PROBLEMS AND COPING STRATEGIES OF SMU-HTM STUDENTS DURING THEIR US CULTURAL EXCHANGE IMMERSION: BASIS FOR AN ENHANCED PREPARATION OF STUDENTS FOR INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Mayvelyn S. Covita
Saint Mary’s University
mrscovita@yahoo.com

Bon Homme Richard G. Torres
Saint Mary’s University

Abstract

This study utilized the phenomenological type of qualitative research in analyzing the experiences of Cultural Exchange Student participants highlighting the coping mechanisms in facing issues/problems/concerns along the areas of accommodation facility, visa/program sponsor, host company (workplace), and cultural exchange program provider while on immersion. Recommendations to future participants on effective coping mechanisms/strategies when faced with similar immersion were likewise laid.

Along the set areas, several concerns were threshed out with their corresponding coping mechanisms. On the area of accommodation facility, concerns include the location with an implication on climate and distance to workplace, few amenities and cramped lay-out providing inconveniences, unfriendly staff and safety and security. Whereas, a not immediate response or action from the visa sponsor is a main concern on this area. Moreover, several concerns were identified on the area of host company: nature of job/difficulty of job; work schedule; problems with colleagues and issues with their supervisors; benefits and compensation; work promotion, communication (English) problem; cultural work values dilemma; dealing with customers/guests/clients; and occupational and health safety in the workplace. On the area of cultural exchange program provider, the concerns identified were: tedious processing which included too many paper documents to process; and expensive air ticket to be purchased from the provider’s affiliate travel agency. Coping strategies were utilized were: Problem-focused and emotion-focused. Specifically, problem-focused coping strategies include: use of heating facilities and winter clothes; early preparations and acquiring of information; assertiveness and seeking of help; skills enhancement through observation, interaction and practice; and mediation of conflict. Emotion-focused coping strategies include: seeking for social and emotional support; cognitive reappraisal; involvement in leisure activities; venting, ignoring and postponing; aggression; attending religious activities; and intake of energy drink.

It is worth noting that despite the common concerns, issues or problems they faced the respondents emphasized that the whole experience is very much worth it and will still recommend other students to grab the same opportunity.

Key Words

cultural exchange; immersion; coping strategies; on-the-job training
Introduction

Cultural immersions has been seen as a vital engagement among students across varied educational programs which potentially result to increased intercultural awareness and may encouraged a global perspective. This is in consideration for some educational programs that open varied job opportunities not only on one’s homeland but beyond one’s national borders. Moreover, study abroad is one of the major vehicles in the development of young students to be globally competitive. However, with a variety of world cultures, diversity on all the components of culture is evident.

The On-the-Job Training (OJT) Program of any academic course is an essential part of the academic curriculum for it help students be exposed to actual work settings and be able to apply and improve the concepts and skills they have learned in school. In the same manner, the opportunity provided by the Cultural Exchange Student Program for BS in Hospitality and Tourism Management students of Saint Mary’s University is a pivotal OJT credit experience among the willing and qualified students. This strengthens the goal of SMU to mold competitive professionals. Generally, as part of providing a well-polished and improved OJT experience it is then deemed necessary to analyze the Cultural Exchange Student Program highlighting the coping mechanisms used by the students in facing issues/problems/concerns along the areas of accommodation facility, visa/program sponsor, host company (workplace), and cultural exchange program provider while immersing abroad with the 3-4 months participation on the program. Recommendations to future participants on effective coping mechanisms/strategies when faced with similar immersion were likewise laid.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims at capturing the issues/problems/concerns the cultural exchange students encounter in their stay at the United States of America for the Work and Travel (WAT) Program of the US State Department. Specifically, it would like to:
1. Profile the respondents/ cultural exchange student.
2. Identify issues/problems/concerns the cultural exchange students encounter during their 3-4 months stay in the USA along the areas of: accommodation facility, visa/program sponsor, Host Company (workplace), and Cultural Exchange Program Provider.
3. Discuss coping strategies the students undertake to address issues/problems/concerns.
4. Enumerate ways to improve the stay of WAT participants for the succeeding batches (respondent’s recommendations).
Conceptual Framework

This research uses the IPO (Input, Process, Output) model. The first box contains the profile of the participants and the issues/problems/concerns encountered during the students’ cultural immersion. The second box includes the necessary process this research utilized. Because this study is a qualitative exploratory study, it will employ the use of focus group discussions with the participants. The planned result as reflected on the last box will be the coping mechanisms/solutions the students undertake to address issues/problems/concerns encountered from the cultural immersion and their recommendations for an improved conduct of such program.

This research study is an exploratory research of the experiences of the Hospitality and Tourism Management students of Saint Mary’s University who were part of the Cultural Exchange Student Program. Specifically it wanted to focus on the issues/problems/concerns that they faced during the duration of the work abroad experience and the coping mechanisms they used to address such issues/problems and concerns.

Results and Discussions

A. Respondents’ Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HRM</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The subjects of the study are the thirty-four (34) 2015 cultural exchange students from the HTM department. There were 13 HRM majoring students and 21 Tourism majoring students. On the three scheduled FGDs, 22 students were able to attend. From the table shown above, there were more female participants of 17 compared to male which is 5. Program wise Tourism respondents are 15 compared to 7 HRM respondents. The cultural exchange program or also called as the Work and Travel Abroad program generally appeals to Tourism students because of the term “Travel”, that motivates them to participate. One of the respondents even said that, the name connotes fieldtrip.
The table above shows that 7 or about 32% worked as food service workers, 3 or 14% as housekeepers, 2 or 9% as food service, retail sales, stand worker, cashier, 2 as supermarket associates and 2 as theme park associates. These job positions were specifically chosen by the respondents during the application process as early as first semester of SY 2014-2015, and are very much related to the programs the respondents are enrolled to in the university, which is BSHTM (Hospitality and Tourism Management).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Service</th>
<th>Food Service Worker</th>
<th>House Keeper</th>
<th>Resort Worker</th>
<th>Restaurant Worker</th>
<th>Retail Store Worker</th>
<th>Ride Attendant</th>
<th>Sales Associates</th>
<th>Supermarket Associate</th>
<th>Theme Park Associate</th>
<th>Water Park Attendant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HRM</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above reveals that 7 out of 22 respondents or about 32%, stayed in California, 4 (18%) in Illinois, 3 (14%) in Florida, 2 each (9% each) in New York and Wisconsin, and 1 each in the states of Colorado, Maryland, New Jersey and Texas. A common factor that most of the respondents consider in choosing which state to go is the presence of relatives. This is true for some respondents who were in California and Illinois. Whereas, there are few respondents who don’t have any relatives in any states in the US, but chose a certain place because of a certain appeal such as the tropical-like ambiance of Florida, the climate different from the Philippines, that is, the presence of snow in New York and Colorado, the country or provincial appeal of Maryland, New Jersey, Texas and Wisconsin.

**B. Issues/problems/concerns the cultural exchange students encountered along the areas of:**
**Accommodation Facility, Visa/Program Sponsor, Host Company (workplace), and Cultural Exchange Program Provider with corresponding Coping Strategies**

This research also investigated the encountered problems, issues and concerns of the respondents as well as the corresponding coping strategies they used during their cultural exchange immersion specifically along the areas of Accommodation Facility, Visa/Program Sponsor, Host Company (workplace) and Cultural Exchange Program Provider.

Majority of them have a generally good experience on their housing except for the following incidental concerns from several respondents such as the cold weather; travel distance from the accommodation facility to their workplace; discrimination; relationship with their
housemates; size of the room; problems in amenities and staff and safety of housing unit. Specific coping strategies mentioned for these concerns are as follows: looking for direct and available solutions to their immediate concerns and having advanced preparations such as having adequate information about the state they will be going to.

Meanwhile, some respondents rated their Visa/Program Sponsors as reliable, however, some also mentioned inconsistency because of the following issues: unavailability of the coordinator when they need him/her; slow or no replies during queries about their concerns. There seems to be cognitive coping mechanism used by the respondents having this concern: acceptance that a little action of their Visa/Program sponsor is better than nothing at all.

Among all the areas, it is in their host companies or workplaces where there are a lot of issues/problems/concerns that were identified. This includes issues/problems/concerns about the nature of job/ difficulty of job; work schedule; problems with colleagues; benefits and compensations; work promotion; communication; cultural work values dilemma; dealing with customers/guests/ clients and , and health and occupational safety in the workplace. For the Nature of Job/ Difficulty of Job the identified concerns are: heavy workload; huge numbers of customers; physical difficulties of workload especially among female respondents. As for the Work Schedule issues, they reported overtime and forced undertime; difficulties in work shifting; lack of rest days. The specific issue under Problems with Colleagues are cultural diversity of workmates; work gossips; jealousy. Meanwhile, their sole problem with their Benefits and Compensations is the underpaid for the service rendered on overtime. When they were Promoted in their wok they experience jealousy among their workmates. Communication barriers were also reported as follows: initial problem on the use of the English language as their primary mode of conversation and understanding American accent. As for the Cultural Work Values Dilemma they have compared that heavy workload were given to female respondents which are normally given to male; not being allowed to help old workers in their job and not being allowed to help coworkers while on break. In terms of Dealing with Customers/Guests/ Clients, they found it difficult to understand their customer’s needs and wants and the bulk of customers test their patience. Lastly, they reported problems on Health and Occupational Safety in the Workplace such as having jetlag on the first few days they arrived; heavy workload cause tiredness and fatigue; workplace accidents; cold climate condition triggers sore throat; visual harassment, and use of illegal drugs by workmates. To deal with this various workplace issues, the respondents made used of various adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms which includes asking and recognizing possible help from other people; thinking about their salary and compensation as a source of motivation; taking energy drinks; confrontation; acceptance of situation; examining their own value systems; postponement of attention towards health concern; knowing their rights in the workplace, and assertiveness.

There seem to be a consensus on the problems/issues/concerns faced by the respondents about their Cultural Exchange Program Provider: processing was quite difficult especially for those without parents or relatives in the USA for the RGA (Return Guarantee Agreement); processing is costly; processing is lengthy, starting as early as August, and coaching was not enough.

It is worth noting that despite the common concerns, issues or problems they faced the respondents emphasized that the whole experience is very much worth it and will still recommend other students to grab the same opportunity.
C. WAT participants’ recommendations to improve the stay of future or succeeding batches.

For an enhanced preparation for students who will participate in the Cultural Exchange program, the respondents recommend the following:

- That there is early preparation for documents to be secured or completed. This also includes planning ahead of time the itinerary whenever there is a need to travel to Manila. In addition, when traveling to Manila for necessary document processing, make certain that related documents are ready or on-hand.
- To have companions to travel with. This might have been raised by an individual who see the importance of being accompanied with, in oppose with individuals who are used to travelling alone or prefers to travel without any companion.
- To secure documents in preparation for the Cultural Exchange program, considering that much time is required, patience is also a must.
- As much as possible, practice speaking English often times. This will contribute in the students to gain greater confidence in the use of the English language. In addition, watch movies or YouTube when relevant to getting practice the English language. The Practical Spoken English Program (PSEP) included in the college curricula in SMU has a huge help for the students, together with the mock interview students had underwent as part of their pre-OJT activities in the university. It is recommended then that these activities continue in preparation for OJT.
- Despite the mentioned concerns, the respondents emphasized the whole experience is very much worth it and will still recommend other students to grab the opportunity of participating to the cultural exchange program or the Work and Travel abroad program of the United States of America.

Conclusions

1. Most of the cultural exchange participants are female tourism students working as food service worker deployed in the State of California. Tourism students are generally highly motivated to participate in the cultural exchange program for the reason that the American dream appeals to them, with the chance of working and travelling abroad at the same time.
2. It is concluded that given such international on the job experience through participation in a cultural exchange program, issues/problems/concerns are inevitable along the areas of: accommodation facility, visa/program sponsor, host company (workplace), and Cultural Exchange Program Provider. The greatest number of issues/problems/concerns were encountered at the host company for the reason that participants spend the most number of their hours of stay in their workplaces.
3. It is concluded that the coping strategies are primarily an imminent (spur of the moment) or come what may solutions. Considering that the participants are literally far by distance from the usual place called home to them, whatever reasonable coping strategy at a reasonable reach are the solutions they have. This includes solutions as provided by the presence of relatives, friends they have made, and schoolmates/classmates. In addition, the typical conservative attitude of a Filipino such as the “bahala na” (come what may), is observed. Patience as a virtue is likewise noted, as source of coping mechanisms against the issues/problems/concerns.
4. Despite the difficulties the participants had been challenged with in their 3-4 months stay in the USA, they themselves had provided recommendations from their own perspectives on how to
improve the stay of future or succeeding batches. These recommendations were practical and reasonable recommendations.

**Recommendations**

**Cultural Exchange Students.** The results of this study in a way will help concern students on their preparation for participation in this cultural exchange program. They would be able to anticipate the possible issues/problems/concerns they might be facing once they are already in a foreign land and be able to decide what practical adaptive coping mechanisms to be applied. With a different culture overseas, it is suggested that students stick with their original culture with reasonable adjustment (within the reasonable boundaries). But they need to consider themselves to be more vigilant and/or assertive especially if the situation calls for it. For instance, prior to acceptance of the accommodation facility to be rented or leased, check the entirety of the facility itself. If damages or defects are found, these are to be reported ahead of time for immediate actions. This may also avoid charging of damages during the duration of stay, which may have potentially been there prior to checking in. In addition, the strong Filipino values are to be maintained and always practiced.

**Cultural Exchange Program Provider.** It is suggested that it will continue strengthen the manner of orientating participants to this program from the start of application up to departure, so as the participants be able to prepare early which includes getting familiar with the State the student will be visiting to. In addition, it is suggested that the cultural exchange program provider consider the possibility of looking for affiliate travel agencies which may offer more affordable airfares for its participants.

**Host Company.** It is recommended that host companies continue to patronize Filipino J1 students for the latter’s cultural exchange immersion or experience. Moreover, it is suggested for some host companies to hire more workers to lessen the too much working hours schedule or overtime hours among its employees. Thus, this may contribute to enough or reasonable rest for its employees to be able to maintain work productivity.

**Host School/Department.** With the results of the study, the host school is recommended to continue assist and monitor students who intend to participate on this program. In addition, it is suggested that a regular forum of former participants be conducted before lower year students who wish to join the program. The forum will encompass the early dissemination of information across areas relevant in the preparation for participation to a cultural exchange program. Furthermore a specific assistance to students may include the provision of continuous English Language Proficiency trainings (as may be embedded on the programs being enrolled by the students in the university). Likewise, such training may contribute to students being easily adaptable to the English language of other nationalities whose proficiency may not be as good as the proficiency of Filipinos.

**Visa Sponsor/s.** It is suggested that a more efficient mechanism in addressing concerns or problems from participants be considered. This includes faster response to text messages or calls, or an alternative person in contact if in case the coordinator may not be available on a certain date.

**Future Researchers.** It is recommended that future studies in relation to cultural exchange programs or related student activities especially in foreign land be conducted for the benefit of the activities’ stakeholders. Moreover, it is recommended that another study on problems or concerns of employers or host companies in relation with their employees/workers be conducted to validate the FGD results of this study.
Bibliography


