Finding the Best “Fit” Among Study Abroad Opportunities: An introduction to R. Michael Paige’s Intensity Factors

Selecting a study abroad program might be framed as three basis steps. The first step is to consider the essentials, such as language, minimum grade point average, program length, the number of students who can participate, financial aid, etc. Next, it is important to think about your goals for study abroad. Becoming a fluent speaker of the host country’s language, extensive travel in an intriguing region of the world, living in a major urban center and sharing international experiences with friends and team-mates are very common goals, but there are literally hundreds more.

The third step is the more complex issue of fit: what is the best program for you given who you are at this point in your life? To think about fit students have to be pretty realistic about who they are and what kind of environment would be most beneficial for development and growth. Some questions to consider, when identifying which programs might be a good fit, are:

- How do you respond to change?
- How do you cope when you have limited control over your situation?
- How important are comfort and familiarity to you?
- How different from the mainstream can you tolerate being?
- How much independence, privacy and time alone do you need to take care of yourself?

Answering questions like these sets the stage for students to be practical about the cultural differences between the home-culture and host culture and the discomfort (or culture shock) those differences are likely to generate.

Educator, Dr. R. Michael Page developed a list of contrasting cultural circumstances that have a significant psychological impact upon individuals in cross-cultural educational experiences. He names these circumstances "intensity factors" because they can heighten the psychological intensity of stress in the adjustment process (1).

Because there is no inoculation against culture shock, careful and honest consideration of the following intensity factors can be an important part of determining a program’s fit. These factors often help students anticipate potential adjustment challenges overseas. The ten intensity factors are:
1) Cultural differences
The degree of actual difference between home and host cultures and how negatively the student views those differences.

2) Ethnocentrism (the extent to which one’s own group is considered superior)
The more ethnocentric a student is,
a. the more difficulty he or she will have in accepting the other culture, and,
b. conversely, the less accepting of difference the host culture is—the more ethnocentric the country as a whole is—the more difficult it will be to become engaged with people in that culture.

3) Language
The less language ability one has and the more essential language is to functioning well in the host culture, the more difficult it will be to function.

4) Power and Control
To the extent that students feel they have no power and control in intercultural situations, especially over their own circumstances, the intensity of the experience rises.

5) Cultural Immersion
Generally, the more completely the student is immersed in the culture, the higher the intensity.

6) Cultural Isolation
The level of intensity increases with the reduction of access to the student's own culture group. Students should consider the degree of isolation from their own cultural group when considering study abroad programs and sites. Cultural immersion is different from isolation.

7) Prior Intercultural Experience
If this is the first time the student has been out of his or her own culture, the intensity of the experience will be higher.

8) Expectations
If the student’s expectations are unrealistic—extremely positive and/or naïve —disappointment can be a serious factor. Conversely, extremely negative expectations can often create a self-fulfilling prophecy. A wise saying related to this aspect of intercultural preparations is that “Expectations are premature disappointments.” The antidote is keeping expectations reasonable and realistic.

9) Visibility and Invisibility
Being physically different from the host nationals and thus being very visible can make the experience more intense. Having to keep parts of one's identity, such as being gay, hidden, can also increase the intensity.

10) Status
Feeling that one is not getting appropriate respect can raise the intensity. Conversely, receiving attention that does not seem warranted is equally distressing. Whatever the cause, receiving unwanted attention or scrutiny (good or bad) can intensify the experience significantly. (1)

The Intensity Factors Index is a tool students can use before application to study abroad or before overseas travel to identify potential adjustment challenges. It also offers practical steps for the preparation process to address the challenges.
INTENSITY FACTORS INDEX

To complete the index, rate each of the following ten intensity factors by estimating the degree to which that factor might play a role in your overseas adjustment. Check the number you best think fits the culture you are going to or your own personal circumstances. If you are unsure of what the category means, go back to review the Intensity Factors description. When you are finished, total your score.

Feel free to discuss what you learn about the intensity factors with the staff of the CIP and the Counseling Center. These are often at the heart of many apprehensions as students make decisions about study abroad programs or begin to prepare for their international opportunities. At the same time, students’ abilities to respond constructively to the challenges the 10 factors present leads to the life-changing quality of study abroad.

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My Score is: [ ]
Score Interpretation

When your score falls on the low side of the intensity factors scale (10 - 39):
This might be because you believe that the country you are going to will seem very similar or familiar to home. You may have even been there before. Or, if it is your first time abroad and you are going to an English-speaking country, you may feel that since they speak "your language" and their culture is European-derived, that your adjustment will be relatively easy. It might also be low because you are going to study abroad in an area and in a language you already feel comfortable with because of your ethnic heritage, such as studying in Mexico as a U.S. Mexican American or in Vietnam as a Vietnamese American. You may well be correct in your assessment, but we simply caution that a low score might also suggest that you are underestimating the degree to which such intensity factors might impact you. We suggest that rather than be complacent about your ability to "fit in," you look a little deeper into the intensity factors and try to be as objective and honest as you can in your self-assessment. That way you can be prepared for things that otherwise would catch you by surprise.

When your score falls within the middle range of the intensity factors scale (40 - 79):
It seems likely that you have a reasonable idea of what kinds of issues might arise while you are overseas, even if it is only a guess. Since you have identified at least some of the factors as relevant to your situation and the country you are going to study in, you are in a position to work out strategies to deal with those elements which might cause you the most stress. Realizing in advance what elements you might have to deal with gives you the ability to conceptualize appropriate responses and be prepared to encounter them. If it turns out later that you over- or under-estimated some of these, at least you have raised your consciousness about potential areas of concern and that should help you make a better adjustment in any case.

When your score falls at the high end of the intensity factors scale (80 -100):
This score could indicate several things. One is that you are correct that the country you are going to and the circumstances of your study abroad program are such that the number of stressors will be high. For example, a US-American woman of European, non-Muslim descent who is studying abroad in a rural middle-eastern context will find that high visibility, degree of cultural difference, and ethnocentrism are likely to be quite high. A Caucasian male or female going to areas of Central Africa are likely to find the same factors significant, although there will also be many differences.

On the other hand, a high score might indicate that you are either overestimating your potential degree of difficulty or have developed a high anxiety about the trip. Only you can determine if your perception of intensity factors seems accurate, but you might want to check with people recently returned from your intended study abroad site to compare your projections with their actual experience. It is good to "worry" about your upcoming study abroad experience if it leads you to seek out an accurate and reliable picture of what you will face, but "obsessing" about it is generally unproductive. On the other hand, if you "prepare for the worst" and it turns out to be much easier than anticipated, at least you were ready for anything by having seriously considered the intensity factors (2).


(2) This section is adapted from Pacific University's intercultural training website, “What’s Up with Culture?”