

**Cultural Immersion through a study abroad program and its role in changing students' attitude
towards different cultures**

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Abstract:

As the world becomes more and more globalized, the need of intercultural understanding becomes greater. Study abroad programs are one of the ways of exposing young college students to other cultures through service learning programs or enrollment into university or college programs in other countries. This study was conducted to examine cultural competence and needs assessment skills in different culture of College of Agriculture undergraduate students from Purdue University. The study analyzed 10 students participating in semester long course on international engagement that included a one-week long study abroad trip to rural areas of Peru, as well as pre, during and post trip instruction. Findings from this study are based on student surveys administered before, during and after the trip. Results revealed that there was an increase in trend on importance for having cultural competence and needs assessment skills. There was also a statistical significance difference on improvement for cultural competence and needs assessment skills across time. It can be concluded that the experiential learning through this study abroad course influenced positively the students' cultural awareness and international engagement skills. Improving intercultural understanding is demonstrated by the student surveys, however sufficient time is needed for cultural immersion, and the small size of the group are limitations of this work. On both the undergraduate and graduate level, there is a need for promoting well-structured study abroad programs, which can easily be assessed for their impacts to the beneficiaries, locally and globally. There is also a need for comparing between students who participated in the program and those who are learning the culture in the content without hands on experience.

Keywords: Cultural awareness, study abroad, international engagement, experiential learning