Cultivating Lifelong Commitments to Cultural Humility in an Undergraduate Study Abroad Program

Mandy L. Kellums Baraka, Laura S. Meitzner Yoder, Alex H. Jones, and James G. Huff

Abstract: Cultural humility has become an important framework for engagement in a multi-disciplinary, undergraduate, six-month study abroad program at a Midwest Christian university. Students in the program intern with partner organizations that respond to social and environmental issues, including injustice, discrimination, marginalization, and bias at all system levels. In this brief narrative, the authors reflect upon why the program staff chose cultural humility as the preferred framework for learning and engagement with students and how that framework is implemented throughout the program. The authors begin with a short overview of the program, giving particular attention to the curricular elements. Then, the authors briefly acknowledge the selection of cultural humility over cultural competence in the training and mentorship of students. Finally, the authors conclude with a description of how cultural humility is applied as a posture of interaction with students, and they provide examples of how cultural humility fosters collaborative learning in the context of accompaniment in students' preparation for an international internship and for lifelong learning in a variety of settings and circumstances.

***Keywords*:** cultural humility, study abroad, lifelong learning, intercultural education

Since 2016, the Human Needs and Global Resources (HNGR) program's mission statement has included the purpose of cultivating a "life-orienting commitment to . . . intercultural humility" (Wheaton College, n.d., para. 1). As faculty and staff of an undergraduate study abroad program, we understand that cultural humility applies to our own ongoing growth as we interact with students and international partners, as well as being a posture that we seek to practice in our interactions and teaching. We hope to foster cultural humility in student cohorts through their two years of intentional intercultural learning, both at their US college campus and while overseas for six months (Foronda, Baptiste, Reinholdt, Ousman, 2016; Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013). We use this reflection to consider why we choose to use principles of cultural humility, rather than cultural competence, in our academic setting. The following narrative provides a glimpse into cultural humility as a framework for engagement in an undergraduate study abroad program.

Human Needs and Global Resources: Brief Program Overview

The HNGR program at Wheaton College in Illinois began in 1976 and continues today as "an academic certificate program that integrates multidisciplinary coursework, a six-month internship, and whole-person formation through experiential learning" (Wheaton College, n.d., para. 1). The heart of the program is a six-month international internship where students are placed with partner organizations according to their academic disciplines and interests. These organizations are small- to medium-scale and led by local staff in a low-income or

socio-politically marginalized community located in Latin America, Asia, Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. The programs and initiatives that partner organizations implement address a broad range of human and environmental concerns: public health and wellness, microenterprise and economic development, political advocacy and legal support, peace and reconciliation work, education, sustainable agriculture, water resource management, and theological training, among other issues of power, social injustice, discrimination, marginalization, and bias at all system levels (Jones, Huff, Kellums Baraka, & Meitzner Yoder, 2019). A key opportunity in the HNGR program is for students to walk alongside and learn from local leaders about how organizations, churches, and communities respond to critical human needs in their midst (Scott, 2015).

The HNGR program, a multi-disciplinary program, is open to student applicants from across the undergraduate curriculum. The application process typically begins in the fall semester of students' second year, and they are notified of acceptance to the program late in the spring semester of that academic year. Approximately 22-30 students are accepted into the program annually; a new cohort officially begins the program at the end of the students' second year of studies at Wheaton College (Jones et al., 2019). Cohorts always include national, racial, and ethnolinguistic diversity and socio-economic backgrounds that span rural, suburban, and urban contexts. Additionally, our program commonly holds students with international and intercultural experiences. With a high representation of *third culture kids*, whose personal histories sometimes involve voluntary or forced high mobility across different countries and cultures, or contain portions of childhood in more isolated enclaves within non-passport countries (e.g., military, missionary, or corporate compounds), the diversity among our student population is always present, but always unique. The two-year curriculum is comprised of programmatic components that combine classroom-based learning (e.g., core HNGR courses), experiential learning, and field-based forms of learning (e.g., HNGR small groups and retreats, local volunteer work, international internship), all of which are designed to prepare the students for the accompaniment of others in different contexts and circumstances and for "[pursuing] justice, and [seeking] fullness of life" in the lives they build during and beyond their years at Wheaton College (Wheaton College, n.d., para. 1).

We recognize that the HNGR program requires considerable collaboration among our five faculty and staff members. As we seek to integrate diverse curricular elements, we actively must listen to and learn from one another. In doing so, we each draw from our different academic specializations (e.g., international and community development, political ecology, higher education, theology, sociology/anthropology, and psychology/counseling). We also use our professional expertise and experience (e.g., field-based and experiential learning courses, study abroad programming, mental health counseling, and wellness care to humanitarian workers) to develop and implement the two-year curriculum. Our students participate in small groups during the preparation stage, in individual mentoring, and in teaching English to recently-arrived refugees, and they attend retreats along with classroom components. Thus, we are mindful of the variety of ways that we also are privileged to learn from our students' engagement with others throughout the curriculum as well.

Choosing Cultural Humility

In our sector of study abroad within higher education, cultural competency is a dominant paradigm (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, 2009; Earnest, Rosenbusch, Wallace-Williams, & Keim, 2015; Hermond, Vairez, & Tanner, 2018; Neito & Zoller Booth, 2010). The competency orientation dovetails with the overall achievement orientation of higher education, situating culture among the suite of skills and knowledge which can be mastered in, through, and for international educational experiences. Deliberate attention to cultural awareness is an important part of working with students preparing for study abroad, but the purpose of our particular program is to foster an enduring, lifelong posture of seeking to learn from people and institutions that are often relegated to social margins (Foronda et al., 2016; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998; Wheaton College, n.d.). For this reason, the language and framework of mastery and competence runs counter to our program's larger purpose of challenging the human propensity to grasp power and its multiple manifestations that enable oppressive systems to coalesce and injustice to persist.

Cultural humility is an essential learning outcome for the HNGR program because the program's pedagogy is oriented toward learning through deliberate displacement of the human penchant to exert mastery and control over circumstances, other people, and the natural world. Undergraduate study programs list the various competencies (e.g., speech, language) students must acquire through coursework or demonstrate through testing, but cultural humility is a posture of never-ending learning through coming to know others. This learning is enacted in relationships where, unlike typical classroom assignments, there is no endpoint at which one might arrive and rest in the sense of completion. In relationships, the possibilities for learning are never-ending. Being placed in situations where one is clearly not able to control the situation interrupts many students' normal habitus of mastery and competence fostered through higher education. For many students, these circumstances profoundly challenge the *evaluative form* they are accustomed to carrying and applying all around them (Jennings, 2010). For example, in one instance, a student reflected on her journey of photographing a highly marginalized population in her host context, remarking that using a camera to capture the images of people who are vulnerable can realign commonly used forms of evaluation (i.e., still images that capture in time preconceived pictures of a particular group of individuals) and emphasize who has control within a context. By learning to pass the camera on to her photographic "subjects, " allowing them to also capture their own images, the student learned that the relieving of the artist's power is important in building relationships.

Our desire is that our students will increasingly become curious about their hosts' experiences as they see how their hosts address issues of power imbalance, social injustice, discrimination, and bias at all system levels in a particular context (Hook et al., 2013). We work toward helping students of all backgrounds make an enduring lasting commitment to not just the process of learning, but also to putting themselves in relationships, contexts, and situations with neighbors and community members where they are consistently encountering difference in various dimensions. We hope that their dispositions become such that they do not seek positions of control but recognize and challenge power imbalances for respectful engagement, and that they will seek to bridge differences, to know strangers, and to become the kinds of people who will

not isolate themselves in cultural enclaves. In our final capstone class with our students before graduation, we ask them three important questions that we hope they will contemplate for years to come: Where are you going to live? With whom will you live? Who goes with you? As students grapple with these questions, they develop an overall disposition of cultural humility and a desire to do the work of encountering difference and allowing intentional engagement to change them in an ongoing way personally and professionally. We want our students to choose and to be able to live well in diverse worlds.

How We Use Cultural Humility as a Framework

We see cultural humility as a disposition that is to be cultivated and developed in the course of learning from and interacting with others. It is not, then, in a strict sense a static outcome that one can achieve at a point in time. We repeatedly introduce students to cultural humility—while not always using that term explicitly—before, during, and after the six-month international internship component of the program. Our program faculty and staff are comprised of individuals with different professional experience and, thus, different roles within the program and in relation to students. While only one of our program staff members is a licensed mental health counselor, we collectively find that our approach aligns with many of the findings from Hook et al.'s (2013) study on cultural humility among counseling psychologists in relationship with clients. We seek to engage with our students with an attitude of curiosity and humility toward their background and its effect on shaping their responses, goals, and expectations. For example, in the internship placement process with our students, we intentionally ask questions and consider a student's life experiences, from birth to the present, in identifying placements. This is also important in helping students both understand and navigate the wide array of parental and family expectations they bring to the international internship and its future effects on their lives. For some, the experience is specifically expected to boost career prospects, while others receive messages about expanding personal horizons or (re)connecting with a family member's heritage. Other students face family suspicion or reluctance regarding their involvement with marginalized communities, sometimes because such communities are seen as *dangerous others* or because that experience is seen as reflecting the student's own family background from which parents or others seek distance (e.g., immigrants, low socioeconomic status, minority status, religious and cultural differences).

We strive to develop strong working alliances with our students individually and as a cohort to foster trust in the relationship, which is important to ongoing support during the internship. For example, when we recognize a student's internalized bias against learning from people of a different gender, we can provide a few initial invitations to unpack some of the hesitations through reading an article written by an author of that gender from an upcoming internship context. We can discuss the student's learnings and inquire about how listening to diverse voices could become a life-changing habit. Through retreats and extra-curricular and co-curricular experiences, such as preparing and eating meals together, we build the trust that allows us to introduce challenging topics and help students discover pathways to personal growth regarding intercultural and interpersonal understanding.

Since our program is a multi-disciplinary undergraduate program, different from helping

professions in which cultural humility is typically described and discussed, we believe in incorporating knowledge, values, and skills at appropriate development levels and maintain expectations of a humble learning posture (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2015). Cultural humility plays an active role in how we and our students engage in social justice, particularly partnering with communities worldwide. The program curriculum incorporates a robust and interrelated set of learning practices that repeatedly provide us with the opportunity to come alongside our students as co-learners and provide our students with the opportunity to engage in observation and critical self-reflection.

Students who become accustomed to introspective awareness and consideration of their own cultures are better able to engage in intercultural learning with others (Harper, 2018). When speaking to students, for example, members of the HNGR staff might name their own positionality as indicators of our ongoing need to learn more about ourselves, such as our race, gender, class, marital status, and other socially defining categories. Other important habits to cultivate include regular (ideally, daily) writing of field notes that prompt students to interpret their responses and experiences to being guests in a new cultural context. Before departure for international locations, students participate in weekly in-home English tutoring of recently arrived refugees resettled near campus. Following each tutoring session, students record their activities to report to the sponsoring agency and respond in their field notebooks to a self-awareness prompt to note something they learned about their own responses to the intercultural interaction.

Within our program's framework, learning about self is normally paired with learning about others, and we try to explicitly link these processes in and out of the classroom. Assignments, experiential activities, small group meetings, and cohort-building events and interactions normally have tandem elements of self-reflection in a group context alongside the process of coming to learn to perceive and understand the cultural expressions of the people right around them. This can be the catalyst for students to remember to continue these practices throughout their internships and upon return to campus for their final semester. For example, alumni frequently write about their plans and experiences of entering any new space (e.g., graduate school, home in a changed context, new international placement) as a learner, seeking to understand the backgrounds and experiences of the people around them.

We have the opportunity to walk with our students inside and outside the classroom. In every interaction we seek to cultivate a collaborative proximity with the student participants in the program, including our own selves and our own life experiences in the educational process. Program staff often give examples from our own stories, past and present, modeling the openness of cultural humility as we relate not our own competence, but narrate real-life personal experiences of failure. We regularly acknowledge our own identities and the intersecting dimensions of diversity among us as a staff, within the cohort, with host partners, and beyond. We strive to continually be upfront about our societal placements and the limitations of our own perspectives, encouraging students to consider how their own identity and positionality may affect relationships in their new setting as well. Such discussions are woven throughout the program—in advising, the classroom, and mentoring—and we invite students to develop relationships with trusted others who can include space to voice questions and concerns as well.

Finally, experiential assignments and class materials also aim to demonstrate a humble approach even toward the content of our learning together. For example, on the opening day of class, we tell the students, "We don't know all the content that you will learn in this course." The reason we tell them that is because the material that we will work through in the class is largely drawn from the students' weekly field assignments, which include observation, interviews, curiosity, and participatory mapping. Ongoing opportunities for program alumni and partner organizations' personnel to attend class and speak to and field questions from students about their experiences provide a chance for us to emphasize learning and engagement with others. Given the high achievement orientation of most of our students, we find it necessary to explicitly release them from the pressure or expectation that they are "sent out as little experts" in the words of a Filipina supervisor, Dr. Melba Maggay (2016).

Conclusion

While cultural humility has largely been explored within the helping professions, we find that the principles of cultural humility have a prominent place in our program's history and future. We are committed to the practice of self-reflection, self-critique, and curiosity about people with life experiences different from one's own to promote among our students an ongoing life-orienting posture of humility and openness to learning from and with others. Our hope is that as we engage in cultural humility as much as possible with our students, our students will catch and continue the vision of the HNGR program, pursuing justice and fullness of life through a humble posture of learning and accompaniment in a variety of settings and circumstances.

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***About the Authors*:** Mandy Kellums Baraka, PhD, LCPC (Illinois) is Student Support Coordinator, Human Needs and Global Resources Program, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL (630-752-5687; mandy.kellums@wheaton.edu); Laura S. Meitzner Yoder, PhD, is Director, Human Needs and Global Resources Program and Professor of Environmental Studies, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL (630-752-5199; laura.yoder@wheaton.edu); Alex H. Jones, MA, is Assistant Director, Human Needs and Global Resources Program, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL (630-752-5199; alex.jones@wheaton.edu); James G. Huff, PhD, is Associate Professor, Human Needs and Global Resources Program and Anthropology, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL (630-752-5199; james.huff@wheaton.edu).