

# The Power of Being There: Study Abroad in Cuba and the Promotion of a “Culture of Peace”<sup>1</sup>

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If one of the main purposes of study abroad is to promote a greater understanding between members of the host and home nation via face-to-face relations and in-country living experiences, there is no place in the world where United States students studying abroad takes on more significance than it does in Cuba. Given a situation in which home and host nation, at least at a governmental level, view each other as the enemy and restrict and regulate travel between them, this is particularly important. In case of the US and Cuba, “being there” takes on a heightened power and may contribute significantly to bringing forth a “culture of peace”.

Each of this article’s authors led short-term study abroad programs to Cuba during 2004. The institution that hosted our sending institutions’ programs on site, *La Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO)*/Cuba, is our common link. FLACSO/Cuba’s director, Dr. Beatriz Díaz González, fervently believes that educational exchanges between the US and Cuba have played a significant role in promoting greater understanding between peoples of the two countries. She is convinced that US-Cuban exchanges have actively promoted a “culture of peace” in the otherwise tense and conflict-ridden relationship between Cuba and the US.

## **A Culture of Peace**

The most recent exposition and widespread diffusion of the concept of a culture of peace can be traced to UNESCO<sup>2</sup>. In 1990, UNESCO proposed “A Program for a Culture of Peace,” which envisions a culture of peace, in

contrast to the culture of war, which, it holds is not intrinsic to human-kind. The UNESCO authors contend that just as humans have invented and supported a culture that focuses upon war, they can create a culture that promotes peace. This represents an important shift in conceptualizing efforts of peace-promotion, moving away from peace-keeping towards peace-building.

The lynchpin of peace-building is facilitating a culture of peace. As UNESCO Representative Francisco José Lacayo Parajon explained,

The culture of peace, like all processes, needs acculturation and education; it is comprised of mental, psychological and even physical skills. No one is born knowing this, just as no one is born knowing how to walk or write. The culture of peace is something that must be built; it poses to us the enormous challenge of how to create a peace that is something more than just an historical parenthesis between wars. (personal interview with Skye Stephenson July, 2003; see also Lacayo Parajon, 1998)

Building a culture of peace involves both external and internal changes to promote and enhance it. The institutionalization of peace is fostered through external changes in organizations, laws, and other institutions. Internal changes in values, attitudes, knowledge, skills and abilities foster the interiorization of peace.

UNESCO outlined concrete ways in which peoples and nations can begin to move toward this lofty, albeit abstract, goal. Three specific sub-cultures are envisioned as various steps along the path towards a culture of peace. These are: a culture of difference, a culture of dialogue, and a culture of *concertación* (accord). Francisco Lacayo described these cultures:

We (at UNESCO) proposed the concept of a “culture of differences” because we felt that it was crucial for humanity to change its way of perceiving differences...we not only need to tolerate ideas and views that are different than ours, but also be educated about these differences.... A further step along the path towards a culture of peace lies in the culture of dialog. This dialogue consists of learning and listening to the other with the intention of trying to understand the other, to see the other both as connected to one and, at the same time, as something totally different from one. Even higher is the culture of *concertación* (accord). In Spanish this word has a metaphoric meaning,

giving the sense of a music concert. A concert is a group of different musical instruments: each one is different, each can play on its own, but when they come together they produce a quality of music that is superior to what any could produce on their own, and they do this without losing what their self-identity. For UNESCO this is possible for humans; we can promote a culture of *concertación* even with our adversaries. (personal interview with Skye Stephenson July, 2003)

In 2001, a decade after UNESCO first introduced the concept of a Culture of Peace, the United Nations passed Resolution 253<sup>3</sup> that hailed the profound significance of this concept and, for the first time ever, called for a global movement to forward the promotion of a culture of peace. The 2001-2010 period was declared the “International Decade for the Culture of Peace and Non-Violence” (cf., see [www.decade-culture-of-peace.org](http://www.decade-culture-of-peace.org)). We are currently halfway through this designated decade, and, as international educators, it behooves us to consider the potential connection between study abroad and promoting a culture of peace.<sup>4</sup>

## Genesis of this Project

The authors were convinced that study abroad in Cuba may contribute to the interiorization of a culture of peace through fostering changes in values, attitudes, knowledge, skills and abilities. As there was little concrete data addressing this outcome, the authors agreed to gather such data for presentation at the October 2004 Latin American Studies Association (LASA) meeting. We did not anticipate at the time the radical changes that would soon befall US-Cuban academic exchanges, due to a US government fiat that in effect closed down the ever-growing numbers of study programs in Cuba. Since beginning of the study reported in this article, all three authors’ programs have been suspended. The study’s originator, Dr. Díaz González, was denied a visa to attend the LASA conference. At present, FLACSO/Cuba no longer hosts US-based study abroad programs, although its programs from Canada and other countries continue in full operation. The current situation makes it all the more important to gather meaningful data regarding the effects of educational exchanges in the US-Cuban context.

While our primary motivation for carrying out this study has been to explore the power of US study abroad in Cuba for promoting a culture of peace, this work may have import beyond this specific setting for several

reasons. First, participant evaluations designed to document transformative changes in the direction of cross-cultural deepening<sup>5</sup> remain relatively rare in the study abroad field, despite growing clamor (e.g., Barber, 1983) from some international education circles to more systematically evaluate program outcomes (see Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004 for a review of the current status of this research). Even less common are studies that include groups from more than one sending institution and program, such as this study.

This study is of further interest because it exclusively examines short-term programs. In recent years, this program format has been rapidly increasing in prevalence (see Chin, 2003) but continues to provoke debate regarding program outcomes, particularly in relation to cross-cultural learning and adjustment. Many question how much an undergraduate really can learn about another country and about themselves in a cross-cultural setting in only a few weeks. With few exceptions (e.g., University of Delaware's 2004 study cited by Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004), there is little sound research available to address the question of whether short-term programs are anything more than just glorified tourism, packaged as an academic course.

Finally, two of the three groups involved — those of Dickinson College and the University of Vermont — represent a type of a study abroad program that is infrequently discussed in the literature and deserves more attention as a unique program type. These are programs that could be termed “study abroad module programs,” in which the short-term study abroad component is an integral part of a longer academic course, the majority of which is undertaken at the home campus. Obviously, these programs are significantly different from study abroad programs, of whatever duration, that are carried out solely in the host country.

### **The Three Study Abroad Programs**

The three programs in this study shared important characteristics but had notable differences including their US institutional affiliation, program theme, connection (or not) with academic courses stateside, and, in one case, the host institution in Cuba. Among their commonalities was their short duration (2–3 weeks) in Cuba, their size (14–15 participants), participants' predominantly social science and humanities backgrounds, and their exclusively undergraduate status. In all cases, participation was elective, that is, not required for their academic degree. Spanish language was not a prerequisite for any of the groups; most participants were not conversant in Spanish, which conditioned both program design and

participant experiences while in Cuba. These particular course programs were in their first, second, and fourth years (for SIT, Dickinson, and University of Vermont, respectively), although all three institutions had had a relationship working with FLACSO/Cuba for five or more years.

The programs of both Dickinson College (Carlisle, PA) and the University of Vermont (UVM; Burlington, VT) involved two weeks of study-travel with FLACSO/Cuba (*Universidad de la Habana*). In both cases, the study-travel in Havana was a part of an undergraduate credit-bearing, semester-long course (14 weeks), the remainder of which occurred at the respective home campus. The Dickinson course, titled "Cuban Economy and Society Today" (led by economics Professor Sinan Koont and sociology Professor Susan Rose), was cross-listed at the 200-level in Economics and Sociology. Its focus, as stated, was upon economic and cultural dimensions of Cuba. The University of Vermont's course, titled "Individual and Community Development in Cultural Context: Cuba" (led by psychology Professor Lynne Bond), was cross-listed at the 100- and 200 levels in Psychology and Latin American Studies. It focused on community structures and systems and their effects upon individual and group development; the ways in which people structure communities in order to promote the culture's human development goals; and the ways in which community structures and systems reflect a culture's values and assumptions regarding human development.

During the two weeks in Havana, the Dickinson and UVM groups spent six mornings attending three-hour seminars taught by the FLACSO/Cuba professors specifically for each of these groups. Topics included: Cuba's culture, history, gender issues, relations with the US, sustainable development, education, and health care systems. During most afternoons the classes engaged in field trips to community, health, educational, and social service organizations, complementing the morning lectures. Educational/recreational activities were scheduled on the weekends.

The School for International Training (SIT; Brattleboro, VT) program, led by Skye Stephenson, was part of a seven-week stand-alone program titled "African Spirituality in the Caribbean." This program explored manifestations of African spirituality via music, dance, literature, cultural manifestations, and religious practices during three and one half weeks in Jamaica (with a different program director) followed by three weeks in Cuba. Given the focus of the program, its Cuban host was the *Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística* (ILL). Unlike the Dickinson and UVM groups, which

remained based in Havana, the SIT program traveled between Havana and Santiago. Also in contrast to the other two programs, SIT is a third-party provider of study abroad; thus these program participants came from different home colleges and universities across the US.

Course requirements were relatively similar to those of other undergraduate courses. In all three programs, students participated in frequent group processing while in Cuba, maintained journals during their travel, completed small writing assignments (before, during, and/or after their travels), and completed a research paper or other final project. However, there were unique dimensions to the program assignments as well. For example, the UVM students were required to interview at least two Cubans (in English or Spanish) who could contribute to their term paper content and, upon return to the US, integrate those interviews into their final paper. Students in all three programs had accommodations in moderate-priced tourist hotels (the Cuban government required that US student groups reside in hotels rather than private housing).

The participant profiles of the programs were similar as well, as illustrated in Table 1, with the exception that three SIT respondents in this study were African descended, while only one from UVM and none from Dickinson were. It should be noted that for the UVM and Dickinson programs, many more students requested to enroll in those courses than could be accommodated, and admittance into each class was competitive (based upon an essay or interview and faculty consideration of the students' curricular and co-curricular experience).

A major distinction between these three programs was the timing of their travel to Havana in the context of each group's study of Cuba (and therefore, the timing of the pre-post travel assessments that are reported below). SIT was a stand-alone program, not connected to a further academic component in the US, and the group arrived to Cuba after having spent three weeks in Jamaica. The SIT students received a brief orientation to Cuba before departing Jamaica. For the Dickinson group, travel to Havana occurred at the beginning of the course; students received readings and attended two orientation sessions in November and December 2003, traveled to Cuba in January 2004, and subsequently met throughout the spring 2004 semester. The University of Vermont course met weekly on the home campus for 14 weeks, completing weekly readings and writing assignments throughout the spring 2004 semester and then traveled at the end of the semester for two weeks, in May 2004. In addition, although all three programs were structured

so that participants interacted with a variety of members of the host society, the SIT program put more emphasis on experiential learning and less on an academic environment; it also reached out to Afro-Cuban culture in particular given its program's focus on Afro-Cuban spirituality. These distinctions may be important in considering group variation in the results.

## **M e t h o d s**

### **E v a l u a t i o n   Q u e s t i o n n a i r e**

With the input of Dr Díaz González, the three authors (each also their program's director) developed an evaluation questionnaire to administer to program participants before and after their study-travel in Cuba. The questions examined participants' anticipation of and experience in Cuba, specifically to measure indicators of their interiorization of the culture of peace. Of particular interest were apparent shifts in views, values, and beliefs regarding self and other as a result of program participation. Questionnaires assessed four main sets of issues: (1) background information about respondents; (2) anticipated or actual challenges and outcomes of the Cuban experiences, (3) perceived similarities and differences between people and life in Cuba and the US; and (4) overall goals for and impact of the study abroad experience. Pre- and post-travel surveys were similar in format but modified in verb tense to address expectations (pre-travel) or experiences (post-travel). The majority of questions asked participants to rate their expectations or experiences and beliefs on a series of 5-point Likert type scales; these data were analyzed subsequently using *t-tests* on matched pairs (although the small sample sizes call for caution in interpreting statistical significance). Semi-structured open-ended questions were also used to encourage participants to identify and elaborate upon those issues that were most salient to them; these were analyzed subsequently using content analysis.

Qualitative analyses of participants' papers and journals entries were helpful in augmenting and clarifying the information gleaned from the pre- and post-travel questionnaires.

## **R e s p o n d e n t s**

Table 1 summarizes the international and Cuba-related experiences of the 34 (of 43) program participants who completed both the pre- and post-travel questionnaires. The data were analyzed separately by program rather than combined due to important distinctions between the programs.

These distinctions described above, were that the specific program themes differed, one program was free-standing rather than embedded in a semester-long US-based course, and the travel abroad (and therefore, the evaluation immediately pre- and post-travel) occurred at different points in participants’ study of Cuba.

**Table 1:    *Number of participants with prior international travel and exposure to Cuba***

|   | <b>Dickinson<br/>College<br/>(n = 13 of 15)</b> | <b>University of<br/>Vermont<br/>(n = 13 of 14)</b> | <b>School for<br/>International<br/>Training (SIT)<br/>(n = 8 of 14)</b> |
|---|---|---|--|
| No prior travel out of US                   | 0 (0%)  | 2 (15%)   | 2 (25%)  |
| Prior international travel<br>2–6 weeks     | 10 (80%)  | 10 (77%)  | 5 (63%)  |
| Prior international travel over<br>6 weeks  | 4 (31%)   | 1 (8%)  | 1 (13%)  |
| Prior travel to<br>Spanish-speaking country | 6 (46%)   | 8 (62%)   | 6 (75%)  |
| Close friend or relative<br>in Cuba         | 3 (23%)   | 5 (38%)   | 1 (13%)  |
| Female/Male ratio of survey<br>respondents  | 9/6 (total class<br>composition)                | 11/2  | 6/2  |

**Questionnaire Results**

Four general sets of findings from the evaluation questionnaire will be presented: (1) expected and experienced challenges in Cuba; (2) beliefs about people and life in Cuba; (3) effects of the study abroad on perceptions of self, other, and US-Cuban relations; and (4) overall expectations and evaluation of the study abroad experience.

**Perceived Challenges in Cuba**

The questionnaires asked respondents to use 5-point Likert type scales to indicate how challenging they expected (pre) or experienced (post) each of twenty situations/experiences to be in Cuba (1 = not very challenging, 5 = very challenging). Table 2 summarizes the mean ratings of each program pre- and post-travel.



**Table 2:** *Mean rating of anticipated and experienced challenges pre- and post-travel, by program (1= not challenging; 5 = very challenging)*

| Survey Item   | Group <sup>a</sup> | Pre-travel | Post-travel |
|---|--------------------|------------|-------------|
| 2-1. Living and getting around in Havana:                 | D                  | 3.2        | 2.9         |
|   | V                  | 2.9        | 2.6         |
|   | S                  | 2.9        | 2.4 *       |
| 2-2. Figuring out how things work in Cuba                 | D                  | 2.8        | 2.6 +       |
|   | V                  | 3.2        | 3.2         |
|   | S                  | 3.         | 3.9+        |
| 2-3. Making Cuban friends                                 | D                  | 3.4        | 2.8 +       |
|   | V                  | 2.9        | 2.8         |
|   | S                  | 2.6        | 3.8+        |
| 2-4. Getting along with members of the study group abroad | D                  | 1.9        | 2.2         |
|   | V                  | 1.5        | 1.9         |
|   | S                  | 2.9        | 3.3*        |
| 2-5a. Adjusting to the life style in Cuba                 | D                  | 2.5        | 2.8         |
| 2-5b. Adjusting to the realities in Cuba                  | D                  | 2.7        | 3.2 +       |
| 2-5. Adjusting to the life styles and realities in Cuba   | V                  | 3.4        | 3.8*        |
|   | S                  | 3.1        | 3.6*        |
| 2-6. Speaking Spanish                                     | D                  | 3.5        | 3.8         |
|   | V                  | 3.9        | 4.2         |
|   | S                  | 3.6        | 3.5         |
| 2-7. Understanding the Cuban professors                   | D                  | 3.00       | 3.31        |
|   | V                  | 3.4        | 2.5*        |
|   | S                  | 2.4        | 2.4         |
| 2-8. Completing academics successfully                    | D                  | 2.3        | 2.2         |
|   | V                  | 2.7        | 1.5*        |
|   | S                  | 2.1        | 2.3         |
| 2-9. Maintaining personal health                          | D                  | 1.9        | 2.5*        |
|   | V                  | 1.7        | 1.9         |
|   | S                  | 2.5        | 2.4         |
| 2-10. Living in a Communist nation                        | D                  | 2.4        | 1.9 +       |
|   | V                  | 2.7        | 2.4         |
|   | S                  | 2.5        | 3.1 +       |
| 2-11. Dealing with Cubans' expectations                   | D                  | 2.8        | 2.6         |
|   | V                  | 3.5        | 2.9*        |
|   | S                  | 2.6        | 3.4 +       |
| 2-12. Interacting with people of different values         | D                  | 1.9        | 2.7*        |
|   | V                  | 3.2        | 2.5*        |
|   | S                  | 2.3        | 2.4         |

*Table 2 continues on page 10*

**Table 2:** *Mean rating of anticipated and experienced challenges pre- and post-travel, by program (1= not challenging; 5 = very challenging) (continued)*

| Survey Item  | Group <sup>a</sup> | Pre-travel | Post-travel      |
|--|--------------------|------------|------------------|
| 2-13. Interacting with people of different political beliefs           | D                  | 1.7        | 1.9              |
|  | V                  | 2.5        | 2.4              |
|  | S                  | 2.4        | 2.5              |
| 2-14. Interacting with people of different religious/spiritual beliefs | D                  | 1.7        | 1.9              |
|  | V                  | 1.9        | 1.8              |
|  | S                  | 2.0        | 2.1              |
| 2-15. Interacting with people of different economic perspectives       | D                  | 2.6        | 3.1 <sup>+</sup> |
|  | V                  | 2.2        | 2.4              |
|  | S                  | 1.9        | 2.4 <sup>+</sup> |
| 2-16. Interacting with people with different communication styles      | D                  | 2.6        | 3.1 <sup>+</sup> |
|  | V                  | 2.5        | 2.8              |
|  | S                  | 2.3        | 3.1+             |
| 2-17. Dealing with gender-based behaviors and perspectives             | D                  | —          | —                |
|  | V                  | 2.6        | 2.5              |
|  | S                  | 2.2        | 3.9+             |
| 2-18. Interacting with people with fewer economic resources            | D                  | 2.2        | 3.0 <sup>+</sup> |
|  | V                  | 2.1        | 2.7*             |
|  | S                  | 1.6        | 2.8+             |
| 2-19. Dealing with issues of race                                      | D                  | 2.1        | 2.5              |
|  | V                  | 2.5        | 3.1*             |
|  | S                  | 3.3        | 3.6              |
| 2-20. Dealing with views regarding sexual preference                   | D                  | 2.1        | 1.9              |
|  | V                  | 2.4        | 2.2              |
|  | S                  | 1.8        | 1.6              |

\*  $p < .05$

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ , one-tailed t-test on matched pairs

<sup>a</sup> D = Dickinson College (n=13), V = University of Vermont (n=13), S = SIT (n=8)

Note that four situations were expected to be particularly challenging before the study abroad experience, as indicated by the fact that at least two of the groups gave them mean ratings of 3 or higher: (a) figuring out how things work in Cuba; (b) adjusting to the life styles and realities in Cuba; (c) speaking Spanish; and (d) understanding the Cuban professors.

Upon completion of the study abroad, five of the experiences were indicated to be particularly challenging, as indicated by the fact that at least two of the groups gave them a mean rating of 3 or higher. Resembling the pre-travel expectations, these included: (a) figuring out how things

work; (b) adjusting to the life styles and realities in Cuba, and (c) speaking Spanish. In contrast to pre-travel expectations, two of the three groups also gave post-travel mean ratings of 3 or higher to: (a) interacting with people with different communication styles, and (b) dealing with issues of race.

*Paired t-tests* revealed a statistically significant shift in perceived challenge of several situations from pre- to post-travel. As Table 2 indicates, among one or more programs, there was a decrease ( $p < .05$ ) from pre- to post-study abroad in how challenging students found: (a) living and getting around in Havana; (b) understanding the Cuban professors, (c) completing the academics successfully, (d) dealing with Cubans' expectations, and (e) interacting with people of different values (although one group reported this challenge to be greater than anticipated, all three groups ended with similar post-travel ratings of this challenge, 2.4-2.7). Table 2 also notes trends ( $p < .1$ ) in decreased perceptions of other challenges. Thus "being there" permitted study abroad participants to discover their ability to cope more effectively than they had anticipated in a variety of potentially challenging situations.

On the other hand, at least one of the groups reported statistically significant increases ( $p < .05$ ) in perceived challenge of other situations from pre- to post-travel: (a) getting along with members of the student group abroad, (b) maintaining personal health, (c) interacting with people of different values (as noted above, one group reported this challenge lesser than anticipated), (e) interacting with people with fewer economic resources (reported by all three groups,  $p < .05$  or  $p < .1$ ), and (f) dealing with issues of race (in the UVM group only; the single African American participant was mistaken to be Cuban and asked for identification by a hotel employee and sexually harassed by a European man on a separate occasion). Table 2 reveals other trends ( $p < .1$ ) in increased perception of challenges.

As suggested earlier, some of the differences in perceptions and change between the three program groups may reflect the differences in participants' programs and backgrounds at the time of departure for Cuba. For example, the Dickinson and SIT groups reported it to be more challenging than expected ( $p < .1$ ) to interact with people of different economic perspectives and with different communication styles, whereas the UVM group did not. However, the UVM group had been studying Cuba and preparing for the trip for 14 weeks before departure, whereas the other program had not. Although all three groups received in-depth educational experiences, the points at which they traveled (and therefore

completed their pre- and post-travel questionnaires) could have made a difference in the participants' responses. Group variation may also be attributable, in part, to the different nature of the programs; the SIT program was more experiential than the other two and exposed participants to a broader cross-section of Cuban life and society, and this group reported more challenges overall than the other two groups.

In summary, students embarked upon their study abroad in Cuba expecting several, albeit limited, challenges. The most pervasive concerns involved speaking Spanish, understanding Cuban professors, adjusting to the life style and realities of Cuba, and figuring out how things work in Cuba. Many of the students' original apprehensions were appeased to some degree by their study in Cuba, although this pattern varied by program, most likely reflecting different program content, activities and preparation. On the other hand, some participants found other situations in Cuba to be more challenging than anticipated, particularly in the areas of interacting with people with different values and expectations. All three groups concurred that the challenges of interacting with people with few economic resources exceeded their expectations.

### **Beliefs about People and Life in Cuba**

Respondents indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with five statements noting similarities between people and life in Cuba and the US (5-point Likert scale; 1 = totally true, 5 = totally false). Table 3 presents the mean responses to each question by program.

Note that before the travel, respondents from all three programs consistently reported dissimilarities between people of Cuba and the US on most indices, with all mean scores above 3, except on the question of similarities in people's goals for themselves and their families. Pre-post comparisons revealed that "being there" significantly changed students' beliefs on four of the five questions. Specifically, respondents from all three programs came to believe that people in Cuba and the US are more similar than they had originally thought in terms of their basic values, and the UVM and Dickinson groups reported increases in perceived similarity in terms of the goals people have for themselves and their families in Cuba and the US. The SIT students, examining African spirituality, reported a shift in the opposite direction, perhaps reflecting their program focus on Afro-Cuban spiritual and religious beliefs that strongly differed from anything the students had previously encountered.

**Table 3:** Mean ratings of similarity between people of Cuba and the US pre- and post-travel (1=totally true; 5 = totally false).

| Survey Item  | Group <sup>a</sup> | Pre-travel | Post-travel      |
|--|--------------------|------------|------------------|
| 3-1. The people of Cuba are really quite similar to people in the United States regarding their basic values.  | D                  | 3.4        | 2.9*             |
|  | V                  | 3.2        | 2.8*             |
|  | S                  | 3.1        | 2.6 <sup>+</sup> |
| 3-2. The people of Cuba are really quite similar to people in the United States regarding their goals for themselves and their families.                     | D                  | 2.6        | 2.0*             |
|  | V                  | 3.1        | 2.5*             |
|  | S                  | 2.3        | 2.6 <sup>+</sup> |
| 3-3. The people of Cuba are really quite similar to people in the United States regarding the day-to-day challenges they face in their lives.                | D                  | 3.7        | 4.1 <sup>+</sup> |
|  | V                  | 4.2        | 4.2              |
|  | S                  | 4.4        | 4.6              |
| 3-4. The people of Cuba are really quite similar to people in the United States regarding the day-to-day opportunities they have in their lives              | D                  | 4.2        | 3.5 <sup>+</sup> |
|  | V                  | 4.3        | 4.2              |
|  | S                  | 4.3        | 4.8 <sup>+</sup> |
| 3-5. The people of Cuba are really quite similar to people in the United States regarding their views about the responsibilities of community and government | D                  | 4.1        | 3.9              |
|  | V                  | 3.3        | 4.3*             |
|  | S                  | 4.1        | 4.4 <sup>+</sup> |

\* pre-post travel ratings different at  $p < .05$

+ pre-post travel scores different at  $p < .10$ , one-tailed t-test on matched pairs

<sup>a</sup>D = Dickinson College (n=13), V = University of Vermont (n=13), S = SIT (n=8)

The study abroad experience led the UVM and SIT groups to perceive greater differences between peoples of Cuba and the US in terms of their views of the responsibilities of community and government (note, the focus of the UVM course emphasized specifically how communities are structured differently in Cuba and the US in order to inspire these different roles and responsibilities). Interestingly, the three programs had distinct patterns of change on one item: Although all three groups embarked upon their study abroad with a belief that the people of Cuba and the US are dissimilar regarding their day-to-day opportunities (ratings of 4.2 and 4.3), by the end of their travel-study, the Dickinson group came to see these opportunities as more similar, the SIT group came to see these opportunities as even more dissimilar, and the UVM group did not change views.

In summary, over the course of these short-term, two-three week structured study abroad experiences, participants came to identify greater similarities between people from Cuba and the US in terms of their basic

values and, generally in peoples' goals for themselves and their families, even while recognizing that peoples of these nations have different day-to-day challenges, opportunities, and beliefs about government than one another (mean ratings all above 3). This suggests that even brief study abroad experience may foster a growing ability among participants to distinguish between day-to-day experience and structures, at one level, and shared human values and identity at another.

**Effects of Study Abroad on Perceptions of Self, Other, and US-Cuban Relations**

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they believed the study abroad experience in Cuba would (pre-travel) or did (post-travel) affect their understanding on five dimensions. Table 4 presents participants' mean responses to each question by program.

**Table 4:** *Mean ratings (by program) of how study abroad in Cuba affected respondent understanding (1 = no effect; 5 = very powerful effect)*

| Survey Item  | Group <sup>a</sup> | Pre-travel | Post-travel      |
|--|--------------------|------------|------------------|
| 4-1. Your understanding of your own personal strengths   | D                  | 3.2        | 2.9              |
|  | V                  | 3.9        | 3.6              |
|  | S                  | 3.6        | 3.8              |
| 4-2. Your understanding of your own personal limitations | D                  | 3.1        | 2.8              |
|  | V                  | 3.8        | 3.7              |
|  | S                  | 3.6        | 3.4              |
| 4-3. Your understanding of other people                  | D                  | 3.6        | 3.6              |
|  | V                  | 4.3        | 4.1              |
|  | S                  | 3.8        | 4.1 <sup>+</sup> |
| 4-4. Your understanding of culture                       | D                  | 3.8        | 3.8              |
|  | V                  | 4.2        | 4.5              |
|  | S                  | 4.2        | 4.1              |
| 4-5. Your understanding of US-Cuba relations             | D                  | 4.3        | 4.3              |
|  | V                  | 4.5        | 4.8 <sup>+</sup> |
|  | S                  | 3.9        | 4.5 <sup>+</sup> |

<sup>\*</sup> pre-post travel ratings different at  $p < .05$

<sup>+</sup> pre-post travel scores different at  $p < .10$ , one-tailed t-test on matched pairs

<sup>a</sup> D = Dickinson College (n=13), V = University of Vermont (n=13), S = SIT (n=8)

Perhaps not surprisingly, program participants began their study abroad experience (which in all cases, was voluntary—not required for their academic degree) with generally strong expectations that the experience would powerfully affect their understanding. Note that the mean ratings of anticipated effects for all three groups were above 3 on every pre-travel question. Respondents expected the study abroad experience to affect their own understanding of: their personal strengths, their personal limitations, other people, culture, and US-Cuba relations.

Most importantly, participants returned from their study in Cuba with these expectations confirmed. In no instance was there a statistically significant decrease in perceived effect of understanding from pre- to post-travel (and in only one program did any mean ratings drop below 3, and those hovered at 2.8-2.9). In fact, the ranges of post-travel ratings of impact are impressive for each of the three individual programs (2.8-4.3, 3.6-4.8, and 3.4-4.5 for Dickinson, UVM, and SIT, respectively).

Moreover, despite the very high expectations pre-travel, participants reported effects that were even stronger than anticipated ( $p < .10$ ) in two categories. The SIT group reported greater effects than they expected in their understanding of people as a result of their travel-study experience; and UVM and SIT reported greater effects than anticipated in their understanding of US-Cuba relations as a result of their travel-study experience (which was difficult to achieve statistically in light of potential ceiling effects with the scales). In fact, on a separate question that asked, “How important are educational exchanges in shaping US-Cuban relations” (1 = insignificant; 4 = very important), mean group responses were 3.5, 3.8, and 3.6 before travel and 3.8, 4.0, and 3.8 upon return from the study abroad. Thus, participants embarked on their travel with a firm belief in the importance of these educational exchanges and they returned even more convinced of their value.

## **Goals and Accomplishments of the Study Abroad Experience**

Using an open-ended question, pre-travel questionnaires asked respondents to indicate their personal goals for their study abroad experience. Content analyses were conducted on responses from the 21 UVM and SIT participants (Dickinson responses were not available). Students most commonly reported a desire to open their minds to new lifestyles and culture (52%) and/or to learn “the truth” about Cuba first-hand (57%). Some students also explained that they hoped to: learn about themselves

(29%), grow independently and socially (19%), experience a new way to organize society (14%), improve Spanish proficiency (14%), learn more about spirituality and the Diaspora (14%), be in a setting with many people of color (10%), and learn about government (5%).

Upon their return from Cuba, students were asked in an open-ended format to identify what they “believe were the most important aspects of the study abroad in Cuba.” Content analyses of the 21 UVM and SIT students revealed different responses by program. Those in the University of Vermont program most commonly pointed to their interactions with faculty, students, and other Cubans, and conducting interviews as the most powerful (54%), as well as their first-hand observation of life in Cuba (24%). Many noted that the most significant dimension of this personal contact was developing “real relationships with real people” (as one student put it). Some students pointed to the powerful impact of the field trips that complemented the course material (15%) and the importance of learning and questioning politics and complex systems of the US and other countries (15%). SIT participants focused upon the overall experience. More than half (63%) highlighted the significance of simply being in Cuba. Respondents also mentioned the growth that came from learning to deal with material shortages like water and electricity (25%) and with Cuban government restrictions (25%). One student reported it was “hard to formulate a response (to this question) because everything is important.”

Across the programs, participants concurred on the “power of being there”—in Cuba. As one student wrote in her questionnaire:

Being abroad made me question many aspects of my own culture in a way that is incredibly important. As one of the Cubans I met explained, communication opens a world of opportunities. This trip has opened doors to me that no book or video could ever accomplish alone. Traveling to Cuba and speaking to [Cubans] personally has been an experience I only wish could be easier for Americans.

Another student explained:

Being able to actually be in the country and experience it to the extent that is possible, any extent. It was awesome to be able to connect in some ways and communicate with people and make an impression on others’ lives as an American in Cuba and learn from the Cuban people. It was an exchange.



In fact, in their anonymous course feedback all of the students reported that they had accomplished their personal goals for their travel, although several added that they would have liked to have had more opportunity to talk directly with a wide array of Cubans, and one stated that it had been difficult to be truly open to the Cuban system given the biases she brought as the daughter of a Cuban-American émigré.

## **Journal Themes**

One of the course requirements for the UVM students was that they maintain a journal during their stay, and that they interview at least two Cubans. A qualitative analysis of the entries, especially some of the entries based on their interactions with the Cubans they interviewed, reveals common themes that support and complement the quantitative data.

### **The Power of Relationships with the "Other"**

Nothing had a more profound impact on how students understood Cuba, its people and, for that matter, themselves than the personal relationships the students established with Cubans and especially with those who were in positions that engendered relatively egalitarian, reciprocal friendships (rather than tourist-service provider relationships). For example, the University of Havana student translators spent a great deal of time with UVM students after class, during evenings, and on weekends. Some of the instructor's Cuban friends hosted the class in their home for lunch and introduced the students to their neighbors. The students interviewed professors, translators, and others for the research papers they completed. Students wrote frequently and extensively about what they saw and learned from these types of encounters; the students developed great trust in the opinions and information these newfound friends offered. For example, one student (interestingly, from a Cuban-American family) who had interviewed a FLACSO professor for her research paper wrote:

When I first started asking my interview questions I began to realize how much Prof. X is for the revolution and how much she believes in the system. It was really hard for me to ask my questions from that point of view because I didn't want to say anything that would attack her beliefs. I have grown up with everyone around me hating the policies created by the revolution in Cuba so to talk with someone

who is a firm believer in them was extremely hard. Although it was really hard I thought it was the coolest thing to hear the other side of things. It is easy for my relatives to be against the policies in Cuba because they don't have to live under them. Prof. X knows things that my relatives don't. Prof. X also lived in Cuba before the revolution, during the revolution and after the revolution. My relatives left right before so they have no idea what the people of Cuba have had to adjust to and how their life is . . . I never thought I would learn so much from a half hour interview but Prof. X really taught me a lot about family life and Cuban life in general.

### **Different Social Systems Reflect and Promote Values Differently**

Throughout the semester, UVM students had discussed the power of government policies and practices to shape the daily lives, expenses, leisure time, eating habits, etc. of community members. However, students found it difficult to truly comprehend that notion. But a visit to an agricultural cooperative brought the idea to life. Students suddenly achieved clarity when they discovered, with shock, that the "chemical-free, organic vegetables" that they saw cultivated were actually less expensive instead of more costly than non-organically raised vegetables in Cuba. This was due to both government support and the high cost of chemical fertilizers for a country with import restrictions such as Cuba's. In the US, they recognized, market price of organic produce, grown without government support in either ideology or funding, was much higher.

### **Idealist Constructs as Pursued by Apparently Divergent Strategies**

Students noted that they have assumed that democracy is achieved in the US by guaranteeing each adult one vote and by permitting open speech and open campaigning by each candidate. However, after witnessing the Cuban policy of restricting each political candidate's campaign material for the Municipal Assembly to a one-page typed biography, thereby removing the power of big money and political advertisements from elections, students reconsidered a host of strategies for achieving democracy that minimize the influence of wealth.

## **Reassessing One's Values and those of One's Community/Culture**

Students frequently noted how experiences in Cuba made them rethink their own values and behaviors and stimulated them to entertain change. These reassessments frequently focused on students' own materialism, particularly after witnessing the extent to which Cubans live day-to-day with access to minimal material resources. For example, following her transition back to the US, one student wrote, "I just wish more people understood where I was coming from instead of asking me what I brought them back." Similarly, upon return to the US another student wrote:

I sit at my computer in my new apartment. There's nothing on my walls but a small framed photograph, only a mattress on the floor, a desk and chair, fan, an old steamer trunk fixed up to service as a bureau. I can't stand to think of adding clutter. I'm overwhelmed by a desire to be frugal and Spartan.... Understanding the structure and elements fueling these economic inequities [between the US and Cuba] doesn't prevent me from feeling physically disgusted by the excesses so commonly flaunted here at home.

## **Conclusions**

### **The Contribution of Study Abroad in Cuba to a Culture of Peace**

What can we glean from our examination of participants' experiences in these three short-term US study abroad programs in Cuba as a contribution to the promotion of a culture of peace? It is clear that the specific focus and format of each program may have differentially influenced the participants' experiences. At the same time, we can make several generalizations about participants' shared experiences as well. Students typically reported that they undertook study abroad in Cuba in order to open their minds to new lifestyles and cultures and learn the truth about Cuba first hand. They harbored these goals even in light of the fact that they anticipated particular challenges that study in Cuba (even of a few weeks) would entail, particularly negotiating the language, academics, figuring out how things work, and adjusting to the lifestyles and realities of Cuba. While students' experience in Cuba confirmed certain of their

expectations, participants found that the academics and logistics of travel were not as difficult as expected; however, they learned that it was more challenging than they had anticipated dealing first-hand with people who have dramatically fewer material resources and different styles of communicating and interacting.

Interestingly, in the process of negotiating these challenges and accessing the resources available to them as they studied in Cuba, these US students came to see greater similarities than they had anticipated between people of Cuba and the US in their basic humanity and human values, at the same time that they were increasingly struck by the dissimilar opportunities and realities of day-to-day life available in the two countries. Students concluded that people in the two countries have different views of the role of government and community, and yet, share basic values and goals for their families. Moreover, students reported, as expected, that their study abroad experience had powerful effects on their understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses, of others, and of US-Cuban relations. This is a lot to have accomplished in a mere 2–3 week period!

Do these transitions reflect an increased interiorization of a culture of peace? Do they indicate changes in values, attitudes, knowledge, skills and abilities? We contend that they do. They also show progress in relation to the sub-cultures that are part of path to a culture of peace. These study abroad participants appear to have advanced toward a culture of difference (recognizing and learning to live with differences between peoples and nations) as well as a culture of dialog (being able to simultaneously understand and discuss such difference and similarities with ‘the other’).

### **Study Abroad, Personal Transformations and the Culture of Peace**

The results of our study corroborate the power of US study abroad in Cuba in diverse ways. Although secondary to our focus, our findings suggest that different structures and formats of programs may have the power to lead to distinct outcomes for participants. More systematic control and analysis of program variables are necessary to draw specific conclusions in this regard. Moreover, different program foci will attract different participants, making it difficult to conduct highly-controlled research. What is most important, however, is for those who design study abroad programs to have opportunities to document their experiences, exchange ideas with one another, and experiment with alternative designs in order to identify

and adopt those strategies that are most effective in achieving their particular goals and those of their students.

The powerful influence of the host nation and people was also apparent in our study. Recall that students identified their contacts with “real Cubans” as among the most important aspects of their study abroad experience. First-hand person-to-person experience with “real people” provides the foundation for personal and interpersonal growth and understanding.

The mere act of being in Cuba was profound in and of itself for students. Given the challenging and restrictive nature of Cuban-US relations, the simple act of making one’s way into Cuba appeared to have powerful effects symbolically and practically. In light of US-Cuban policy, US students who pursue study abroad in Cuba are a selective group, and may be individuals who feel particularly ready to engage in a profound process of personal reflection, growth, and conscious grappling with deep-seated issues regarding values, beliefs and views of self, culture, and society. Visiting an ‘other’ that is as controversial, mythologized, elusive, and compelling as Cuba is bound to be powerful.

Our study suggests the power of even relatively brief study abroad experiences to shift participants’ values and beliefs in constructive directions. This may be surprising in light of some literature that questions whether programs of short duration can bring about much personal growth and cultural development (e.g., Dwyer, 2004). While our program participants may have experienced even more dramatic impacts had they remained longer in Cuba, it is significant that even a few weeks of study abroad experience in Cuba may be sufficient to change lives in important ways.

True student transformation involves sustained change, and at this point we have limited data regarding long-term changes among the students. Anecdotal feedback from former students of the University of Vermont program (four years old, until its suspension in August 2004) reveals that many have made powerful transitions in a variety of dimensions of their lives. These include five students who have pursued careers in international nonprofits that focus on developing countries, inspired in various ways by their study in Cuba; two students who subsequently completed semester-long study abroad courses in Cuba; five students who returned to Cuba one or more times to continue to build bonds with the Cuban people; three students who were inspired to pursue careers in “green agriculture,” and three who went on to study and work in community development strategies, expanding the work they discovered in Cuba. As Lynne Bond relates

Most convincing of the transformative nature of the experience are the regular communications that I continue to receive from students who have studied with me in Cuba. They consistently talk of the mind-expanding experiences they had and their continuing resolve to stay focused on the lessons they learned from “being there”—from travel/study in Cuba.

Profound change can arise from the power of relationships that cross national boundaries, political frameworks, media barriers, and socially-constructed world views—the power of first hand experience with the shared humanity that exists in the face of difference as well as the difference that can underlie apparent similarity. Grasping, grappling, and processing these challenging constructs are steps along UNESCO’s peace path. The potential for creating a more peaceful world in which we celebrate constructive differences as well as commonalities depends upon more of us having the experience of “being there” and experiencing its power ourselves. At times of international and cross-cultural conflict and strife, open educational exchange is no longer simply beneficial; it is essential. Open educational exchanges are needed if we hope to walk side-by-side with our students and neighbors down the pathway to a culture of difference, a culture of dialogue, a culture of *concertación*/accord— a culture of peace.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to our Cuban partners at FLACSO/Cuba and the Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística, and all those individuals and groups in Cuba and the United States who have worked and continue to work to promote exchange and dialog between the two countries.

<sup>2</sup>General UN Resolution A/53/243, available at <http://cpnn-usa.org/resolutions/resA-53-243B.html>

<sup>3</sup>This Resolution was one of the most controversial ever passed at the United Nations, and was passed over the opposition of both the United States and the European Community. While the latter two could not successfully stop the passage of this resolution, they did manage to block any funding to support efforts for promoting the culture of peace; their actions served to hinder, but not stop, the diffusion of the campaign for promoting a “culture of peace”.

<sup>4</sup>In the recent report, “The State and Future of Study Abroad in the United States: A Briefing Book for the Bipartisan Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program” (December 2004), five broad areas of measurable outcomes for study abroad are outlined: foreign language competence, intellectual growth, cultural

competence, breadth of professional knowledge, and interpersonal skill building. While these are crucial to consider, the promotion of a culture of peace has not been included.

<sup>5</sup> Stephenson (1999; 2002) coined the term cross-cultural deepening to indicate: "a perceptual shift in the subject such that he/she is able, at the same time, to consider the same event, experience or belief from the vantage point of more than one cultural framework....Thus, cross-cultural deepening presupposes the ability to encompass two or more differing realities within oneself simultaneously."

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