

CURRICULAR MODEL FOR FACILITATING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE  
DEVELOPMENT FOR STUDENT LEARNING ABROAD AT SPELMAN COLLEGE,  
ATLANTA, GEORGIA, USA.

By

**‘Dimeji Togunde, Dorian Brown Crosby, Kathleen Phillip Lewis and Rokhaya Fall**

**Abstract**

This article is a case study of how Spelman College has developed and implemented the Global Intercultural Seminar - an innovative curricular model for facilitating the development of student intercultural development and its assessment. It describes the mission-driven seminar, student learning outcomes and the embedded assessment tools. Spelman has won several awards including the 2017 Senator Paul Simon award for internationalization from NAFSA, Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion in International Education from Diversity Abroad in 2018, Seal of Excellence in study abroad from IIE in 2019 and ranked #32 in the U.S. News and World Report among institutions with stellar programs in study abroad in 2019. The paper concludes with the rationale for the replicability of Spelman’s curricular model to other contexts and institutions.

**INTRODUCTION:** Spelman College is a highly selective, historically black college that empowers women to change the world. Located in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, it was established in 1881 and currently enrolls approximately 2100 women undergraduates. A global leader in the education of women of African descent, Spelman offers a holistic education founded on academic excellence in the liberal arts and sciences and the intellectual, creative, ethical, and leadership development of its students.

Spelman has a long-standing commitment to expose students to the world around them through teaching, research and service learning as this is core to its mission to develop leaders who can effectively “engage the many cultures of the world.” As a major component of the College’s internationalization efforts, learning abroad at Spelman aims at enhancing students' intercultural understanding and their global competence in an interconnected, increasingly interdependent and rapidly changing global society. It aims to provide students with the skills they will need to navigate the diverse global cultural landscapes, function effectively, and to be successful as global leaders. It seeks to enhance student learning through global study-travel experience that is connected to the College’s liberal arts curriculum, the Spelman MILE (My Integrated Learning Experience).

Spelman’s commitment to learning abroad led to the College’s decision to leverage accreditation through the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP, *Spelman Going Global!* 2011-2016), an initiative mandated by our accreditation body- the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). This agency requires all institutions in the Southern Region of the United States to develop a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that addresses a well-defined topic related to enhancing student learning as part of the reaccreditation process and to submit an impact report at the end of the fifth year.

In order to facilitate the success of the *Spelman Going Global!*, Spelman College Strategic Plan (2010- 2017) was developed to carve-out a road map for the implementation of the vision to internationalize the Campus. Its major goal regarding student learning abroad was to ensure that every Spelman student had a global travel experience before completing her studies at the College. Consequently, varieties of other goals were set in both the QEP document and the

Strategic Plan to foster and grow the breadth and depth of internationalization on the Campus. In addition, the Gordon-Zeto Center for Global Education was established in 2011 with a \$17 million endowment as an infrastructure to provide strategic leadership, coherence, centralization of all international initiatives and the assessment of students' global learning outcomes.

Following a successful review of the QEP report that was submitted in 2016, the College has since institutionalized its components as required by the accreditation agency. Furthermore, the College's regard for internationalization is further demonstrated by its inclusion in the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan: Imagine/Invent/Ascend under the leadership of President Mary Schmidt Campbell and Provost Sharon Davies.

**SUCCESS IN STUDY ABROAD:** Through deliberate efforts in breaking barriers to study abroad while simultaneously fostering diversity and inclusion in international education, Spelman College has experienced a tremendous growth in study abroad participation, jumping from 218 in 2011-2012 to 474 in 2018-2019, an increase of 117% in 8 years. Participation in semester and short-term programs has included students from all academic divisions, all classifications, first generation students, international students and Pell-grant recipients. In addition, faculty-led programs have increased from 8 in 2011 to 44 in 2019. During the same time, study abroad destinations have grown from 22 to 33 to include non-traditional locations that have enabled Spelman students to explore their identities and connect with other black people in the diaspora.

Spelman internationalization efforts have earned the College several awards as a nationally recognized hub for global learning. For instance, the National Association of International

Educators (NAFSA) honored Spelman with the 2017 Senator Paul Simon Award for engagement in internationalization. In 2018, Spelman won the Diversity Abroad's Excellence in Diversity & Inclusion in International Education. In 2019, the Institute for International Education (IIE) awarded Spelman with the Generation Study Abroad Seal of Excellence. In addition to Spelman's consistent recognition year after year as a top producer of the Benjamin Gilman Scholarships for study abroad, Spelman was the first Minority Serving Institution to break into the IIE's Top 40 Open Doors Report on the highest number of students studying abroad among baccalaureate institutions. Spelman has jumped 11 spots (from the 29<sup>th</sup> rank in 2016) to rank #18 in 2018). According to IIE (2019), Spelman sends more black students to study abroad than any other baccalaureate institutions in the United States.

Spelman has also earned a regional recognition from its accrediting body – the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) - for its ability to demonstrate in its fifth year QEP report a clear and thorough assessment of the student learning abroad outcomes. The report was subsequently displayed as a model for other institutions in the region at the agency's 2017 annual meeting.

**CURRICULAR MODEL FOR ASSESSING LEARNING ABROAD OUTCOMES:** The objective of this article is to describe the innovative curricular model that facilitates the development of student intercultural development and the assessment of learning abroad at Spelman within the past eight years. It is a case study of an institution with a historical legacy of success in learning abroad that is combined with innovative assessment tools for understanding

its transformative impact on students' knowledge of other cultures, personal growth, openness to cultural differences and language acquisition.

While Spelman has defined Intercultural Competence (ICC) as acquisition of knowledge about global issues and other cultures and the development of skills to interact and engage with different cultures, at the same time, we are aware that ICC takes place at different intervals and different levels of intensity. Besides its alignment with the institutional mission statement, we were persuaded to focus on this outcome because research and various assessment results have shown that student learning abroad often leads to the development of intercultural competence. Indeed, we were intrigued by the importance of helping our students to explore their identities while abroad; to analyze issues from multiple perspectives; and develop the learning skills necessary to excel in a global society. Spelman has developed its learning outcomes (see below) with the theoretical guidance provided by the Deardorff Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006). For more information about the Intercultural Competence Model and the results of Spelman's student learning outcomes on education abroad over a five-year period see Togunde, & Fall, 2017.

**Learning Abroad Outcomes:** To measure intercultural competence, we have developed and implemented two learning outcomes (SLO) that are embedded into all global travel courses:

- Identify differences and commonalities of two world societies based on political, economic, social and/or cultural values during each international experience (**Knowledge Component**).
- Develop a personal definition of cultural engagement that reflects openness to cultural difference (**Attitude Component**).

**Global Intercultural Seminar (GIS 100):** To facilitate the assessment of the two learning outcomes associated with intercultural competence development; Spelman has designed a

curriculum innovation- Global Intercultural Seminar- GIS 100- connected to learning abroad experience at different stages (pre-departure, while abroad and post study abroad).

The inaugural Dean of Global Education (now the Vice Provost for Global Education) in the Gordon-Zeto Center originally developed GIS 100 in 2011-2012 along with the first Director of Cultural Orientation. The Director of Cultural Orientation (DOCO) is a faculty who teaches GIS 100 and serves a three-year rotational position. The DOCO receives a stipend and a course release for coordinating the seminar and she reports to the Vice Provost for Global Education, who also is a tenured Professor of International Studies.

GIS 100 is a mandatory, one-credit pass/fail seminar required for all global travel programs, and is designed to equip students with the intercultural knowledge and competencies they would need before they travel abroad and while abroad. It will also enable students to analyze and reflect upon the two learning outcomes based on their cultural engagement.

The goals of GIS 100 Seminar include the following:

- Draw students' attention to the importance of the two learning outcomes of the *Spelman Going Global* and to prepare them for the requirements related to the assessment of these two learning outcomes;
- Provide destination site-specific information that would enhance students' knowledge of the host countries and ensure adequate preparations;
- Enable students to develop the ability to analyze and reflect upon their global travel experience;
- Prepare students for their encounters with different cultures; and
- Learn about general safety precautions at the country of destination.

**One credit hour Justification:** Although one credit-hour course requires 15 contact hours per semester, this course requires only 5 contact hours for the semester. The remaining 10 hours are fulfilled through out of classroom activities and assignments connected with the course.

Three of the five classroom contact hours are taught by the Director of Cultural Orientation, while the fourth hour is taught by the faculty leading a specific study abroad program or by a representative of a study abroad provider (for students traveling for a semester). Students going on a semester study abroad take the course during a semester prior to their travel. Spring break and fall break travelers take the course in the same semester of their travel. Summer-bound travelers take the course in the spring prior to departure.

**Enrollment in GIS 100:** At Spelman, students could enroll for up to 20 credits as a fulltime student but since most students take an average of 16 credit-hours per semester, enrolling in GIS 100 for an additional credit is at no additional cost. If a traveling student has already registered for a maximum of 20 credits, she can still enroll in GIS 100 for zero credit. Students who have traveled before and successfully completed GIS 100 are exempt from sessions 1 and 2 but must attend sessions 3 and 4, which are destination and program specific.

**Responsibilities of DOCO:** The incumbent is required to teach three one-hour sessions of the pre-departure Global Intercultural Seminar - GIS 100; coordinate with the Registrar's office in enrolling all prospective student travelers into the GIS 100 class and setting up venue and meeting times. Coordinate with both the Faculty-led Program Directors and Coordinator of Short-term Programs in ensuring that all materials (surveys, student evaluations and student reflection essays related to the evaluation and assessment of global travels are completed by

students); and to coordinate with the Faculty-led Program Directors in setting up all post-study abroad round table discussions.

**Qualifications of DOCO:** This three-year appointment is open to tenured, tenure-track faculty and lecturers or instructors with multi-year contracts. Requirements for this position include a Ph.D. degree and experience in leading students abroad. Teaching experience and research/creative work that inform global topics and promote cross-cultural understanding are required. In addition, a strong knowledge of the challenges that students face in an unfamiliar socio-cultural environment as well as clear understanding of strategies for enhancing their success while abroad are critical. Moreover, flexibility and ability to build collaborative relationships among faculty, staff and students are essential.

**GIS 100 COURSE CONTENT/SCHEDULE:**

***Class Session #1: Global Intercultural Competency- Why do I need this?***

- € Syllabus review
- € Inter-cultural competency pre-test
- € Developing intercultural communication skills; strategies and tools  
strategies for growing in intercultural competency
- € Stages of Cultural Competency exercise

*JUMPING IN AT THE DEEP END:* Learning to be comfortable with discomfort; Learning and Becoming OR Choosing to remain a ‘*tour-ist*’

***Class 1 Assignment: Exploring Biases***

*What cultural biases, assumption, stereotypes and expectations of the host culture do you now have? What do you expect to present you the biggest cultural adjustment challenge/s? What is your plan for making said adjustments?*

***Class Session #2: Communicating across Cultures: How do I enter? This class is region specific***

- € What do I need to know about my destination region before I travel?
- € Traveling while American in your destination region
- € Traveling while Black in your destination region
- € Traveling while Woman in your destination region
- € Traveling while LGBTQIA in destination region
- € Traveling with a disability in your destination region

*BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND: Developing and articulating a personal perspective on how you will be perceived while traveling globally and a plan on how to ‘enter’ foreign spaces with the goal of openness to cultural difference and maximization of your intercultural learning in mind.*

***Class 2 Assignment: Intercultural Competency Nightmare***

*What things could create an intercultural competent nightmare you in the region to which you are traveling and what strategies would you use to get yourself through and beyond the communication block?*

***Class Session #3: My destination country culture: What do I need to know? This class is destination-specific***

- € Destination culture: location specifics
- € Cultural dos & don'ts

- € Factors influencing site specific culture
- € Current dynamics in my destination country
- € Comparisons with your own culture

*“IT’S JUST GEOGRAPHY” OR IS IT?: Developing and articulating an appreciation of cultural difference; developing a personal plan on how to engage successfully with your destination culture to demonstrate your understanding of points of connection and disconnection between your own culture and the host culture, to enhance your own affective learning from the intercultural experience.*

***Class 3 Assignment: Destination Profile Essay***

*Discuss TWO ways in which your destination culture is similar to US culture, and TWO ways in which it is different. You must draw your ideas from your own research. Your assignment should be 1-2 pages, typed, double spaced 12-point professional font. Include a title page bearing your Name, Date, Section 3, CRN #, Program & Destination. You must include a list of no fewer than 4 sources including no more than 2 can be valid and verifiable internet sources (not counting digital books and scholarly, peer-reviewed articles with stable urls).*

***Class Session #4: Program orientation/Program specifics. This class is program specific***

**PROGRAM SPECIFICS:**

- € What to expect;
- € What to bring and not bring
- € RECAP, RESOURCES, & REMINDERS

***Class Session #5: Post study Abroad Re-integrative discussion***

- ◆ Identify differences and commonalities of two world societies based on political, economic, social and/or cultural values during each study-travel experience.

- ❖ Develop a personal definition of cultural engagement that reflects openness to cultural difference.
- ❖ What kinds of cultural shocks did you experience and how did you overcome the challenges that you experienced while you were at your destination country?
- ❖ What advice you give to other Spelman students traveling to your destination country?
- ❖ What advice would give for other young black women traveling abroad?
- ❖ Of all that took place during your stay at the destination country, what would you say are the highlights?
- ❖ Would you go back to visit and live there? Why or why not?
- ❖ How has this travel experience changed your life?

## INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT TOOLS ASSOCIATED WITH GIS

### 100

In order to assess the student learning outcomes (SLO), we utilize a comprehensive, multifaceted but yet integrative assessment methods. **Figure 1** shows the various components of our assessment plan.

**Figure 1: Evaluation and Assessment Tools Associated with GIS 100**



**Study Travel Program Evaluation.** This tool elicits students' responses to a variety of questions aimed at verifying the extent to which the pre-departure seminar (GIS 100), post-study abroad activities and assignments (re-integrative round table discussion and reflective essays) and respective study-travel program orientations are useful in enhancing students' achievement of the learning outcomes.

**Reflective Essays:** An important component of this curricular innovation requires that students submit a Reflective Essay upon their post-study abroad experience, which serves as the primary method for assessing the SLO.

*Students are asked to write a 3-5 page essay that presents their summative reflections on the following questions based on their recent study abroad experience:*

- ❖ What are the main commonalities and differences you have observed and experienced between your own culture and the culture of the host country?
- ❖ What factors in the geographic, historical, economic, demographic, political, social, religious, or other context account for those differences you have identified?
- ❖ Using at least one personal encounter experience in Illustration, reflect on what tools, skills, or competencies did you have to rely upon in order to negotiate and get beyond points of cultural disconnect?

- ❖ What did you learn from such cultural encounters about your cultural assumptions of your own, about the host culture, and about the importance of intercultural knowledge and competency?
- ❖ What information, tools, or skills do you think would have provided you with additional assistance in establishing more effective intercultural communication and mutual understanding?
- ❖ What changes do you see in the ways you perceive yourself and your own culture vis-à-vis other global cultures at home or abroad?
- ❖ What long-range impact do you think this global cultural encounter will have on your academic, professional, and personal path?

The reflective essays are evaluated by study-travel program directors against the Global Competency Rubric. Standardized across all global study-travel programs, the Rubric was adapted from the ACE/FIPSE Project Rubrics and AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric. In the Rubric, each learning outcome is represented by a set of indicators that are assessed on a scale of 1-4 where 4 indicates “Extensive Knowledge” or “Extensive Openness”. We then calculate a Composite Index that represents the average score of all the indicators representing each learning outcome.

**Blog Prompts:** Blog prompts are included as an assessment tool to help in documenting students’ experiences about their destination country and to encourage acknowledgement and acceptance of cultural difference. The blogs are submitted on the Moodle Page of GIS 100. Unlike a wholly quantitative technique that tends to condense information into numbers, a qualitative measure

such as blogs can be used to enhance data regarding intercultural skills gained by students while abroad.

*BLOG # 1: What to Expect... Perhaps the Unexpected? Unconscious Incompetence*

- ❖ You've been going through all the steps to go abroad and, now, suddenly, it's time to go! As you prepare to depart are you excited? Stressed out? Or maybe a little of both?
- ❖ It is true that international travel experiences will be both exciting and, at times, stressful. One way to combat stress, is to recognize that because you are going to a new or different culture, some of your expectations may be inaccurate or too much to hope for. Will you become fluent in your foreign language in one semester – probably not!
- ❖ Pause for a minute and jot down a few of your expectations; then reflect on whether they are realistic. Why or how might these expectations impact the beginning of your experience abroad?
- ❖ If you recognize that some of your expectations might *be overly optimistic*, are you able *to lower your expectations*? Are you willing to accept the unexpected – and appreciate the diversity in your new surroundings, lifestyle and friendships?

*BLOG # 2: What's Happening? Cultural Shock/ Intercultural Communication Reflection on your own Conscious Incompetence*

- ❖ What things have you noticed or experienced in this host culture that present challenges to you because they are different from your own culture? What things are similar?

- ❖ You are abroad, settled in, and attending classes. So...how is it going? – Conscious Incompetence dealing with intercultural burn out; what strategies are you employing to heighten your intercultural understanding and acceptance? What strategies are you using to work through and get beyond intercultural communication blocks? Describe/narrate any particular intercultural encounter/s that illustrate your growth in intercultural competency.
- ❖ Choose a picture to post on your blog and describe in some detail why it *best* describes your experience in-country to date. Think about how it portrays the emotions, feelings and thoughts that you are having as you settle into your overseas experience.

*BLOG #3 Rethinking Stereotypes & Critical Thinking. Conscious Competence*

- ❖ Reflect on your time since your arrival. How do you know that you have grown in your intercultural competency? What changes do you see in yourself and in the way you react to, interact with the destination people and culture?
- ❖ Hafez Adel, a University of California at Irvine student who studied in Barcelona, Spain, wrote an article entitled “Slashing Stereotypes” for the magazine *Abroad View*. Wrote Adel: “Living abroad taught me that stereotypes endure because they provide a comfortable shortcut to understanding complex matters and that they usually emerge to fill a vacuum of knowledge. Talking with my roommates, classmates and strangers on the streets of Spain dispelled many of the stereotypes I held, while studying and hearing stories about Spanish history dispelled my misconceptions even more... What we [Hafez and his Spanish roommate] learned is that we know much less about each

other's cultures than we thought. But what we lost in certainty, we made up for in understanding." (*Abroad View*, Fall 2009, Volume 11, Issue 2, page 26-28.)

- ❖ Has your abroad experience caused you to question any stereotypes? Is there a stereotype that the residents of your host culture hold about Americans that has intrigued, surprised, or infuriated you? Why do you think this stereotype has developed? Do you think the stereotype emerged to "fill a vacuum of knowledge" as Adel suggests, or do you think there are valid reasons for the stereotype?
- ❖ Conversely, are there stereotypes that you held about the residents of your host country that have been dispelled? Blogging about these kinds of considerations can be an excellent way to document the way in which study abroad is improving your critical thinking skills.

*BLOG #4 Preparing for Re-Entry: Reflecting on How You've Changed. Toward Unconscious Competence*

- ❖ Many people describe abroad experiences as a life-changing event. As your abroad experience winds down, pick one example of how being abroad has changed you and explain to us not just *how* you have changed, but *why* this change came about.
- ❖ Consider this your "capstone blog" – something that you can point to with pride and use to articulate to your friends and family, even future employers, why your education abroad experience was more than simply "awesome."
- ❖ What things have you come to appreciate and embrace about your host country? Are there any aspects of the host culture that have become second nature to you i.e. that you now do/say/think/believe/ without thinking twice about it? What are you going to miss most

about the destination culture? Also, include strategies for cultural re-entry and for continuing your intercultural competency learning.

**Pre-Departure and Post-Return Global Assessment Surveys:** We employ this tool to assess change and development in students' self-evaluation of their intercultural development. Students are asked to provide self-evaluations of certain measures of global knowledge and intercultural competence before and after their international experience. The expectation is that students' global knowledge and openness to cultural differences would improve following their global travels.

## **GIS 100 ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST AT DIFFERENT PHASES OF EDUCATION**

### **ABROAD PROCESS**

#### **A. PRE-DEPARTURE:**

- ✓ Attend ALL four GIS 100 **Class Sessions (Two for those who took GIS 100 previously)**
- ✓ **Complete ALL CLASS Assignments and Engagement Activities**
- ✓ Complete and Upload **Destination Profile Essay Assignment** before Session #3
- ✓ Complete **Pre-Departure Survey BEFORE leaving the US.**
- ✓ Register your trip with **step.gov**

#### **B. WHILE ABROAD:**

- ✓ **Keep a Journal** documenting your encounters with the destination culture and your responses, and reflections upon those learning experiences over time. This journal will prove helpful when you write your reflective essay which will be submitted and graded.

- ✓ Complete all **Blog** assignments
- ✓ Complete **Inter-Cultural Competency Survey** before leaving your destination.

**C. POST-TRAVEL:**

- ✓ Submit ***Reflective Essay*** in (**\*Due 7 DAYS after return home**).
- ✓ **CLASS SESSION #5: Attend Scheduled Post-Travel RE-INTEGRATIVE Roundtable**
- ✓ Complete and Submit **Post-Travel Survey/Evaluation** (\* Due online immediately following *Roundtable*)

**CONCLUSION:** GIS 100 is not only innovative; it is also transferrable to other contexts and different kinds of institutions. Any higher educational institution can easily adapt this model and align the course description and learning outcomes to their mission on global learning at either the institutional level or programmatic level. Furthermore, since students do not have to pay to enroll in GIS 100, there is no cost barrier to its implementation. Moreover, since GIS 100 is offered once a week for an hour, most students do not see it as conflicting with their other course schedules. In addition, institutions interested in preparing and assessing student global learning in all the three phases of education abroad should find this model beneficial, especially, at a time when the values and impact of education abroad are being challenged. The shared learning outcomes for all study abroad programs embedded in this model should put an end to the “random acts of internationalization” that is pervasive in most institutions where study abroad programs are scattered across the campus without coherence and assessment. GIS 100 has been helpful in providing pertinent health and safety precautions, which should be helpful to institutions in mitigating risks in study abroad. The adoption of this model, however, requires

intentionality and commitment to provide an outcome-based learning abroad. Its success is contingent on having a strong infrastructure and leadership. In addition, because this model is required of all study abroad programs on campus, its success is dependent on a shared commitment by all the stakeholders to embrace the values of comprehensive assessment mechanisms.

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