



Evaluating the international dimension in an undergraduate curriculum by assessing students' intercultural sensitivity



Sarah R. Gordon*, Mwarumba Mwavita

School of Educational Foundations, Leadership, & Aviation, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, USA

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ABSTRACT

This formative, outcome-oriented, theory-based evaluation research study assessed the effectiveness of requiring an international ('I') course by measuring students' intercultural sensitivity (IS) at the start and end of a semester. Findings revealed that students' IS scores did not change regardless of the type of class in which the student was enrolled and were not significantly different based on gender, age, ethnicity, undergraduate classification, or number of 'I' courses taken. There were significant differences in IS based on religion, traveling outside the US, participating in a study abroad course, and the number of cultural events in which the student had participated. Regression analysis confirmed that religious affiliation and number of times traveled outside the US were significant predictors of IS. This study is an example of the use of theory-based evaluation in an educational system and provides important insights into what experiences affect college students' IS.

Since the 1970s, colleges and universities have increasingly been tasked with helping students become more adept at navigating the multicultural and global world in which we live (Bardhan, 2003; Griffith, Wolfed, Armon, Rios, & Liu, 2016; Price & Gascoigne, 2006). In fact, some even suggest that the higher education environment has a social and ethical obligation to develop students into global citizens (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). Today's college students are obtaining their postsecondary education in a highly global environment that includes attending classes with international students, taking courses led by professors from other countries, taking part in study abroad experiences, and witnessing an international presence on TV shows and news outlets. As such, administrators and faculty at today's colleges and universities should be asking themselves, 'How well prepared are our students for this global world in which we live and work?' (Deardorff, 2011, 77).

The focus of international education in colleges and universities has changed from diplomatic intercultural exchange to globalism and preparing students to function in an international and multicultural context; in other words, the focus is now on improving understanding, competence, and intercultural relations (Lee & Rice, 2007). General education requirements have shifted to include these ideas, as intercultural competence and diversity are among some of the most important skills and developmental issues that must be addressed within learning outcomes for today's college students (Deardorff, 2011; Griffith et al., 2016). Currently, college curricula not only include strict academic requirements but also provisions for providing students with

certain skills and attitudes that will help them navigate an increasingly diverse global society (King, Perez, & Shim, 2013). The concept of 'internationalization at home' programs, which provide students with information about other cultures and countries and foster a sense of global citizenship in general educational curriculum, has come about in many academic institutions (Harrison & Peacock 2010; Prieto-Flores, Feu, & Casademont, 2016). However, questions have been raised about these programs, as there are significant hurdles to their success. One such hurdle centers on the difficulty of facilitating the intercultural development of students (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). Further, the effectiveness of these programs is difficult to assess because choosing an outcome measure is complex and the options these programs provide are diverse (Griffith et al., 2016).

When discussing the goals of an international or diverse education, many different terms have been used, including 'multiculturalism, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, international communication, transcultural communication, global competence, cross-cultural awareness, and global citizenship' (Deardorff, 2011, 66). This evaluation focuses on intercultural sensitivity as an outcome in higher education. Intercultural sensitivity, as used in this study, is the 'emotional desire of a person to acknowledge, appreciate, and accept cultural differences' (Fritz, Mollenberg, & Chen, 2002, 3). Thus, intercultural sensitivity is *cognitive* and *attitudinal* in nature (Altshuler, Sussman, & Kachur, 2003). Chen and Starosta (2000) assert that intercultural sensitivity is comprised of five components: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction

* Corresponding author at: 310 Willard Hall, Stillwater, OK 74074, USA.
E-mail address: sarah.gordon@okstate.edu (S.R. Gordon).

confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness.

At our institution, part of the undergraduate general education experience includes a provision that all students must take a course designated 'I', for international. This course designation/requirement is not unique to our institution and is common in the US (e.g., other institutions with similar requirements include Texas State University, the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV), the University of Utah, the University of California at Berkeley, and Iowa State University). While our university has incorporated international education and appreciation for diversity and other cultures into degree requirements, the effectiveness of these courses in effecting students' intercultural sensitivity has not been thoroughly examined. The purpose of this formative, outcome-oriented evaluation research study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the 'I' course by measuring students' intercultural sensitivity at the start and end of the semester in which the student takes the 'I' class. This study was guided by the following evaluation research questions:

- 1) Do students' intercultural sensitivity scores change after taking an 'I' course?
- 2) Are students' intercultural sensitivity scores influenced by demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, classification in school, and previous intercultural experience?
- 3) Which student characteristics best predict students' intercultural sensitivity?

1. Context of the study

This evaluation research study was conducted at a Midwestern US land-grant university with an enrollment of over 25,000 students. The institution offers over 200 undergraduate and graduate degree programs, with the average undergraduate program requiring 120 h of coursework. Regardless of major, all undergraduates at this institution are required to complete at least 40 h of general education courses including at least one course that carries university-assigned designation 'I' (international). Per university guidelines, at least 51% the content of these courses (as indicated on the syllabus) must emphasize contemporary cultures outside the United States. The course syllabi of 'I' courses are reviewed by a committee of faculty and must receive approval from that committee in order for the course to carry the 'I' designation. There are over 100 courses that carry the 'I' designation in over 30 academic departments, spanning all six colleges within the university.

1.1. Theoretical foundations of the study

This study was guided by theory in two primary ways. First, this study was designed as an evaluation research study, which means it used social research methods for evaluative purposes (Powell, 2006). Because this study focused in part on the process and outcome of an institutional policy or requirement, the evaluation research approach is appropriate (Weiss, 1998). With regard to evaluation approach, the Theory Based Evaluation (TBE) approach (Chen & Rossi, 1983; Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen 2004; Rogers, Petrosino, Huebner, & Hacsí, 2000) guided the selected outcome in this study (intercultural sensitivity) as well as the focus of data collection (gathering information from students themselves). TBE 'uses program theory as a tool for (1) understanding the program to be evaluated, and (2) guiding the evaluation' (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004). In TBE, *theory* often refers to '... nothing more than a few simple assumptions about why the program should work' (Bickman 1987, 6). TBE helps identify the processes or mechanisms through which a program or policy achieves its ultimate outcome (Rogers et al., 2000). The theory this evaluation research study is based on is that requiring undergraduates to take an 'I' course will expose them to other cultural perspectives to help them understand other cultures/people different than themselves and increase their

intercultural sensitivity.

This 'theory' statement was developed after the researchers spoke with administrators and faculty familiar with the approval of the course designation and the assessment of the general education curriculum. In actuality, the goals of the program are somewhat ambiguous, the ways in which instructors accomplish these goals are not clear, and the intended outcome of taking the 'I' course is not clearly defined. According to Chen and Rossi (1983), one goal of theory based evaluation is to help clarify the intended effects of programs and thus aid in selecting an outcome variable(s). Thus, in the present study, though 'intercultural sensitivity' is not stated as an outcome for the 'I' course requirement, this outcome variable was selected based on conversations with stakeholders and deemed appropriate by both stakeholders and the evaluators given the theory behind the requirement.

This study is also informed by Bennett's (1984) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which suggests that intercultural sensitivity is a concept that can be taught and learned. Bennett's (1984) DMIS is based on the ideas that 1) cultures differ in their views of the world; 2) people can and do perceive these differences as problematic and even threatening; 3) people employ a range of strategies to avoid 'confronting the implications of fundamental difference' (181); and 4) concepts must be internalized in order for development to take place. The DMIS model asserts that intercultural sensitivity develops along a continuum: when individuals improve in their ability to subjectively understand and experience cultural differences, their intercultural sensitivity (and in turn, intercultural competence) improves (Bennett, 1984).

2. Procedures, sample, and measure

The sample for this study consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in an 'I' course and a random sample of students who had never taken an 'I' course. Students were invited to participate in the study (via email) at two points during the semester: once during late August/early September (baseline data phase) and again in late November/early December (posttest phase). Of the 259 respondents, 150 (57.9%) were enrolled in an 'I' course and 109 (42.1%) had never been enrolled in an 'I' course. After students completed 85% of their coursework (14 weeks), all students who responded to the baseline survey were sent an email inviting them to participate in the posttest phase of the study. One hundred fourteen students responded to the post-test survey (44% of students who completed the pretest). Of those students, 67 (58.8%) were enrolled in an 'I' course and 47 (41.2%) had never taken an 'I' course.

The demographic information for students in this sample was similar to that of the overall undergraduate student population (see Table 1). Compared to the undergraduate student body in general, there were fewer males and more females in this sample; however, the percentages of students by classification were similar to the student body as a whole, and this sample had a higher percentage of freshman. This is not surprising given that students who have never taken an 'I' course are likely to be lower classmen.

The measure used to assess intercultural sensitivity was Chen and Starosta's (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). The stakeholders in this evaluation research study chose the ISS over other measures due to its shorter length, lack of cost, and its focus on intercultural sensitivity (a precursor to intercultural competence). The ISS consists of 24 items and five subscales. Answers to each item are given using a five point likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. Total scores on the ISS can range from 24 to 120, with higher scores suggesting a person is more interculturally sensitive. Because this evaluation was exploratory in nature, the overall total score (rather than individual subscale scores) was used in this study. The ISS has been found to have concurrent, discriminant, and predictive validity (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Graf & Harland, 2005) and high internal consistency, with reported reliability

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