

# The Effect of the AUAP Study Abroad Experience on the Students' Cultural Perceptions

K. James Hartshorn

Central Washington University

## Introduction

As the Asia University America Program (AUAP) commences its second decade, those who have closely observed this unique study abroad experience are aware of a variety of ways the students seem to benefit from their participation. Some of these benefits are academic and can be seen in the development and improvement of specific language skills, gains in standardized test scores<sup>1</sup> and earned university credit applied toward graduation. However, there seem to be a variety of other valuable benefits that may be a little more difficult to measure. Such benefits could include the enlargement of the students' international perspective as world citizens or their heightened awareness of the cultural influences that help shape societies in Japan and in the United States.

Though perhaps not as easily quantified as academic achievement, these other benefits are vital to a quality education in the twenty-first century and are central to AUAP objectives. For example, the preface to the AUAP curriculum set forth for the consortium universities in 1995 begins with the following affirmation: "The overall mission of the Asia University America Program (AUAP) is to broaden the international perspective of Asia University students."

Another goal emphasizes the need "to develop students' intercultural awareness." The growing concern over the students' intercultural development can also be seen in the recent completion of a cultural training video entitled, *Bridging Islands*, produced by the Office of International Affairs at Asia University. As a new decade dawns on the AUAP horizon, it seems

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<sup>1</sup> The AUAP students in this study who were sent to CWU took a practice TOEFL in September 1998 (M = 386.8) and an Institutional-TOEFL in January 1999 (M = 436.2) with the following results:  $t = 12.936$ ,  $df = 55$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similar gains are observed for other groups of AUAP students before and after the collection of data used in this study.

appropriate to begin to examine how the AUAP experience may affect the students' international perspective and intercultural awareness.

Most AUAP students appear to approach their study abroad experience with a variety of preconceptions and expectations of what life may be like in the United States. Many of these may be formed through exposure to the mass media, hearsay from those who have lived abroad, or even their own personal interactions with Americans. Occasionally these preconceptions are colored by stereotypical assumptions that emerge as students do their best to interpret and make sense of the bits and pieces of US culture to which they have been exposed. As Althen (1994) suggests, despite their best efforts, students are likely to "bring unspoken, culturally-based assumptions into every situation they enter" (p. 70).

As students arrive in the United States and begin interacting with others, these pervasive assumptions and expectations may begin to influence their motivation and attitudes about their study abroad experience. Gudykunst and Tsukasa (1994) suggest that motivation to communicate appropriately and effectively wanes when students find themselves in situations where their assumptions have been violated and they are left feeling anxiety, fear or confusion. Ellis (1994) also points out that some learners who are unable to make the progress they expected can develop negative attitudes that in turn interfere with their language development. Thus, if unchecked, cultural assumptions and expectations may dramatically affect the entire study abroad experience. If more were understood about student perceptions, more might be done to help them have the best study abroad experience possible.

With the AUAP goals in mind, this study seeks to help provide a better understanding of some of the inherent cultural perceptions of students before their AUAP experience and how and to what extent their AUAP experience may change their perceptions. In addition to helping instructors and administrators better understand how the students are affected by the program, such an awareness could also help them better prepare students both to participate in the program as well as to process their experience after they return to Japan.

Accordingly, the following research questions have been formulated to guide the focus of this study.

1. What kind of cultural perceptions do AUAP students have before they study abroad in the United States?
2. What is the effect of the AUAP experience on the cultural perceptions of the students who participate?

### **The Subjects**

A group of 137 sophomore students from Asia University were used for this study. The group was made up of males and females with ages ranging from 19 to 21. Although most students had never resided in the US before, all had completed the university's Freshman English course and many of the students had studied English for four or more years prior to their AUAP experience. All of the students were either business or law majors who were completing graduation requirements by attending AUAP classes at one of three AUAP sites in the United States: Central Washington University, Eastern Washington University or Western Washington University.

### **The Instrument**

An attempt was made to develop an instrument that was an appropriate means of data collection as well as one that was practical to administer. Practicality and simplicity were particularly important considering the complexity involved in collecting data from students at Asia University and at the three AUAP sites. Accordingly, a simple survey was developed with thirteen statements. All of the statements were derived from AUAP student comments in homework assignments or from discussions in the cross-cultural communications class at Central Washington University. The statements used in the survey represent topics that occurred frequently and that seemed to be of great interest to the students. In an attempt not

to influence student responses, an effort was made to form the statements in a way that would be viewed as positive or neutral statements about each culture.

These statements can be divided into three general categories: (1) the value of English and the study abroad experience to AUAP students, (2) the students' perception of people from the United States, and (3) students' perceptions of US culture in relation to Japanese Culture. The thirteen statements to be used were randomly ordered to disperse statements from one another in the same category. Although the survey was written in Japanese (See Appendix), the questions are translated into English below:

1. Americans are friendly.
2. English will help me be successful in life.
3. The United States is a safe place to live and travel.
4. Americans work hard.
5. Living in the US is a good way to improve my English.
6. Americans are polite.
7. Japanese are more formal than Americans.
8. Equality is more important to Americans than to Japanese.
9. Living in the US is a good way to learn about US culture.
10. Americans are honest.
11. Individuality is more important to Americans than Japanese.
12. Americans are clean.
13. The Japanese are more traditional than Americans.

In addition to requesting their student numbers and AUAP sites, using a Likert scale with eight levels, the survey asked the students to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the thirteen statements. The levels and assigned values are listed in Table 1 below. Surveys were initially completed by the AUAP students in a pre-departure orientation at Asia University in July, 1998. The same surveys were administered again at each

of the respective AUAP sites in the United States near the end of January, 1999. The surveys were then collected for analysis.

Table 1

Likert Scale	Value
Very strongly agree	8
Strongly agree	7
Agree	6
Somewhat agree	5
Somewhat disagree	4
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	2
Very strongly disagree	1

### Design and Analysis

For practical reasons, rather than conducting a true experiment using a control group, a pre-experimental design was chosen that would only elicit and analyze data from those students participating in AUAP. In an attempt to answer the first research question regarding cultural perceptions held by AUAP students before they study abroad in the United States, mean responses were calculated for each of the survey statements.

Then, in an attempt to answer the second research question regarding the effect of the AUAP experience on the students' cultural perceptions, the *t*-test was used to compare the ordinal data responses following the recommendations of Conover and Iman (1981). The level of significance was set at .95 and SPSS software was used to calculate the *t*-tests according to the following formula for repeated measures:

$$t_{matched} = \frac{\text{first group mean} - \text{second group mean}}{\text{standard error of difference between the means}}$$

Where statistical differences were found, the *eta*<sup>2</sup> strength of association ( $\eta^2$ ) was also calculated to determine how much of the variability was accounted for by the AUAP experience

itself. The following formula was used with  $t$  representing the  $t$  value and  $df$  representing degrees of freedom.

$$\eta^2 = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + df}$$

The higher the  $\eta^2$ , the higher the association and the more meaningful the results. However, as Hatch and Lazaraton (1991) point out, an association of .10 or less may not account for enough of the variability in performance to make meaningful claims about the phenomena under investigation.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the survey administered in Japan before the students' AUAP experience can be seen in Table 2. Although the student responses show much more agreement with the survey statements than disagreement, it is clear that there was some disagreement as well. On average, responses ranged from *disagree*, with a mean of 3.522, to *strongly agree*, with a mean of 7.146.

It seems interesting to note that the three items demonstrating the highest level of agreement in Table 2 were all from the same survey category: *the importance of English and the study abroad experience*. It seems that as the students anticipated their participation in AUAP, they highly valued their opportunity to come to the United States and improve their English and their understanding of US culture.

Table 2

Pre-AUAP Survey Results Ranked by Mean Scores	
Means	Survey Statements
7.146	1. Living in the US is a good way to learn about US culture
7.103	2. English will help me be successful in life
6.970	3. Living in the US is a good way to improve my English
6.533	4. Individuality is more important to Americans than to Japanese
5.810	5. Equality is more important to Americans than to Japanese
5.585	6. Americans are friendly
5.228	7. Americans are honest
5.118	8. The Japanese are more traditional than Americans
4.949	9. Japanese are more formal than Americans
4.927	10. Americans work hard
4.748	11. Americans are polite
4.637	12. Americans are clean
3.522	13. The United States is a safe place to live and travel

Ironically, the one item that shows the strongest disagreement also was connected to the study abroad experience itself. It appears that although most students seemed to look forward with great anticipation to their AUAP experience and how they might benefit, they also seemed to harbor some concerns about their safety while living and traveling in the United States.

The remaining nine statements were made up of a combination of the other two survey categories: *the students' perception of people from the United States* and *perceptions of US culture in relation to Japanese Culture*. Average responses for these statements seem to follow a relatively even placement along a continuum, ranging from just below *somewhat agree* (4.637) to a point below *strongly agree* (6.533). Although the responses seemed to show a higher level of agreement for the ranked items such as 4 and 5 dealing with individuality and equality, there seemed to be a little less certainty over statements regarding issues such as the cleanliness, politeness, and work ethic of Americans.

The results of the survey administered in the United States at the end of the students' AUAP experience can be seen in Table 3. Although the rank order of the means showing the

level of agreement for each statement changes from the pre- and post-AUAP administrations, they are still highly correlated with a coefficient of 0.929. Though the rank orders did not undergo a dramatic change, seven of the thirteen post-AUAP responses were significantly different from the pre-AUAP responses. Survey statements with significantly different means include Items 1, 4, 6, and 10-13. These have been emphasized below in Table 3.

Table 3

Post-AUAP Survey Results Ranked by Mean Scores	
Means	Survey Statements
7.306	<b>1. Living in the US is a good way to improve my English</b>
7.263	2. Living in the US is a good way to learn about US culture
6.978	3. English will help me be successful in life
6.207	<b>4. Individuality is more important to Americans than Japanese</b>
6.036	5. Americans are friendly
5.453	<b>6. Equality is more important to Americans than to Japanese</b>
5.162	7. The Japanese are more traditional than Americans
5.059	8. Americans are honest
4.964	9. Japanese are more formal than Americans
4.375	<b>10. The United States is a safe place to live and travel</b>
4.243	<b>11. Americans work hard</b>
3.882	<b>12. Americans are polite</b>
3.385	<b>13. Americans are clean</b>

Although significant differences were found in each of the three survey categories, the only significant increases in agreement were observed in responses for items 1 and 4 from the survey category *the value of English and the study abroad experience to AUAP students*. These statements were *Living in the US is a good way to improve my English* and *The United States is a safe place to live and travel*. The descriptive statistics for these statements can be seen in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4

Matched t-test on Gains after Treatment						
<i>Living in the US is a good way to improve my English</i>						
Survey	n	Mean	s.d.	t value	Df	p
Pre-AUAP	134	6.970	1.040	3.460	133	.001
Post-AUAP	134	7.306	0.860			



Not only is the post-AUAP mean in Table 4 significantly different, but it represents the highest of all of the pre- or post-AUAP responses with a mean of 7.306 or the equivalent of a point *between strongly agree and very strongly agree*. This suggests that while students already believed before their study abroad experiences that residence in the United States would help improve their English, it seems that the actual study abroad experience itself convinced them even more of the benefit of US residence on their English development. However, this result should be interpreted cautiously since the  $\eta^2$  was a mere .083, suggesting that there may be additional factors that may have contributed to the difference in means.

Table 5 shows the other observance of a significant increase in the level of agreement. The mean of 3.522 represented the lowest of all of pre-AUAP means calculated in this study and suggests a general concern of the students about the safety of living and traveling in the United States. However, the post-AUAP mean of 4.375 suggests that for many of the students, fears over safety were significantly less of a concern at the end of the program than they had been originally. The  $\eta^2$  of .219 should account for enough of the variability to make this a meaningful result.

Table 5

Matched t-test on Gains after Treatment						
<i>The United States is a safe place to live and travel</i>						
Survey	n	Mean	s.d.	t value	Df	p
Pre-AUAP	136	3.522	1.068	1.151	135	.000
Post-AUAP	136	4.375	1.299			

All the remaining comparisons were either insignificant or demonstrated a significant decrease in the level of agreement. Table 6 and 7 show the two of four cultural comparisons where post-AUAP means dropped significantly. Of the four cultural comparisons, these two demonstrated the highest means in both the pre-AUAP and post-AUAP surveys. So, despite the lower means observed in the post-AUAP survey, Tables 6 and 7 still show relative agreement with their respective statements. However, *Individuality is more important to*

Americans than Japanese yielded an  $\eta^2$  of .057 and Equality is more important to Americans than to Japanese produced an  $\eta^2$  of .049. In each case the  $\eta^2$  seems too low to make definitive statements about the differences in means.

Table 6

Matched t-test on Gains after Treatment <i>Individuality is more important to Americans than Japanese</i>						
Survey	N	Mean	s.d.	T value	df	p
Pre-AUAP	135	6.533	1.138	-2.844	134	.005
Post-AUAP	135	6.207	1.299			

Table 7

Matched t-test on Gains after Treatment <i>Equality is more important to Americans than to Japanese</i>						
Survey	N	Mean	s.d.	t value	df	p
Pre-AUAP	137	5.810	1.275	-2.658	136	.009
Post-AUAP	137	5.452	1.539			

The remaining three comparisons that were significant can be seen in Tables 8, 9 and 10. All of these statements come from the survey category dealing with students' perception of people from the United States. The statements include: *Americans work hard*, *Americans are polite* and *Americans are clean*. The  $\eta^2$  results produced by these statements are respectively .193, .239 and .374. These seem to account for enough of the variability to make the observed differences meaningful.

Table 8

Matched t-test on Gains after Treatment <i>Americans work hard</i>						
Survey	N	Mean	s.d.	t value	df	P
Pre-AUAP	136	4.949	1.104	-5.673	135	.000
Post-AUAP	136	4.243	1.314			

Table 9

Matched t-test on Gains after Treatment <i>Americans are polite</i>						
Survey	N	Mean	s.d.	t value	df	P
Pre-AUAP	135	4.748	1.098	-6.480	134	.000
Post-AUAP	135	3.882	1.322			

Table 10

Matched t-test on Gains after Treatment						
<i>Americans are clean</i>						
Survey	N	Mean	s.d.	t value	df	P
Pre-AUAP	135	4.637	1.028	-8.956	134	.000
Post-AUAP	135	3.385	1.036			

These three cases represent the only significant comparisons where responses actually crossed the agreement/disagreement border following the post-AUAP survey. Although in each of these cases the pre-AUAP mean demonstrated a slight level of agreement, the post-AUAP mean showed varying levels of disagreement. In fact, these three means for the statements, *Americans work hard*, *Americans are polite* and *Americans are clean* represent the lowest of all the means calculated. They translate to varying levels of *somewhat disagree* to *disagree* respectively.

### Conclusion

This study represents an attempt to answer the following questions: (1) What kind of cultural perceptions do AUAP students have before they study abroad in the United States? (2) What is the effect of the AUAP experience on the cultural perceptions of the students who participate? Surveys were developed based on an eight-level Likert scale showing varying degrees of agreement with 13 culturally-laden statements. Surveys were administered to 137 AUAP students before leaving Japan and again nearly six months later before returning to Japan. Mean scores for the pre-AUAP administration are reported in Table 2. Data were then subjected to *t*-tests and the *eta*<sup>2</sup> was calculated for each of those comparisons that were found to be significant. The results of these findings are reported in Tables 3-10.

Responses for six of the statements were not found to be significant. These are summarized in Table 11 below. However, responses for the other seven statements were significant. Of those significant responses only two demonstrated gains following the post-

AUAP administration of the survey. These are summarized in Table 12. The other five responses showed a significant decrease in levels of agreement. These are summarized in Table 13.

Table 11

Post-AUAP Survey Results That Were not Significant	
Means	Survey Statements
7.263	1. Living in the US is a good way to learn about US culture
6.978	2. English will help me be successful in life
6.036	3. Americans are friendly
5.162	4. The Japanese are more traditional than Americans
5.059	5. Americans are honest
4.964	6. Japanese are more formal than Americans

Table 12

Post-AUAP Survey Results with Significant Gains	
Means	Survey Statements
7.306	1. Living in the US is a good way to improve my English
4.375	2. The United States is a safe place to live and travel

Table 13

Post-AUAP Survey Results with Significant Declines	
Means	Survey Statements
6.207	1. Individuality is more important to Americans than Japanese
5.453	2. Equality is more important to Americans than to Japanese
4.243	3. Americans work hard
3.882	4. Americans are polite
3.385	5. Americans are clean

In the preceding discussion reference was made to the AUAP objectives of broadening the students' international perspective and developing their intercultural awareness. The evidence provided in this study suggests that the AUAP experience had a significant effect on

students' intercultural perceptions for more than half of the statements under investigation. Yet, the results also suggest that the influences that shape student perceptions are varied and complex. This can be seen in the fact that some survey responses were found to be significantly different and others were not. Moreover, some of the significant responses demonstrated gains in mean value, while others resulted in lower means. Further study is needed to better isolate and examine the complex variables that influence student perception.

The results of this study also provided evidence that the AUAP students who participated in this study highly valued their opportunity to study abroad to improve their English skills and learn more about US culture. They also seemed to be less fearful about their safety after they actually lived and traveled in United States. Yet, ironically, it seems that some of their perceptions of Americans declined in areas such as work ethic, politeness and cleanliness. If these declines represent cases where certain assumptions or expectations continue to be violated, then sharing these results may help Japanese students more accurately anticipate these potential perceptions of American life.

Although the results of this study should be helpful to all those who are interested in the AUAP experience, further research may provide a greater understanding of the effect of the program on cultural perceptions. The statements used in this study address only a narrow part of student perceptions. The focus could be expanded to cover additional areas of inquiry. Research could also isolate some of the areas included in this study and examine them in greater detail.

As AUAP administrators, instructors and students understand more about student perceptions of their AUAP experience, each will know more about how to ensure that students take advantage of the extraordinary benefits offered by this unique program.

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