

International Study Abroad: Impact of Changing Host Families

MITCHELL R. HAMMER
and BETSY HANSEL

International Student Exchange

International education contributes \$13 billion to the economy of the United States alone. Over the past 50 years, there has been a significant increase in international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities. In 1954–1955, a total of 34,232 international students were studying at U.S. colleges and universities, representing 1.4% of the total college student population. By 2004, this figure had risen to 572,509, accounting for over 4% of all university students. Further, other host countries are developing various programs to attract international students. While the United States currently accounts for 40% of all placements for international college study, the United Kingdom (18%), Germany (15%), France (12%), Australia (6%), China (5%), and Canada (4%) have increasingly become destinations for study-abroad programs (Open Doors, 2004).

While figures are gathered annually in the United States and many other countries regarding college and university enrollments, an underreported yet equally important arena of study-abroad experiences exists at the secondary- or high-school level. In this area, one exemplar organization, AFS Intercultural Programs, is one of the largest international student-exchange programs in the world. Each year, approximately 11,000 volunteer host families around the world open their homes to young people from over 50 countries who are participating in an AFS intercultural exchange. Most of these programs involve a full academic year (8 to 9 months), during which the students attend a local secondary school; live with a host family; and receive support from host-country volunteers who provide orientation programs, serve as local contact persons, and act as liaisons between the host families and the exchange students.

International educational exchange, as a form of experiential learning (i.e., learning by doing coupled with reflection), is demonstrated to be important in foreign language learning (Risager, 1998) and more generally, in the development of intercultural competence (Bennett, 1993; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, a theoretical framework that explicates how intercultural competence is developed, posits that intercultural sensitivity/competence increases when behavior is understood as arising within a particular cultural

context (Bennett, 1993). Intercultural competence, then, can be viewed as the ability to generate increasingly more complex perceptions and adapt behaviour to cultural context. As applied to the 15- to 18-year-old adolescent international student, the impact of his or her host-country family in facilitating this type of learning and the development of intercultural competence is critical insofar as it is the host family's living experience that provides a key intercultural learning platform and the opportunity for reflection in terms of how the student's own behaviour fits into a particular cultural milieu.

In short, for many high-school international exchange programs, the host-family living experience is a central, integral feature of the exchange experience. AFS Intercultural Programs is no exception. As an organization, AFS Intercultural Programs carefully screens both the students and the host families by means of home interviews and recommendations from the community. In some cases, host families select a student on the basis of application information provided by the student and the sending country office. In other cases, the AFS office will place a student with a host family that appears both to be compatible with the student and to provide the student with the challenge of adapting to a new culture and way of life.

In spite of the care taken with the student placements, in the nearly 60 years that AFS has been operating programs for high-school students, they have found year after year that approximately one quarter of the students on the year-long international exchange program need to change host families during the course of the program, for a wide range of reasons. While AFS volunteers and staff are trained to deal with these family changes, difficulties and frustrations are, nevertheless, often expressed by the student and/or the host family. Dealing with the issues associated with a change in host family also involves dealing with concerns expressed by the student's parents back home. To illustrate the importance of this issue of changing host families midstream, one AFS student commented,

My new host family and I get along very well, as I had wished from the beginning. In the beginning, my feelings were very mixed. I thought that I could stay the course, it was only for a few more months.... But after many tears were shed, I nevertheless decided to leave them. The best decision of the year. When I left the house (with my rapidly accrued luggage), and drove off with my new host parents, it felt as if an entire mountain had been lifted from my shoulders.... I was unbelievably relieved!

At a pragmatic level, AFS was very interested to know what impact a change in host-family living experience might have on a student's intercultural development and the overall learning gained from the study-abroad program. From a theoretical perspective, while host-family living is often cited as critical to the success or failure of international study abroad, systematic examination of the impact of change in host-family

living for high-school students had not been previously undertaken. This question, therefore, was one of a number of critical foci of a recently completed, three-year study, *Assessment of the Impact of the AFS Study Abroad Experience* (Hammer, 2005) designed and conducted by Mitchell R. Hammer, Ph.D., with support from AFS Intercultural Programs. This large-scale study examined the learning and development of intercultural competence by AFS students from nine different countries. Selected results that compare students who changed host families with those who did not are presented below.

Background to the Study

In one of the largest studies of its type, Hammer (2005) examined the experience of over 1500 exchange students from nine countries who participated in the AFS year-long high-school exchange program. The study also involved over 600 friends nominated by the exchange students as the control group. In addition, responses from the AFS students' parents and their host families in the nine countries were also obtained.

The study used a number of measures to assess intercultural competence, foreign-language speaking ability, knowledge of other cultures, anxiety around other cultures, the social networks and friendships the AFS students maintained across cultures, and the extent to which the students were interculturally effective and demonstrated the values that correspond with the AFS mission (e.g., an awareness of the dignity and worth of every human being, respect for cultural differences, the ability to act as a responsible global citizen). The main measure for assessing intercultural competence was the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer et al., 2003). All of the measures used in the study obtained good reliabilities and had demonstrated cross-cultural validity testing (see Hammer [2005] for more information). In addition, many of the AFS students also completed critical incident electronic journals (e-journals) at four different times during their study-abroad program. A rigorous pretest, posttest, post-posttest, control-group design was used. The post-posttests were administered 6 months after the students' return to their home countries. Overall, this study represents one of the most comprehensive studies of international study abroad undertaken in recent years.

The overall (significant) findings of the study showed that the AFS year-long high-school exchange program leads to significant increases in students' knowledge of the host culture, moves students forward dramatically in their spoken fluency in the host country's language, increases both their intercultural friendships and time spent with people from other cultures upon their return to their own country, significantly lowers their level of anxiety or discomfort around other cultures, and leads to a significant increase in intercultural competence, specifically for students who began the program with a polarised view of other cultures.

Can We Predict Who Will Change Host Families?

For the local AFS volunteers, helping students through a family change can be stressful and demanding on their time. It can also strain the relationship with the local host family and sometimes with the community as well. As one student indicated,

I tried for three months to get accustomed to the lifestyle of my host family, but it became more and more difficult, and I talked to my host family, and we came to the decision that it was better to change family. I felt a little "stupid" after this decision, because I was not able to get used to the lifestyle of the family. And it was also a strange feeling that I had to move away from the family, and it is still strange when I run into the family somewhere.

One of the overall findings indicated that first impressions count. As one student suggested,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In answer to your questions, I must say that I have not yet had any problems with my family and that I am quite pleased about that. I am sorry that I cannot report anything to you, but I can tell you that AFS found a perfect family for me and that I am very pleased about that. I want to thank you very much, and I hope that you don't mind receiving this piece of news even if it may not be very informative for you.

As indicated earlier, specific measures were administered to the AFS students, the students' parents (prior to the students' leaving for their study-abroad program), and the students' host families (upon arrival of the students). These measures all obtained satisfactory reliabilities in the study and had previously been found to be cross-culturally valid (for a full description of the various scales used in the study, see Hammer [2005]). The following measures were used to assess the impact of change of families:

1. *Cultural Knowledge* (AFS student's level of information concerning the host country's political, economic, and other systems). This was completed by both the host family and by the student.
2. *Host Language Fluency* (student's level of fluency in the host culture's language). This measure was adapted from the U.S. Foreign Service Institute's Interagency Language Roundtable Scale, a "set of verbal descriptions defining six levels of general language proficiency, ranging from no functional proficiency in the language (Level 0) up to proficiency equivalent in all respects to that of an educated native speaker (Level 5)" (Interagency Language Roundtable, n.d.). This measure was completed by the host family.
3. *Intercultural Anxiety* (student's level of anxiety and discomfort in interacting with people from different cultures).
4. *Intercultural Competence* (degree to which the student is able to shift cultural frame of reference and adapt behaviour to the host culture, as measured by the IDI).

5. *Intercultural Effectiveness* (student's ability to relate to people from different cultures). This was completed by the student's parents and by the host family.
6. *Student's Demonstration of AFS Values* (degree to which the student is able to demonstrate behaviour consistent with AFS values). This was completed by the student's parents and by the host family.
7. *Intercultural Friends* (percentage of the student's friends who are from other cultures).
8. *Intercultural Interactions* (percentage of time during which the student interacts with people from other cultures).
9. *Intercultural Satisfaction* (degree to which student enjoyed the international study-abroad experience).

How Students' Preparation Affects Number of Host Families

We examined three different host family experiences, using one-way ANOVAs (analysis of variance): (a) students who remained with the original host family; (b) students who had two host families; and, (c) students who had three or more host families during their year-long program. Looking at the pretest scores on the measures, we discovered that those who stayed with one host family had created a better first impression with that family than those who had multiple host families. First, the host families of these students rated their AFS students as having significantly more cultural knowledge about the host country than did those of students who lived with two or more host families.¹ Second, the host families rated the one-family students as having a significantly higher fluency level in the host language. One student's e-journal spoke directly to why greater host-language fluency may be related to more stable family placements:

My family sat down with me and slowly explained why I can't take long showers and that everything was ok but they needed me to follow this rule. My Spanish wasn't too good then but they took their time and explained so I understood. I felt a little foolish for not understanding them the first time they explained the rules. I am very sure that my misunderstanding of Spanish and of my family's financial situation are the reasons that my extended shower was kind of a big thing with them.

Other than these two first impressions, no other measures in the pretest showed any significant differences in terms of the number of family placements a student had. That is, there were no differences among students who had one family compared to students who had multiple family placements in terms of the host families' rating of the students' intercultural effectiveness and the degree to which the students demonstrated values consistent with the AFS mission. Further, the results did not indicate that students who were less interculturally competent when they began the program were any more likely to change families.

¹ All findings presented in this article are significant at the .05 level. For a more detailed statistical presentation of these findings, see Hammer (2005).

Students' own ratings of their host-country knowledge and of their level of anxiety around other cultures also showed no relation to changes of host family. Nor did we find any relationship between the number of friends students had from other cultures at the pretest phase, or the extent of their intercultural networks, and the number of host family placements the students had.

In short, there seems little benefit in trying to assess the students' levels of intercultural competence or other factors prior to the study-abroad experience in an effort to reduce the need for host family changes. Attention is perhaps better directed toward helping students and their host families deal with specific issues that arise during the program. In terms of preparation, however, the study did suggest that there is value in improving language fluency prior to departure, and perhaps in improving the students' general knowledge about the host cultures, though it should be noted that the students' self-ratings of their cultural knowledge were not predictive of changes in host family placements.

Effects of Host-Family Changes on the Student at the End of the Program

One-way ANOVAs were run on the posttest measures to examine differences among students who remained with one family and students who had multiple host families. Significant differences at the conclusion of the program were found in three areas.

First, there were differences in host-language fluency. Students who stayed with just one host family on average had significantly higher levels of language fluency as rated by their host families at the end of the experience than those who lived with two or more host families. A possible explanation of the relationship between language gains and number of host families is that host families often form a very strong bond with their students over the course of the year, and this relationship can remain a lifelong, albeit long-distance, family-like bond. Previous research conducted by AFS (AFS Intercultural Programs, 1993), shows that two of the many factors related to the durability of the first host-family placement are the key role played by the host-family siblings and the host parents' degree of authoritarianism. We can thus think of foreign-language gain as an outcome of the very close connection to just one family. However, it could also be true that students who are more effective at learning the language in their daily practice with the host families become more connected to those families. This was reflected in one student's e-journal comment:

Now, I'm half-way through my trip and can offer an objective opinion about my experience up to this point. It's true, there were dark moments when I doubted my decisions and the choices I made but I never doubted myself and the fact that I would have been able to face any situation presented to me, and that's how it was. Even the fact of having changed families after being here 2 months made me

understand that there were obstacles that I could not overcome in order to fully live out my experience here. Even the language factor that seemed to me to be one of the hardest obstacles to overcome turned out to be easier than I had thought. Facing things day after day, you look back and realize that, step by step, you have already scaled half the mountain.

Second, shortly after their return home, students who were placed with just one host family also showed significantly less anxiety than did those who were with two or more host families. Since changing host families is often an emotional strain for the participant, it is not surprising to find that the levels of anxiety around other cultures would be higher for those who had been through this experience. They may be concerned about repeating past behaviors that led to misunderstandings, or they may simply not feel as confident and at ease because of their difficult experience. This finding also supports a related finding from the study: namely, the small but significant inverse correlation between intercultural anxiety level and language level.

Finally, when surveyed shortly after their return home, students who lived with just one host family also reported significantly higher levels of intercultural satisfaction with their study-abroad experience than did students who had two or more host families. As a student who remained with one host family reported,

I would love to help your cause, but I have a little problem and it's that, thanks God, I haven't had any problems or clashes with my host family here in Minnesota. They have treated me like another of their children and I have loved them very much.

More surprising, perhaps, are the differences that were *not* found. No significant differences were found between students with one host family and those with multiple host families in gains in their intercultural competence as measured by the IDI or in overall ratings of their intercultural effectiveness as assessed by their parents or host parents. Further, at the end of the year there were no differences in cultural knowledge of the host culture as rated by the students themselves or by their host families. Also, there was no difference in the extent to which the students demonstrated the AFS values, according to their host families, and no difference in the extent to which they had friends in other cultures or in the amount of time they spent interacting with people from other cultures after they returned home. This leaves us confident that students who must change host families during the course of their year abroad are generally as able to succeed in most areas as those who remain all year with the same host family. These findings are further supported by results obtained when we examined the effects of multiple host family placements over time – 6 months after the students reintegrated back to their home culture.

Diminishing Differences in the Longer Term

As time goes by, there are fewer and fewer visible effects of the change of host family. Six months after the students return home, they and their parents were again surveyed. We could not reassess the students' language ability at this stage, since the host families were not in constant contact with the students to make this assessment. Therefore, while we cannot draw any further firm conclusions about the impact over time of host-family changes on language ability, we do know that language achievement typically remains, depending on the degree to which the student continues to use the language. We also know anecdotally that many of the AFS students continue to study their host country language in their schools upon return. Therefore, we suggest it is probable that the increased language fluency obtained by students with one host family will likely continue over time.

In the other two areas, however, differences that were found at the time of the posttest disappeared 6 months later. The greater anxiety experienced by students with more than one host family, compared to those who had just one host family, was no longer evident after the students were home for several months. Further, we no longer found a significant difference between students who had one host family and those who had two host families in intercultural satisfaction with the experience 6 to 8 months after return, though the few students who had three or more host families were still somewhat less satisfied with their experience than those who had just one host family. Also, the parents of the students who had more than one host family rated just as highly the students' intercultural effectiveness and demonstration of AFS values as did those who had more than one host family. Finally, no significant differences in intercultural competence as measured by the IDI distinguished students with just one host family from those with two or more host families.

Overall Conclusions

The findings reported in this article represent a portion of the results obtained from a three-year, comprehensive examination of the intercultural study-abroad experience of 1500 AFS and 600 control-group high-school students from nine countries. The results provide a more nuanced picture of the impact of single host-family placements compared to multiple host-family placements.

Overall, differences in language fluency seemed to be consistently significant prior to the students' leaving for their study-abroad experience, immediately upon completion of the program, and in all probability, over the longer term after returning home. Students who lived with one family had significantly greater host-culture language fluency compared with students who lived with more than one host family. Further, this fluency, as rated by the host families themselves, remained greater at the conclusion of the program (and likely continued following the program).

Other than host-culture language fluency, however, all other measures showed clearly that students who lived with more than one host family, upon return to their home culture, were not significantly different from students who had only one family placement. Specifically, as measured upon the students' return to their home country, multiple host-family placements had no significant impact (compared to single-family placements) on intercultural anxiety, intercultural competence, ratings of the students' intercultural effectiveness, ratings of the students' demonstration of behaviour consistent with AFS values, percentage of time students spent interacting with people from other cultures, and percentage of friends who were from other cultures. Further, there were no significant differences in overall satisfaction with the study-abroad experience between students who stayed with one host family and students who stayed with two families. There was a slight difference in satisfaction, though, between students who stayed with three or more host families and students who had only one host family.

Overall, while program volunteers may hear various complaints when the subject of a new host-family placement is brought up, the reality is that multiple host-family placements are not particularly detrimental to the overall experience and learning – including the development of intercultural competence – of the study-abroad experience as developed by AFS Intercultural Programs. ©

**MITCHELL R. HAMMER
and BETSY HANSEL**

Mitchell R. Hammer, Ph.D is President in Hammer Consulting, LLC, an intercultural consulting firm and Professor Emeritus of International Peace and Conflict Resolution at the American University in Washington D.C. His work focuses on intercultural competence, cross-cultural adaptation, and crisis and conflict dynamics across cultures. His 1997 book, (co-editors: R.G. Rogan, M.R. Hammer & C. Van Zandt), *Dynamic Processes of Crisis Negotiation: Theory, Research and Practice*, was given the "Outstanding Book Award" in 1998 by the International Association of Conflict Management. He has published widely, and won awards for his scholarship from the Speech Communication Association, the Academy of Management, the International Communication Association and the Society of Intercultural Education, Training and Research.

Betsy Hansel, Ph.D has worked with AFS Intercultural Programs in New York since 1980, where she is currently Head of Research and Evaluation. In this role, she leads the program evaluation survey conducted annually by dozens of AFS organizations around the world, and is responsible for AFSs' international research efforts. She has a strong professional interest in enhancing the educational content of AFS programs. Dr. Hansel received her Ph.D. in geography from Syracuse University (1985) and has presented on a wide variety of intercultural topics in numerous academic and professional conferences in Europe, Latin America and the United States. In 1991 she was the recipient of an Indo-American Fellowship which sponsored her research in India on re-entry. Her book, *The Exchange Student Survival Kit* (Intercultural Press, 1993) is now being revised for a new edition in 2007. A native of the United States, Dr. Hansel also speaks Spanish and French.

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