study abroad student GPAs.

When student sojourners return to their home university after a year abroad, there is a need for enhanced student support before, during, and after their experience. The theory of reverse culture shock explains the process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating once a person has returned to one's own home culture (Gaw, p.83). This process can be experienced in varying degrees by returnees and can have severe negative effects on students' academic success. This study seeks to discover if there is a correlation between stronger perceived support before, during and after the sojourn experience and students' academic success in their first returning semester. This knowledge may shed light on the importance of institutional support and how it may enhance student experiences abroad and in returning to their home university.

### **Study Abroad Students & Student Missionaries**

A small, Christian university in the Southeast contributes to the increase of international students through its study abroad program, Adventist Colleges Abroad (ACA) and student missionary (SM) program. These independent programs differ in requirements and expectations of participating students, yet both groups spend nine to 12 months abroad in a foreign country and culture.

Possible service positions in the SM program include: teaching, construction work, medical assistants, and chaplaincy. Students are required to enroll in an orientation class or comparable online course the semester before their departure. The returning SMs attend a mandatory re-entry retreat and are encouraged to participate in the Student Missions Club, assisting with mailing SMs

care packages and promoting mission service at assemblies and planned events throughout the year. SMs are immersed in the culture and language of their host country and may live without first world commodities of home.

ACA students are immersed in a foreign culture while becoming conversant in its language and completing classes relevant to their degrees. The ACA program is managed through the modern languages department. Students are expected to attend informational and orientation meetings the semester prior to their travel. Returning ACA students have no suggested or required events, however, a pilot class was offered in the fall semester of 2011 for returning ACA students majoring in modern languages.

When ACA students study abroad they usually have taken classes on the spoken language of the country. The modern languages department encourages students to make the main purpose of studying abroad to experience a new culture. Therefore, the student will try to fully submerge himself in the culture.

### **Culture Shock**

ACA students and SMs who choose to travel and have cross-cultural experiences expect mixed emotions and culture shock in the host country. Culture shock is the intense disorientation, confusion, and anxiety travelers face when immersed into a new and unfamiliar culture (Griffiths, Winstanley, & Gabriel, 2005). Preparing for culture shock is part of the anticipation of leaving home.

Culture shock is not unique to certain individuals, but is a process that happens to all sojourners. Without recognizable faces, customs, and languages, students feel anxiety, which in turn triggers culture shock. There are four stages associated with this phenomenon: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment (Sovic, 2007). "When students go through these phases their sense of identity is of critical importance; students often feel that they have lost their identity, or that their normal identity has been disrupted and replaced by another..." (Sovic, 2007, p. 147).

First, students go through the honeymoon (tourist) stage. It is characterized by interest, excitement, and generally positive expectations about the new culture (Winkelman, 1994). Second, they experience the crisis stage. Students begin to have negative emotions, reactions, and experiences in the host society. The crisis stage may take place immediately after arrival, but usually it emerges in the first few weeks after the honeymoon stage (Winkelman, 1994). "Things start to go wrong, minor issues become major problems, and cultural differences become irritating" (Winkelman, 1994, p. 122). Third is the adjustment (recovery) stage. During this time period, all the previous negative feelings are reduced as students develop problem-solving skills to deal with the culture and begin to accept the culture's ways with a positive attitude (Winkelman, 1994). Adjustment may take a while, as it is a slow and learned process. Fourth, students will go through the adaptation stage. One reaches this part of culture shock when he or she has acculturated comfortably into the host culture. This leads to the development of a bicultural identity and the integration of new cultural aspects into one's previous self-concept (Winkelman, 1994, p.122).

Students will experience even more problems if their unrealistic expectations of the host culture are not met (Griffiths, Winstanley, & Gabriel, 2005). Two of the main difficulties consistently identified with culture shock are building friendships outside of one's cultural group and language skills/communication problems (Griffiths, Winstanley, & Gabriel, 2005). This is one of the reasons why research is essential for future travelers. Research and study do not guarantee the prevention of culture shock, but can equip students with valuable information and knowledge helping them transition more effectively.

Once better acquainted with a new culture, students begin to adjust and adapt, learning new rules, norms and behaviors (Sayakci, 2007). "When strangers cross cultures at the beginning they are outsiders and as they go through daily interactions with the new environment, over a period of time strangers start becoming insiders" (Sayakci, 2007, p. 8). Students tend to have difficulties transitioning when they arrive in a new country, but once they have adjusted to the new culture they learn to appreciate its differences and may embrace them as their own.

Students do not overcome culture shock in one day. It takes time to adapt to a different education system and learn how to interact in a different culture. Students are not always aware of these changes, even while they occur. SMs also have a different environment to overcome. Instead of learning they are teaching, and once they have fully mastered their new skills, it is time to return home.

### **Reverse Culture Shock**

Students are not always prepared for, or expect, reverse culture shock once they return home. Reverse culture shock is the changes students go through when they return to their home country. "Students returning home from studying abroad experience various levels of altered perceptions of their native country" (Davis, Chapman, Bohlin, Jaworski, Walley, Barton & Ebner, 2008, p.16). These changed perceptions can affect their relationships with friends and family, as well as their academic performance.

Once students return, their home school and culture may now be at odds with their new perceptions and increase their difficulty adjusting. Readjustment to study habits and school life in the home country may be especially difficult.

Reverse culture shock is "temporal psychological difficulties returnees experience in the initial stage of the adjustment process at home after having lived abroad for some time"(Uehara, 1983, p. 420). Returning students have acclimated to a new culture, but now must readjust to their home culture. They go through four stages: leave-taking and departure, the honeymoon, reverse culture shock itself, and readjustment (Davis, 2008). The first stage, leave-taking and departure, involves thinking about returning home and experiencing sadness about leaving the host country. The second stage, honeymoon, is the excitement and happiness the student feels upon returning home. After the excitement fades, the third stage, reverse culture shock, begins. Returnees try to use their new cultural learning and experiences in their home culture. The final stage is readjustment, where a student learns how to balance their host and home cultures. Davis (2008)

continues saying that the time a student has spent in their host country is the same amount of time necessary for them to adapt back to their home country.

Huff (2001) found that a sense of feeling “at home” in the host country was significantly related to reverse culture shock. Therefore, students who feel the most at home in their host culture will have more severe reverse culture shock.

### **Cultural Identity Model**

Many sojourner studies have investigated cultural transitions and adjustments through the lens of intercultural communication and psychology (Sussman, 2001). But Sussman (2001, 2002) suggests that while repatriation, coming back to one’s home, might seem counterintuitive, different cognitive processes make the repatriation process unique from adaptation to a host country. Sussman’s (2001) first study examined preparedness for repatriation as well as change in cultural identity. The study predicted that sojourners with the least preparation for repatriation and the least understanding of what returning home would be like, experienced more repatriation distress than those who had a better understanding of the repatriation experience. They also studied cultural identity formation and change as a result of cultural transitions, predicting that the more the sojourner has successfully adapted overseas, the more difficult the repatriation experience.

A year later, Sussman (2002) developed the Cultural Identity Model (CIM). The CIM relates a shift in cultural identity to successful repatriation experiences, rather than correlating it with overseas adaptation (Sussman, 2002). According to Sussman (2002), sojourners may have an affirmative, additive, subtractive or global identity. The CIM predicts that those who describe themselves as patriotic and positive towards their home country (affirmative identity) will experience less reverse culture shock than those whose home identity feels lost (subtractive identity) or those who have embraced many aspects of the host country (additive identity). Someone with a global identity travels extensively and sees themselves as belonging to an international community and generally experiences mild reverse culture shock.

The study found that sojourners whose home identity was affirmed and maintained throughout the transition process experienced less repatriation distress when they returned home and had more satisfaction in their lives. In contrast, the study predicted and confirmed that American sojourners, who feel less American, known as subtractive identity, experienced a high level of repatriation stress.

This study attempts to test this theory by comparing the shift in cultural identity between ACA and SM students as a function of their perceived support, by affirming and maintaining home identity throughout the sojourning experience. The researchers predict that students who received social support while in their host country will feel affirmed by their home country. Students who are welcomed home by a social support group would feel affirmed by their home country. This affirmation creates a positive attitude towards (affirmative identity) and will result in less repatriation distress. Students who did not receive as much social support while in their host country may feel either “less” American (subtractive identity) or eventually relate more to their

host country (additive identity). With no social support group upon returning to their home country, students will feel either estranged from their home country or wish to be back in their host country. Both subtractive and additive identities would result in more repatriation distress.

### **Perceived Cultural Support**

Sojourners receive social support before, during, and after their time in another country. Perceived social support comes from many sources such as family, faculty members, friends, organizations, coworkers, etc. Students usually are supported when the decision is made to go abroad and it is relatively easy to stay in contact with family members or teachers. The largest misconception is the amount of social support these students receive after their time abroad and in the transition of adapting back to life in their home country. It is important in the reentering phase that students feel they have support from any one of the sources to help in the process of reentering into the home culture. In a 1954 study by Bretsch, it was reported that a major challenge during reacclimation was social support and adaptation.

For adapting back into the home culture after spending a significant amount of time in another foreign culture, the process is difficult and can be quite stressful. Stringham (1993, pg. 7) hypothesized that “the returnees’ perceptions of connectedness with sources of social support are associated with adaptive or maladaptive coping styles.”

After returning, many students may feel their social abilities have changed since being abroad. Priel & Shamai (1995) also found a relationship between attachment style and perceived social support. They found that individuals who were securely attached to their environment perceived more social support and were more satisfied than individuals who were insecurely attached to their environment.

One of the major issues student sojourners deal with is the stress of going back to school. Kessler and McLeod (1985) found that perceived support availability was consistently demonstrated as a buffer to the effects of stress.

### **Academic Success**

Academic success can mean something different to each individual, but in academic institutions it is measured by grades, which are dependent on the completion of assignments, tests, and varying objectives given by the teacher. “Often [grades] do not adequately depict student learning or classroom success,” students must reconcile their grade to their learning experience (Sanders, M. L., & Anderson, S., p. 51). In the 2010 study by Sanders and Anderson, students reconciled with disappointing grades by focusing on personal growth and genuine learning. When a student could say that they remembered and were applying concepts learned in the classroom even after completing the class they were better able to accept a disappointing grade.

Students returning from a year abroad may experience academic difficulties through both reverse culture shock and learning shock. Learning shock is experienced when people return to education expecting it to be exactly like their previous experience, it can also occur when the

student must adapt to a different teaching and learning style than otherwise encountered. After being abroad, students return to their home university with varying expectations. Students will discover that life at home continued moving while they were gone and things are not the same as when they left. Those who return to school with unrealistic expectations will experience more problems (Griffiths, D. S., et al). Learning shock “entails a sudden and disorienting immersion in a new environment where familiar routines and reference points are lost,” (Griffiths, p. 278). An effect of learning shock is that students may feel unable to function in other areas of life, such as their social life, because of frustrations and anxieties carrying over from academic stress (Griffiths, p. 278).

Academic success may become an additional struggle after a year away from school or learning in a different environment overseas. Academic problems identified by students suffering from reverse culture shock were, “. . . trouble studying, academic performance concerns, concerns about a career match, and adjustment to the college environment,” (Gaw, p.101). A study on Japanese students returning from a year abroad showed that 90 percent of the students reported scholastic difficulties returning from studying abroad (Davis et al, 2007).

When a student is going through the challenges of reverse culture shock and potentially learning shock, their grades may show the effects of that stress. “An ‘A’ is widely understood as the standard for success,” Sanders and Anderson found in their study, and “Lower grades, although often framed to students as ‘good,’ still indicate some lack of learning.” Students suffering from learning shock may have to adapt their expectations to gauge academic success through personal growth and genuine learning, instead of the letter grade.

## **Hypotheses**

Three research hypotheses guided this study:

- 1: GPA is directly affected by perceived support.
- 2: SMs will perceive more support before, during and after their abroad experience than ACA students.
- 3: Because SMs receive more support than ACA students; the SM GPA will be higher.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The modern languages department and student missions’ office at the university provided the research group with a list of ACA or SM students from the past three years. These students participated in either one or both of the programs, and had spent at least one semester enrolled on the university’s campus before departing, and completed at least one semester at the university upon returning. The goal of this research was to determine the significance of perceived support on students’ academic success by comparing pre- and post-experience GPA. Participants filled out a short survey detailing how they felt about the support they received while abroad, and were



asked if they would be willing to provide access to only the information required to compute a change in GPA.

Fifty-three SM participants and 28 ACA students were contacted by e-mail, and a remaining 47 of varying identity were contacted via Facebook.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In order to ensure no physical, psychological or emotional harm was done to the participants, this research project was submitted for review before the Institutional Review Board, and was approved for continuation. The study required access to the participants pre- and post-experience GPA, therefore, it was necessary to provide access security to participants. GPA is typically restricted information and express permission to access GPA was needed from the primary source. A section of the survey contained a space in which participants could supply either their full name or university identification number. Anonymity was achieved because names or ID numbers were not reported as part of the research.

### **Variables**

The basis of this study was to find how the difference in perceived support between ACA and SM students affected their GPA. The researchers hypothesized that ACA participants would report receiving less overall support than would SM participants. This formed the independent variable as the participants category—either being ACA, or SM. The dependent variable for this study was two-fold: perceived support and GPA. The effect of ACA students' perceived support was measured against SM perceived support, and the resulting difference was compared with the positive or negative difference between the measured pre- and post-experience GPA.

### **Preparations**

The survey sent to the participants was first pilot-tested by a class of approximately 25 university students enrolled in the communication research course. The survey was revised three times, first to increase question clarity, second to unify the Likert-type scale measurements, and a third change was made to create more evident distinction between the “before,” “during,” and “after” sections on the survey.

### **Research Design**

The survey consisted of four demographic type questions determining gender, differentiation between ACA and SM students, age at time of departure, and class standing before leaving. The remainder of the survey contained a total of twelve questions. Three sections with four questions each determined by the in-text clarification of: *before*, *during*, and *after*. Each section asked how supported the participant felt by family, friends, host culture, or university during the designated point in time. Participants answered the question by choosing one of five options provided in a Likert-type scale format (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always), the exact wording of which was dependent on the nature of the question being asked (see Survey).

## Data Analysis

Once the data was collected it was analyzed in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). A series of statistical tests were run to compute correlations between received support and GPA. SM and ACA perceived support, SM and ACA GPA, and GPA by class standing.

## Results

An independent samples t-test was run to determine whether there was a difference in the amount of perceived support reported by ACA students as compared to SMs. The test determined that not only was the difference not statistically significant before ( $t(41)=.064$ ,  $p=0.74$ ), during ( $t(40)=0.35$ ,  $p=0.73$ ), or after ( $t(41)=0.71$ ,  $p=0.48$ ), but that there was little to no difference in perceived support between the two groups. Further research was done in perceived support and through a series of independent-sample t-tests it was found that, while the amount of perceived support did not differ between the two participant groups, the area of lowest indicated support occurred while the student was abroad.

Next a cross tabulation of questions by class standing was conducted. For the question *You felt supported and welcomed by campus staff your first semester back at Southern* the response percentages for the category of "Completely true" were: 75% of freshmen, 46% of sophomores, 65% of juniors, and only 20% of seniors. This difference in perceived support was trending, but was not statistically significant. When class standing was compared to the calculated difference in pre- and post-experience GPA it was found that all four groups experienced a drop in GPA after their first returned semester. The most substantial declines occurred for freshmen (~.70%) and seniors (~11.5%). Sophomores and juniors experienced decreases of ~2.5% and ~.06% respectively.

Upon discovering the overall decline in GPA by class, a one sample t-test was run to see if the difference between pre- and post-experience GPA of the combined participants was significant. It was found that there was a significant effect between pre-experience GPA ( $M=3.54$ ,  $SD=0.61$ ) and post-experience GPA ( $M=3.40$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ) conditions,  $t(30) = 3.22$ ,  $p < .001$ . To further determine this significance an independent-sample t-test was conducted to compare the pre- and post-experience GPA of ACA students to that of SMs. There was a significant difference in the scores for SM GPA ( $M=0.02$ ,  $SD=0.39$ ) and ACA GPA ( $M=0.33$ ,  $SD=0.39$ ) results;  $t(29)=-2.12$ ,  $p=0.04$ . These results suggest that ACA student GPA typically declines by a greater degree than does SM GPA upon reentering the academic program.

## Discussion

This research study sought to discover a correlation between student sojourner's perceived support before, during and after their year abroad and their GPA upon returning to their home university. The research findings discovered that the first hypothesis: "GPA is directly affected by perceived support," was incorrect. The second hypothesis stated that: "SMs will perceive more support before, during and after their abroad experience than ACA students," was also incorrect

because there was no significant difference in the perceived support by both SMs and ACA students. ACA students' perceived support was lower than SMs but not significantly so. Because both groups of sojourners perceived support the same, the differences in GPA before, during, and after were not affected by perceived support.

The third hypothesis was two-part: "Because SMs receive more support than ACA students; the SM GPA will be higher." Part one of this hypothesis was found to be incorrect because of the insignificance between SM and ACA perceived support, however, the second part, "SM GPA will be higher," was found to be true. ACA students showed a significant drop in average GPA (-.33) in their first semester back at their home university, while SM GPA only dropped marginally (-.03).

Living abroad for a year is a major life change and with that comes major growth through challenges. Many expected challenges deal with initial culture shock, but less emphasis is given to reverse culture shock. Once they returned to their home university, all sojourners both suffered from a drop in GPA, however, ACA students' GPA dropped significantly while SM GPA dropped only marginally.

This research did not discover why ACA student GPA dropped more than SM even though there was no significant difference in their perceived support. Perhaps SMs were able to better readjust to the academic rigors of school because they had not been in a different educational system during their year abroad. The key difference between SMs and ACA students is that ACA students continue their education abroad to learn another language. ACA students must adapt their learning to the educational system in their host culture and again when they return to their home university; because of this we would recommend more research in the area of learning shock, which may be the cause of the ACA students' significant drop in GPA. SMs are also required to take an orientation class before leaving and participate in a re-entry retreat upon their return. ACA students should be given these same requirements in the hopes of helping them maintain their GPA.

The other significant finding was that neither group of sojourners felt significant or a part of the university community while abroad. The university should work to better facilitate support of global students before, during and upon return. This could be remedied through more involvement from the program coordinators in maintaining contact with sojourners through emails and packages. Once back at the home university, participation in an active club, group, or class should also assist students in successfully working through any reverse culture shock. This research has also provided a tested survey to assess perceived support that could be implemented in yearly research, assisting the university in better supporting its students.

### **Limitations**

First, the sample size of the ACA students and SMs was small because it was necessary for the participants to have a *before* and *after* GPA. After receiving our list of student names, it was found that a majority of these students had graduated or transferred from the university. Second, the question of what semester the student left should have been asked to make it easier to access

the students' records. Third, there was limited research found on perceived support and the effects of learning shock.

### **Further Research**

The results show that support is not the determining factor of GPA and therefore future research is needed to identify what causes this drop in GPA. More research should be done on learning shock to determine if it is a significant factor in GPA drop. Further research should also be done in perceived support for students while abroad and how the university can better identify and maintain a supportive relationship with its students while abroad.

### **Conclusion**

Immersing oneself into another culture for a year is an experience that comes with the trials of culture shock and reverse culture shock upon returning home and can directly affect student GPA. As the number of international students increases, universities must become better able to support students while they experience another culture and readjust upon return. This study provides information to help move in a direction of improvement for student sojourners.

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### **Survey**

As former Student Missionaries (SM) and Adventist Colleges Abroad (ACA) students, our research team has created a study that might improve both of these programs. We understand that you have either served as an SM, been a part of ACA, or both. As such, your input and participation in our study is valued. Please take 5 minutes to fill out our survey. Circle your answer.

Gender: Male Female

Most recently I was a(n): Student Missionary ACA Student

Class Standing before leaving: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

Please state how old you were DURING the major portion of your study-abroad or missionary experience. \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the response that best describes your experience:

1. Before I left Southern, I felt prepared to travel abroad.

Completely true | Somewhat true | Neither true nor untrue | Somewhat untrue | Completely untrue

2. Before I left Southern, I knew exactly where to go and who to talk to about any questions I had prior to leaving.

Completely true | Somewhat true | Neither true nor untrue | Somewhat untrue | Completely untrue

3. Before I left Southern, Faculty assisted me with filling out necessary paperwork.

Completely true | Somewhat true | Neither true nor untrue | Somewhat untrue | Completely untrue

4. Before I left Southern, I was sufficiently knowledgeable about the country I was going to (culture, climate, government, living arrangements, school system, transportation, etc).

Completely true | Somewhat true | Neither true nor untrue | Somewhat untrue | Completely untrue

5. During my year abroad Southern helped ensure a safe arrival and smooth transition into the host-culture.

Completely true | Somewhat true | Neither true nor untrue | Somewhat untrue | Completely untrue

6. During my year abroad, I still felt a part of Southern's student community while geographically distant.

Completely true | Somewhat true | Neither true nor untrue | Somewhat untrue | Completely untrue

7. During my year abroad, I was contacted by Southern faculty members and/or students through letters, emails, and care-packages.

Very often Fairly often Occasionally Rarely Never

8. During my year abroad, I had access to a phone and/or an internet service.

Very often Fairly often Occasionally Rarely Never

9. My first year back at Southern, I felt supported and welcomed by Southern faculty members my first year back at Southern.

Completely true | Somewhat true | Neither true nor untrue | Somewhat untrue | Completely untrue

10. My first year back at Southern, I found it difficult concentrating in class and completing homework assignments my year back at Southern.

Very often Fairly often Occasionally Rarely Never

11. My first year back at Southern, I felt out of place.

Completely true | Somewhat true | Neither true nor untrue | Somewhat untrue | Completely untrue

12. My first year back at Southern, I often experienced negative feelings (loneliness, stress, irritation, frustration, etc) my first year back at Southern.

Very often Fairly often Occasionally Rarely Never

17. Thank you for completing our survey. As we said before, your knowledge is vital to the success of our study. We want to learn how social support for SMs and ACA students relates to academic success the first year back. With your permission, the Records Office will provide us with ONLY your GPA before and after your experience abroad. Please understand that we will NOT have access to your personal academic records and that the results of the study will not be linked to your name. In order to allow Records to link to your GPA, please provide us with your full name or Southern Student ID#:

18. (Optional) If you'd like to share your experience with us please comment below.