



# **Intercultural Programs**

**Research at AFS**

Educational Results: A brief Description of Recent AFS Research Efforts



AFS began studying the impact of its exchange programs in 1978 when AFS's Research Department started a four-year project that developed a pre- and post-test instrument to measure the impact of its programs on recently returned AFS students. The responses documented that adolescents traveling abroad showed greater improvement in a number of positive personal characteristics—including foreign language acquisition and appreciation—than similar students who did not participate in an exchange program. AFS students, especially on the ten-month program, showed tremendous increases, while those who did not go abroad showed a marked decrease on the scale. As emphasized above, this does not mean just a greater language facility for AFS students, nor does it mean that the others have so quickly lost whatever language ability they had prior to applying for AFS, but that the attitude about learning other languages has been altered. The immersion in a foreign culture changed the world view of the AFS students; by experiencing the need to communicate in another language they came to recognize language learning as important and necessary<sup>1</sup>.

Recent research indicates that AFS participants demonstrate substantial gains in foreign language after spending 10 months in another country. As rated by their host parents in the Hammer study of 2002-05, students moved from an average elementary level of proficiency in the spoken language to a level of advanced proficiency. By year-end, 47% were rated by the host families at advanced proficiency or bi-lingual proficiency. Former AFS participants are more engaged in learning foreign languages than other students at the tertiary education level.

In 2002-05 with the support of AFS, Dr. Mitchell R. Hammer of Hammer Consulting designed and conducted an independent research study, *The Assessment of the Impact of the AFS*

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from Bettina Hansel, "Developing an International Perspective in Youth through Exchange Programs," in *Education and Urban Society*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (February 1988), pp. 177- 95.



*Study Abroad Experience*, e.g. “the Hammer Study.” (See Section 1 a above). A total of 2,100 students of 9 countries with AFS programs participated in the Hammer Study. Of these, 1,500 were AFS students who lived with a host family and studied in another country for 10 months and 600 “student friends” comprising a control group. This study was based on an innovative and comprehensive model of intercultural competence (The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, DMIS) created by Dr. Milton Bennett and used a sophisticated, cross-culturally validated assessment tool for assessing intercultural competence. This research instrument is The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) and was designed by Dr. Mitchell Hammer and Dr. Milton Bennett.<sup>2</sup> A rigorous, pre-test, post-test, and post-post test, control group design was used to scientifically assess the impact of the AFS study abroad experience on AFS students. This design enabled assessment of the impact of the AFS study abroad experience on AFS students compared to students who did not participate in the study abroad program. Further, the study design enabled analysis of the impact of the AFS experience over time (post test to post-post test measures). Data was gathered using three different groups of respondents: (1) the AFS students and control group members (self report measures); (2) questionnaires completed by the AFS students’ own families; (3) surveys completed by the AFS students’ host families. All the measures used in the study had cross-cultural validity testing and were reliably used. In addition, selected AFS students participated in a “critical incident” electronic journal (e-journal), qualitative data gathering process, in which stimulus questions were asked intermittently during the study abroad program.

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<sup>2</sup> For additional information on the DMIS and the development of the IDI, see: Hammer, M.R., Bennett, M.J. & Wiseman, R. (2003). The Intercultural Development Inventory: A measure of intercultural sensitivity. In M. Paige (Guest Editor), *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27, 421-443 and Bennett, M.J. (1993). Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In R.M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp.21-71). Yarmouth: ME: Intercultural Press.



**What We Learned:** The Hammer Study demonstrated that students participating in AFS exchanges of 10 months made significant improvements across a number of critical benchmarks:

- ❖ **Substantial gains in foreign language.** Students' host families in this study assessed their language ability at the beginning of the year and again prior to the students returning home. Language levels were described in detail to the families and were based on the I.L.R. levels for spoken language ability. While just over 30% of the students began with a "basic" level, by the end of the year 35% were at "advanced fluency" and an additional 12% scored even higher at the bi-lingual level.
- ❖ **More intercultural friendships.** In the months before the AFS program, students reported that about 10% of their friends came from other cultures. Students who did not go abroad had almost as many intercultural friendships. However, 8 months after the AFS students had returned home, they reported that 23% of their current friends in the home country came from other cultures. Students who did not go abroad with AFS were still at about 9%.
- ❖ **Less "polarization" of cultural differences.** It is common for students at high school age to divide the world generally into "good" and "bad;" or "us" and "them." Whether the students view their own culture as superior or, more commonly, feel that their own culture is somehow *less* worthy than another culture, the AFS experience was shown to help students overcome this polarization.
- ❖ **Greater knowledge of another culture.** After their participation in the year program, AFS students showed significant increases both in their own ratings of their knowledge of the host culture and in the host parents' ratings of their knowledge. Students who did not go abroad showed no increase in knowledge about any other culture.



❖ **Lower anxiety in dealing with other cultures.** Pre-AFS program, students may have been a little nervous about their upcoming encounter with another culture. But students who did not plan to go abroad were also not very much at ease around people from other cultures. During and after the AFS program, students became much more comfortable around other cultures, and thus better able to form relationships across cultures, while students who stayed home showed no significant change.

In 2007, AFS is undertaking a largely quantitative study in 14 countries of our alumni from the 1980s. Using a web-based tool, the results of this new research will add to our body of knowledge on the long-term impact of the high-school level exchange program. The proposed study using in-depth interviews with a significant number of the 2002-03 alumni and their families will present the mid-term impact. Together, these three studies will give us a strong understanding of the way in which the AFS program relates to intercultural attitudes and understanding, as well as to the ability and motivation to study and use a foreign language.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For further information about the study, download “Educational Results Study Report” and “Assessment of the Impact of Study Abroad Experience” available from <http://www.afs.org/research>.