



AFS Long Term Impact Study

*Report 1: 20 to 25 years after the
exchange experience, AFS alumni are
compared with their peers*

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Introduction

What do we really know about our former participants and how they compare to others their age and situation in their own countries?

In 2005, following the completion of a major study of AFS program participants by Dr. Mitchell R. Hammer, AFS realized the need for a longer-term perspective in understanding the impact of our programs. The AFS students in the 2005 “Educational Results” study were shown to be different from their friends who did not go abroad, but might these friends later “catch up” and become just as interculturally sensitive and comfortable around other cultures? Or did the AFS participants have an advantage that would last over the course of their lives?

From these questions, a new research project was launched. We chose to return to a group we had studied before, where we had seen significant short-term impact. In 1981-82, a large-scale study of the impact of the AFS program was conducted with a group of US students who went abroad on both year-long and summer-long programs to any of 50 countries in the world. Now, 25 years after their return, these individuals are all more than 40 years old. Some are among our current host families and some could be parents of the next generation of exchange students. They are typically at mid-career and may be well-established leaders in their communities.

25 years later: Are they still different from their peers?

This question is not just interesting for the participants who were from the United States, so we undertook this project to survey the former AFS participants of this era from 15 countries. All together, we had a pool of almost 12,000 program alumni who were contacted by email or letter to request their participation in the survey. Of this group, 1920 submitted survey results. To compare with their peers, we asked each person responding to nominate two individuals who would have been peers of theirs in their high school years. This resulted in 511 responses from these nominated friends, who have become our control group.

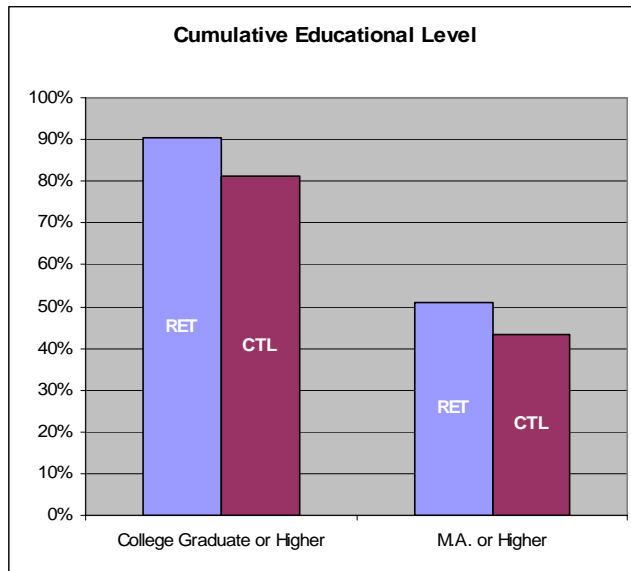
AFS Returnees are Different

Our research project began with focus group sessions in twelve countries that involved AFS returnees in some groups and people of a similar age and background without the high school abroad experience in others. Through these conversations, we identified several potential ways in which AFS participants might be different than their peers, both *before* they went abroad and long afterwards.

Interest in other cultures is passed from parents to children

As the returnees in our study looked back on their childhood, they were significantly more likely than their friends to report that their parents had encouraged them to meet people from other cultures and to study abroad. In addition, they were more likely to travel abroad as children than the peers who did not go on a high school exchange.

The interest is also passed down to the next generation. One of the strongest factors distinguishing returnees from their peers is found in how they plan or hope to influence their own children. Returnees who now have children are much more likely to strongly encourage their children to meet people from other cultures and to participate in a study abroad program than are their peers.



In terms of demographic information, the breakdown by sex and age is approximately the same for both returnees and controls, with 97% of the control group falling in the same age range as the former AFS participants. This basic similarity was requested for the peer nominations, and was found.

The educational levels achieved by returnees and controls are also similar, although returnees show a slightly higher level of educational achievement overall than the group of controls, and this difference was found to be statistically significant.

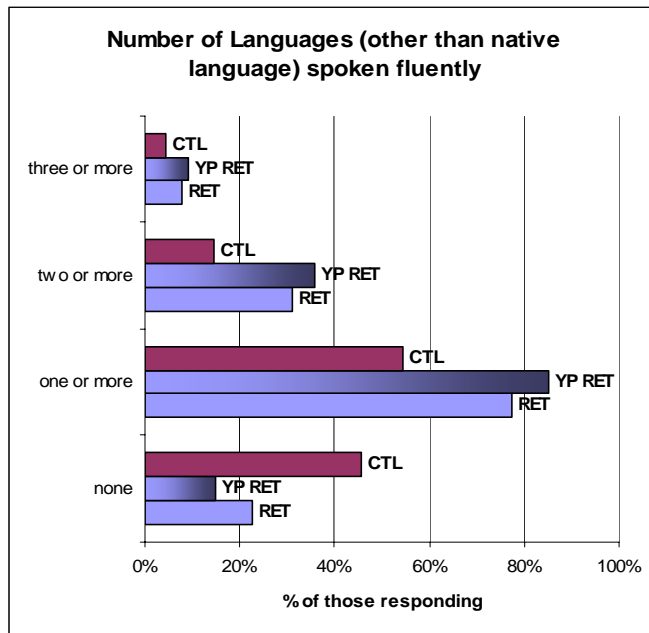
Ideally, a control group should match the group studied in all the basic demographic data. In our case, these differences found – the greater encouragement from their own parents and their slightly higher level of education – mean that we cannot always be sure that the other differences we find between returnees and their peers can be attributed to AFS, since they might also be related to the kind of parents they had, or the educational level they attained. We will need to take this into account as we further analyze the data concerning the long-term influence of the AFS program.

Studying Abroad Again

It is not uncommon to hear people ask whether it is better to study abroad at the high school level, as is typical of AFS programs, or later at the university level. For the AFS participants in the years 1980-81, and for their peers, university-level study abroad was not as common as it is in the early 21st century. Nevertheless, 34% of the AFS returnees *also* studied abroad as college or university students, compared with 22% of the control group who studied abroad at the tertiary level. We don't have national figures for study abroad for all the countries represented, but of all students enrolled in US universities and colleges in the 1986-97 academic year, only 1% studied abroad, and a similar figure for Germany in 1991 shows about 2% of enrolled university students studied abroad in that year. This suggests that our control sample over-represents study abroad compared to the general population, but even so, the AFS returnee group is clearly more likely than their control group peers to study abroad *again* at the university level.

AFS in the 1980s included a very large number of US students heading abroad for a two-month “Summer Program.” Though no other country had a substantial volume on a short program, we included these students from the US in our overall study. In looking at the data for college or university-level study abroad, we found that approximately 40% of the AFS alumni from the USA studied abroad again in their college and university years. This figure did not vary whether we looked at Year Program or Summer Program students.

More Languages Spoken



The ability to speak and carry out conversations in other languages is important in every way to the AFS mission. The ILR¹ “Moderate Proficiency” rating is a reasonable high rate of fluency that, according to their host families’ assessments, was achieved by over 70% of the AFS students during their year program in 2002-03. Fluency at this level is described as being able to ...

...speak with sufficient grammatical accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations;

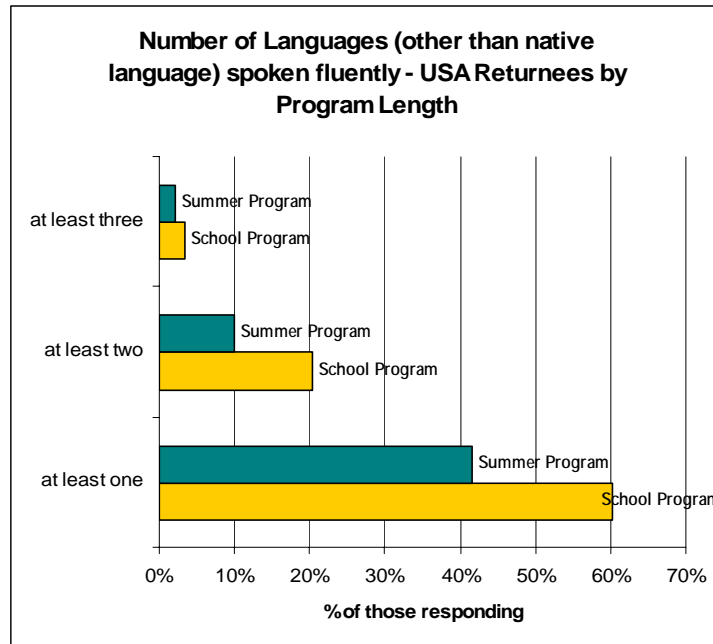
...discuss particular interests and special fields of competence with reasonable ease; and

...comprehend completely at a normal rate of speech.

Using these and other guidelines, 77% of all AFS alumni, and over 85% of all year program alumni, reported that they could speak at least one language in addition to their native language, and over 30% could speak at least two other languages.

Not all returnees considered themselves this fluent in another language. In particular, those who had participated in a two-month program were less likely to see themselves as really fluent in another language, although over 40% of them did say that they achieved fluency at this level in at least one other language. The relationship between length of program and language fluency achievement makes sense, and confirms AFS research from the 1980s that compared the Year and Summer programs.

¹ A rating scale developed by the Interagency Language Roundtable. See: <http://www.utm.edu/staff/globeg/ilrhome.shtml> and http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=11841&page=360



How Cultural Differences are Experienced

Our understanding of the nature of the intercultural exchange experience has been enhanced with the use of Milton Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which indicates that our knowledge and understanding of other cultures is based on the way we experience cultural differences. The research of Mitchell Hammer with the AFS students from 2002-03 helped clarify the type of changes the AFS program is able to bring about.

More Comfortable Around Other Cultures

In general, we found that the 1980-86 AFS alumni feel more comfortable around other cultures than the control group of their peers. They are less anxious, irritated, or nervous when they encounter other cultures. We know from the 2002 Hammer study that the drop in anxiety around other cultures occurred for the year program students during the course of their exchange year.² Prior to their departure, they were very similar to their friends in their level of comfort around other cultures, but post-experience, they were much less anxious, irritated, defensive or embarrassed around other cultures, while their friends showed no change. We also found that the AFS alumni are less likely to report feeling very concerned about their personal safety when traveling abroad.

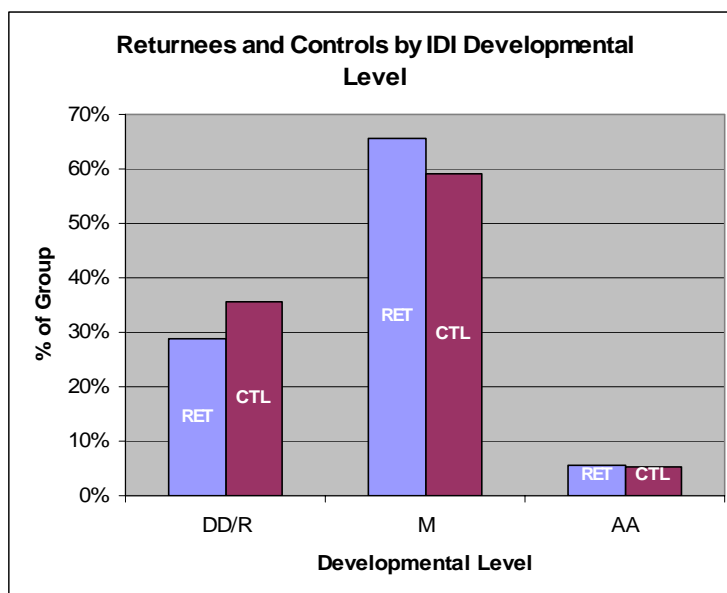
In looking at the longer term with the program alumni from 1980-86, we wondered if they would maintain the advantage they had over their peers at that time, and if they would show

² The older group of returnees in the present study is a bit more anxious or uncomfortable around other cultures than the recently returned group from the 2002-03 program, but the difference is small.

signs of greater sophistication with increasing intercultural experience over their lives. In our preliminary analysis, we do find a small but significant overall advantage that AFS alumni have over their peers in terms of their intercultural development as measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory.

To make this difference more meaningful, we used the IDI results to assign each person to a “Developmental Level” based on their dominant tendencies in how they experience other cultures.

- The DD/R group is characterized largely by a tendency to think of the world in terms of “us” and “them.” However, for both returnees and controls, there is a larger tendency for them to view their own culture cynically and see other cultures or some other culture as superior to their own.
- The M group is the largest group, and is characterized by a tendency to minimize cultural difference because of an underlying assumption that the similarities among cultures are more important or deserve more attention than the differences.
- The AA group is the most advanced, and also the smallest. This group is characterized by a nuanced awareness and acceptance of the behaviors, values and thought patterns of another cultural group as well as by an understanding themselves in the context of their own culture.

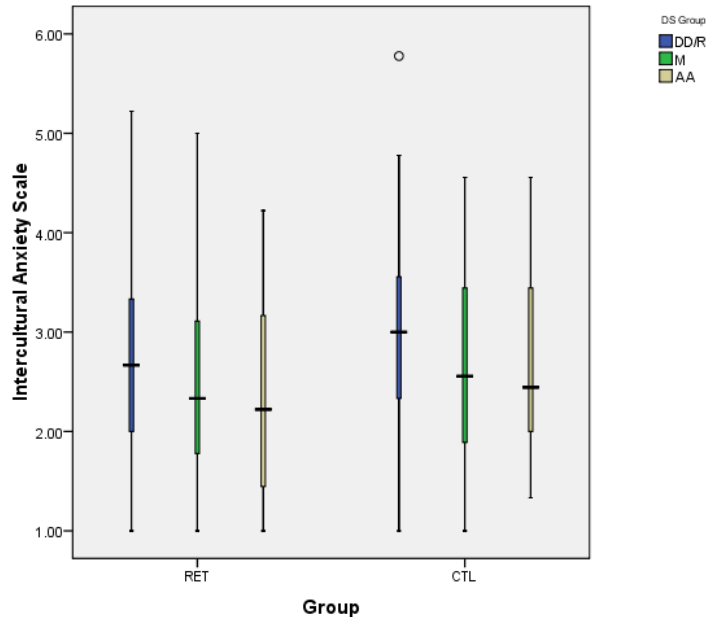


As we look at the numbers of AFS alumni and their peers in each of these groups, we find the major difference in distribution is that AFS returnees are somewhat more likely than the controls to be in the M group, while controls are somewhat more likely than returnees to be in the DD/R group. Since the AA group contains 5.6% of the AFS alumni and 5.2% of the controls, it contributes very little to the difference in variation between the returnees and their peers.

The intercultural anxiety scores in our study showed a consistent pattern with the developmental level identified through the IDI.

In the graph below we look at returnees in each developmental group, and controls in each developmental group, according to their IDI profiles. The vertical bars in the chart represent the range of anxiety scores for the members of each of these groups, with the “middle 50%” shown in the thicker, colored sections. The median is shown by the small line in that crosses the vertical bar. (The circle above the vertical line for Control group members in DD/R Group

shows one case of an individual who is an “outlier” case – someone unusually anxious or uncomfortable around other cultures.) There are two important things to observe in this chart:



(1) In general, the median anxiety level is highest for those at DD/R developmental level and lowest for those at AA level.

(2) At each developmental stage, returnees have a lower median level of anxiety and discomfort around other cultures.

The 2002 Educational Results study by Mitch Hammer showed that the AFS students decreased their anxiety on this same scale from the pre- to post-test stage, and stayed that way through the post-post test. The controls in that study did not shift position.

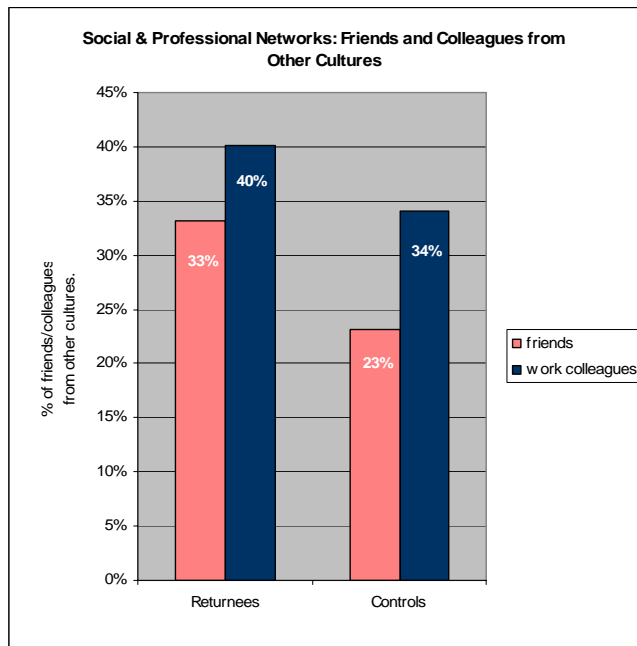
With this Long-Term Impact study, we now have evidence to show that the lower levels of anxiety (or higher levels of comfort) around other cultures that students gain during their experience abroad do in fact remain with them long after (approx 20-25 years!) their experience abroad. In our further analysis of the data, we will specifically be looking at how other variables in our study relate both to the developmental level of intercultural sensitivity and to the intercultural anxiety scale.

When we compared the results of the IDI with those of the Hammer study in 2002, we find that both the older alumni and their peers are significantly more advanced than the young adolescents from the 2002 group at post-test. This suggests that life experience such as that of our older group in general may be related to increased levels of intercultural sensitivity. We will be doing further analysis with these results.

Different Preferences and Life Choices as Adults

While some of the societies to which these individuals belong are traditionally more homogeneous than others, we found overall among both returnees and controls that about 70% of them live in fairly homogeneous communities with less than 25% of the people coming from a different cultural background than the survey respondent. Yet when asked about the desirability of a multi-cultural neighborhood, 39% of returnees said that it is “very desirable” to live in a diverse neighborhood, compared with 28% of controls who would agree.

An intercultural flavor is also more commonly found among returnees in their professional and work lives. Close to half (45%) of the returnees reported that they needed to work “very often” with people from other cultural backgrounds; among the control group, compared with 30% reported this. It is also clear that AFS alumni are more likely than their peers to seek jobs and professional opportunities involving other cultures. This was a very important consideration for 20% of the returnees, and for 7% of the controls. In addition, over one-third (35%) of the AFS alumni have at some point lived abroad for at least a year because of their own work or that of their spouse. This was true for 18% of the nominated peers.



Social and Professional Networks

In their professional and social networks, AFS alumni are much more likely to include people from other cultures. AFS returnees, compared with their peers, are also much more likely to marry someone from another culture: 26% of them had partners from other cultures, compared with 17% of the control group.

Giving Time and Opening their Homes

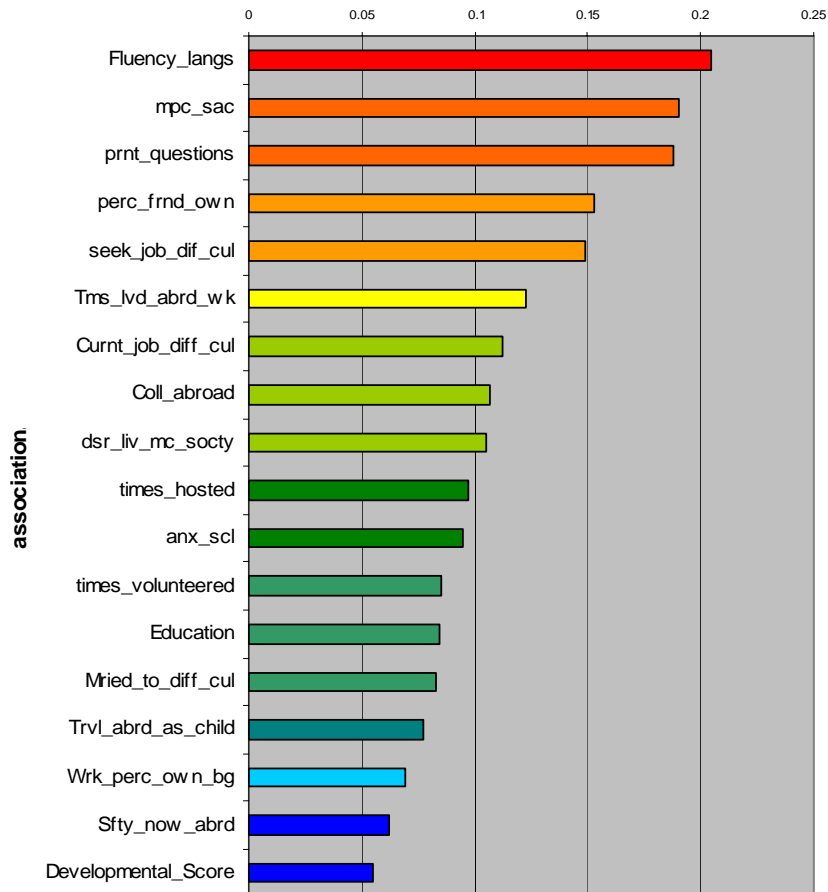
A quarter of all AFS alumni surveyed had hosted an exchange student at least once compared with 14% of the controls. Returnees are also somewhat more likely to volunteer time to organizations with an international or an intercultural focus, and to see this activity as increasing in the years to come.

Strength of Measures

What are the variables most associated with the AFS exchange experience?

We have noted many differences between the results of the returnee group and their peers. The results we have reported are statistically significant, meaning that it is highly unlikely that these differences occurred just by chance. These differences are not all equally important, however, in distinguishing those who are AFS alumni and those who are not. The association of each variable or characteristic can be mapped on a chart according to the strength to which it can be associated with former participation in the AFS program.

Strength of Association with AFS Program Participation



The chart to the left illustrates the relative strength of the association of each variable with the AFS exchange experience in the length of the line and by the color spectrum, which highlights those variables most strongly associated with the exchange in red hues and those weakly associated in blue and indigo. All of these variables have been found to have some level of significant association with participation in the AFS program. The table below provides an explanation of each of the variables provided here.

Variable name		Explanation
Fluency_langs	◆	fluency in other languages
mpc_sac	◆	scale: related to encouragement of children
prnt_questions	◆	scale: related to encouragement from own parents
perc_frnd_own	◆	scale: % of friends who are from own/other culture
seek_job_dif_cul	◆	sought job involving contact with other cultures
Tms_lvd_abrd_wk	◆	lived abroad for work or spouse's work
Curnt_job_dif_cul	◆	current work involves contact with other cultures
Coll_abroad	◆	studied abroad in college or university
dsr_liv_mc_socty	◆	desirability of a multicultural community
times_hosted	◆	times hosted an exchange student
anx_scl	◆	scale: intercultural anxiety/comfort
times_volunteered	◆	days volunteered for international/intercultural organization

Variable name		Explanation
education	◆	educational level
mried_to_diff_cul	◆	marriage with someone from another culture
Trvl_abrd_as_child	◆	frequency of travel abroad as a child
wrk_perc_own_bg	◆	scale: % of work colleagues who are from own culture
sfty_now_abrd	◆	concern for safety in travel abroad now
Developmental_Score	◆	scale: IDI Developmental Score
Sfty_at_home	◆	concern for safety in own community as teenager

Fluency in more languages and family attitudes are strongest

We can see, then, that AFS program participation is most closely associated with having fluency more foreign languages. This measure looked at the number of languages spoken fluently, and is by far the strongest measure associated with the high school exchange experience. We know that this association is strong because over ¾ of the returnees speak at least one foreign language fluently, making fluency the strongest variable that characterizes returnees.

Closely behind language fluency are the general attitudes that the AFS program alumni try to instill in their children and those that they have received from their parents about meeting people from other cultures and encouragement to study abroad.

A social network with more people from other cultures is also strongly related to the AFS experience. In this case, the measure is an inverse one, with the AFS experience associated with having a *lower* percentage of their friends coming from the same background. Also somewhat strong is the association between participation in AFS and seeking a career or job that involves contact with other cultures.

While there were proportionally more returnees than controls who had lived abroad for work for accompanying a spouse, the broad majority of those responding had not has this experience, so the strength of our conclusion that this is a variable that characterizes returnees is a bit lower.

We also note in general that the workplace reality for many people in the world today probably involves some level of contact with other cultures, whether one seeks it out or not, so this is also slightly less likely to be seen as a characteristic associated with participation in AFS. And while significantly more returnees than controls studied abroad in their college and university years, the peers nominated for this study as controls are also much more often found to have studied abroad than would seem likely for the average population, so again, there is a relationship between participation in AFS and studying abroad at the college or university level, but we may feel less comfortable concluding that studying abroad at the college level is a characteristic of returnees in general (and not of controls) even as we see that this relationship exists.

Other variables that somewhat characterize the returnee group include the tendency to believe that it is desirable to live in a multicultural community, frequency of hosting exchange students, and frequency of volunteering for an organization with an international or intercultural focus.

The intercultural anxiety scale used in this study assesses the degree to which individuals feel more anxious, irritated, impatient, defensive, suspicious, nervous, awkward and feel less comfortable and accepted when interacting with people from other cultures. Lower results on this scale are more positive, and were also found to be somewhat strongly associated with AFS participation.

When we look at the association between AFS participant and higher levels of education or intercultural marriages, we see that the ability of these variables to be used as especially characteristic of AFSers is at a lower level than the other measures above. In the first instance, the difference in educational level between returnees and controls is fairly small, even though the data show that this is unlikely to be a difference just from chance factors. In the second instance, most returnees had never married outside their own culture, so the fact that the percentage of this group who had is significantly higher than for the control group.

The extent of travel abroad as a child is also somewhat less characteristic of returnees specifically; we note that for both returnees and their peers, a very large portion of each group answered that they “never” traveled abroad as children. Similarly, low levels of current concern about safety when traveling abroad are not strongly characteristic of AFS participation, probably because so few in this study population are very concerned about personal safety in travel abroad.

We also found less strength in the association of AFS participation with higher levels in the developmental score derived from the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), largely because only 5% of either group is found at the highest levels. As with the Educational Results findings with the 2002 AFS group and their peers, we can see the largest difference at the mid levels of the IDI scale, and in the greater portion of returnees who can be characterized as minimizing cultural differences rather than polarizing cultures in terms of “us” versus “them.”

Discussion

After 20-25 years, AFS alumni are shown to be significantly different than their peers in a several important aspects. Some of these differences, including the influence and encouragement of their parents for study abroad, no doubt affected their motivation to apply for AFS in the first place.

The study results so far suggest that AFS alumni are more likely to speak at least one other language fluently, will be more likely to have friends from other cultures, to seek jobs that involve contact with other cultures. They are also more likely to encourage their children to meet people from other cultures and to study abroad, indicating that this type of interaction across cultures is a core part of what they value.

Of particular interest for our subsequent analysis are:

- the scale related to intercultural anxiety and its relationships to intercultural developmental levels
- a closer look at the particular developmental phases characterized by minimization, defense, and reversal as found by the IDI assessments in both groups.

Statistics and Technical Notes

Scale Reliability

A few scales were created or re-used with this survey. The items included in each scale were assessed for reliability as a scale, and all three passed the standard expectations.

1. The “Intercultural Anxiety Scale” was also used in the Educational Results Study by Mitchell Hammer. It is an adaptation of the Stephan & Stephan 1985 Intergroup Anxiety Scale by Gao & Gudykunst, which was used in the Educational Results Study. In that last study, one of the ten items – the extent to which the person reported feeling self-conscious – was found to be unreliable in translation, and was therefore dropped from the scale. This item was not used in the current version, which is confirmed to be a reliable scale of nine items, with Chronbach’s Alpha = .882
2. Three questions formed a scale concerning Parents’ influence or “Parent Questions.” These questions related to the encouragement of parents for study abroad, to meet people from other cultures, and parental interest in other cultures. This scale was also confirmed to be reliable, with Chronbach’s Alpha = .797
3. Two questions on the extent to which individuals intend to encourage their children to study abroad and meet people from other cultures also formed a reliable scale with Chronbach’s Alpha = .796

Language Assessment Measure

In the 2002 study by Mitchell Hammer, we asked host families to assess the language ability of their students before and after the program. In that study we found that over 70% of the students ended the program with ratings from their host families that matched the ILR level of “Moderate Proficiency” or better, and 47% had “Advanced” or “Bi-lingual” Proficiency. Because these ratings include specific descriptions of language skills that the individual has, self-ratings are also possible. The use of self-ratings for culture knowledge scales in the 2002 study showed that these compared readily to the host parent ratings for the same scale, with much less over-estimation of skills than anticipated.

Tests Comparing Returnees and Controls

Throughout this report, any differences that are reported between AFS alumni and the control group have been submitted to statistical tests and the differences are considered significant. Those where we report “no difference” or “basically similar” have also been tested and the difference failed to achieve a significance level of $<.05$.

The most commonly used test was the Pearson’s Chi Square test, which was used with all categoric and ordinal data. Independent Samples T-Test was used to compare means for all scale data. In all cases, equal variances were not assumed, and a 2-tailed significance level was found to be $<.05$. In most cases the significance level was $.000$. The exceptions were:

Difference in breakdown by DS group for Returnees and Controls. Chi Square test shows a difference significant at $.029$.

Difference in breakdown of frequency of volunteering for Returnees and Controls. Chi Square test shows a difference significant at $.001$.

Difference in average Overall DS Score between Returnees and Controls. Independent Samples T-Test and One-way Analysis of Variance show this difference to be significant, both at $p = .002$

Strength of Association of Variables with AFS Participation

Kendall's Tau was used in these measures of association. All of the variables discussed in this section are significantly related to participation in AFS with significance levels $< .05$.

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