

# **Paradigms and Patterns: Assessing the Multicultural Aptitude of Students at a Midwest University**

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*The need for international experiences has never been greater, but what is the acceptance and participation on a regional level? This purpose of this paper is to consider the interest level of students at a Midwest university compared to national trends and the factors that contributes to or subtracts from the students' level of participation. This project is attempting to determine the level of openness and support of international education programs on a regional level compared to national trends. Also under consideration will be regional perceptions for the need of international experiences.*

The importance for international experiences for today's college students has been recognized for its ability to gain knowledge of different cultures, cultural communication skills and cultural aptitudes. The future for all of today's post-secondary students in all disciplines across the campus now includes an international facet due to the interconnectivity of the global markets. This mandates that students who wish to position themselves as leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must recognize and prepare for this interconnectivity. Even if students do not see themselves leaving domestic soil, knowledge and competencies of cultural diversities as managers and team members will increase their marketability.

Nationally, evidence shows that a wide majority of students, parents, and faculty approve and support international experiences during their academic years, that international experiences and study abroad programs increases the value of undergraduate education. While there is this evidence that shows strong support, participation rates, while increasing, still remain low. Prominent factors listed for the low participation rates include cost, interruption of academic goals, and lack of language skills.

## **BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

*Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness – all foes to real understanding. Likewise, tolerance or broad, wholesome charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in our little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.*

Mark Twain  
*Innocents Abroad* (Twain, 1869)

It is with common agreement that today's college students will be facing a labor market that is global in scope. Not only is the labor market globally interconnected and interdependent requiring experience and skills that demonstrates this awareness but also competency of working with and among different cultures. It is becoming increasingly important for institutions of higher education recognize their roles in increasing this awareness and developing these skills by providing focused international experiences for

their students. (For the purpose of this paper, the term “focused international experience” is defined as: engaging in an international academic study or work program that focuses on development of knowledge and skills.

While the current “paradigm,” or mindset, is that a focused international experience is a necessary and beneficial component of preparing for today’s labor market, the “patterns,” or sensitivity to these skills, is contradictive. In the 2002-2003 academic year, only 11 percent of the graduates of U.S. post-secondary institutions were involved in any type of focused international experience. (Institute of International Education, 2003)

On a national level, the lack of participation does not appear to be due to an absence of awareness. It is hypothesized that this lack of participation is due to a lack of substantial incentive, explicitly and implicitly, to compensate for the cost of this type of decision. Economic theory states that decisions are based on a marginal analysis of costs versus benefits. What are the perceived costs and benefits? Also, how do these paradigms and patterns found on a national level compare to those found on a more focused, regional, level?

In July of 2007, a Midwest University was awarded a grant from the U.S. Department of Education Title VI B Business and International Education Program (BIE). The BIE program entitled **Global Economic Gardening: An Alliance for Business and International Education in Rural Nebraska** was designed to change the current paradigm among our younger population so they begin thinking about growing global entrepreneurial capacity in Nebraska's by seeking global links, acquiring global business knowledge, and engaging in global economic growth to prepare them to be globally-focused business leaders.

Through alliances with regional leaders in government, business, and economic development, activities in this program are designed to help the targeted populations in rural Nebraska recognize and develop opportunities for engagement in global business by continuing to partner with the universities and businesses in Europe and Asia with which the University has established relationships.

Specifically, the program's objectives and activities are:

- Objective One (Acquiring Global Business Knowledge): The grant will enable the college to (1) introduce an International Business minor in the undergraduate program, (2) implement international internships and study abroad opportunities for undergraduates, (3) create a web site to inform students, faculty and community about international business opportunities and experiences, (4) develop a speaker database of faculty and students who have international business experiences, and (5) hold global awareness seminars for students. Further, to encourage the understanding and embracement of the possibilities of global entrepreneurship in the region's K-12 student population, a web-based, pod-casted international entrepreneurship curriculum with complementary lesson plans will be created and made available to the regions elementary and secondary teachers.

- Objective Two (Seeking Global Links): The grant will enable the College to strengthen its faculty through participation in international conferences and study programs. This will create an environment conducive to teaching, learning, and scholarship in international business.

- Objective Three (Engaging In Global Economic Growth): The grant will enable the College to provide networking opportunities for entrepreneurs, business owners, and undergraduate students while learning about and engaging in international business practices and opportunities through (1) seminars and professional development programs, and (2) a non-credit certificate program in International Business and Technology.

After two years of implementation of the BIE grant, the purpose of this paper is to determine the current success of this BIE grant and the challenges that are still present. Have the extra resources aligned the paradigms of the students at this Midwest University with their patterns? Have the additional exposures to the opportunities available provided the necessary incentive to participate in international experiences?

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The base of literature that substantiates the need of a focused international experience is considerable. The review of literature centers around three main areas of focus. The first centers on the fact that the goal of higher education is to prepare *culturally* competent individuals. This competency goes beyond the availability of focused international experiences but also a domestic learning environment that provides exposure to international students. (Astin, *Four Critical Years*, 1977) (Astin, 1993) (Chickering, 1993) (Smith, 2000). This focus is particularly important because a common perception among students may be that their chosen career will not require international travel. The obvious myopic analysis behind this thought is that it ignores the obvious that, while their position may not require international travel, it is more than probable that they will be working with other cultures on a daily basis. Diversity on college campuses from international students provides a relevant and important source for this exposure. (Calleja, 2000) Having a base of international students allows for increasing their sensitivity towards and ability to work with different cultures and backgrounds.

The second area of focus found in the literature is that while the knowledge of different cultures will be beneficial, it does not replace the competency that would be gained from a focused international experience. (Ledwith, 2001) Theoretical exposure does not replace the ability to function with diversity. This function is most efficiently accomplished through actual international experiences. Sensitivity to differences in mores, traditions, and ethnicities are not absorbed into practice simply by the interactions found in a classroom. Affective learning requires an incorporation of relevancy to understand and appreciate. In other words, it is not enough to recognize the differences, but requires assimilation. (Slate, 1993, October)

The third area of focus is that a focused international experience is a prime method to start the process of understanding how to function in a global economy. (Ortiz, 2004) Contributing to the second area of focus is the growing body of information that the process of assimilating diversity includes awareness, understanding and competency of other cultures. This process requires active learning via actual international exposure. (Arpan, 1993)

Finally, beyond the professional benefits possible for students, personal benefits are also important. In a study by Angene Wilson, these personal benefits were broken into four main areas. First is the gain of substantive knowledge. It is a dynamic, not static, knowledge of other cultures, world issues and global dynamics. Second focused international experiences provide perceptual understanding which is supported by a resistance to stereotyping, an inclination to empathize, and an increased ability to be open-minded. Third, focused international experiences, besides contributing to a student's resume, provides personal growth through the acceptance of self and others, responsibility and independence. Finally, students grow personally through increased interpersonal connections and the development of intercultural relations. (Wilson, 1993, Winter)

## METHODOLOGY

The national trend for focused international experiences, through a study abroad program among undergraduate students is increasing. And while also increasing, the rate of growth has been slower in Nebraska. (Table 1)

**TABLE 1**  
**U.S. STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS**

	<u>2005/2006</u>	<u>2006/2007</u>	<u>% Change</u>
U.S.	223,534	241,791	8.2
Nebraska	1,499	1,556	3.8

*Source: Institute of International Education, Open Doors 2008 (Institute of International Education, 2008)*

A regional state University was used to gauge the tendencies of its students to national propensities. The University is a public, residential university that consistently strives for a high quality, multi-dimensional learning environment. A progressive University of approximately 6,500 students, eighty-six percent of the undergraduate students lists Nebraska as their permanent residence, six percent are from other U.S. states and territories and eight percent are from other countries.

A survey (Appendix 1) was used to gauge the level of the perceptions of the students and determine if these perceptions matched their mindsets. Also of interest was the perceived costs of a focused international experience and what format is better suited for their designed career path.

The following classes were selected for distribution of the survey.

- Two Personal Financial Management Classes: As a general studies course the students in these classes are primarily freshmen and sophomores and provided a cross-campus representation.
- Four Contemporary of Economics Classes: Also a general studies course for economics, these classes consist primarily of freshmen and sophomores and provides the study a cross-campus representation.
- Four Principles of Economics Classes (Micro and Macro): A general studies course taken primarily by freshmen and sophomores, representing a heavier concentration of business students.
- Two Upper level Economic Classes: Primarily juniors and seniors with declared business majors.

The survey was given to 391 students representing a cross-campus sample of the students.

## RESULTS

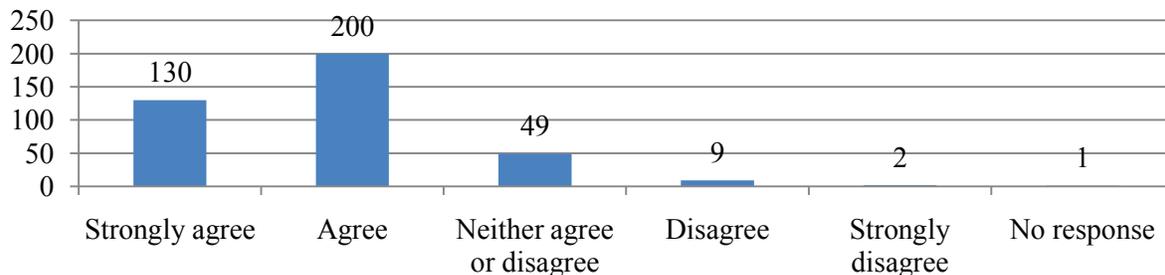
At the beginning of the Fall 2009 semester the survey was distributed to 391 students. Among those surveyed, 12.3 percent were Freshmen, 49.4 were Sophomores, 24.5 percent were Juniors, 13.5 percent were Seniors, and 0.3 percent did not respond.

What is the mindset of the students surveyed? How do their patterns relate to these paradigms?

While several points of interest presented itself in the aggregate results of this survey, this section will be contained to students' paradigms and patterns.

**CHART 1  
PARADIGM 1**

**BARRIERS IN THE WORLD ARE DISAPPEARING AND SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE WILL HAVE TO BE ABLE TO WORK WITH PEOPLE FROM OTHER COUNTRIES AND CULTURES**



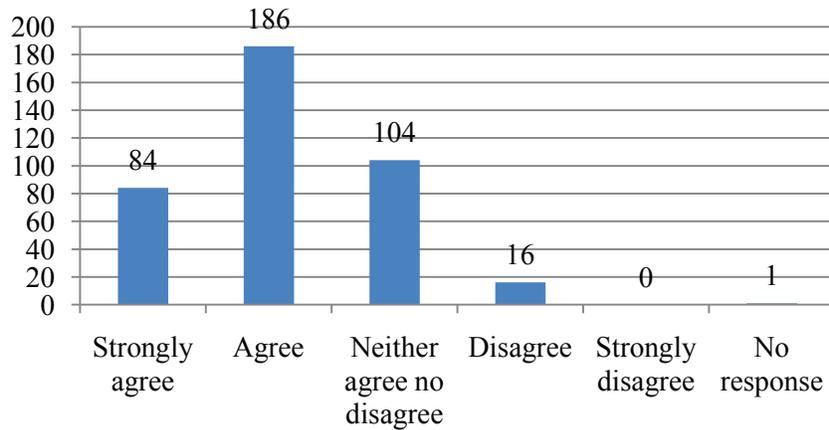
**TABLE 2  
PARADIGM 1**

**BARRIERS IN THE WORLD ARE DISAPPEARING AND SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE WILL  
HAVE TO BE ABLE TO WORK  
WITH PEOPLE FROM OTHER COUNTRIES AND CULTURES**

	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Strongly Agree	33.2
Agree	51.2
Neither Agree or Disagree	12.5
Disagree	2.3
Strongly Disagree	0.5
No Response	0.3

**CHART 2  
PARADIGM 2**

**INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND  
EDUCATION WILL BE AN ADVANTAGE IN  
GETTING INTO GRADUATE  
OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL**



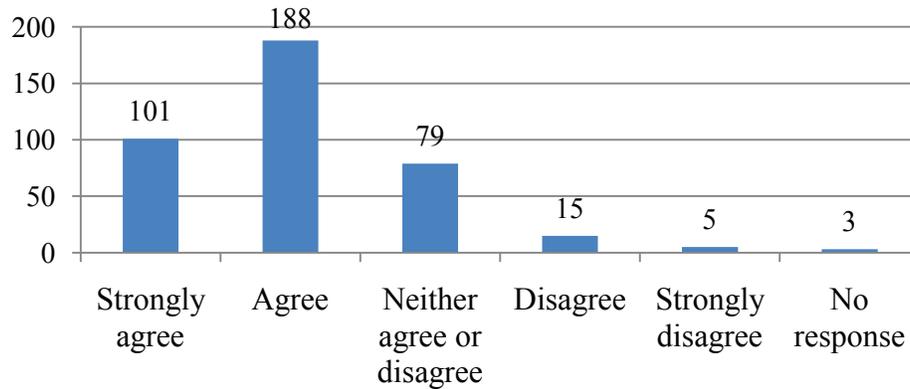
**TABLE 3  
PARADIGM 2**

**INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION WILL BE AN ADVANTAGE IN  
GETTING INTO GRADUATE OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL**

	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	21.5
Agree	47.6
Neither Agree or Disagree	26.6
Disagree	4.0
Strongly Disagree	0.0
No Response	0.3

**CHART 3  
PARADIGM 3**

**HAVING INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES WILL BE BENEFICIAL  
TO MY CONTRIBUTION AS A MEMBER OF THE LABOR  
FORCE AND A CITIZEN OF A GLOBAL ECONOMY**



**TABLE 4  
PARADIGM 3**

**HAVING INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES WILL BE BENEFICIAL TO MY CONTRIBUTION AS A MEMBER OF THE LABOR FORCE AND A CITIZEN OF A GLOBAL ECONOMY**

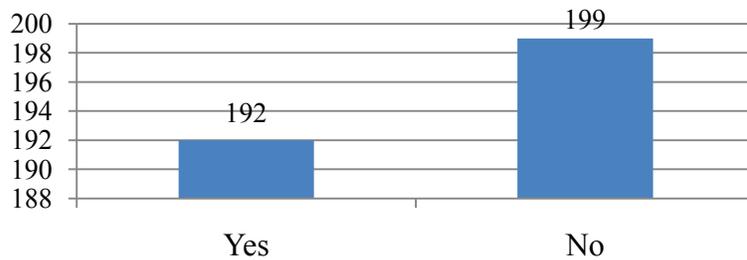
	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Strongly Agree	25.8
Agree	48.1
Neither Agree or Disagree	20.2
Disagree	3.8
Strongly Disagree	1.3
No Response	0.8

In a national poll of college-bound high school seniors, 55 percent indicated that they would participate in a college study abroad. An additional 26 percent had a strong desire to study abroad. (American Council on Education, Art & Science Group LLC, and the College Board, 2008) But what happens when reality meets idealism? When our high school students are immersed into the programs of higher education do their expectations change?

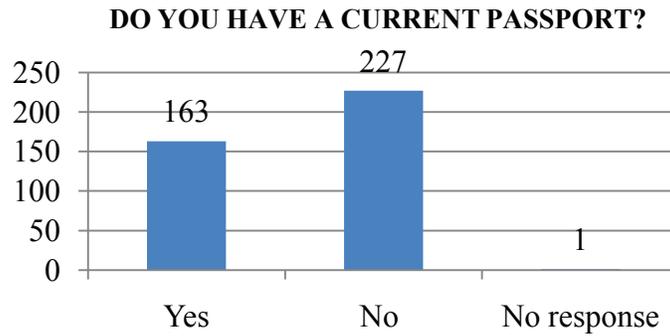
According to the respondents of this study survey, patterns differ from their mindsets.

**CHART 4  
PATTERN 1**

**DO YOU SEE YOURSELF TRAVELING INTERNATIONALLY?**



**CHART 5  
PATTERN 2**



**TABLE 5  
PATTERN 1**

**DO YOU SEE YOURSELF TRAVELING INTERNATIONALLY?**

	Percentage (%)
Yes	49.1
No	50.9

**TABLE 6  
PATTERN 2**

**DO YOU HAVE A CURRENT PASSPORT?**

	Percentage (%)
Yes	41.7
No	58.0
No response	0.3

An apparent disconnect is observed between the mindset of the students and the patterns of their actions. This requires an explanation of why? What do the students perceive as challenges or obstacles to participating in a recognized benefit for their career path? The obvious indicator would be that, for the students, perceived costs outweigh perceived benefits.

**TABLE 6**

**WHICH PERTAINS TO YOU AS A REASON FOR NOT WANTING TO STUDY ABROAD OR PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIP?**

	Percentage (%)		Percentage (%)
Worried about cost	62.9	Do not want to delay degree	29.2
Do not speak a foreign language well enough	53.5	Would not fit in with culture	7.4
Will take too much time from academic goals	18.4	Not worth the time	3.3
Interfere with social or extracurricular life/sports	26.6	Not worth the expense	5.9
Anxiety/concern about security or acts of terrorism/recent world events	11.5	Other	6.7
No interest	15.3	Don't Know	4.9

Sixty-eight percent listed what amounts to explicit costs as a reason for their hesitancy. The nominal costs of an international study abroad or internship ranked highest among the students concerns. As more and more institutions of higher education provide subsidies and other forms of financial support for these focused international experiences, this challenge should diminish. However, the implicit costs also dominated their concerns at almost fifty-one percent. Time is a strong non-price determinant for students' decisions. This factor is an important challenge for higher education institutions. How can these perceptions be changed to address the benefits? For students in this mid-west University the support system of the students needs to also be addressed. The encouragement by faculty and parents will be required to help reinforce the need of international experiences as a benefit.

**SUMMARY AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS**

The discussion of the results of this survey was limited to students' paradigms and patterns. The observations from this survey reveal that students do understand and accept the importance of focused international experiences. However, it also revealed that the majority of students find the costs, implicit and explicit, as strong deterrents to the benefits perceived. The results of this survey strongly highlight the need to provide substantial information, relevant to them, that acts as a buttress to their objections of cost.

The support systems that exist in the lives of the students will provide the strongest reinforcement for a decision to take time for an international experience. To participate in an international experience of any duration typically requires a loss of credit hours for graduation, income from jobs and an extension to their time as a student.

Faculty can assist in providing a support for this change. By sharing focused international experiences, talk becomes action and has more meaning to students. The role of faculty in encouraging and supporting focused international experiences for students is not being sufficiently utilized across the campus. Future studies should include a more focused section on the role of faculty and a comparison of this role on the national and regional level.

Also of importance to most students in this Midwest institution is the parental support system. It is recommended that any future study include the perceptions and concerns of parents concerning international experiences.

This study is the first step in determining the strengths of an active program and how to change challenges into strengths.

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