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## Developing Intercultural Competence in Future Student Affairs Professionals through a Graduate Student Global Study Course to Doha, Qatar

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*This paper describes a 2-week global study course to Doha, Qatar for graduate students in the higher education leadership and student affairs program at the University of San Diego. The course sought to develop intercultural competence with a specific focus on understanding Qatari and Middle Eastern perspectives and culture, understanding the unique challenges in higher education student affairs for Qatar and other Middle Eastern countries, and identifying ways for students to apply learning from the course to student affairs practice. These learning outcomes are discussed in the context of the profession of student affairs and the University of San Diego and its Catholic mission. An overview of the global course components is presented along with student and instructor reflections of learning from the course. Challenges from the course are discussed followed by recommendations for similar global study courses.*

Developing intercultural competence is a key outcome and priority of the integrative student learning efforts of higher education today (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2011). Intercultural competence encompasses an individual's "set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett, 2009b, p. 97). A focus on intercultural knowledge and competence is becoming more and more prevalent in a variety of organizational settings, with the field of education taking the lead in this transformation (Bennett, 2009a). The focus is shifting away from the mere composition of diversity within organizations on individuals' knowledge, skills, and abilities to understand different cultures in a deeper way, and interact effectively with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds (Bennett, 2009a).

While colleges and universities focus efforts on developing students to be interculturally competent, there is a parallel emphasis on intercultural compe-

tence in the preparation of student affairs practitioners, the staff and administrators who work with students on college campuses outside of the classroom. The American College Personnel Association (ACPA; 2011) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA; 2011), which are the two primary professional associations for the field of student affairs, greatly emphasize the importance of intercultural competence as a key competency in professional preparation and development. NASPA's (2011) professional competency of equity, diversity, and inclusion is described as the "knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to create learning environments that are enriched with diverse views and people...[and] create an institutional ethos that accepts and celebrates differences among people, helping to free them of any misconceptions and prejudices" (para. 1). It is the responsibility of student affairs graduate programs to help students gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be culturally competent practitioners (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2009).

The movement in Catholic higher education toward developing intercultural competence and valuing understanding across differences emphasizes a focus on the social mission of the Church by promoting justice and transformation of society (DeBerri & Hug, 2003). Catholic colleges and universities address these aims in a number of ways, including the integration of Catholic Social Teaching into the institutional environment and curriculum. Catholic Social Teaching is a "collection of key themes which has evolved in response to the challenges of the day [and are] rooted in biblical orientations and reflections on Christian tradition" (p. 15). The social teachings emphasize a commitment to the humanization of life and world justice. Within the social teaching there is a focus on cultural understanding and global thinking through the themes of dignity of the human person, the person in community, rights and responsibilities, and, perhaps most directly, solidarity (DeBerri & Hug, 2003; Hornsby-Smith, 2006). Catholic Social Teaching is a key framework in Catholic higher education today and a lens through which to view the emphasis of intercultural competence in colleges and universities.

This paper focuses on intercultural competence through a description of a 2-week global study course for graduate students at the University of San Diego studying student affairs and higher education. The global course took place in Doha, Qatar, and the outcomes of the course reflected the development of intercultural competence. First, we will discuss the background and rationale of this course, identifying how the course aligned with the goals of the department and the institution, with particular emphasis on the Catholic

mission of the institution. Next, we will describe the course and experience as a whole. We will then provide reflections from the experience, highlighting the students' experiences and learning along with ours as the instructors. Last, we will discuss the challenges of the course and identify recommendations for similar future courses.

### Background of the Global Study Course

As was identified above, developing greater intercultural knowledge and ability was the primary outcome of this global study course. This outcome is aligned with the larger institutional context at the University of San Diego (USD), a Roman Catholic institution. Internationalization is a central goal for the university, which seeks to promote the development of a culturally competent community, attend to issues of social justice, and create international partnerships and learning experiences (USD, 2010b). The Catholic identity of USD informs the university's focus on creating a just and peaceful society, and faculty and staff are encouraged to integrate aspects of Catholic Social Teaching into their courses and other experiences for students. The outcome of intercultural competence closely aligns with the Catholic Social Teaching of solidarity with the human family. Solidarity stresses the interdependence of people and the responsibility people have to all other human beings around the world (Hornsby-Smith, 2006). In describing its commitment to solidarity, USD (2010a) promotes the idea that "We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences" (para. 1). The different ideological and cultural backgrounds of the U.S. worldview and that of the Arab community was a central focus of the course, with a goal of breaking down cultural and religious barriers and misconceptions.

In addition to the larger institutional focus, intercultural competence is also central to the goals of the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES), which is where our course is located. Faculty and students are encouraged to participate in international experiences, and for the last 3 years all graduate students in the school were required to participate in an international experience (SOLES, 2011b). An overarching goal of this requirement and the school's focus on internationalization is to prepare students to work with culturally diverse populations. The explanation, objectives, and goals of the international requirement for graduate students in the Department of Leadership Studies are included the Appendix.

The 11 students who participated in the course were master's and doctoral

students studying higher education leadership with a focus on student affairs. The emphasis on developing intercultural competence was reflected in the three primary learning outcomes of the course: (1) demonstrate understanding of Middle Eastern perspectives, specifically the Qatari and Arab culture; (2) describe the unique challenges in higher education student affairs for Qatar and other Middle Eastern countries; and (3) identify ways for students to apply learning from the course to student affairs. The next section describes the course and the ways in which the course was constructed to meet these learning outcomes.

### **The Global Study Course**

To provide a context for our work, this section describes the Qatar global study course for graduate students in the higher education and student affairs professional preparation programs. We begin with background information on Qatar and then explain higher education in Qatar. Next, we provide information about the institutional partnerships involved in the course design and coordination. We complete this section with a description of the in-country learning experiences and other components of the global course.

### **Context of Qatar**

A natural first question about this course is “Why Qatar?” Qatar, a small country on the Arabian Gulf, has a population of approximately 1.5 million people, a majority of whom are Muslim. The population doubled from 2004 to 2008 (Moini, Bikson, Neu, & DeSisto, 2009). Approximately 20% of the population are Qatari nationals, with the remaining 80% being expatriate workers and their families (Moini et al., 2009). One of the reasons for the population growth and large expatriate population is the country’s proactive efforts to educate and develop further the human resources of the Qatari people. In recognizing the challenges in long-term economic reliance on oil and natural gas, the Qatar Foundation was created in 1995 by His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, the emir of Qatar (Qatar Foundation, 2010a). The Qatar Foundation addresses the mission of building human capital in Qatar through programs and services in education, community development, and scientific research.

Since 1998, six American universities were established in Doha as part of the Qatar Foundation’s Education City. These universities are: Northwestern University, Georgetown University, Texas A&M University, Virginia Com-

monwealth University, Weill Cornell Medical College, and Carnegie Mellon University. The universities bring to Qatar expertise, prestige, and quality education, delivering equivalent degrees as their U.S.-based campuses (Qatar Foundation, 2010a). The six universities are located on the same campus, and while they exist as separate entities, they also work together to reach the goals of Education City. Beyond the Qatar Foundation and Education City there are other higher education institutions worth noting in Doha: Qatar University and the College of the North Atlantic-Qatar. These institutions, together with the Qatar Foundation, are transforming the future of Qatar by educating the Qatari people and building human capacity.

A number of American professionals have been pioneering the student affairs initiatives in Qatar, charting new territory and working alongside Qatari professionals while doing so. The growth of higher education in Qatar and the development of student affairs initiatives in these institutions made Qatar an excellent model of international higher education. Alongside this growth and development in higher education in Qatar, there is a parallel focus on developing students to be global citizens. In Education City there is a commitment to international networking to develop the intercultural competence of their students: “the global citizen of the future will need to adopt different perspectives....[and] will enjoy tasting the traditions, beliefs, and cultural experiences of others” (Qatar Foundation, 2010b, para. 2). Solidarity is also reflected in the efforts of developing the global citizen in Education City: “[Global citizens] will increasingly see conflict as an opportunity to work toward positive and mutually beneficial change rather than a wedge driven between individuals or groups” (para. 2). The cultural and religious makeup of the country along with the higher education landscape of Qatar and its focus on developing the global citizen provided the rich backdrop for the global study course.

### **Global Study Partnership and Course Goals**

The global study course was coordinated and taught through a partnership between USD, the University of Maryland (UMD), and universities in Qatar. There were a few key reasons for this partnership. First, the faculty members at USD and UMD were professionally connected and through similar professional networks were connected to the assistant vice president of faculty and student services at the Qatar Foundation, Dr. Denny Roberts, who has over 30 years of experience in U.S. higher education institutions. Second, both USD and UMD, within months of each other, had separately been in contact with

Dr. Roberts about the possibility of a global course. The graduate programs at USD and UMD were similar in many aspects, and their initial goals for a global study experience were overall consistent, so it made sense to collaborate in this endeavor.

Upon engaging in conversations between the three partners (USD, UMD, and Qatar), colleagues in Qatar expressed their intended goals for the experience, including collaborative and mutually beneficial relationships with USD and UMD faculty and students. In the past they had hosted many visiting groups to Education City and expressed concern with merely showing and telling what they were doing in Qatar rather than truly engaging and benefiting from the visitors as well. They also had experiences with Western visitors not fully engaging in the culture and making judgments and assumptions about the culture rather than seeking understanding. We (USD and UMD) echoed these concerns and agreed that we would prioritize immersion, cultural understanding, and collaboration; we did not want to be simply consumers in the experience.

In discussing how the Qatar professionals could benefit from this relationship, they identified a need for additional professional development for the student affairs professionals working in the Qatari universities. There are not many professional development opportunities for the field of student affairs in the Middle East, and the student affairs professionals who were from the Gulf region did not have master's degrees or training in student affairs (although some of the expatriates working in Qatar did). Additionally, there is a lack of sufficient literature and research on higher education and student affairs issues within the Gulf region context and on Arab students. The challenges facing student affairs practitioners in Qatar are not uncommon; many international colleges and universities using an American higher education model struggle with developing student services that fit the institutional and cultural contexts of their institutions (Lipka, 2010). There is a challenge of the globalization of American higher education in truly adapting programs and services to fit the institutional and cultural contexts, moving beyond the import-export model of developing student affairs programs and services (Lipka, 2010).

In seeking to create a mutually beneficial experience for everyone involved in the experience, we wanted all stakeholders and all three partners to bring their valuable insights and knowledge to the experience. USD and UMD students and faculty could serve as experts in the content (American higher education and student affairs), and the student affairs professionals in Qatar could serve as experts of the context (Qatari culture and higher education). Building

from these different areas of expertise, we sought to engage in mutual inquiry and work together to examine some of the challenges facing student affairs in Qatar and address these challenges together. This was achieved primarily through the Young Professionals Institute (YPI), which was a 3-day professional development institute we created and engaged in together during the trip. USD and UMD students worked with professionals at the various Qatari institutions in small groups to examine aspects of higher education and student affairs in Qatar. From this experience, the graduate students and faculty from USD and UMD benefited by learning about the Arab culture and higher education in Qatar, and the Qatari professionals benefited by learning more about higher education and student affairs trends and research. Further, the outcomes of the YPI informed student affairs practice in Qatar and international relationships and partnerships were strengthened.

### **Global Course Components**

To address the learning outcomes of the course, the global study included five components: (1) pre-trip immersion, (2) pre-trip inquiry research, (3) in-country cultural immersion, (4) the Young Professionals Institute, and (5) post-trip reflection. Each of these components of the global course included key learning activities and experiences that reflect different stages of developing cultural competence. While we did not have a specific focus in our preliminary assignments on Catholic Social Teaching, the model we used reinforced many of the themes inherent in the teachings. For example, lively class discussions about the roles of women and strong familial ties within the Qatari culture deepened our understanding of themes related to the teachings on the call to family and community that emphasize the family as central for growth and fulfillment. Connections to other elements of Catholic Social Teaching became more evident after spending more time in-country and in post-trip reflections.

Using the Papadopoulos, Tilki, and Taylor Model of Developing Cultural Competence (Papadopoulos, 2006) as a framework, the course components reflect different stages of the model. These four stages are: (1) cultural awareness, (2) cultural knowledge, (3) cultural sensitivity, and (4) cultural competence. Each stage is described in Table 1 with examples of course components that were designed to address each stage of developing cultural competence. The stages of the model are also integrated within the description of the five main components of the course and the related activities and experiences below.



Table 1

*Stages of Cultural Competence and Associated Course Components*

| Cultural Competence Stage* | Description of Stage*  | Course Component  |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Cultural Awareness         | Examination of one's own personal values, beliefs, and cultural identity   | Previous course work in graduate program<br>Paper on intentions for the experience (pre-trip)<br>Journaling   |
| Cultural Knowledge         | Enhanced understanding through knowledge acquisition and meaningful contact with others from another culture   | Pre-trip reading and research:<br>Quatar & higher education<br>Internationalization of higher education<br>Arab culture<br>Inquiry topic research (pre-trip):<br>Student affairs models and practice<br>Leadership development<br>Student development<br>Role of family in Arab students' lives<br>Independent living<br>Engaging commuter students<br>In-country cultural immersion<br>Museums<br>Cultural activities<br>Shopping malls<br>Local cuisine<br>Desert safari<br>Doha Debates<br>Al Jazeera<br>Campus visits |
| Cultural Sensitivity       | Developing relationships with others that reflect empathy, trust, acceptance, and respect for the culture  | Young Professionals Institute   |
| Cultural Competence        | Skills and dispositions to integrate effectively awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to work with others in various professional and personal contexts | Young Professionals Institute<br>Final group projects (post-trip)<br>Final reflective paper (post-trip)   |

*Note.* \*(Papadopoulos, 2006)

**Pre-trip immersion.** The first stage was the pre-trip immersion. Consistent with the goal of developing intercultural competence and with the learning outcomes of the course, we recognized that we (instructors and students) had a lot to learn about Qatar and the Arab community prior to the trip. There were two class sessions prior to the departure where we immersed ourselves in the literature on the country and our topic of study. To do this, we all read and reviewed a number of articles, reports, websites, and other documents that spanned three units of study: Qatar and higher education in Qatar, globalization of higher education and branch campuses, and Arab culture. Our partners in Qatar recommended a majority of these readings and resources to us. In addition to these reading assignments, each student researched one topic about Qatar and delivered resources and a presentation to the rest of the class on topics such as the roles of women, men, family, marriage, and children; Qatari food, arts, sports, and recreation; culture and norms; religion; history; and media. This process of learning about the country, higher education in the country, and the culture reflects the cultural knowledge stage of the model of developing cultural competence. This stage focuses on enhancing one's understanding of the culture in part through knowledge acquisition (Papadopoulos, 2006).

Students also examined their intentions and expectations for the course in a brief reflective paper. Through drawing on their own cultural perspectives and personal values and beliefs, students focused on what they hoped to learn from the course, how they wished to approach the course while we were in Qatar, the connections they hoped to make, and how they might accomplish these goals and intentions. This assignment aligns with the cultural awareness stage, which is the first stage of the model for developing cultural competence (Papadopoulos, 2006). This stage recognizes that people use their personal values and beliefs to guide the decisions and judgments that they make, an important awareness when interacting with cultures that have different world-views, customs, and values. As a class we discussed the expectations and intentions from these papers during our second pre-trip class session.

These pre-trip classes also focused on preparing students for their inquiry team assignment, which is discussed below. This initial process of the global course served as the beginning of the knowledge acquisition process of understanding the culture of Qatar and the context of higher education in Qatar in preparation for the trip.

**Pre-trip inquiry research.** A parallel process to the pre-trip immersion was the students' participation in inquiry research projects that focused on relevant and timely topics and challenges facing student affairs at Qatar higher education institutions. These projects served as the pretext for the YPI. Based on the desired outcomes of our Qatari colleagues and the common goals of developing a mutually beneficial experience, six key challenges facing student affairs professionals in Qatar were identified by our colleagues in Qatar:

- (1) student affairs models and practice,
- (2) leadership development,
- (3) student development,
- (4) the role of family in Arab students' lives,
- (5) independent living, and
- (6) engaging commuter students.

Each of these topics had varying levels of previous research and literature, but a common theme was the lack of knowledge on these topics within the context of Arab students and higher education in the Arabian Gulf region. To address each of these topics, inquiry teams were formed with students from USD, students from UMD, and student affairs professionals at the various higher education institutions in Qatar. The graduate students from USD and UMD worked together virtually using Google Groups to create literature reviews on these topics prior to the trip. Unfortunately, the professionals from Qatar had minimal participation in this process due to limited experiences with the technology, vacation schedules, lack of clear direction and expectations, and other cultural differences (such as differences in working styles). As was expected, most of the research identified on the topics was from an American perspective, due in part to the American students writing the literature reviews and in part to the fact that much of the research on student affairs topics comes from the United States. While this limited, Western perspective was a known limitation of the process, the information gathered was valuable, particularly since higher education in Qatar was largely based on an American model of higher education. This preliminary research served as a foundation for the inquiry process that would take place at the YPI in Qatar with USD, UMD, and Qatar participants. It also aligned with the second stage of the model on developing cultural competence: cultural knowledge (Papadopoulos, 2006).

**In-country cultural immersion.** A second stage of cultural immersion for the course took place once we actually arrived in the country. Prior to arriving we had gained basic knowledge and understanding of Arab culture; the in-country experience allowed for immersion in the culture to continue to build cultural knowledge. The in-country experience was a total of 2 weeks; the students from USD and UMD arrived in the country within a day of one another and operated as one group during the trip. The first 8 days of the in-country experience were focused on cultural and campus immersion. Qatar is a culturally rich country, and is one of the most traditional countries in the Gulf region (Weaver, 2003). Thus, there were many opportunities to engage in and learn about the country and the people. Excursions and activities included visits to museums and other cultural sites, including the Fanar Islamic Cultural Center, the Museum of Islamic Art, Sheikh Faisal Museum, and the Qatar Philharmonic. We experienced everyday life by visiting Qatar shopping malls and the Souk Waqif (a traditional outdoor market), going on an overnight desert safari, and eating local cuisine. The students also spent the second week staying in the homes of hosts who were professionals working at Qatari higher education institutions. Although these hosts were mostly Westerners, the students were able to learn about Qatari culture from an expatriate perspective.

Students also had the unique opportunity to be audience members in the Doha Debates (2011), which is a forum for free speech in the Arab world broadcasted on the BBC and sponsored by the Qatar Foundation. In the Doha Debates a controversial topic is selected and two speakers take opposite sides in arguing the proposition. The proposition argued during our visit was “This house believes this Afghan government is not worth fighting for.” In this particular debate, our students joined students from Qatar, as well as others in attendance, to hear opposing views about the efficacy of military intervention in Afghanistan. Speakers included former Deputy UN Envoy to Afghanistan, Peter Galbraith, who spoke for the motion, and Lawrence Korb, a senior U.S. defense adviser, who spoke against the motion. These debates were a rare and rich opportunity for our students to understand the complexity of the cultural, social, and political issues impacting the Middle East. Additionally, we visited the Al Jazeera International headquarters and studio, which is an international news station housed in Doha that seeks to deliver unbiased and impartial information through providing multiple points of view and opinions.

The in-country cultural immersion also included visiting the six higher education institutions located in Education City, Qatar University, and the College of the North Atlantic-Qatar, where we met with student affairs pro-

professionals and students. We learned about the programs and gathered additional insight and context on higher education in Qatar. Together, the pre-trip immersion and initial in-country immersion served as a foundation of cultural knowledge providing many opportunities for students to gain knowledge and experience the Qatari culture and engage with Qataris and people working in Qatar. This cultural knowledge served as a foundation through which students could meaningfully engage with others and around the content in the YPI.

**The Young Professionals Institute.** The fourth component of the global study experience was the primary vehicle for addressing the goals of creating a transformational and mutually beneficial experience, and for seeking cultural sensitivity (Papadopoulos, 2006). Along with our colleagues at UMD and in Qatar, we designed the YPI, a 3-day professional development opportunity for our graduate students and student affairs professionals in Qatar. The institute was focused on addressing the challenges facing higher education student affairs in Qatar through inquiry-focused learning communities, which we created early in the process around the six pre-trip inquiry topics previously described. The YPI sought to increase the understanding of rigorous educational practice in a culturally diverse and organizationally dispersed setting. This goal was identified because there was a stated need by the professionals in Qatar for enhancing student affairs practices in Qatar, and ensuring that practices were more rigorous and based on credible research and well-grounded theory. This is particularly complex because each of the six universities in Education City has its own mission, vision, and various organizational structures, yet they still have the structural umbrella of Education City. Thus, the nature of an organizationally dispersed community presented us with a unique opportunity to address some of the inherent structural and cultural challenges they encounter. Another primary goal of the YPI was developing new understanding of student affairs and leadership in the context of Qatar along with concrete ideas that could be put into practice to improve the effectiveness of student affairs practice.

To accomplish these goals, multi-institutional and multicultural groups worked together over the course of 3 days to learn together and propose ideas that would provide additional insight on the six inquiry topics (student affairs models and practice, leadership development, student development, the role of family in Arab students' lives, independent living, and engaging commuter students). USD and UMD graduate students shared their literature reviews on the topics they worked on as part of their course requirements. This provided

important preliminary information and initial research on each of the topics. Additionally, these literature reviews guided the inquiry questions identified by each group and addressed throughout the YPI.

During the first 2 days, the groups engaged in a variety of experiences in this process, including connecting with one another, sharing individual perspectives, creating shared perspectives, individual reflection, brainstorming, and group discussions. This group experience allowed for meaningful and deep contact across cultures, which reflects the cultural knowledge stage of developing cultural competence. The group experience also encompassed opportunities to develop relationships with others to build empathy and trust in one another as well as respect and acceptance of the culture, which allows for developing cultural understanding (Papadopoulos, 2006). In addition to developing cultural understanding, these different activities in which the group engaged were designed to allow the groups to uncover the challenges facing student affairs professionals in the Gulf region, confront assumptions and typical ways of thinking, seek to understand and learn from one another, and ultimately imagine new ways of operating and working together. Each group created a proposal for concrete ideas for how higher education in Qatar can better address the challenges identified in each group.

During the third day of the YPI each group presented the proposals they developed on their inquiry topics. Over 100 people attended the presentations, including a variety of student affairs professionals and high-level administrators from the different Qatari higher education institutions. Each inquiry group delivered a presentation that encompassed their group process; the purpose and goals of their process; their conclusions on the topic; recommendations, action plans, and visions for Qatari higher education; and further questions for inquiry. Following the presentations, Qatari professionals led cross-topic dialogues for the YPI participants and guests to discuss further the common themes and the recommendations posed by the YPI groups. The YPI concluded with an opportunity for reflection and celebration. This was an intensive experience that allowed for deep and meaningful engagement among the diverse groups; it provided an opportunity for students to develop intercultural competence through engaging in cultural sensitivity and practicing solidarity.

Since returning we have had the opportunity to present our work with our UMD and Qatar colleagues at three professional conferences. Many of the recommendations made at the YPI are currently being considered by some of the Education City campuses, and the feedback on post-YPI surveys administered to those who were present has been mostly positive. Another group of

students from two other university programs is scheduled to return to Qatar in 2012, and they will engage in a similar process of inquiry using our work as a starting point.

**Post-trip reflection.** Upon returning to USD, we knew that our process was not yet over and that reflection and integration of the newly acquired knowledge and the valuable experiences was necessary. The 2-week experience highlighted above was invigorating and at the same time emotionally and physically exhausting. A few weeks after returning from Qatar we met for a post-trip class session to share reflections and learning from the experience. USD students prepared and delivered presentations on their experience in Qatar to other student affairs professionals working at USD and other universities in San Diego. One purpose of this assignment was to help the students continue to make meaning of their experience and help them solidify and integrate their learning. Students were asked to talk about the impact the trip had on them personally, and in what ways their experience informed their practice as student affairs professionals. Additionally, the presentations provided the opportunity to share information about the Qatari culture and higher education landscape of Qatar with other administrators, faculty, and students. The final component of the post-trip experience was a required reflection paper that gave the students another opportunity to articulate their learning. These post-trip activities reflect the cultural competence stage of the model of developing cultural competence, which is the final stage of the model. This stage focuses on the development of dispositions and skills to integrate one's cultural awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to engage with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds in various contexts (Papadopoulos, 2006).

### Reflections from the Course

It has been a little over 1 year since we returned from our trip to Qatar, and the experience continues to serve as a catalyst for dialogue among students and faculty. We have shared in these conversations that the experience has affected our lives personally and professionally, increasing our intercultural awareness, knowledge, sensitivity, and competence (Papadopoulos, 2006). The global experience allowed us the opportunity to develop and demonstrate solidarity through recognizing the interconnectedness of our diverse world (Hornsby-Smith, 2006). Demonstrations of this learning, for both the students and for us as the instructors, are presented below through student and faculty reflections.

These reflections come from an initial examination of potential learning and impact on students relevant to the outcomes of intercultural competence. The information that is shared here does not reflect a formal and complete analysis of the data available from this experience. However, these reflections provide insight into how this global study course provided many opportunities for all of us to think more deeply about cultural differences. This work enhanced student's capacity to engage with and learn from others who had divergent ideas, cultures, and backgrounds.

### **Student Reflections**

Data from course evaluations, post-trip anonymous surveys with all of the YPI participants (not just USD students), and final reflection papers and presentations demonstrate that student learning was evident. The students demonstrated learning that reflected the stated learning outcomes of the course, gaining a stronger sense of cultural awareness, knowledge, sensitivity, and competence.

None of the students on this trip had ever been to the Middle East, and the students had minimal previous experience with Middle Eastern cultures. There is great value in visiting a country and being immersed in its culture. Cultural dissonance awakens and challenges stereotypes about the other, and has a way of stimulating deep internal work (Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Tatum, 2003), and thus developing more cultural competence. During the early stages of the global experience (pre-trip immersion and in-country immersion) many students expressed that what they heard and saw was very hard to understand; they began to draw conclusions and make judgments based on their own Western values. For example, learning to respect the dignity of others, which is a theme reflected often in Catholic Social Teaching (Hornsby-Smith, 2006), became a challenge for many students who had previously held beliefs and stereotypes about the role of women in the Arab culture. Several of the students commented in reflection papers about the role of women, their style of dress, and their assumption of how the women must feel. For example, in her reflection paper, one student said:

Recently, the French government called for the ban on Muslim women wearing the veil in public institutions. With this as an example, it gave me a more heightened sense of cultural awareness, since I do understand why Muslim women decided to wear the hijab and the burqa. In my mind it's sad when a government doesn't take the time to under-



stand this and become more familiar with the customs and traditions of their citizens.

With greater knowledge, experience, and meaningful contact with men and women in Qatar, the students' initial perceptions of the culture began to shift and the students began to see the culture for what it was, rather than how it was not reflective of Western culture. They were also able to apply this new awareness to professional contexts. One student discussed this in terms of how she might now interact with college students:

I've also learned that I should give students the responsibility to decide whether or not they feel oppressed. This may seem obvious or "matter of fact" but I think this was an important realization for me. The Qatari women helped me learn that lesson in particular.

After spending time and talking with Arab women on campus, students gained tremendous insight and a new respect for women in the Qatari context as well as the culture as a whole.

Another important theme that emerged was the impact of the role of the family in the Arab culture. We heard from students attending the various universities in Education City about the importance of family in their daily lives. Much of what we heard was very different from our own culture, especially concerning marriage, discipline, and the role of women. In particular, many traditional Muslim women, regardless of age, do not make any decisions about school and/or other life choices without conferring with their families. Also, some do not participate in activities with men, are not permitted to leave their homes until they are married (often in arranged marriages), and most are forbidden to travel from home without a male escort from their families. For student affairs professionals from the United States who are accustomed to arranging activities, events, and community trips for men and women, this was something very different and an adjustment. At times this was disorienting for the students, and initial reactions were disapproving. But deeper explorations helped students see the value in a culture where family is integral to the college students' lives. One of our students found a meaningful connection to her own Latino family culture, where she shared a deeply moving story about her desire to be close to her family, yet she moved away for college. She noted on several occasions how valuable the Qatar experience was for her developing understanding of her own culture.

The students expressed the challenge of balancing an understanding of another culture while feeling a sense of oppression from that culture. Of course, there *are* oppressive elements in Arab culture, just as there is oppression in Western cultures, and helping students see the complexity in these situations was essential. Our students found solidarity with others as their stereotypes were confronted, one student noting, “despite my personal appraisal of Qatari culture, one of my most important personal realizations was not to immediately approach other cultures with a deficit model point of view.” Another said,

Though I don’t think it’s possible to be human and not possess some misapprehensions about unfamiliar cultures, I certainly felt I was beyond those kinds of stereotypes. Looking back, though, every instance that I was surprised at the positive attributes of the people we met or the culture we were experiencing was actually an indication that I did have some stereotypes about the Middle East, or at least had made sweeping generalizations about the region.

Many of our students as well as the students from UMD left with a sense of connection to the college students and the student affairs staff they met from Qatar and Education City. These relationships also helped shape the ways in which our students hoped to apply what they learned in their student affairs practice. In their final reflection papers, all of the students talked at length about how they could use this global experience to enhance their work as college student educators. They talked about being more open to students’ experiences, *really* listening to students, and different ways of understanding family dynamics. For one student the connections to the students he worked with through his student affairs graduate assistantship were evident:

I started to understand and even appreciate the various backgrounds of the students I advise and supervise and the different people I meet. They all have stories to tell, which are based in their values and belief systems, and I learned to become more aware than ever that it’s important to be patient and understanding.

One of the students who worked with fraternities and sororities on campus wrote, “I have even noticed my experience in Qatar come up in recent conversations about engaging and managing involvement of parents within residential life at USD, particularly surrounding the Western thought of ‘cutting

the cord.”

A number of the students discussed the value of their previous course work in the graduate programs in preparing them for the YPI group work and provided examples of how they were able to apply this course work to working with a culturally diverse group. Our graduate programs share a common goal of understanding the complexity of group dynamics and teaching students to understand the ways in which culture shapes group dynamics and one's understanding of him- or herself and others. The YPI provided a real-life context with diverse people and worldviews from which the students could apply their previous learning and further develop their intercultural competence. Students completed the course with a renewed sense of confidence working with diverse groups. One student expressed the value and connection of past course work with the YPI experience; “working in groups was one of the best practices I got from this...just putting into practice what I have learned over the last semester and knowing I am capable of working with intense and diverse groups was huge.” This comment represented many that we read about the complexity, dynamics, challenges, and opportunities of working within the groups. The students also learned to appreciate differences, not just in the Qatari culture, but also in the culture of Education City and their staff, and even the difference in cultures between the graduate programs at USD and UMD. The students experienced and noted the importance of interdependence across cultures within the YPI groups and within a larger, global scale; this recognition of interdependence in the global community is central to understanding solidarity (Hornsby-Smith, 2006).

Included in this section were a few key examples of student learning as they relate to the learning outcomes of the course. Overall we were very encouraged by what we heard from the students. Values of respect, solidarity, diversity and inclusion, and community building are values that are prioritized at USD through its Catholic mission and its commitment to Catholic Social Teaching. These values are also key dispositions for the development of intercultural competence (Papadopoulos, 2006). Next we discuss our reflections, as the instructors of the global course.

### **Instructor Reflections**

Working together as a faculty member and doctoral student was a valuable collaboration that provided many benefits to us as the instructors and to the students. It was Paige who brought the most experience in student affairs, and

in fact she had a previous connection to the staff at Education City that started this process. Cheryl agreed to serve in the role of faculty, and had been working with the graduate students in the Student Affairs/SOLES collaborative since the beginning of the program, but had much to learn from Paige about helping young professionals in student affairs. We worked hard to make the most of one another's strengths to engage the students in the learning process while simultaneously doing the same with our UMD colleagues and our Qatari partners.

Like the students, we each also experienced cultural dissonance and many of our own ideas and beliefs about the Middle East were challenged. We learned much more than could be articulated in an article such as this. Therefore, we will each discuss a few key thoughts we feel have contributed to our overall personal and professional development.

**Cheryl.** What had the most impact on me were the discussions about religion, and learning about the tenets of Islam. The role of religion for the people of Qatar holds an interesting paradox in my view. I can see and feel the beauty of Islam in a way I could not have before the trip, *and* I can understand how religion and culture are so intertwined in the Middle East; that what is beautiful can also be used as an instrument of oppression. I see this in our own culture when Christianity is used similarly.

I learned about the five pillars of Islam: proclamation of faith, daily prayer, charitable giving, fasting to allow nearness to God, and the pilgrimage to Mecca as an expression of devotion to God. Instead of differences, I saw connections. For example, Catholic Social Teaching places great emphasis on living in relationship with God, and on helping the poor and vulnerable. We have become fearful of people and beliefs such as Muslims and Islam, but we know nothing about them. I hope to use what I learned to help others better understand how we are much more similar than what most of us believe. Working at a Catholic university allows us to talk about faiths of all kind, religion, and God, and I feel a stronger sense of responsibility now to engage in these types of conversations with our students and my colleagues.

**Paige.** Learning about the focus on family and its intersections with gender in Qatari culture and the Arab culture in general was very salient for me. I am finishing up my doctoral studies and am considering my career and family life in the future; my experiences in Qatar led me to be more aware of and reflect on familial and gender expectations within my own culture and how

this may be similar or different within the Arab culture. Similar to Cheryl's reflections above, I experienced a paradox, holding the value of both culture's expectations and norms of family and gender in one hand, and recognizing the challenge of both of them in another. I came to value the strong emphasis on family in Qatar, and this experience helped me reconnect with the value family holds in my life.

I also reflected a great deal on my identity of being a woman while in Qatar. While I am often aware of this identity in the United States, this identity was much more salient for me while in Qatar. I felt a sense of freedom and respect being a woman in Qatar, particularly since women's bodies were not as publically sexualized and exploited as in the U.S. At the same time, I felt a lack of freedom and respect based on the gender norms and expectations within the culture, wondering how I may be viewed by Arabs as a Western woman who was career focused and not married. This experience reinforced my awareness of the social construction of societal institutions.

### Challenges

This experience was not without challenges. As the instructors of the course, we had to start from scratch. What did we know about Qatar and the Arab culture? Well, not much. We recognized that it would be impossible to become experts in such a short time frame, so we settled into seeing what would emerge as we engaged with our students in a reciprocal process of teaching and learning. Of course, we did a lot of reading, and we spent quite a bit of time refining the syllabus. We tried to frame the process the best we could, but there were many details that we were unable to foresee, and this caused anxiety in us and in the students. We faced challenges such as trying to do too much in a limited amount of time, building a syllabus without much knowledge about the country or culture, and different expectations among the USD and UMD graduate programs, and American and Arab cultures.

Through challenges such as these we learned many lessons. We now know that we needed to be clearer with our colleagues and the students about our expectations for the experience, particularly for the YPI pre-trip work and in-country YPI experience. Working collaboratively with our colleagues at UMD and in Qatar, our expectations often varied and were not explicitly discussed. For example, it was unclear what role, if any, the Qatari participants would play in the pre-trip literature review research and discussions. Additionally, there seemed to be different expectations from the faculty at UMD and USD

around time lines and the length, depth, and format for the reviews of the literature. These challenges within our own faculty group seemed to create similar challenges within the student groups. The differing expectations and unforeseen technology communication challenges led students to feel anxious about the pre-trip work with others and contributed to additional uncertainty and anxiety when meeting and interacting with their UMD and Qatari colleagues. When the students began their work with the mixed groups on the first day of the YPI, the different expectations among the groups surfaced. Our students were accustomed to focus on the process directly, and the students from UMD, while attending to the process, had a stronger sense of urgency around the final written product. Also, some of the Qatari professionals were more familiar with hierarchical group work, where one designated leader took charge of the group, while the USD and UMD graduate students were more comfortable with a fluid process and less leader-centric approach.

While we frame these as challenges, and they certainly felt challenging to the students at the time, we also believe the diversity of the groups contributed to the overall goal of developing cultural competence in our students. We ultimately felt the benefits to the students and faculty far outweighed the challenges. Recommendations for implementing similar global experiences are discussed next.

### Recommendations and Conclusion

We anticipate that we may plan and/or participate in similar global study courses in the future, and we hope that others will as well. Hence, we offer the following recommendations. First, the course would not have even been a possibility if we did not have colleagues in the region who were invested in the process and who had the connections and passion for the work we were studying (in our case student affairs). We recommend that anyone who hopes to engage in a process like this first identify a partner who shares similar goals about international work, and who is well connected in the region. Second, the process was successful because there was a mutual interest in the professional field among all of the participants and instructors. Although there is value in courses that include students from a variety of academic disciplines and professional fields, we feel this particular course was stronger due to the shared interest in the student affairs profession. Third, we recommend getting clarity and creating opportunities for ongoing communication between the instructors of the course from each institution. We realize in retrospect that the lack

of clarity about the YPI process in advance of the trip, as well as a lack of ongoing communication between the two academic institutions (USD and UMD), created far more confusion than we had anticipated. Specific time needs to be devoted to this aspect of the process prior to the first class session.

Fourth, we recommend that more time be devoted to processing the experience while in the country with each group and also with the groups together. We were very busy, and we had many activities prepared for us by our hosts; in the little downtime we had, most people wanted to rest. We have had this experience on previous trips, where we try to see and do everything in order to maximize the experience for students. But we found that in this case fewer activities and more time to reflect and discuss them is a better way to help students make sense of their experience. Fifth, we could have been more explicit with students about the link between their learning about another culture, the development of cultural competence, and Catholic Social Teaching. It is not enough to assume this is understood. We were so intent on learning about the Arab culture that after mentioning this relationship we did not return to the discussion until the end of the course. In future courses we plan to be more explicit about the connections to Catholic Social Teaching during the ongoing course reflections and debriefing. Finally, it is important that any faculty member considering a global experience like this one adapt the learning model to the specific group with which they are working. Understanding the culture of the country is imperative, and when traveling with other university partners, knowing the culture of the other university is also important for a successful and seamless experience.

In conclusion, our experience with the Qatar course gave us important insights about the differences between global study courses where students are passive learners and courses where students are actively engaged in the process of co-creating the learning with colleagues from another culture, *and* giving something back that will improve conditions for others. We have both participated in and led other study abroad courses, but the strategy for this course that we have described in this paper led to much deeper learning than our previous courses. We learned that the engagement before the trip and then at the YPI event with staff from Education City and students from UMD was a powerful way for students to participate fully in their own learning. The process of mutual inquiry across differences and the ongoing 3-day dialogue greatly enhanced the overall experience for students.

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## Appendix

### Goals and Objectives of the International Requirement for the Department of Leadership Studies<sup>1</sup>

An international experience is defined as an opportunity for students to interact with a culture other than their own in a manner that fosters their personal and professional growth, promotes cultural understanding, and prepares them for working more effectively with diverse communities. Through this experience it is hoped that students will:

- develop a deeper understanding of another culture
- appreciate its differences and similarities
- consider its gifts and challenges
- understand the educational and practical implications of cultural diversity and globalization issues

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<sup>1</sup> (SOLES, 2011a)