We All Need Somebody to Lean On: The effects of peer relationships on development of cross-cultural competencies
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Opportunity
The demand for individuals with global leadership capabilities has skyrocketed over the past two decades, and organizations and universities alike have recognized the need to develop individuals’ cross-cultural competencies.

This study examines the development of college students’ cross-cultural competencies before and after travelling on a short-term study abroad trip. We hypothesized that in the presence of a network of friends, social learning would occur more readily and support greater development of cross-cultural competencies. Findings suggest that students who reported travelling with at least one close friend experienced significant development while abroad, while the group of students who reported travelling with no close friends did not experience a significant shift in cross-cultural competencies. These findings indicate support for peer relationships as an important component of a developmental experience abroad and are also consistent with work done in experiential learning and social learning theory.

Results
I used a two-way repeated measures ANOVA to test the central hypothesis of this study, that students who travelled with at least one close friend would experience greater development than students who travelled with no close friends. As hypothesized, the interaction effect was significant ($F(1, 65) = 4.98, p < .05$), suggesting that students who had close friends prior to their departure showed the greatest increase in cross cultural competencies and that those with no close friends did not demonstrate significant development.

Approach
Students were invited to participate in pre- and post-trip surveys assessing their cross-cultural competencies. Pre-trip surveys were emailed to students 2-3 weeks prior to their departure date, and post-trip surveys were sent to students 2-3 weeks after their return.

As a measure of cross-cultural competencies, students responded to 63 items ($α=.887$) from the Cultural Agility Self-Assessment (Caligiuri, 2013), Herman and colleagues’ (2010) tolerance for ambiguity scale, and Ou and colleagues’ humility scale (2014) in pre- and post-trip surveys. Students were also asked how many students from the trip they would consider to be close friends. Students were grouped based on reported close friends pre-trip. The first group included students who reported no close friends pre-trip (N = 40), and the second included students who reported at least one close friend pre-trip (N = 27).

Impact
Conclusion: This study adds to the cross-cultural competency development literature by providing support for peer relationships as an important component of a developmental experience abroad. This is also consistent with work done on experiential and social learning theory.

Value Proposition: The unique feature about my innovation/research is: it provides implications for how we design developmental experiences abroad. This addresses the problem of understanding how social support can help individuals develop while abroad.

References