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# Cross Border Community Research, Opportunities and Challenges: Case Study Analyses

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## DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY

## Cross Border Community Research, Opportunities and Challenges: Case Study Analyses

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### Abstract

In the context of a global knowledge economy, this paper underscores the need for cross border social and community research and suggests several critical procedures necessary for successful implementation of such research projects. Using data derived from diverse sources it describes the importance of cross border knowledge sharing, and critical procedures that enlarge the perimeter of traditional teaching and learning experiences. It further describes the advantages of implementing a combination of in-class instruction and field-based activities in international settings. A discussion of the constraints and benefits of conducting social and community-based fieldwork in politically stable developing countries follows.

*Keywords: cross border research, community, globalization, intercultural communication*

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# Cross Border Community Research, Opportunities and Challenges: Case Study Analyses

This paper is for the professors, students, higher education administrators, and community development practitioners who engage in, or plan to engage in cross-border social research. It explores research issues that arose from the authors' research experiences abroad and responds to calls by McMurtrie (2007), McAllister and Whiteford, Hill, Thomas, and Fitzgerald (2006) for social scientists to recognize and incorporate disparate social settings and cultures into curricula.[1] The paper addresses the question: What are the opportunities and challenges that exist in conducting sociological/community research overseas in the new global era?[2]

In the current era of rapid globalization[3] and increased cross-border cultural exchange, social scientists are increasingly endorsing the view that globalization encompasses changes in the spatial and temporal contours of social existence (Boyer & Drache, 1996; Giddens, 1990; Gill, 1992; Glasmeier & Conroy, 1994; Hodges, 2005; Meikle-Yaw, 2005, and Stiglitz, 2002). Accordingly, the ways social scientists teach and conduct empirical research embraces a wider set of processes. Facts and ideas are now oriented globally in efforts to fully describe, explain, and predict the comprehensive set of social and economic factors that affect a variety of entities from individuals to nation states.

Gille and Riain (2002, p. 272) noted that since the late 1980s, "globalization has exploded onto the sociological agenda." Therefore, we argue that enlarging the boundaries of traditional teaching, learning, and research experiences is inevitable. **"**Globalization poses a challenge to existing social scientific methods of inquiry and units of analysis by destabilizing the embeddedness of social relations in particular communities and places" (Gille & Riain 2002, p. 271). The challenge for social scientists is to examine the global nature of social change as they grapple with boundaries, and interactions in diverse economic and social spheres. For example, how has globalization produced unequal costs and benefits among individuals, communities and nation states?

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[1]This paper does not address general practical day-to-day issues related to doing cross-border research. For a comprehensive practical guide see Barrett, C. and Carson, J. (1997). *Overseas Research*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. Barrett and Carson deal with a wide range of pertinent logistical issues from identifying the site, to pre-departure preparation, and living and working in the host country.

[2]This paper focuses on the opportunities and challenges in conducting sociological/community research overseas in politically stable developing countries. Politically stable countries, as used in this study, are countries that have experienced at least a decade free of political conflicts and civil unrests.

[3]We argue that local economies have always been a part of the globalization process. Beginning with the advent of colonialism through the era of the internalization of world economies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the globalizing effect on local economies, cultures, peoples, and politics has accelerated dramatically since the twentieth century, particularly since World War II (The authors refer to this as the new era of globalization).

**Relevance of Cross Border Research Programs**

In the new era of globalization, students and community development practitioners are not only interpreting globalization as a social phenomenon but they are also being exposed to theories of globalization and how to use these theories and a related set of processes to understand dissimilar social conditions and cultures (both past and present). These new perspectives, including the consequences of globalization, have led social and economic integration and marginalization.

The "internationalization" of programs is in demand in this new epoch of globalization and will likely increase in the future; therefore, there is a need for an internationally agreed upon set of standards for the development and implementation of research while not disregarding quality (McAllister, et al., 2006). With the expansion of globalization, business and political leaders are stressing the importance of producing "globally competent students" in academic institutions (McMurtrie, 2007). Consequently, a substantial part of globalization theory driven curricula in various universities is devoted to understanding similarities and differences in globalization processes in diverse places abroad. We argue that students and professors can broaden their theoretical insights by conducting empirical inquiry into globalization's effects not only in local but also in cross-border places, where groups, communities, and regions compose the unit of analysis, rather than the individual.

The idea behind such research initiatives is promoting orientations towards social contexts to capture qualitative information through a variety of communication behaviors, listening, participating, and talking, in local and in cross border settings. Ornstein and Nelson (2006) argued that students could maximize the benefits of their learning experience with both content- and process-oriented coursework.

The quest for understanding community relationships within fluid boundaries near and far opens up avenues for dynamic social investigations. An intensive period of field research overseas can provide students, professors, and community practitioners with opportunities to collect empirical data to broaden their understanding of a range of social phenomena.

**The Increasing Relevance of International Field Research in Higher Education**

Over the years, academic institutions have reconstructed the definition of "internationalization" to encompass elements beyond those employed in the past that, in layman's terms, constituted a fanciful term for "study abroad" (McMurtrie, 2007, A37). Academics no longer use "internationalization" to describe the action of travel beyond one's geographical borders for exposing one's self to other cultures. With the emergence of a new globalized era, the meaning of "internationalization" has transformed itself to be inclusive of actions as well as rich interactions that occur between students, professors, and professionals within and outside of geographical boundaries. McMurtrie (2007) further states that: Today, [internationalization] refers to a complex set of efforts that covers what happens in classrooms on the home campus, research partnerships formed by faculty members, public diplomacy on the part of institutional leadership, and…the pursuit of profit through fundraising and recruiting students overseas. (p. A37)

In referring to "globally competent students," business and political leaders as well as cultural scholars stress the importance of cultural competence among students.

In recent years, intercultural communication scholars have published extensively on the subject of communication competence. For example, intercultural communication researchers Martin and Nakayama's (2010) proposed a model that included four components: motivation, knowledge of self and others, attitude, and behaviors/skills. According to the researchers, if one lacks the basic motivation to interact with others, then other components of the competency model are, for all practical purposes, irrelevant (p. 435). The second component, knowledge of self and others, focuses on one's ability to engage in critical self-evaluation, knowledge of others, and linguistic knowledge (pp. 438-439). The third component, "attitude" includes tolerance for ambiguity, empathy and nonjudgmentalness. Since people generally respond favorably to predictable situations, many find it difficult to experience the ambiguity associated with living in a foreign culture. Empathy, the second part of the attitude component, relies on one's knowledge of other cultures. While empathy relates to physically or psychologically "stepping into someone's shoes," such an act, according to intercultural communication scholars Lustig and Koester (1999), would almost be impossible in many cross-cultural situations (p. 332). Thus, Bennett (1998) developed a wholly different approach to the Golden Rule, a statement that he referred to as the "Platinum Rule" ("Do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them") (Martin & Nakayama, 2007, p. 441). The last element, nonjudgmentalness, is the ability to suspend judgment in intercultural communication situations. However, it is difficult to achieve a state of nonjudgmentalness since many people express mild to strong forms of ethnocentric behavior.

To ensure students develop intercultural communication competence, many American universities are creating new programs and are hiring senior administrators to oversee these programs (McMurtrie, 2007). The subject matter of the newly instituted programs includes international research, service learning, and teaching. Moreover, the increasing number of study abroad courses (McMurtrie, 2007; McAllister, et al., 2006) illustrates current trends in the integration of "internationalization" by American academic institutions. These course opportunities for studying abroad are plentiful and offered in many academic disciplines in the attempt to educate using various techniques and educational tools specific to the discipline and the region.

The spaces in which changes are occurring have expanding boundaries and inter-boundary social and economic relations. Sociological and community research and service learning ventures are increasingly embracing such dynamics. Thus, methods of social inquiry ask specific globalization entrenched questions and seek to answer them. Answering these questions effectively often requires collecting empirical data in diverse and extra-boundary places. From methodological and theoretical perspectives, empirical procedures used to study trends in globalization related social change might vary from field to field in the social sciences; all should embrace the scientific method of social inquiry. A discussion of such methods is beyond the scope of this paper.

**Methods**

We used a content analysis of cross-border research journals written by students and professors in sociology and community development degree programs to address the research question.  Students and professors were involved in intensive periods of community research in international settings.  The researchers evaluated the international research field journals of the 21 students and professors participating in the three cohorts.  In addition, we conducted an examination of field observation and focus group notes recorded by students and professors.  We coded, categorized into themes and analyzed data generated from these sources.

Research journals documented daily personal accounts of challenges and opportunities surrounding the practice of field research in three politically stable English-speaking developing countries.  To systematize these accounts, the journaling process contained structured sets of questions.  Question categories included: (a) Pre-Trip Questions, (b) Daily-in-Field Reflections and Introspections; and, (c) Post-Trip Reflections and Introspections (see appendix I for an example of questions).  The design of the journaling process encouraged participants to consider the sources of their assumptions and behaviors in the field and determine answers to questions that arise through self-reflection.

*Field Research Processes*

*Jamaica:* In June 2007, nine students and two professors immersed themselves in rural communities and collected empirical data to broaden their understanding of the relationships among globalization, inequality, poverty, gender and natural resources management at the community level.  They studied the sociology of community and cultural differences in community development from an international perspective.  Students were then required to compare community development issues in the United States with those in Jamaica.  They collected data by way of intensive interviewing of rural people on the local effects of globalization in rural communities in North East Jamaica during a 17-day period.  To enhance the learning process, students attended lectures by a team of multidisciplinary professors at the University of the West Indies' Mona Campus, in Kingston, Jamaica.

*Grenada West Indies:* During the summer of 2008, four students and the principal author spent five weeks in rural Grenada, West Indies, engaging in intensive and diverse community activities.  They worked with local community residents and community officers, gaining knowledge about how the Grenada Rural Enterprise Project (GREP) affected change in small rural areas.[4]  Students also conducted 107 in-depth interviews regarding community engagement among rural women (this process was part of a dual-site study—we asked the same set of questions of 107 women in a small rural town in the United States—Shelby, Mississippi).  Students and professors who immersed themselves in rural life in Grenada were required to consider GREP goals, project impact (particularly on gender inequality), and project challenges and opportunities.  They studied the sociology of community and cultural differences concerning community development from an international perspective.  Students were then required to compare community development issues in the United States with those in Grenada.  To enhance

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[4] The purpose of GREP is to strengthen the capacity and build confidence of rural communities through diverse rural support projects to meet community needs.

the learning process, students attended lectures presented by a team of multidisciplinary professors at St Georges University, Grenada.

*Cayman Islands:* In March 2010, under the guidance of their professor, (and personnel at the host agencies: Department of Children & Family Services, Community Affairs and Housing Ministry and the National Council of Voluntary Organisations in the Cayman Islands), six Master of Science in Community Development students engaged in critical thinking regarding ethnocentrism and cultural relativism to enhance their academic, social and community engagement experiences in this unique Caribbean island. The students experienced a rigorous and intensive schedule of activities, such as presenting work at several sessions at a two- day workshop with government officials on community development in the U.S., and engaging in reciprocal presentations by personnel from Department of Children & Family Services, Community Affairs and Housing Ministry. Students spent two day immersed in community transect walks and participating in diverse community activities. Students and their professor learned about the successes and challenges of implementing social and community services in a unique island nation. They learned about community development through oral histories from a group of 30 elderly men and women.

In general, intensive interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes in study sites in Jamaica and Grenada. Professors and students immersed themselves in rural communities and conducted four focus group meetings with more than 120 local participants, addressing issues regarding the effect of globalization on rural livelihoods (in Jamaica), and community engagement among rural women in the new global era (in Grenada). The primary objectives of community immersion were to help students make real life connections with theoretical ideas and concepts learned in the classroom and to become engaged in real life community development. Focus group meetings did not occur in the Cayman Islands.

Using data from research journals, field observations, and focus groups, the following sections detail pre-trip planning and implementation, and learning opportunities and challenges in conducting cross-border research; overseas engagements guidelines, globalization theory and overseas engagements, and debunking cultural differences.

## Pre-Trip Planning and Implementation, and Learning Opportunities and Challenges

The success of cross-border fieldwork requires careful and systematic pre-trip planning. The planning process may require anywhere from six to eighteen months depending on the proposed length of stay and the complexity of the engagement process. Financial resources influence the length of this process.

The pre-trip/pre-research process involves making initial contacts with the host institution or organization(s), understanding relevant institutional policies and procedures and logistics regarding connecting with the target population. A broad understanding the culture, communities, and institutions and organizations of the host country is pivotal. Inaccurate assumptions about how community institutions operate locally can impede the international research process and create site-specific challenges. Rushing the pre-planning process can lead to unrealistic and faulty assumptions about overseas infrastructural conditions, cultures,

accessibility, and local languages.  Thus, it is important to create connections that are more *collaborative* and *integrative* rather than *superior* and *predatory*.

Participants who engage in a series of pre-trip opportunities and regular on-site cultural activities will be more likely to adjust successfully to the stress, discomfort, and anxiety resulting from international travel.  Pre-trip activities should include:

(a) Students and professors meeting at the home university formally in classroom settings prior to departure to learn about globalization and regionalism theories and frameworks, and to participate in pre-trip preparatory workshops;

(b) Students study the host country's history, cultural elements, social, economic and political conditions and local language differences;

(c) Students prepare for field engagement in host country by learning the cultural attributes and conducting exercises in cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication;

(d) Students engage in critical thinking about ethnocentrism and cultural relativism to enhance their academic and social experience in the host country and;
(e) Students, professors, and organizers openly discuss the goals, plans, challenges and opportunities of the impending trip.

The globalizing of education has also spawned a movement of professors across national borders; this offers ideal situations for successful empirical data collection in international settings.  With their prior knowledge and acquaintances, interested professors and students who originate from a potential host research country have several advantages to the internationalization of curricula and community engagements.  First, international students and professors can play pivotal roles in site selection.  They are anchoring links with universities overseas, local community development organizations, and communities with which universities may wish to collaborate.  Second, from their own previous research and community work, they are ideal resources for scouting out the best communities in terms of safety, accessibility, gaining entry, and assessing how globalizing forces are affecting people's livelihoods and community life in disparate areas.  Through their understanding of local contexts, international professors and international students can open doors easily, by defining and establishing ethical boundaries, communication trust, and working rapport, and as key informants.  Community residents tend to open-up to a group more easily when they recognize a familiar face, language or accent.  Third, the social and cultural capital of international students and professors are resources that can connect overseas researchers to important local social and economic peculiarities that may not be immediately perceivable or obvious, thus enriching the travel experiences of the international researchers.  Fourth, they can enrich the research process by bringing uniquely personal and fresh perspectives to theory interpretation and the rendering of appropriate methodological angles.

Nevertheless, the absence of overseas professors or students does not preclude the internationalization of research curricula and successful fieldwork experiences, but the process may require even more time and systematic and intricate pre-planning strategies.

Reconnaissance field visits and cross-border university networking are highly essential. Although these avenues require financial, time, and psychological investments, they are critical in creating social and logistical resources for the smooth execution of cross-border research.  In addition, U.S. and overseas universities are increasingly investing in full-time international program offices.  These offices organize and facilitate cultural and academic immersions on behalf of groups and universities.  The offices can provide services to overseas institutions by organizing accommodations, setting up lectures by appropriate domestic professors, and identifying local experts.  They can also work out "kinks" in research designs, arrange field visits, and make arrangements with local governmental and non-governmental organizations. They could facilitate contacts with key local leaders, inform local community residents of the impending research, locate and arrange for appropriate transportation, ands handle with telecommunications and health services logistics  In addition, these offices can act as headquarters for visiting students and professors; as posts for the dissemination of real time and relevant local information; for acting as first response units for unexpected issues that may arise in the field, and for initiating and monitoring formal and informal partnerships among the local populace.  We recommend making full use of these services as the easiest route for collaborative and integrative processes and for desirable research outcomes.  For example, the 2007 Jamaica field engagement (described in the methods section of this paper) was successful because of a range of accommodative and logistical services provided by the International Programme Office at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, located in Kingston, Jamaica.

In developing countries where there are no international program offices, the international researcher(s) can handle logistical issues.  In these cases, enlisting the help of a local and independent local organizer is vital.  That individual can facilitate connections with relevant local organizations, key informants, local residents and assist with understanding local power structures and cultural peculiarities.

**Participant Selection:**  This process is crucial to the success of group engagement overseas.  Widespread advertisement at the home campus using several media should begin at least one year in advance to generate a reasonable number of student participants, allowing for possible student attrition.  Researchers often desire a diverse pool of potential students to participate in the program.  A consideration of evidence from thematic analysis of research journals, pre-trip meetings and discussion and other faculty/organizer's interactions with students on a United States college campus, led to the development of a typology of students who participated in international research.  Table 1 presents the typological classification and student characteristics.

**Table 1: Typology of Students' Pool for Participating in International Research**

| Type of Student | Characteristics |
|---|---|
| **Internationally Aware** | Has international travel experience, civically engaged at home, altruistic, self-assured, high achiever, embraces diversity, passionate and eager to exploit new learning opportunities. May (or may not) interact regularly with international students. Has the economic resources required for participation. |
| **Internationally Motivated** | Lacks international travel experience, civically engaged at home, altruistic, self-assured, high academic achiever, embraces diversity, passionate and eager to exploit new learning opportunities. But does not have the economic resources required for participation. |
| **Internationally Intrigued** | Has the desire and economic resources to travel, and has had prior international travel experiences for leisure. Not civically engaged, non-altruistic, nor serious academically. Seizes the opportunity to go overseas and values the travel opportunity as a chance for recreational rather than academic advancement. |
| **Internationally Unmotivated** | Has the desire to travel internationally. Has no prior travel experience. Not civically engaged, non-altruistic, and serious academically. Afraid to travel overseas for academic advancement for fear of diseases and terrorism. |
| **Internationally Unaware** | Although academically exposed to theories of globalization and the interconnectivity of social, economic, and political relations, shows little personal interest in these issues and international affairs in general. Lacks the energy and motivation to travel. Rooted in place and lacks the foresight to appreciate the value of international engagement. |

*Students from a rural regional university in Mississippi, U.S.A. were the basis of this typology.

## Overseas Engagement Guidelines

*Group Dynamics, Culture Shock, and Homesickness*

To achieve a certain level of intercultural competency, it is incumbent on international fieldworkers to learn as much as possible about the culture, decide for themselves if they are willing to shed their *taken-for-granted* security to advance knowledge gathering. From the analysis of research journals, several issues came up regarding intra-group interaction. Among participants, previous international travel experiences varied from none to several. Students traveling overseas as a group may come from diverse disciplines and backgrounds and may not be familiar with each other. Students may not have time to adjust to each other because they are required to share unfamiliar living spaces while simultaneously attempting to live in tight accommodations and acclimatize to cultural differences in the host country. These new arrangements often create a sense of disorientation, producing symptoms of "cultural stress" or "culture shock" such as homesickness, exhaustion, frustration, and unforeseen conflict. In addition, agitated individuals will often express hostility toward the host country in the form of direct complaints, judgementalness or insensitive humor, affecting the overall atmosphere of the research process by affecting psychological well-being and task performance of the entire group. It is important to recognize individual differences and the effect it might have on the group's dynamics and cohesiveness. To counteract the tendency to evaluate other cultures (a reflection of minimal intercultural communication competency), students and professors should be attentive to uncomfortable and unbearable feelings and make steps to diffuse, instead of

discounting them.  Finally, it is important to note that culture shock is a "state of dis-ease, and, like a disease, it has different effects, different degrees of severity, and different time spans for different people" (Barna, 1998, p. 186).  Sojourners who receive special cultural training prior to departure, participate in individual or group-related activities to reduce cultural stress, or remain isolated from the new culture may experience mild and no culture shock at all (Martin and Nakayama, 2010, p. 327-328).  There are five main mechanisms to address and reduce the severity of culture shock: *Nightly Group Meetings:*  Students and professors can openly discuss innovative ways to addresses potential challenges.  Meeting briefly each night after the evening meal to discuss the day's events and make plans for the following day will help all parties adjust to the inevitable stress that accompanies any cultural transition.  Participants should bring their journals to every night meeting and be prepared to share their research progress, problems, and concerns.  Group activities should focus on common and shared interests rather than around individual interests.  Nightly group meetings give participants opportunities to engage in critical self and team evaluation, and assessment of tolerance for ambiguity, empathy and nonjudgementalness (Martin and Nakayama, 2010).

(a). *Individual Meetings:*  To prevent the alienation of introverted students, professors, research organizers, or team leaders, schedule individual meetings as necessary to discuss challenging issues and to express concerns constructively.  While addressing individual needs it is important to avoid situations that exacerbate individual resentment; an emphasis on shared goals and outcomes is important.

(b). *Personal Journals:*  Participants may use personal journals to vent feelings of frustration.

(c). *Goal Centered Discussions:*  Faculty, students, and organizers should be prepared to focus on research goals and opportunities amid unexpected challenges.  Occasionally refocusing participants on the goals of the trip may be necessary and involve reconstituting elements of both academic and cultural immersion goals.

(d). *Emphasizing the Ephemeral Nature of the Process:*  It is important to remind those encountering stress related to their international experience that the current lifestyle is temporary.  One student noted, *"When I got frustrated and exhausted in the field, I just reminded myself that it will soon be over."*  This attitude helped the student's ability to engage and cope by acknowledging the transitory structure of current field activities.

**Physical Challenges**

Ornstein and Nelson (2006) focus on the challenges posed by the physical and cognitive aspects of the traveler.  In their study, they found that travel inflicts stress upon its participants, therefore leading to increased sensitivity and participants' emotions.  They relate the heightened level of stress experienced by the traveler to many factors, including little to non-existent travel experience by the participant, rigidity of personality and changes in diet and routine.  Our empirical evidence supports their assertion.  Several students encountered physical strain while navigating rural communities and sleeping in accommodations without air conditioning.  Regarding physical and mental strain, several responses were isolated:

(a) Severe complaints that affected the emotional state of other team members and even actual disruption of the research schedule;

(b) Moderate complaints which had minimal impact on the team's well-being and the overall research process; and,

(c) A mature approach that showed attitudes of empathy minimized emotional responses and focused on teamwork and on achieving research goals. A student's journal entry exemplified this latter approach.

"When confronted with the very hilly climbs and curvy rides, I just did what was required. I gave 100 percent to my team. Yes, I was tired, stressed and overwhelmed, but I used every bit of my own will power to persevere. The first thing towards fulfilling our goals was to be open and receptive. We had to prepare every day for something new. It wasn't just a go with the flow kind of assignment. Every day brought new opportunities, and we had to take them head on. We had to really capture the experiences, so we could bring them back and use them."

This student appears open to new experiences and displays the ability to be goal-oriented with an aptitude to benefit from deep learning activities as well as a propensity to suspend judgment in intercultural communication situations (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

*Scheduling of activities:* Daily activity schedules should attempt to include recreational opportunities for the participants. Students should have input in choosing cultural and recreational immersion options in the host country. To avoid exhaustion, organizers should be careful not to over-schedule activities. Reasonable downtime (where participants have no group activity obligation) is necessary for short-term recuperation.

*Journaling:* Journals provide opportunities for the organizers to reflect on problems and issues identified by students to improve program scheduling for future trips. This documentation aids in the analysis of research goals and data and in the evaluation of research ventures. Field researchers should keep two separate journals:

(a) A research journal: in this journal, structured documentation of the research process in terms of documenting pre-trip expectations, daily-in-field reflections, introspections, and observations is necessary to achieve stated goal(s); and

(b) A personal journal: in this journal, field researchers can explicitly record personal thoughts and feelings regarding their daily experiences outside of academic and research obligations. Journals are useful for expressing personal feelings of dissonance brought on by culture shock and homesickness; documenting and reflecting on such notes can help individuals determine their personal strengths and weaknesses vis-a-vis cross border research.

*Globalization Theory and Overseas Engagement*

It is imperative that students not only understand research design and implementation strategies, but also understand the assumptions and ramifications of globalization theories to provide direction for what to talk about, listen for, and observe while in the field.  Theory based knowledge will enrich the research process by shedding greater light and deepening understanding.  The following quotes from post trip reflections (documented in research journals) attest to the importance of prior theoretical knowledge, facts and ideas about the new global era.  Three students wrote:

> "I really understood the impacts of globalization on developing countries from being in the rural areas of Jamaica."

> "Expanding my global worldview was accomplished by traveling to Jamaica, talking with the people, experiencing the culture, watching the news and reading local papers. As many Americans do, I thought only about America and my place in the U.S. I gave little consideration to other countries and how they are impacted by decisions made concerning the U.S. and other countries. Globalization theory had helped, I think, to foster the concept of people living in one world together. Living in one world together should make us more concerned about what is happening in other places."

> "I felt a connection between the theories we have studied and the actual system."

All three students exhibit critical reflection, application of deep learning processes, sociological debunking, and application of theory to practical issues.

## Debunking Cultural Differences

An effective measure to test the benefits associated with pre-trip orientation and on-site cultural exercises is to compare *pre-trip expectations* with *post-trip reflections*.  Students who traveled to Jamaica, Grenada and the Cayman Islands had an assortment of pre-trip expectations. Some of these expectations were positive: students expected to become comfortable interviewing strangers and, in the process, learn different perspectives from individuals who are experiencing the most severe effects of globalization.  Students traveling to Jamaica, Grenada and the Cayman Islands sought exposure to a wide variety of cultural experiences, including the dramatic differences often found in the country's urban and rural areas.  They expected to witness a "communal bond where people share to enhance their livelihood."  Most important, students expected to learn about social inquiry and community development; and expected to practice cultural relativism, to engage in open-mindedness and nonjudgmental behavior (a quality associated with optimal intercultural communication competence).  That they fulfilled these expectations is obvious in the following post trip reflections of students who went to the Cayman Islands:

> "I open myself up to new ideas, new experiences, and got involved in what was happening around me.  As far as learning opportunities, I would say my being there and being put in situations that I wasn't used to were the learning opportunities.  I had never

worked with 4 yrs. olds, I had never had yams like the ones that were cooked, I had never had the Jamaican national dish, I had never been to a foster home or worked with foster children, I had never been a VIP at a club, I had never been to a pro volleyball tournament.  I had held a stingray, and I had never attended at church like the one we went to the first Sunday we were there.  These were learning opportunities for me because it allowed me to see new things and understand how people outside of the norms of my life interact and function.  It's an awesome thing to have so many first time experiences in such a short time."

"The most obvious learning opportunity that we had was the two days spent with Children and Family Services department.  They taught us a great deal about how they did community development work in the Cayman Islands.  It was very helpful to hear them describe what sort of things they did in the community, but the most valuable thing was going to the east end district and the George Town district.  I really got an understanding in how one has to be a part of the community to help the people who live there.  In the east end we walked through the homes of people who lived in poverty there.  Our guides new the people and their problems and they built a system of trust between each other.  That is the most important lesson that I will bring back with me and that I will put to use in the U.S., you have to understand for yourself the struggles that people are going through in the community that you are trying to development.  You have to be an insider, and if you are not a part of that community you must take steps to understand the problems they face and gain their trust."

Nonetheless, some perceptions were negative, with students feeling that the host countries embodied the worst media-portrayed images of developing countries.  Negative narratives focused on economic and social conditions, starving children, unpaved, dirt roads, extreme poverty,  material conditions similar to the depression years in the U.S.A., isolated homes and a general sense of  remoteness, underdeveloped locations similar to  poor communities  in Mississippi, and communities and individuals  trying to survive in a world of harsh material conditions.

In some cases, the students' post-trip reflections mirrored their pre-trip expectations.  For example, students learned from multiple perspectives and lectures on the effects of globalization on the Jamaican economy offered by an interdisciplinary team of professors at the University of the West Indies and St. George's University in Grenada.

Regarding the lectures, one student wrote*:*

"I learned lot in the lectures.  They told us about the problems farmers have with things such as yam sticks, and natural disaster, as well as the effects of globalization.  I learned more from the farmers themselves.  They understood that times have changed and it is harder to sell goods but generally didn't blame the government or the U.S.  It really made me understand the impacts globalization has on developing countries."

Students also learned about the effects of globalization on local rural residents.  Students also

believed that they were able to engage in behavior associated with open-mindedness and non-judgment, as exemplified by students' post-trip comments:  One student wrote:

> "We got to learn about different cultures, not only by living in the environment for five weeks, but we also attended classes at the University.  We learned about history of Grenada, and culture.  Every day was a learning opportunity.  For example, going out in the field to collect data helped us strengthen our interview and personal skills; working closely with other people of different cultures built character and tolerance; talking with community development officers not only helped us while we were there, but will also help us in this field for the rest of our lives."

Other students wrote:

> "The experience is something I will never ever forget.  It was once in a lifetime.  I can't grasp everything I learned.  I think it will sink in and start showing up slowly."

> "Although Jamaica is lacking financially, God has blessed her with peaceful serene places, fruits in abundance, soothing lakes and a determined people."

> "The Jamaican culture is amazing!  It is rich just as I thought.  I did not know about Marcus Garvey being from Kingston or Nanny of the Maroons.  Also, reggae was more influential than I expected.  The main cultural differences I noticed were the reaction to the Government and marriage.  From my experiences, people did not generally get married in rural areas and just lived together.  It was a widely accepted practice there unlike in the U.S.  Also, in the U.S. people tend to blame the Government for their problems and they don't."

In some instances, however, student reflections indicated distinct differences between expectations and reality.  For example, while exposure to poverty occurred in all three countries, student comments did not reflect critical reflections on stereotypical images of starving and naked children, rural pollution, and unpaved roads.  One student wrote:

> "I did not think that cars would be driving in rural areas, I did not think that people would have clean clothes, shoes, or proper grooming, I thought that people would be hungry to say the least."

In the same vein, other students wrote:

> "I expected to see children starving like you see in the commercials.  I also expected to see more trash and waste there."

> "I saw magnificent homes built on the hillside above impoverished places."

> "St Georges University was totally different than what I thought it would be.  I did not expect the building to be as nice as they were.  I also did not think they would have all of

the technology that they did.  I thought it would be a farming community and also I thought it would be small.  It was big and there were no farms in sight."

"There were many cultural differences.  They drove on the left side of the road.  The police did not carry guns.  Everybody was friendly.  They did not air conditioners in every household.  I really did not know how to react to these differences.  I tried to be open to the differences, but it was a hard thing to do."

Despite structural and systematic efforts to prepare students to live temporarily in a foreign country, the students still encountered cultural and material challenges.  While English is the official language for Jamaica, Grenada, and the Cayman Islands, locals often use patois/local dialect.  Since students had to interview rural inhabitants in study sites, they were particularly concerned about the potential for miscommunication due to language barriers.  While some students indicated they did not encounter any significant difficulty in this area, others found language to be a cultural barrier.  At the same time, some of local residents had difficulty understanding American students' accents and some of the concepts on the questionnaires.

In addition, students anticipated other problems, including rugged, impassable roads, isolated communities, exotic and different foods, poverty, and local people's unwillingness to participate in the research project.  While travel was slow due to poor roads in some rural areas, students remained in the field, collected data and learned about rural communities during a period of two to four weeks.  Others perceived challenges among students, included the fear that members of the local population would be unfriendly and unresponsive were illusory.  Finally, the challenges associated with living in a perceived isolated rural community caused many students to experience physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion.  Despite this stress associated with "culture shock," the students actually collected quality data.  As one student noted:

"I made connections with what we read about by actual experience I thought that there would be a challenge from not knowing the area, but the GREP workers helped us get around and made sure we knew where we were going.  Not having private transportation all of the time was overcome by meeting people who helped us with public buses.  Sometimes food was a challenge, but we always had what we needed and made do."

Still, the barriers to achieving optimal intercultural communication competence were evident:  reflecting culture shock and cultural adjustment process, students routinely failed to exhibit a competent "attitude" (one of the components of the Martin and Nakayama model).  Exhibiting ethnocentric behavior, many students did not display tolerance for ambiguity and nonjudgementalness.  This was evident not only during the trip, but during a post-return presentation to the university community.  Nevertheless, the pre-departure instruction as well as the structured activities designed to address the problems of culture shock helped mitigate some of expected cultural challenges that any student would face, particularly students whose cultural training and experience are arguably very limited.

*Giving Back/Service Learning Opportunities* – Research activities can often be daunting for residents in the host country.  Stoecker and Tyson (2009) argued that the question of who benefits from service learning/community engagements requires consideration.  The research

often showed that meeting professors and students' needs shifted the focus and outcomes of community engagements away from the community toward faculty and students.  American professors and organizers of overseas research engagements can consider opportunities for reciprocity, how they might "give back" to communities overseas.  Including appropriate and realistic community projects in the budget is one possibility.  For example, students who participated in the Grenada research trained 74 rural folks in information technology; each participant received 30 hours of computer training and received certificates that were valuable for employment.  However, the notion of "giving back" may not be immediate or even tangible. Students and professor sent gifts to Grenada after returning to the United States.  A student's journal entry sums up the intangibility of giving back to a community in need:

> "I learned that even though you do not have the ability to provide immediate help, what you are doing is better than doing nothing at all.  By saying this, I mean that, at first, I found it wrong to go into someone's hometown and take an hour or more away from their time with the knowledge that you do not have the ability or even the connections to help them in any way.  I have though, come to the realization that maybe, just maybe, my research will fall into the right hands someday and will give that person a basis for creating change.  My research may not help the respondents whom provided me with the data, but it might help their future generation of family."

It is evident that the student's altruistic awareness increased and showed evidence of engaging in critical reflection and critical thinking during the process of conducting cross-border research.

Yet students were also aware of the fact that they were perhaps the ones gaining most from engaging with the locals.  After noting her surprise that so many local farmers showed up to participate in a focus group meeting, a student expressed real frustration over the perception that local farmers did not benefit from the intercultural exchange.

> "The farmers were very responsive; however, one was somewhat irritated because he felt that we were robbing them of their knowledge without giving back in return.  This was my greatest frustration because I can understand how he feels.  We reiterated what we said at the beginning that we would write papers that may potentially impact what is happening in Jamaica but that other than that we had nothing else to give."

In an example of tangible benefits to a host community, students who visited the Cayman Islands gave back by spending a day at a local foster home painting, planting flower gardens and planting a fruit tree that symbolized a bond between the U.S. students and the foster home children.[5]

## Conclusion

Globalization has created a smaller, more interconnected world, disrupting traditional understandings of nation-state borders through an increased flow of goods and services, capital

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[5] To work with children in the foster home the Cayman Islands, each U.S. student was required to present a police record for clearance.

and culture.  Not surprisingly, the academy has not been immune to the impact of globalization, as more and more universities address a call by business and political leaders to prepare students to become "globally competent."  And, as mentioned earlier, the widespread impact of globalization has forced research, teaching, and learning beyond its pre-globalization boundaries, creating the need to conduct more cross border social and community research.

This essay has addressed the question: "What are the opportunities and challenges that exist in conducting sociological/community research overseas in the new global era?"  Trips to Jamaica, Grenada, and the Cayman Islands served as important learning opportunities for U.S. students and professors, providing important life skills as well as instilling a greater sense of cultural sensitivity and competence.  Students broadened their worldviews, becoming more culturally competent by coming to understand different cultures and economies beyond the borders of the United States.  Yet, data indicated their tendency to be ethnocentric, judgmental, and simplistic in their interpretation of different cultures, presumably because of ingrained stereotypes.  Finally, this paper has described several critical procedures for successfully engaging in cross-border research.  For example, the typology (Table 1) derived from this study provides a tool to further investigate the extent to which financial/economic resources are linked to motivation, and the extent to which other factors such as apathy and apprehension influence one's motivation to engage in international learning and research opportunities.

We encourage stakeholders—professors, students, higher education administrators, and community development practitioners, and others—to test the relevance and validity of the critical procedures outlined in this paper.  Are these critical procedures effective in all intercultural settings?  Will additional research reveal new and important "best practices" for cross-border research?  In turn, this critical exploration will create opportunities for those involved in cross-border intercultural exchange—professors, students, members of host countries—to achieve *optimal* intercultural communication competence.

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### Appendix I
### Research Journal – Globalization and Food Systems: Implications for Livelihood, Environment, and Health, Jamaica West Indies Summer, 2007

Students are expected to keep a research and a personal Journal. In their research journals, students are required to document and reflect on the following issues. Students are required to bring their journal to each night meeting. While in the field we will be meeting briefly each night after dinner to discuss the day's events and make plans for the following day. Students will be called upon to share their research progress, problems, and concerns.

### Section I

### Pre-Trip Questions

Before going to Jamaica, each student and professor should answer these questions in the first few pages of his/her journal:

a. What are the goals of this trip?
b. How do you expect to fulfill them?
c. What learning opportunities are you anticipating?
d. What challenges do you expect to encounter (while doing your fieldwork as well as generally)?
e. What are your perceptions about the University of the West Indies?
f. What are your perceptions about Kingston, Jamaica?
g. What are your perceptions about rural communities in Jamaica?
h. What are your perceptions about Jamaican culture?
i. How do you plan to react to perceived cultural differences (while doing your fieldwork as well as generally)?

### Section II

### Daily-in-Field Reflections and Introspections

At the end of each day the student and professor will:

a. Document the day's events.
b. Do self-reflection. (What was I proud of personally? What was I confused about? How could I have done better? Etc.)
c. Document problems encountered and solutions applied; successes; frustrations; failures.
d. Other (you specify).

### Section III

### Post-Trip Reflections and Introspections

After returning from Jamaica, each student and professor should answer the following questions.

a. What were the goals of this trip?
b. How did you fulfill them?
c. What learning opportunities did you have (describe them)?
d. What challenges did you encounter (while doing your fieldwork as well as generally)?
e. How do your ideas about the University of the West Indies differ from the perceptions you had before you arrived there?
f. How do your ideas about Kingston, Jamaica differ from the perceptions you had before you arrived there?
g. How do your ideas about rural communities in Jamaica differ from the perceptions you had before you arrived there?
h. How do your ideas about the culture of Jamaica differ from the perceptions you had before you arrived there?
i. What cultural differences did you observe in relation to the U.S.? How did you react to cultural differences (while doing your fieldwork as well as generally)?