

# Teaching Cultural and Racial Understanding Through International Travel Courses: Student Perceptions Through Travel to Cuba

By Scott Ballantyne

In March 2001, 21 graduate students from Alvernia College in Pennsylvania traveled to Cuba for eight days as part of an international study course. Although travel to Cuba is currently illegal in the United States because of the embargo against Fidel Castro's Communist government, exemptions exist for legitimate educational purposes. Under those exemptions, I helped to establish the travel course and collected data on changes in student attitudes about race, people of other cultures, and their own graduate study as a result of traveling abroad.

The travel component of graduate study posits that students will have a life-changing experience when they go abroad. By the time many students arrive at graduate school, they have visited another country, but because of the embargo, none of those in Alvernia College's program had gone to Cuba. The trip thus offered a unique opportunity to assess the impact of travel to a country about which stereotypes abound but little firsthand information exists.

In the course of their trip to Cuba, students researched and discussed among themselves and with their faculty advisers the political and economic system, health care delivery, education, and the provision of daily necessities. They maintained journals and engaged in discussions, often through interpreters, with individuals living in Cuba. They spent time observing and evaluating life in Cuba through active participation in prearranged programs as well as in free exploration opportunities. On completion of the course, students were required to present information about their experiences to various audiences in the United States.

## POPULATION

The students surveyed completed master's degrees at Alvernia College in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 2001. Students earned graduate degrees in business administration (MBA), education (MED), and liberal studies (MALS). Of the 40 students eligible, 38 completed the survey. These included 30 students in the MBA program, seven students in the MED program, and one student in the MALS program. Of the students who responded to the survey, 21 participated in the international travel course to Cuba while 17 elected not to participate. In all, 20 MBA students and the one MALS student traveled to Cuba; none of the MED students made the

trip. The students who participated in the study lived within 60 miles of the college, and their ages ranged from 25 to 65 years. All but four classified themselves as white. The surveyed population was representative of the college's graduate school population as a whole.

## METHODOLOGY

This study, which surveyed both participants and nonparticipants in the international travel course, was designed as a relationship study. The primary purpose of a relationship study is to identify the causes and effects of important phenomena. This type of research design is especially useful for exploratory studies (Borg & Gall, 1989). This design allows analysis of relationships between several variables simultaneously. The analysis of the data will be explained for those relationships that are significant at the .95 confidence level (Matlack, 1993). All data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, 2000, 1993). Processes relating to the statistical procedures were defined and completed in accordance with the manual (Norusis, 2000).

Significant differences in the perception of international populations, economies, and governments were evaluated to determine if preconceived biases were lessened through international travel courses. Racial prejudices are largely the result of ignorance and disinformation and may be countered by the introduction of an international travel component into graduate school programs. This study further evaluated the impact of travel courses on racial biases within selected individuals. Because Cuba is a multiracial society with different racial dynamics than those of the United States, providing students with opportunities to interact with individuals there may improve the approach of the prospective business managers and teachers to race relations here.

## RESULTS

### International Travel Course Implications: Statistical Data

A statistical evaluation was performed on selected variables to determine if there were significant differences in the way students thought about issues based on whether

or not they participated in the international travel course. Significant differences in four variables were found. Students who participated in the travel course felt they had been exposed to cultural differences between countries with differing economic and political systems significantly more than those students who did not participate ( $F=21.83$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Secondly, students who participated in the travel course were less likely to believe that Cuba was a complete economic and political failure ( $F=9.31$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Students visited schools with low student-teacher ratios. Additionally, they learned of Cuba's high literacy rate; nearly 96 percent of Cubans can read and write (Moses, 2000). Although medicines may be scarce due to the embargo, health care is adequate and free to all Cubans. Cuba boasts of having the lowest infant mortality rate in Latin America (Moses, 2000). Individuals can find treatment at a neighborhood clinic, a hospital, or an alternative medicine center. Students also observed a thriving private sector that includes restaurants, shops, and services (Moses, 2000).

Thirdly, students who traveled to Cuba recognized that Cuba was a vacation destination, whereas students who did not participate in the travel course believed that very few people would want to travel to Cuba ( $F=9.68$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Travel course participants observed tourists from all over the world, primarily Europeans and Canadians, vacationing there to escape the cold of winter and early spring. Students who did not travel to Cuba were less likely to believe anyone would want to travel there based on our government's policy banning Cuban travel.

Finally, students who participated in the travel course to Cuba believe more strongly that it should be a required part of the curriculum ( $F=22.28$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Incidentally, students who did not go to Cuba also agreed that it should be a mandatory part of the curriculum, but not at the same level as the others. Only 6 of the 38 students believed that travel should not be mandatory, and 4 of those students were in the education program.

All of the participants in the travel course recognized the value of being immersed in another culture and wanted to make sure all graduate students had an opportunity to experience the life-changing experiences that could occur in this type of course.

### **Qualitative Data**

Students were given the opportunity to express their opinions about international travel in their graduate programs. Twelve students took advantage of this portion of the survey to provide qualitative comments. Two students indicated that they favored international travel courses but were concerned about the additional expenses associated with the courses. The other 10 respondents, including students who participated in the travel course and those who did not participate, wrote favorable comments about the travel component of the curriculum.

Those who did not participate in the trip believed that it would have augmented their graduate education and that it would have been "a mind-developing opportunity." Those

who chose to participate offered comments that it was a "life-changing experience," "the highlight of [their] educational program," "an excellent capstone," and "an invaluable experience."

### **MBA Students Versus MED Students**

The study also identified individuals by the graduate degree they were pursuing. Of the 38 students who participated in the study, 30 were pursuing Master of Business Administration (MBA) degrees, seven were pursuing Master of Education (MED) degrees, and one person was studying for a Master of Arts in Liberal Education (MALS). Twenty of the students who traveled to Cuba were MBA students, and one was the MALS student. None of the MED students selected the travel course.

MED students may have been reluctant to pursue the travel course because it required them to ask for time off during the school term. Teachers have time off during the summer, which makes it difficult for them to take additional time off during the school year, but a travel course offered during the summer would appear especially attractive to teachers, who often travel or take additional courses at this time. MBA students, on the other hand, typically work year-round and therefore can schedule vacation days throughout the year.

In contrast to common stereotypes of MBA students, the study suggests that those students may even be more willing to explore alternative economic and political systems and immerse themselves in other cultures than MED students. The travel course originated with the business curriculum to satisfy the overwhelming desire of MBA students to explore other cultures, and the course was later made available to all graduate students at Alvernia College. The increased interest of MBA students makes sense, since many of these students will find themselves sent abroad on a short- or long-term basis due to the global economy. On the other hand, the education students expect to spend all their working lives in the United States.

### **Racial and Cultural Understanding/ Perceptions of the World**

The students who participated in the travel course to Cuba were asked to respond to the following two statements: (1) "The longer I was in Cuba, the more comfortable I felt with people of other cultures." (2) "This course changed my perception of the world." These statements were designed to measure comfort and perceptions respectively, and both statements were assessed on a scale from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

The data provided by the students indicated that the longer they were in Cuba, the more comfortable they felt with people of other races and cultures ( $m=4.52$ ). With 80 percent of the college's students being Caucasian and currently living and working in rural and suburban communities with little racial or cultural diversity, this was the first time they'd found themselves in an environment in which they were in the minority. Cuba is a multiracial society with relatively

egalitarian race relations in comparison to the United States. Most Cubans are of mixed heritage—African, European, and indigenous—and visitors notice immediately the wide range of skin tones of people who interact without apparent awareness of differences. The full immersion into Cuban society successfully altered the racial and cultural misconceptions and fears that students may have held prior to their arrival.

A correlation test was performed on the two variables—comfort and perception—and indicated that the two variables were highly correlated ( $r=.91$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Subsequently, a regression analysis was performed and found that the variable “comfort” predicted an individual’s perception of the world ( $T=9.78$ ,  $p<.01$ ). In other words, individuals who participated in the travel course had their perception of the world changed because of this experience. Similar studies on the effects of international travel courses have demonstrated results consistent with this study of Alvernia College graduate students (Armstrong, 1981; Dennis-McCauley, 1990; Kessinger, 1997; Orndorff, 1998).

### Implications

The study supports the need to expose graduate students to other cultures regardless of whether or not they are able to participate in an international travel course, such as the trip to Cuba. Alvernia College graduate program faculty and administrators are to be commended for their inclusion of international topics in the traditional curriculum.

The study data suggest that a travel component can greatly improve students’ understanding of racial and cultural issues. Significant differences in perception exist between students who participated in the international travel course to Cuba and those who did not participate with respect to exposure to other cultures. Significant differences in the perception of Cuba as a complete economic and political failure and Cuba as a vacation destination suggest that the students who participated in the international travel course developed a more global view of the world and came to understand that everything is not the way the mainstream U.S. media portray it. Cuba has successes and failures in its economic and political system, as does every country. This difference in thinking will allow students who took part in the international travel course to view world events with a more open-minded and objective viewpoint.

A significant positive correlation exists between those who traveled to Cuba and their attitudes toward persons of different racial backgrounds. The study suggests that increased comfort and improved race relations may result from international travel courses if the destination places the white students in the position of being in the minority and if race is not a source of conflict in that country.


The Alvernia College students who completed the survey supported the inclusion of an international travel component in the curriculum. Even students who did not participate in the travel course reacted positively to this proposal. Students raised concerns about the cost and time commitment associated with a travel course. An international travel course can be accommodated in the curriculum of most colleges if the

course is substituted for a required course at the student’s request, or if the graduate program has an elective component, the travel course can be offered as an elective. To accommodate education students, the course can be offered during the summer in addition to one of the semesters.

### CONCLUSION

This study provides a glimpse into the life-changing experience that an international travel course can have on an individual student. The ability to understand global issues from an international perspective as well as a reduction in racial tensions due to immersion in another culture are worthy goals for education.

The enthusiastic participation and reaction of the MBA students who dominated the ranks of the Cuba travelers are positive signs for the future of U.S. engagement in the global economy. Of concern, however, was the lack of participation of the MED students, who as teachers will be responsible for shaping their students’ attitudes toward the world. These prospective teachers need to be encouraged to take part in international travel programs, and such programs should be scheduled to take into account the elementary and secondary school calendar.

Finally, this immersion of students into other cultures should be encouraged at the secondary level. If high school students experience the same profound effects as the graduate students, travel components could be utilized to help bring about racial harmony, intercultural understanding, and open-minded patterns of thinking at a much younger age. Such an approach may lead to a more peaceful and understanding nation and world. 

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