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Marissa Lewis
lewism1@bgsu.edu

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THIRD CULTURE BUILDING AND INTERACTION DURING STUDY ABROAD
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Marissa L. Lewis

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Alberto González, Ph.D., Advisor

Lara Lengel, Ph.D., Committee Member

THIRD CULTURE BUILDING AND INTERACTION DURING STUDY ABROAD

Abstract

This report examines a common problem among students who study abroad, namely, that they remain with like-nationals during their stay. Some university students refrain from interacting with students from other cultures. This phenomenon is explained by the “stress” phase in Cultural Adaptation Theory. This project commits to providing a solution to interaction barriers by introducing the Third Culture Theory. A framework for third culture building is advanced that allows students to gain more out of the study abroad experience.

Keywords: Third Culture Building, Adaptation Theory, study abroad

Introduction:

Studying abroad. A loose term that is utilized to simply say that one has attended university outside of their home country. Study abroad. A time to step out of one's comfort zone, taking leaps of faith and learning to think in new ways. Studying abroad. Expanding boundaries in new international contexts and in a way that allows the self to overcome a variety of culture-bound relational practices and explore new ones. Upon traveling overseas, students gain many opportunities, including meeting individuals of different backgrounds and cultures. There is a hope that students learn and apply the ability to create friendships and relationships, while expanding their social networks. However, as several students attempt to partake in cross cultural transactions, a particular problem arises, especially among American students. Often, there is a lack of expansion in relation to one's social network, as students remain with people of their own nationality, rather than breaking boundaries to come together with various cultures. This behavior can be explained by a specific model entitled, Cultural Adaptation Theory. This theory emphasizes the different phases individuals face when being placed into new cultural spaces, phases that begin with stress. In the stress phase, students may minimize contact with the host culture, ideally, students should reach the end phase of growth. In this report, I will propose a solution to the phenomenon of stress behaviors: Third Culture Building.

According to USA Study Abroad, in the 2015-2016 academic year, there was a total of 325,339 students from the United States who studied abroad for academic credit. In comparison, in the 2017-2018 academic year, there were 341,751 students who studied abroad for college credit, an increase from the previous year of 2.7%. As the number of students who partake in

studying abroad continues to rise, there are going to be more cultural interactions. It is essential for these interactions to be more than deliberate because relationships have the ability to improve an individual's overall well-being.

While exchange students hope to “find” themselves, several of them do not find themselves in students from other countries, but rather in students who come from their home country. I have seen this myself in Americans who complete an exchange program in which they find comfort in being with travelers who share their nationality. There is a sense of security rather than change and newness. Sometimes, there is no lasting connection with the host culture. During my own experience abroad, in Netherlands, I saw this issue first-hand. It did not occur with the BGSU students because we had decided that we were there to engage in a new culture. However, I noticed this among other American students from different universities. For example, there were quite a few students from Massachusetts and New York who immediately clung to each other during the first international orientation meeting, barricading their social network from the beginning. Whether this was because they were stressed, scared, or something more, I personally do not know. However, near the end of the semester, these students remained together with no international students in their social network. Because of the experience that I gained and the knowledge I gained on how and why people of a similar culture stick together, I became passionate about studying more about student travel. I wanted to identify the stages of experience that students go through and determine steps that allow them to escape their nonsocial ways, enabling a pure social networking process.

Nonetheless, here at Bowling Green State University, the main motto is “Belong. Stand Out. Go far,” and according to the *Wall Street Journal*, BGSU is the #1 public university in the Midwest for student satisfaction. As a university that prioritizes fulfilling student expectations, is

the international aspect a portion of student satisfaction? The BGSU Education Abroad website states,

“The decision to participate in an education abroad experience is often the most transforming and inspiring aspect of a student's academic career! BGSU offers hundreds of international academic programs in more than 50 countries worldwide during the summer, winter session, semester and academic year, with opportunities for internships, field study, undergraduate research, community service, and teaching” (Education Abroad, 2020).

The BGSU website does not offer statistics on the number of students who take part in studying abroad. However, I do remember when I was going through the process, the study abroad advisor mentioned that only about 10% of campus finds interest it and not even half follow through with the process. Also, at one of the sendoff meetings that I had to attend before I left for the semester, there were roughly 300 people who were leaving for spring break, a semester, or a year. The average amount of students attending BGSU is roughly 18,000. If 300-600 students study abroad per year, that means only .03% of the entire student population are taking part. This hypothetical number is extremely low and demonstrates that not many students are being satisfied through the International Office and study abroad.

With my enrollment in different courses from Intercultural Communication to Global Communication, it has become evident that many students in these courses at Bowling Green State University do not have a passport, nor do they have much experience leaving the state of Ohio. With that being said, it is clear why several students are uncomfortable when abroad: they have never left their home state. More research would need to be conducted on this particular matter, especially because the few BGSU students I was with had never left the country before,

yet they still managed to break away from the American culture and dive into something new. On the other hand, there are select bachelor's programs that require students to study abroad, such as International Studies. This specific requirement is one of awe. More major programs should require international travel! Furthermore, it seems as though BGSU makes an effort in showing students that studying abroad is an experience that can be transforming through mentions in various courses and on the BGSU website.

Because there is a divide with among exchange students, the method that is going to be put into action is an in-depth analysis of prior research that has been completed on the topic. Different theories, including the Cultural Adaptation Theory, will assist in establishing the current issue: students sticking together with their natives. In order to effectively remedy what is currently taking place among different student travelers, the Third Culture Building theory will offer a solution, demonstrating how individuals are able to intermingle with other cultures.

Literature Review

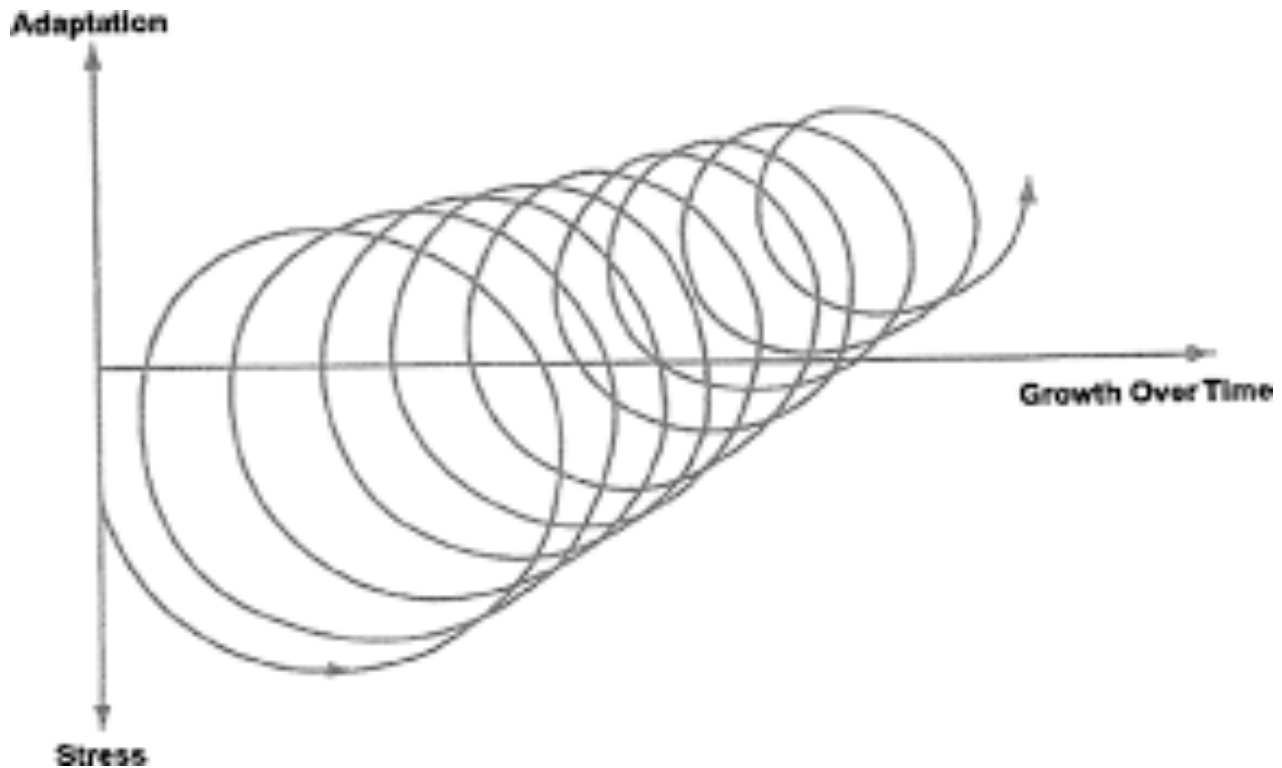
Cultural Adaptation Theory

Within the adaptation process, communication is a prime factor in assisting one to become fully immersed and solidified into a new culture. Young Yun Kim (2001), a communication and intercultural communication scholar, defines adaptation as “the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments” (p. 31). Kim offers the idea that the process of adaptation consists of three different parts: “stress, adjustment, and growth” (Martin and Nakayama, 2004, p. 285). When individuals undergo stress, due to not fitting in with a specific environment, there is a response to adjust. The process of adjusting is an illustration that emphasizes the “psychic

breakdown of previously held attitudes and behaviors” (Martin and Nakayama, 2004, p. 285,). Once an individual has overcome the adjustment stage, it is then they will be able to grow. In order to adapt, communication is necessary because adaptation arises through communication. When an individual is in a new place for the first time, also known as a migrant, they communicate with various people in the environment. Through this process, the migrant is able to progressively acquire newer ways of behaving and thinking, attaining “a new level of functioning and an intercultural identity” (Martin and Nakayama, 2004, p. 285). Not everyone may be able to adapt so swiftly to new cultures because there may be different challenges and difficulty. This can take place due to individuals rejecting new ideas, attempting to fit in with the existing frameworks, or changing frameworks as a whole (Martin and Nakayama, 2004, p.285).

Furthermore, the Intercultural Stress-Adaptation-Growth Process is one of forward-upward movement in intercultural communication wherein there is a cycle of “draw-back-to-leap”. “Each stressful experience is responded to with a ‘drawback’, which then activates one’s adaptive energy to ‘leap forward’” (Kim, Gudykunst et al., 1988, p. 308).

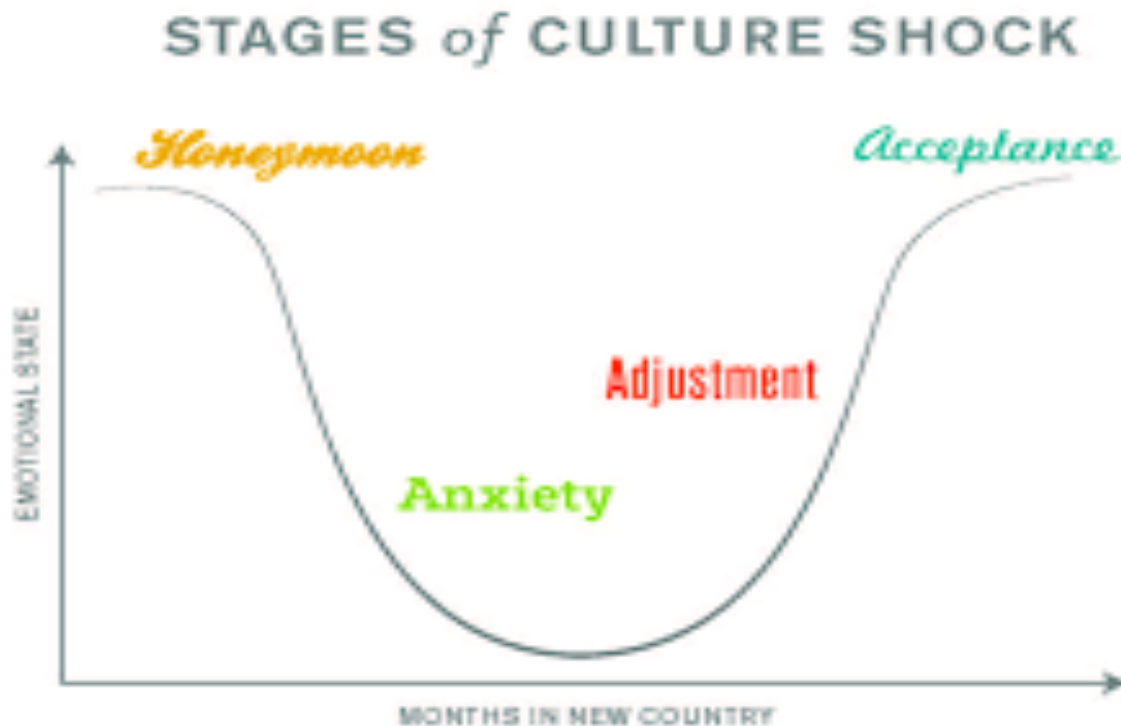
As seen in the model, there can be a great deal of stress in the beginning of one’s cultural adaptation process. As time proceeds forward, an individual will adapt, minimizing the stress. “Through continuous intercultural stress-adaptation-growth experiences stimulated by the environmental challenges” individuals will have “expanded their internal capacities to function in the change environment” (Kim, Gudykunst et al., 1988, p. 308).



In comparison, the cultural adaptation theory consists of another sector. This model is called the U-Curve Model and it is made up of inevitable phases that individuals go through when adapting to new cultural conditions.

First, there will be an experience of excitement and anticipation. Individuals become overwhelmed because they are in something different than their own. Second, the feeling of shock, or culture shock, happens to nearly everyone who goes through an intercultural transition. Third, individuals will begin to rise, learning the numerous customs and regulations of the “new cultural context” (Martin and Nakayama, 2004, p. 282,). This is known as the time of

adjustment. Lastly, people will hopefully begin to feel at home and have fully adapted to the new culture.



Third Culture Building

Before third culture building is applied, the third culture concept is identified. The third culture is not one culture or a second culture to be exact. It is rather the combination of two or more into something new, something different. Third culture is described as “the behavior patterns created, shared, and learned by men of different societies who are in the process of relating their societies, or sections thereof, to each other” (Useem et al, 1963, p.169). Through the action of coming together, different cultural backgrounds establish a method of mindfulness. In relation, third culture theory is defined as, “the construction of a mutually beneficial interactive environment in which individuals from two or more different cultures can function in

a way beneficial to all involved” (Sobre-Denton, 2017). As developed and explained by Casmir, the building aspect of the theory accentuates the mere significance of relationships that exist interculturally along with the development of those intercultural relationships by way of a process comprehending and commitment that continues over a lifetime. It is as though third culture building is simply a way to bridge the gap between adaptation to a new culture and maintaining one’s norms from their home country. The alternative theory is a linkage for social support while cross-cultural adaption is taking place.

Being A Third Culture Individual

In order to become embraced in the third culture building atmosphere, individuals must adapt to the mindset of the third culture. They will essentially become a third culture individual which is known as a “person that has lived a significant amount of time in a culture other than their home culture and has experienced the process of reacculturation or reentry into their home country” (Timmons, 2004, p. 15). Within Timmons research, of his study on the third culture person, attempted to explicate the term into something relatable, something that was simply to understand, through the development of metaphors. Participants responded with third culture being like “a salt water fish in fresh water or vice versa, eating a hotdog with chopsticks, and playing volleyball with a basketball” (Timmons, 2004, p. 202,). These types of people become someone different because they are not their own culture, nor are they the new culture that they are currently in. Furthermore, there is no specific way to define a third culture individual, despite the definition above. These people are cultural groups with a “wide variety of unique characteristics” (Timmons, 20004, p. 214,). At the end of the research, Timmons found that there are two types of third culture individuals. The first type of people are those who have been “acculturated in a host culture that is different than their home culture” and the second type

includes “the people that have enculturated in a host culture different than their home culture” (Timmons, 2004, p.234,). Reacculturation, on the other hand, is a term that describes the cultural and psychological changes that are brought onto an individual due to the adjustments that take place when in a cultural context that is not the same as the individual’s original social space. Upon taking on the third culture individual role, transformation occurs. This transformation process holds important themes including culture shock, changes at home, unrealistic expectations, misunderstandings, being at home in the home culture, cultural fatigue, stress, cultural identity, and loss of language. It is through these transformations in which individuals are able to overcome cultural boundaries, creating the third culture. If there is not a want to accept the culture, it is not possible to bring two cultures together. Third culture building is a choice. A choice to bring various things from different cultures into one.

Listening to the Other

In all things that require communication, there is a definite need to make certain concentration is bestowed upon people, within conversation. Listening is an essential portion of building community. Individuals must come focus on each other and respect each other in order to take characteristics of different cultures and bring them into the third portion of culture. In research conducted by Parthenia H. Franks, an exploration took place of the various ways in which different cultures value and utilize silence throughout the course of conversation. Franks identified the presence of silence within all cultural groups wherein silence was very much valued. One must put in effort be an “interculturally competent communicator”, allowing one to be more “aware of the nuances of another culture’s communication style” (Franks, 2000, p. 9) There are three simple steps that can be followed, enabling one to be fully competent in intercultural communication.

1. A decision must be made wherein the individual is fully mindful and willing to engage in the current moment by ridding “the mind of thoughts, ideas, and plans” to be open to listening to one another—“attend fully, totally, and without diversion” (Franks, 2000, p. 12).
2. Concentration should take place on the person that is being communicated with. It is encouraged for one to make themselves “want to concentrate” on the other person, on what they are “saying and feeling” (Franks, 2000, p. 12).
3. A “multivocal society” is able to be promoted. This is a type of society where “cultural groups hold divided opinions, yet they use their unique perspectives to build a civic and caring culture that accommodates both differences and commonalities” (Franks, 2000, p. 12).

Methodology

As students relocate their lives to a foreign country for a semester or for one year, they are faced with the reality of having to start over--except they are alone. Placing oneself in an unfamiliar place can generate different emotions to form, creating a roller coaster like experience, as seen in the Cultural Adaptation Theory. Students might miss home or want a certain food that is not available. When students go through the stress phase, they retreat to what is familiar: people of the same nationality. Individuals locate a sense of peace and security in people from their home country because they are essentially a piece of home. They each speak the same language, most likely sound the same, and have similarities as university students. If this occurs in the beginning of one's exchange program, comfortability will settle, and students will settle for being at home in a foreign country. This is not ideal. There is no purpose for one to relocate thousands of miles away from home to merely connect with others who live in the same

nation. Thus, there must be a theoretical approach or method identified to support students studying abroad.

Moving forward, there must be a breaking down of the barrier that university students develop. Sticking with one's own culture while abroad will not allow students to fully immerse themselves into the newness that they chose to be a part of. In order to effectively discover a method that works and will have positive results for students engaging in new cultures is to apply the Third Culture Building Theory. As mentioned before, the theory consists of two different cultures, or more, combining into something new. The third culture is "the behavior patterns created, shared, and learned by men of different societies who are in the process of relating their societies, or sections thereof, to each other" (Useem et al, 1963, p.169). So instead of keeping to one's culture, students, with a bit of courage and desire to meet people from different countries, will be able to establish new cultures. Connecting with international students has been said to "lead to better adjustment overall, providing both emotional and instrumental support" (Sobre Denton, 2017). Within this third culture, students have the ability to share their personal customs and ways of life. For Americans making friends in other cultures, they will be able to share their English language, personal hobbies, university background, ways of life, and more. In exchange, the students from different backgrounds will be able to do the same in sharing their cultural, language, new foods, music, and more. Through activity, culture is able to be learned because there is a sharing of ideas that takes place. For example, if both students find a common relation sports, they can compare sports culture and the experience that is attached. For an American, they might mention how football is one of the main sports played and broadcasted throughout the country. They might mention how stadiums sell out and how the Super Bowl is an annual event, bringing people together to celebrate commercials and a big game. A European will most likely

respond by emphasizing how football in American is football in Europe. Football is soccer and American football is American football. Nonetheless, Europeans celebrate too, except they resort to the streets with flares and alcohol to celebrate large football matches. Overall, the two students would be able to relate their experiences and take portions from each experience to gain a new experience in the new culture that they are in. Perhaps the next time they have time for recreation, they might create a new game that is a combination of American football and soccer or they might celebrate The Champions League Final with a Super Bowl Party.

As case in point, several students remain with their nationality because there are some fears of change or fears of stress. Sticking with what is known gives people a sense of security. However, through expanding the social network, with Third Culture Building Theory, students are able create a family atmosphere. Instead of making a family with students from the native country, a family can be created with international students. The Cultural Adaptation Theory goes into detail about how travelers may experience a sense of shock, as they begin to miss the normal of their home. Third culture establishes a place “where sojourners can find a home, even in a space far away from their own physical homes” (Sobre Denton, 2017). When interactions with various international students occur, friendships and relationships will be built on a sense of belonging because of the developed third culture. There should not be any identity struggles in this new familial space, as people are coming together to create a new identity and a new set of norms for behavior. Third Culture becomes a home away from home!

As students find their new home and learn more about each other, they gain the ability to place themselves into the shoes of members in the third culture, awakening a sense of empathy. Because students are learning about the culture of their international peers, there is place for growth and development from an intercultural perspective. For instance, I met a girl named

Maria and in Polish, her name was Marissa. We had the same birthday too. She and I instantly became friends, explaining the essence of our cultures to each other. She was able to ask me questions about the United States and I too was able to gain information about her home country of Poland that I had never known before. We each were able “to consciously evaluate the norms and values of both of our own and...other culture(s)” (Evanoff, 2000, p. 422). As eyes became opened and community formed, a relation occurred between the two cultures, forming empathy in the third culture. Together, Maria and I created a weekly dinner wherein we would take two of our favorite foods from our home culture and combine them for a meal at dinner time. We decided that food was one of the easiest and quickest ways to introduce ourselves to Third Culture Building. Through sharing our taste buds, we were able to get to know the history and to try something new. We then established this weekly dinner as something consistent and shifted to trying new foods of different cultures all the time. It was important to us to delve into the Dutch culture and to other cultures, and we thought food was a great way to do it! In comparison, Maria and I broke down the literal barrier of doors. While we lived on separate floors in our apartment building and had separate rooms. We did not have boundaries when it came to walking into the others room. We walked in as if we personally lived there. My personal space was her personal space: this was our home away from home. When we were not in university, we managed to have a little bit of fun and experience different activities. Maria was someone who loved rap music while I was more of the pop type. I had never been to a concert before and Maria had been to multiple. We found various events across the country that offered musical experiences such as techno concerts, raves, classical orchestras at museums, and live cover music at parks. With our differences, we chose to combine them and get rid of the barricade of only liking a certain type of music. Music was a way for us to connect and a way to grow.

Nonetheless, currently, as the Corona Virus pandemic has hindered the Earth, Maria and I have been able to share our current experiences in an empathetic state, instilling an open mind even in tough times.

In order to study at a university overseas, there are a number of steps that must take place from being accepted into a university to applying for a passport to obtaining a visa, to traveling. Nonetheless, academic programs rely on a plethora of processes to function properly and the details that need to be negotiated can become stressful. Traveling is not easy, yet it is attainable, especially at the college student level. Through the process of preparing to study abroad, growth and learning take place due to the various operations students must go through. It is through this process that students will begin to notice the international systems at a higher level in terms of diplomacy, residency, and what it takes to be a citizen in a foreign country. Throughout the preparation process, study abroad programs across the United States, should present this model of the Third Culture, just as they present the Cultural Adaptation Model. They show what students will most likely go through and how they will feel at certain points, yet they do not offer a clear solution. Study abroad offices must share the facts, emphasizing that it is recommended that students engage in activity with other international students. There should be an emphasis on how the students are meant to learn in a cultural way, not just from their native culture because a different atmosphere will come to life. In all, here is what must be done:

1. Present the model to students during the preparation phase
2. Share statistics and do more research on the different activities that students can get involved in to meet people of different backgrounds
3. Encourage students. The entire experience will not be super easy, but they will have moments of success.

4. Be open minded and willing to change because students will not be able to be their whole native self. Characteristics of the self may change.
5. Establishment of one will receive what they put into the third culture. Building a new space takes time and energy. Students must remember to be patient because it will all be worth it in the end.

As times shift and policies change, there is always a place for emergencies and disaster. The year 2020 has brought the world to a standstill and has raised questions about the future of study abroad programs around the world. Because of the unprecedented times, students are unsure if they should travel outside of their home countries ever again or students are wondering when traveling will be allowed to even take place. It is the goal of universities to find ways to ensure that study abroad is still able to occur, especially for the upcoming fall semester. Many students have been left to hope they can still study in upcoming semesters. Universities must work in correlation with diplomatic offices, particularly at BGSU.

All in all, studying abroad and completing an exchange program are thought of as the time to go and discover oneself. While this is true to some point, several students miss the purpose in student travel: gaining new experiences, meeting people of various cultural backgrounds, and expanding social networks. Students cling to the Cultural Adaptation Model and engage with people of their home country with no offered ray of hope. Through the Third Culture Building Theory and my own experience, a solution to the stress behaviors of study abroad students have been identified. In order for students to have a purposeful time abroad, universities must follow the steps mentioned throughout, to make students aware. Students can have the time of their lives and will have a more meaningful time if their social networks expand into a third culture space.

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