

## **The Role of Study-Abroad Students in Cultural Diplomacy: Toward an International Education as Soft Action**

Madalina Akli, Ph.D.  
*Rice University*

### **Abstract**

This paper argues that study-abroad students should be at the center of cultural diplomacy. It recognizes that students can engage in soft action to establish intercultural dialogue. They develop and sustain relationships with people from host countries through cultural immersion and education. Study-abroad students are encouraged to proactively claim their cultural diplomacy role, and thereby cause a shift from formal soft power, traditionally concentrated in embassies and the diplomatic corps, to informal soft action in daily life abroad. With the recent development of a plethora of study-abroad opportunities, soft power can be re-configured by students and educators who cross national borders. Consequently, they are the potential agents of a paradigm shift regarding cultural diplomacy and international education: they are today's new unofficial cultural diplomats.

Key words: international education, study abroad, student cultural ambassadors, cultural diplomacy, soft action

### **A Brief Historical Overview of U.S. International Education: A Diversity of Rationales and Purposes**

From a historical perspective, the development of international education from 1945 to 1970, although dynamic, was unsteady and underpinned by a diversity of rationales and purposes. The relationship between international education and national policy has historically been prone to a lack of consistent objectives and therefore, to confusion. McAllister-Grande describes the euphoria about international education during the immediate post-war period, which is considered to be the "birth" of international education, and presents evidence for divergent rationales for it "as either based upon national defense/security and/or idealized notion of world peace" (2008, p. 4). He shows that the bifurcation between these two opposing directions has existed since the Morrill Committee's report, *The University and World Affairs* (1961), which underscored conflicting views on the functions of international education: one emphasized higher education's direct impact on national development and foreign policy, and the other reinforced the relationship between the university and its educational mission:

One the one hand are those who, feeling keenly a grave sense of national urgency, would have the government tell the university how they (sic) must serve the new and pressing needs of the nation in the world affairs. On the other hand are those who, cherishing the university's ancient tradition and spirit of scholarship, contend that the university's major contributions to world affairs should come mainly as a byproduct of its scholarship. If pressed to an extreme, these two points of view are incompatible and untenable. (McAllister-Grande, 2008, p. 27).

In the post-war era, educational and cultural affairs were part of the mission of many agencies and departments, including the Department of Health, State, Education, Welfare, and Defense. McAllister-Grande discusses the major legislation affecting international education in that period and argues that "the tone and goals of each act show further evidence of a kind of schizophrenic approach to international education" (2008, p. 21). The Fulbright Act of 1946 created a scholarship program for students and scholars to study and research abroad with the main goal of furthering mutual understanding through cultural exchange. In contrast, the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, in a more unilateral approach, placed emphasis of the promotion of the American image abroad through the radio program Voice of America. The National Defense Education Act of 1958, although meant to provide support for a revised international studies curriculum, was suspected to be motivated by the Soviet launch of Sputnik rather than concern with educational cooperation. The next important Act in the post-WWII legislation was an expansion of the original Fulbright Act, the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961, which was created to "promote international cooperation for educational and cultural advancement, and thus to assist in the development of friendly, sympathetic, and peaceful relations between the United States and the other countries of the world." (McAllister-Grande, 2008, p. 22).

Sylvester (2003, 2005) takes a long historical view from 1946–1998 and points to the lack of a clear definition and mapping of this field. In tracing the roots of international education, Sylvester mentions an early author, Wright, who in 1955 already reflected both on the complexity of a definition and the overlapping connotations of the term "international education." Wright defined it as "a branch of the general discipline of education, which merges into the related discipline of international communications, both having roots in psychology, sociology, and ethics of international relations" (Wright 1955, p.307). The multiple connotations of the term, such as education for internationalism, education in the discipline of international relations, education through international contacts, and education for international service allow different approaches to the field: propagandistic, informational, methodological and practical respectively (Wright, 1955; Sylvester, 2003).

Stephen Duggan, Sr. (1943), one of the founders of Institute of International Education, believed that international student and scholar exchanges should serve only the neutral cause of international understanding and human welfare. However, Becker (1969) notes several layers of tension exist between a politically neutral view of education and another view driven by political considerations. Contemporary higher education researchers, including De Wit (2002) and

Altbach (2004), also emphasize the political objectives of the U.S. government during the post-war period and its desire as a superpower for dominance over other countries.

These opposed perspectives of, “maintaining an education rooted in the intellectual territory of the nation-state,” and the “competing impulse to view the world as a single entity” (Sylvester 2003, p. 128) that is, between a narrow politicized international education and a broad humanistic approach to it, coexisted until the end of the century.

The first approach is represented by Coombs (1964), the first Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs. His rationale was that education and culture are the fourth dimension of foreign affairs, along with military strength, aid to the economic development of Asia, Africa, and Latin America and the liquidation of communism in China and the Soviet Union. Coombs saw education as essential for ending the cold war “on terms favorable to the interests of the United States and other democratic nations.” (1964, p. 113). He believed that extensive educational and cultural exchanges could exert “real influence” on visitors from the Soviet Union to abandon their loyalty to communism, could contribute substantially to the objectives of U.S. foreign policy and promote American values, aims, and interests abroad.

Use of the unilateralist semantics of American *aims*, *interests* and *influence* continued to strengthen the association of educational activities with foreign policy during the cold war and beyond. For example, the Boren National Security Education Act (1991) emphasized the role of American students abroad in contributing to U.S. national security and economic well-being. More recently, Nye refreshed the link between international education and foreign policy, when he asserted that higher education (along with other forms of culture, such as government broadcasting and Hollywood products) represents a soft power tool, which America can use “to affect others and to obtain preferred outcomes by persuasion and positive attraction” (2004, p. 6). Although he points out that this soft power strategy is opposed to propaganda, which had nourished suspicion about the intent of exchange programs during the cold war period, his readers are again prisoners of the unilateralist semantics of a one sided benefit: using attraction, seduction, and persuasion, Americans can obtain the outcomes they want from other people. He encourages a *soft* behavior, which in fact conceals the promotion of national interests. Therefore, power is still at the center of the relationship with others and narrow national interests are being defended, but in a more subtle way.

The second approach to the objectives of international education advocates for distancing it from the influence of national government institutions and firmly linking it to the betterment of the human community. This correlation between education and humanistic values of peace and mutual understanding rather than purely political and economical arrangements of governments is emphasized in the UNESCO constitution of 1945:

That the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfill in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern... That a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the

world, and that the peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind... For these reasons, the State Parties to this constitution, believing in full and equal opportunities for education for all, in the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, are agreed and determined to develop and to increase the means of communication between their peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other's lives." (UNESCO Constitution, 1945).

Sylvester (2005) recalls multiple researchers, mostly academics, who supported this direction: Leach (1969), Hanvey (1982), Heater (1990) and Mattern (1991). In his research on international schools, Leach called for highlighting "the essential unit of mankind and the embracement of the oneness of the human family" (1969, p. 13). He saw in the development of international schools at that time a shift from the era of the dominance of the nation state towards the age of the unity of mankind. In the same vein, Hanvey put forward a conceptual model of education for a global perspective, which "enhances the individual's ability to understand his or her condition in the community and the world and improve the ability to make effective judgments (...). It provides the individual with a realistic perspective on world issues, problems and prospects, and an awareness of the relationships between an individual's enlightened self-interest and the concerns of people elsewhere in the world" (Hanvey, 1982, p. 1, cited in Sylvester, 2005, p. 137). Heater (1990) and Mattern (1991) also adopted this humanistic approach in their call for an education for world citizenship focused upon universal values rather than national interests.

In the same vein, Nussbaum (1997) encourages us to cultivate our own notion of humanity. Drawing upon the branch of philosophy called stoicism, she argues that we should recognize humanity and its fundamental characteristics, reason and moral capacity, wherever they occur and "give that community of humanity our first allegiance," (p. 59). The basic point of view of stoicism is that we should maintain a distance from all forms of government and temporal power and become members of the moral community of all human beings. Nussbaum endorses Cicero's philosophy of placing justice above political expediency, understanding that we form part of a universal community of humanity that shares the moral ends of justice and human well-being. This reflects the Stoics' vision of human beings as surrounded by a series of concentric circles, expanding from self, to family, local group, fellow city-dwellers and fellow countrymen, culminating in an overarching human unity:

Beyond all these circles is the largest one, that of a humanity as a whole. Our task as citizens of the world will be to draw the circles somehow toward the center, making all human beings like our fellow city-dwellers (...) We need not give up special affections and identifications whether national or ethnic or religious, but we should work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern, showing respect for the human wherever it occurs, and allowing that respect to constrain our national and local politics" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 60).

More recently, Slimbach (2010) emphasized the cultural, psychological, and spiritual aspects of international education: “at its center is the intentional crossing of borders of difference in order to understand another’s reality from their point of view (...) we cross the border from personal identity to mutuality. We enter the world of another to listen, to hear, and to receive. We walk a while in their mind and emotions. We try to believe, feel and think as they do” (2010, p. 219).

Education is a vehicle for humanism and takes into consideration both human flourishing and the welfare of the planet. When evaluating study abroad’s impact on students, Slimbach defends the humanistic goals of international education when he claims that “becoming world-wise supports us in the task of rebuilding a common home, metaphorically speaking, with distant others. Although we may inhabit different geographies, cultures, families, and political systems, we are increasingly bound together by a single faith and a shared humanity” (2010, p. 7). He concludes that study-abroad students need to develop a humanistic conscience that goes beyond learning *about* the world. “Global learning must be not only *in* the world but also *for* it. Educational travel should leave the world a saner, stronger and more sustainable place” (p. 9).

### **International Education and Cultural Diplomacy: A Restatement of Purposes**

Charles Frankel, an assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs from 1965 to 1967, refocused the debate on international education and restated its purpose. His restatement reconciles the two opposing approaches presented above, and although it dates from 1965, could be used as a point of reference for reflection in contemporary discourse on international education programs.

First, he positioned the educational and cultural relations among peoples in a larger context that includes political, commercial and military relationships. Cultural and educational exchanges are thus the product of continuing contact between nations, and consequently “the purpose of the advancement of scholarly, educational and cultural objectives cannot be pursued in a vacuum” (1965, p. 97). Thus, Frankel observed that that “economic development cannot be viewed as a self-sustaining thing in itself, as it depends on the existence or emergence of appropriate educational and cultural conditions” (p. 69). Moreover, cultural and educational objectives cannot be evaluated based on immediate results but over a much longer range of time. In restating the philosophy of international education as a field distanced from political justification, Frankel emphasized that political institutions depend not only on their performance but on their *symbolic legitimacy* as well. Therefore, he brought education to the center of attention and pushed foreign policy to the periphery. He turned the relationship of dependence upside down by clarifying that educational exchanges provide symbolic legitimacy and increase sympathy abroad. Foreign policy needs this legitimacy and sympathy, especially among intellectuals, without which “it become more costly and more dependent on violence if it loses the understanding of intellectuals in other countries and in its own” (p. 76).



Second, Frankel affirmed his distance from those who believe that educational and cultural programs should be judged primarily in terms of their contribution to foreign policy. He argued:

Educational and cultural exchange is represented as a straightforward matter with its own obvious and unarguable objective. Its justification is that it contributes to the progress of the sciences and the arts, and enhances the opportunities of students and scholars – both those who travel and those who stay at home – to improve their minds and extend their imagination (p. 95).

He further stressed the distance of educational and cultural affairs from U.S. foreign policy goals by noting that “educational exchange programs make the best propaganda when they have no propagandistic purpose” (p. 89). However, in this radical redirection, there is some space for recognizing that there are secondary foreign policy objectives. Some of these objectives can still be fulfilled, but indirectly, as positive consequences of promoting an education distanced (although not divorced) from diplomacy.

In untangling the purposes of educational and cultural programs overseas, Frankel identified the promotion of international good will and understanding in order to create a peaceful world, respectful of diversity, as the primary purpose and the advancement of the objectives of U.S. foreign policy objectives as secondary. Although he reversed the order of importance, he acknowledged that they will always be interrelated.

Frankel recognized that words such as *good will* and *understanding*, although undoubtedly expressing a sincere dedication to the ideal of peace in diversity, are merely rhetorical, with little practical relation to daily life. In addition there are multiple misunderstandings of these concepts, which he clarified.

In his opinion, *good will* and *understanding* are not synonyms. *Understanding* is an ambiguous concept, which sometimes stands for the growth of sympathy among people and sometimes for their capacity to accurately describe others’ attitudes and behavior. In this second sense, one can understand another but still not like him and, at the same time, recognize that they have opposing ideals or goals. Thus, it cannot be proved that the promotion of international understanding automatically results in international good will, because some conflicts are unavoidable even when their causes are understandable.

The second misconception Frankel (1965) outlined is that “the face-to-face meetings and personal association between people from different countries are the most obvious ways to engender sympathy and mutual accord. Equally doubtful is the belief that close contact and sympathy between people of different nations is enough to keep them at peace” (p. 83). Although such sympathy can reduce tensions it is not guaranteed to prevent conflict. For example, France and Germany, two countries with extensive face-to-face contacts have also gone to war against each other. These observations are not intended to deny the contribution of international programs to the achievement of peaceful relations between nations. They are

cautionary and meant to provide some guiding principles for the implementation of such programs.

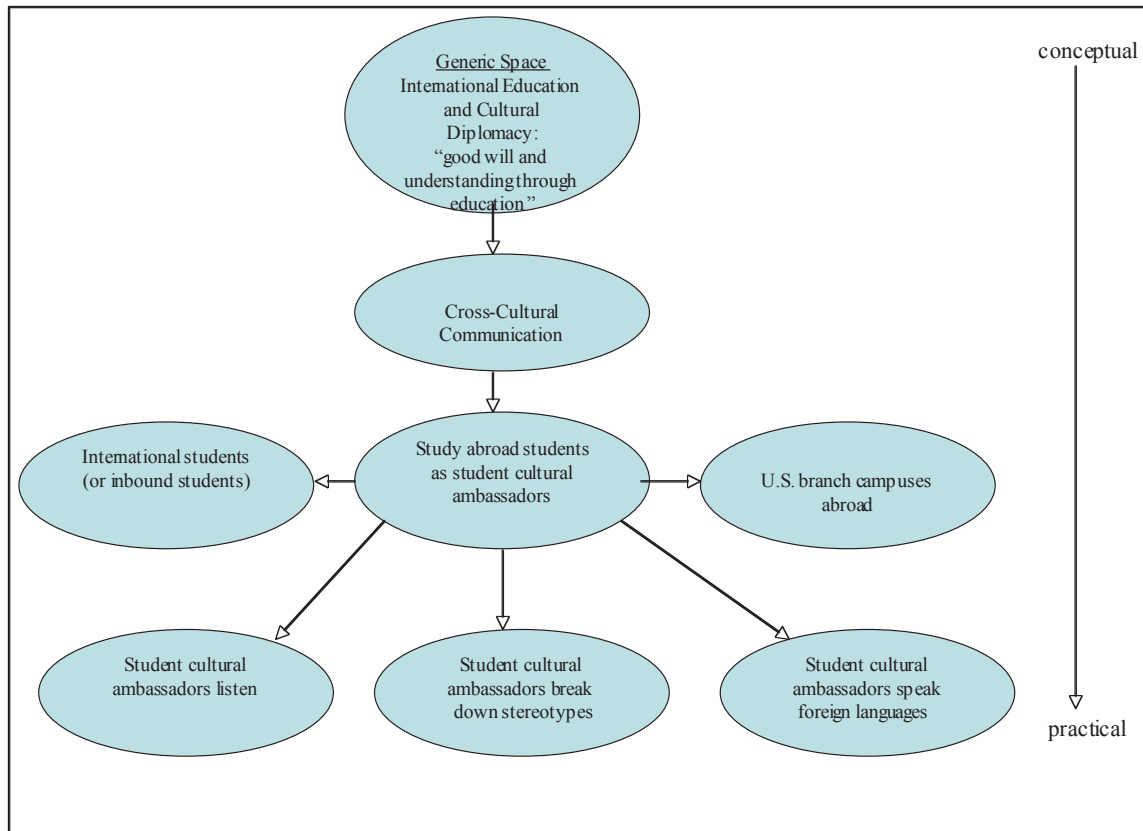
In an attempt to further demystify the concept of promoting international good will and understanding in order to create a peaceful world, Frankel suggested four practical initiatives which can support this ideal: (1) “lacing together educational systems” by reinforcing intentional educational and cultural cooperation, (2) “improving the context of communication to become aware of other’s cultural codes,” (3) “disciplining and extending international intellectual discourse” or, in other words, aligning the meaning of language used by different countries to address international issues (or other related terms, such as Africa, imperialism, the Free World), (4) “developing international education in its own independent terms,” distinct from other economic and social development (p. 99–112).

Drawing on Frankel’s clarifications, restatement of purposes, and guiding principles, I investigated the role of study abroad in advancing cross-cultural dialogue and show how students can put into practice the ideal of good will and understanding.

This overarching humanistic ideal is a constitutive principle of cultural diplomacy, which in addition to educational programs is also embodied in other forms of cultural interaction, such as sport competitions, arts, dance, film, cuisine, television programs, and jazz. Although a component of foreign policy, therefore eventually targeted toward national interests, cultural diplomacy has at its center the enhancement of socio-cultural understanding and fostering of mutual relationships between cultures. One of the main principles of cultural diplomacy is the creation of a context favorable for a global intercultural dialogue. Thus, it focuses on how we can learn how to live together on this planet, aware of human universals such as the respect of diversity, tolerance of differences, and spirit of cooperation. In the schema below, I represent this humanistic ideal of furthering good will and understanding specifically through international education, as a generic mental space, which is highly abstract. If this mental space is not instantiated in concrete actions, it remains a largely rhetorical utopian concept.

The abstract mental space of promoting good will and understanding at global level through education rests on four working principles, which Frankel identified. My attention is directed to the second principle of cross-cultural communication. I argue that this principle is further put into action by different actors, such as international inbound students, study-abroad outbound students, and branch campuses (such as, among others, the American branch campuses in the Arabian Gulf).

**Figure 1:** The generic conceptual space of international education



I then demonstrate how one of these actors, study-abroad students, can play an active role in cultural diplomacy as student ambassadors. This role is presently underestimated in cultural diplomacy and overestimated in postsecondary international programs offices. Although the notion of a *student cultural ambassador* is popular, the term is ambiguous to the extent that it has become rhetorical and stereotypical, thus nonfunctional. The role of study-abroad students in cultural diplomacy is also vague in current practice and research.

I propose to redefine the concept of student cultural ambassadors and show that they can actively claim this role in cultural diplomacy. I introduce a new semantic approach that envisions students using what I will identify as soft skills to engage in what I call soft action in contrast to Nye's (2004) soft power. Lastly, I show how student ambassadors can translate the concept of cross-cultural communication into the practice of dialogue with people from different cultures. More specifically, I discuss three soft action strategies for students: (1) listening to people from the host country, (2) breaking down stereotypes about the United States, (3) and speaking foreign languages.

I conclude that through these soft actions, study-abroad students possess soft skills and promote cultural diplomacy. They can establish, develop, and sustain relationships with international others through culture and education that enables them to proactively claim a cultural diplomacy role. I view this new state of affairs as causing a shift from soft power, which traditionally has been concentrated in embassies and the diplomatic corps to soft action by students. Study-abroad students are today's new informal cultural diplomats.



Before elaborating on the role, characteristics and functioning of student cultural ambassadors while abroad, I want to note the lack of recognition of their importance in international relations and of their ambassadorial potential in recent cultural diplomacy reports.

In the report of the State Department advisory committee on cultural diplomacy, cultural diplomacy is defined as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding” (Cultural Diplomacy, 2005, p. 4). Its authors identify artists, dancers, filmmakers, jazz players and writers as the main actors in these types of exchanges. International educational exchanges are barely mentioned and even when briefly discussed, the focus is on inbound international students as the principal participants in cultural diplomacy. American study-abroad students (or outbound students) are not mentioned, therefore ignoring their role in the international exchange of ideas. More recent interventions and reflections by officials involved in cultural diplomacy do include some examples of educational exchange programs, but without a pro-active and deliberate interest in using the study-abroad students’ potential to further intercultural dialogue (Mueller, 2011; Stock, 2011).

However, the 2011 Open Doors report of the Institute of International Education shows that about 270,000 U.S. students received academic credit for study abroad in 2009-10, a 4% increase over the previous year (Open Doors report, 2011). Their presence does matter and study-abroad students and program administrators may be disappointed by the current lack of recognition.

This state of affairs is a paradox because although there are government-sponsored programs, such as Fulbright, Gilman, Boren, Youth Exchange and Study (YES) and others, the impact of study-abroad students seems not to be fully considered by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. In other words, the political willingness to commit limited financial resources to send American students abroad coexists with an apparent lack of awareness that, beyond their academic endeavors, these students can efficiently serve as cultural ambassadors abroad.

For Fulbright and other similar programs, the term “cultural ambassador” is important at the discursive level, as evidenced by requiring students to include in their scholarship applications their plans to engage the community abroad. However, in many cases, students feel lost in translating this discourse into practice and fall into the gap between concepts and actual experience.

### **Students as Cultural Ambassadors**

#### **Today’s New Diplomats**

The political scientist Joseph Nye defines the concept of *soft power* as “the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals. It differs from hard power, the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will” (2003, para. 2). The meaning of the adjective *soft* makes one think of something that is smooth and fine, therefore more likely to be accepted than its opposite *hard*. However, the tender shell of *soft power* continues to mask a relationship of force. Behind Nye’s definition there is the

reasoning that “If I can get you to do what I want by persuasion then I do not have to force you.” The word *power* has two definitions: the first points to the ability to act, and in this expression, to act softly. The second definition equates the meaning of *power* with the possession of control or command over others. Nye’s definition concentrates on this latter meaning of authority and influence.

I distance myself from Nye’s conception of soft power, especially in relation to international education, and his heavily foreign policy-oriented approach that implements student exchange programs as a means of obtaining desired outcomes from others. However, I believe that the first meaning of *soft power* can be usefully applied to students studying abroad when it is conceptualized as the circulation of abilities and skills, applied in a soft way to further international understanding. This approach to study abroad is free from the objectives of obtaining planned and interested outcomes from others. Rather, it has at its very center the humanistic mission of contributing to a more harmonious communication between peoples while other national interests are relegated to the periphery.

Study abroad programs are then situated within a cultural or citizen diplomacy framework, far from, although not completely independent of, aims such as enhancing our national security and shaping our international leadership. Thus, study-abroad students play their cultural ambassadorial role in a people-to-people spirit to improve communication and build relationships among individuals. All other positive results are peripheral consequences and not direct objectives of the international education programs.

In the United States, it is standard practice for this notion of cultural ambassadorship to be applied to study-abroad students. One can hear it all the time in study-abroad offices, international scholarship advising sessions, international educational fairs, and professional conferences.

On the one hand, government sponsored and funded study abroad scholarships, such as the U.S Fulbright and British Marshall program, as well as many private foundations require students *to view themselves* as cultural ambassadors of their country abroad. Similar phrasing from scholarship application requirements includes: students are expected to be *good* ambassadors; to represent the United States *well*; or to serve as *outstanding* or *true* ambassadors while abroad. On the other hand, both advisers and students struggle to concretize this concept in advising sessions and application statements.

Cultural ambassadorship may be mentioned in general in scholarship applications without being conceptualized clearly, may be expressed as random examples of extra-curricular activities to be pursued while abroad or may be equated with global citizenship, another elusive notion. Sometimes it is confused with a study-abroad ambassador, a student who promotes on his or her home campus an overseas program in which he or she has participated. In short, while all parties, (students, advisers and scholarship foundations) may talk about it, cultural ambassadorship remains poorly defined.

I believe that all students, with proper preparation, can become effective cultural ambassadors but cannot do so without it. Training should be part of an intentional strategy to

prepare them to promote good will and understanding through intercultural dialogue. Otherwise, ambassadorship remains a rhetorical element of study abroad applications that is not actualized in practice.

Graham (2011) describes the student ambassadorial profile in terms of being courteous, friendly, and open to meeting new people. The student ambassadors do emulate the popular image of an ambassador who has an emblematic role. They represent their home country abroad, adopt a complex view of the United States and demonstrate respect for a foreign culture. They may complain at times about differences from their own culture, but not too much; they do not draw conclusions from surface observations but investigate them (Graham, 2011).

To be cultural ambassadors students must travel abroad individually and not as a group. Group travel modifies the interaction with the host culture when a group of students travel abroad because groups of any nationality tend to be less open to interactions with foreigners. The members of a group feel protected and therefore, they have a diminished motivation to step outside the protective circle. "As a result, groups tend to be more arrogant, hypocritical, and ruthlessly self-seeking than individuals" (Slimbach, 2005, p. 214).

I argue that to serve as effective cultural ambassadors, study abroad students must engage in three main action plans: listening to their foreign counterparts, breaking down stereotypes about America, and speaking the local language when in a non-English speaking country. In these ways, they will put the concept of cross-cultural communication into practice in their daily lives through dialogue with people of the host country. These soft skills equip them to play an active role in cultural diplomacy as student ambassadors.

### **Student Cultural Ambassadors As Listeners**

Listening to others while abroad is a soft and diplomatic skill. In intercultural communication, listening gives the host the opportunity to express himself and gives the guest space for discovery. It is an active skill and does not mean being marginalized. If students go loud and bold, potential dialogue becomes a monologue and they miss the opportunity to discover that *the Other* in front of him or her also has a perspective on the world; "unfortunately, it [lack of listening] tends to shut down authentic openness to other sources of truth and goodness, and leaves one stuck in one's own prejudice (Slimbach, 2005, p. 213)." When one knows how to listen it means that one is ready to recognize the presence of *the Other* who also has something to say, which although different, may be right.

Listening demonstrates students' respect towards diverse others, openness to their points of view, and acceptance that "truth is too big for any single individual and culture to contain" (Slimbach, 2005, p. 212). Listening also means accepting that they are not the center of the world. In pre-orientation sessions for study abroad, educators should encourage students to spend time on the periphery of action or conversation in the host country. Generally, education in Western cultures including the U.S. makes students feel that they should be the center of an action all the time. This may be the origin of the myth of the hero who saves the world as well as of the related negative stereotypes.

However, one cannot become an insider in an unfamiliar space by constantly seizing the center. When entering a new culture, student cultural ambassadors do at times occupy the peripheral spaces but this does not mean being excluded. If they occupied the center at all times, they would be unable to perceive ethnic, ideological, and linguistic differences within the host society and would feel isolated.

The mental representation of center and periphery is easy to conceptualize because we all share the understanding that our bodies have a center, the torso, containing most of the vital organs and a periphery, consisting of the parts attached to the torso: arms, legs, head, and neck. Another common physical experience involves the body as the center and the perceptual field as the periphery. By extension, we conceptualize the center as our inner position in the world and the periphery as outer positions exterior to our own. This inner/outer dimension gives rise to self/other and mine/yours distinctions (Johnson, 1987).

Teaching study-abroad students the importance of this basic mental schema will help them open windows to reality outside themselves and feel comfortable giving up (temporarily) the central spot to the host culture so that they can better observe and learn from their foreign peers from the periphery. Successful student cultural ambassadors have this mental flexibility to move easily from center to periphery and vice-versa. Thus, they are open to a picture bigger than themselves and discover that other groups are not peripheral, much less inferior. The process of free movement from center to periphery assists students in dealing with their own identities and worldviews. Undermining centrism focused on their own culture, (in)securities, and judgments will help them to progress from self-absorption to relative and pluralistic world views.

### **Student Cultural Ambassadors Deconstruct Stereotypes**

Student cultural ambassadors represent their own country abroad and thus, their role is to communicate to the members of the host country a more accurate image of the United States and to break down stereotypes that people there may hold about Americans. There are numerous negative and positive stereotypes. Negatively, Americans (1) are environmental polluters, (2) eat only fast food, (3) are superficial, loud, rude, boastful and immature, and (4) think they have all the answers. Conversely, on the positive side: Americans are (1) hardworking, (2) wealthy, (3) generous, and (4) friendly. Even if these stereotypes are not true, and even though students may be inaccurately criticized or praised for them, they should not take them personally.

To prepare for coping with stereotypes, student cultural ambassadors should be trained to apply a questioning strategy that assists them in seeing what is going on behind the scenes in the other person's mind: What is the issue? Is the criticism true or fair? What logic underlies it? How could I explain it or defend it (Kohls and Knight, 1994)? It is through understanding the other's assumptions that one can break down stereotypes. Cross-cultural competence has been achieved when one can shift from bluntly rejecting the stereotype to trying to understand and finally deconstruct it.

Without necessarily rejecting the pattern, student cultural ambassadors transform stereotypes about their country into generalizations that make their peers in the host country

think in more tentative and less absolute ways about Americans. This creates a space for further discussion to assess if the pattern is accurate and if there are exceptions to it. For example, a student dealing with a stereotype such as: “Americans are individualistic,” first puts it into context, describe the general pattern, explains it, and then transforms it into a generalization where “*Many Americans seem individualistic.*”

Yes, Americans like to be independent and to see themselves as in control of their lives. These values are reflected in the popular song “My Way” or in the emphasis on self-expression or self-empowerment in today’s society. Of course, this does not mean that all people living in the U.S. value individualism in the same way or at the same extent. It simply means that many, if not most Americans appear to have this value, and that the culture views this as a positive attitude (Paige et al., 2002, p. 63).

The difference between these two statements “Americans are individualistic,” and “*Many Americans seem individualistic,*” or in other words, between an absolute and a relative point of view, opens an intellectual path to discovering that not every individual fits an absolute profile and allows hypotheses to replace stereotypes. This conceptual strategy creates the likelihood of seeking more information about Americans. In this new context, the stereotype holder not only sees not only the pattern but questions it and becomes aware of those outside the pattern. When he or she starts to ask questions (Why do Americans seem individualistic? How is individualism perceived in their country? Do Americans help other developing countries? Do Americans volunteer? Are Americans that I know individualistic?), the rigid and unvaried nature of the stereotype is undermined. Now the stereotyped information will be used with caution, constantly being tested and revised. Even if general cultural patterns are recognized, it is no longer assumed that all people will act the same way (Paige et al., 2002).

Supplemental strategies used by student ambassadors consist of adopting a complex view of the United States (Graham, 2011) and observing others as small cultures and communities of practice as opposed to large monolithic cultures (Montgomery, 2010). They learn as much as possible about the United States, and more specifically their home state, in terms of hard data: when his or her state entered the Union, major industries in that state, and other local facts. When they interact with their hosts, students identify themselves with that state and thus “they have a second identity rather than just being another American.” “Grounding themselves in American society is very important because of the phenomenon of the virtual American where American style, references, and accents become familiar to non-Americans through television, cinema, and video games” (Graham, 2011, p.199).

Montgomery (2010) proposes the concept of small cultures as communities of practice within the host culture. She builds on Holliday’s argument (1999) that “large cultures are associated with ethnic, national or international groupings and that small cultures are related to any identifiable or cohesive social group” (2010, p.16). Recognizing small cultures reduces the tendency to stereotype because one moves away from a homogeneous perception of a culture toward a more inclusive perspective that perceives social activity and groupings on a smaller



scale. Thus, the study-abroad student does not see only a single host culture, but rather multiple small cultures as communities of practice or groups of people as a set of problems, concerns, and passions.

The concept of small cultures is useful because it breaks down the misleading equivalence between nation and culture. This relationship is conducive to a message of essentialism or ethnic reductionism, which encourages stereotyping and labeling.

This mistaken direct correlation between nation and cultural or personal attributes and even value systems may lie at the root of many of the broad stereotypes that can lead to misunderstanding across groups and individuals. Nations incorporate a wide range of cultural beliefs and linguistic variations, and this means that treating a nation as one culture is misleading and can promote prejudice and from there inequality (Montgomery, 2010, p. 13).

Therefore, student cultural ambassadors, by dispelling stereotypes, eliminate the potentially harmful link between nationality and culture and open up intercultural dialogue, by dissociating general patterns of behavior from particular nationalities.

### **Student Cultural Ambassadors Speak Foreign Languages**

Like diplomatic ambassadors, student cultural ambassadors should have proficiency in foreign languages or strive for fluency. This allows them to interact with the host culture and deepen intercultural understanding. Beyond facilitating communication, speaking the host country's language gives access to beliefs, values, ways of thinking, and perceptions. Everybody sees the world but no one sees it the same way. Since the main tasks of an ambassador are on one hand, to acquire an insider's understanding of the host culture's conception of the world, and on the other hand, to learn to see the United States through the eyes of others, speaking the local language is the basic requirement for cultural diplomacy.

While fluency in a foreign language enhances ambassadorial potential, learning how to speak it is always work in progress. Thus, although the word *ambassador* suggests that the individual is rather accomplished, the word *student* conveys this learning process. Students should be encouraged to strive to increase proficiency from the introductory to bilingual level. Because the concept of student cultural ambassadors is an encompassing one with as little exclusion as possible, I include all students in 100 level language courses and above.

Speaking English does not replace speaking a foreign language. As Graham (2011) points out: "The rest of the world knows that English speakers do not have a practical imperative for learning a second language... the rest of the world simply accepts that English is a *worldwide language* because of our size and power. Never confuse this, however, with English being *the world's language*" (p. 196). Investing time in learning a foreign language can be interpreted as a deliberate sacrifice in the service of learning to live with each other on this planet: "perhaps the biggest sacrifice for many people is to give up their language, their mother tongue...to admit to



someone that if I am going to learn to live with you then I must put myself at a distinct psychological disadvantage by speaking your language” (Walker, 2006, p. 71).

It is paradoxical that students are encouraged to pursue an international education and become global citizens but foreign language programs are offered late, during college, and may even be reduced or closed in this struggling economy. Thus, students’ lack of foreign language skills reflects to some extent the idea that English is a universal language, a position that is fiercely debated and often harshly criticized in international education.

The idea that we will not need to know other languages in twenty-five years because everyone will speak English ... has not served us well. America has a listening problem if we aren’t learning foreign languages. We continually fail to understand – or even to see it as important to understand – what other think – and are telling us, about themselves about their situation, and about our frequently proffered prescriptions for what they should do about it. The list of foreign policy fiascos that this problem has caused us is a long one, and it is growing” (Johnson, 2012, para. 4).

These three action strategies to develop student cultural ambassadors — listening, deconstructing stereotypes and speaking foreign languages — consolidate the foundation for future global citizens. These two concepts overlap, with *global citizen* being more complex and encompassing than *student ambassador*, involving acquisition of enhanced skills such as ethnographic skills, global awareness, world learning and affective development (Slimbach, 2005).

Student cultural ambassadors should proactively claim their role in cultural diplomacy to create relationships with people that endure beyond their study-abroad period, combat stereotypes about their home country and build a foundation of trust between members of different cultures. Student ambassadors reach out to a broad public of non-elites, break language barriers and more importantly, create a neutral platform for people-to-people contact. While abroad, they offset the perception that America is a monolithic society defined solely by its foreign policy. They are the good seeds in the cultural diplomacy garden: “You prepare the bed, plant the seeds, water, and then cut it for five hundred years” (Cultural Diplomacy, 2005, p. 14).

To summarize, the generic concept of furthering cross-cultural understanding through education is implemented by adopting these three soft action strategies of listening, breaking down stereotypes, and speaking foreign languages. They are mainly enacted by student cultural ambassadors who engage in a genuine and humanistic dialogue, reduce ignorance, and thus act on behalf of the common good. These three basic and concrete actions are targeted toward creating a climate whereby members of different and distant cultures learn how to live with each other. This is the principal objective of study abroad and consequently, students must be prepared with this goal in mind. The challenge at the heart of international education is how we can best develop an education that prioritizes learning to live together with different others and pushes to the periphery, at least within the international education enterprise, pursuit of national interests and national security policies.

### References

- Altbach, P. (1998). *Comparative higher education: knowledge, the university and development*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Center.
- Becker, J.M. (1969). *An examination of objectives, needs and priorities in international education in U.S. secondary and elementary schools*. New York: Foreign Policy Association.
- Coombs, P. (1964). *The Fourth Dimension of Foreign Policy: Educational and Cultural Affairs*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Cultural diplomacy: The linchpin of public diplomacy. Report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, U.S. Department of State (2005). Retrieved from <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/54374.pdf>
- De Wit, H. (2002) *Internationalization of higher education in the United States of America and Europe: A historical, comparative, and conceptual analysis*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Duggan, S. (1943). *A professor at large*. New York: Macmillan.
- Fulbright U.S. student program. (2011). Retrieved from [http://us.fulbrightonline.org/overview\\_program.html?page=us/overview\\_program](http://us.fulbrightonline.org/overview_program.html?page=us/overview_program)
- Frankel, C. (1965). *The neglected aspect of foreign affairs. American educational and cultural policy abroad*, Washington: The Brookings Institution
- Graham, C. (2011). *Coping with anti-Americanism. A guide to getting the most out of studying abroad*. Washington: Potomac Books.
- Hanvey, R.G. (1982). *An attainable global perspective*. New York: American Forum for Global Education.
- Heater, D. (1990). *Citizenship: The civic ideal in world history, politics and education*. New York: Longman.
- Holliday, A. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied Linguistics*, 20 (2), 237-264.
- Kohls, R., Knight J. (1994). *Developing intercultural awareness. A cross-cultural training handbook*. Maine: Intercultural Press.
- Johnson, M. (1987). *The body in the mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Johnson, V. (2012). *We have a listening problem if we aren't learning foreign languages*. Retrieved from <http://blog.nafsa.org/2012/02/15/we-have-a-listening-problem-if-we-arent-learning-foreign-languages/>
- Leach, R.J. (1969). *International schools and their role in the field of international education*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- MacLeish, A. (2012) *UNESCO 1945 Constitution*. Retrieved from [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=15244&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15244&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)
- Mattern, W.G. (1991) *Random ruminations on the curriculum of the international school*. in P.L. Jonietz and D. Harris (eds.) *World Yearbook of Education. International Schools and International Education*, 209—16, London: Kogan Page.
- McAllister-Grande, B. (2008). *The historical roots of internationalization*, Retrieved from

- [http://www.nafsa.org/\\_/File/\\_/ac08sessions/GS089.pdf](http://www.nafsa.org/_/File/_/ac08sessions/GS089.pdf)
- Montgomery, C. (2010). *Understanding the International Student Experience*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mueller, S. (2011) *Smart Power and Citizen Diplomacy*. Retrieved from [http://publicdiplomacy.org/pages/index.php?page=sherrymueller\\_nov2011](http://publicdiplomacy.org/pages/index.php?page=sherrymueller_nov2011)
- The National Security Education Program (NSEP) David Boren Fellowship. (2012). Retrieved from <http://majorscholarships.siu.edu/nsep%20grad%20info.pdf>
- Nussbaum, M. (1997). *Cultivating humanity. A Classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nye, J. (2003). Propaganda isn't the way: Soft power. Retrieved from [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/1240/propaganda\\_isnt\\_the\\_way.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/1240/propaganda_isnt_the_way.html)
- Nye, J. (2004). *Soft power. The means to success in world politics*, New York: Public Affairs.
- Open Doors Report. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors>
- Paige, R., Cohen, A. D., Kappler, B., Chi, J. C., Lassegard, J. P., & Minnesota Univ., M. n. (2002). *Maximizing study abroad: A students' guide to strategies for language and culture learning and use*.
- Slimbach, R. (2005). The transcultural journey. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 11, 205-230.
- Spaulding, S., Collucco J., Flint, J. (1982) International education, in Harold E. Mitzel (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, 945-53. London: Macmillan.
- Stock, A. (2011). *Educational and cultural affairs: New Directions*. Retrieved from <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/115.htm>
- Sylvester, R. (2003). Further mapping of the territory of international education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1944-1969), *Journal of Research in International Education*, 2–185.
- Sylvester, R. (2005). Framing the map of international education (1969-1998). *Journal of Research in International Education*, 4–123.
- Walker, G. (2006). *Educating the global citizen*. Suffolk: John Catt Education.
- Wright, Q. (1955). *The study of international relations*. New York: Appleton Century Crofts.

### About the Author

**Madalina Akli** holds a doctorate in French studies from Rice University (Texas), a Master of Arts in linguistics from Sorbonne University (France), and a Bachelor of Arts in French literature from Iasi University (Romania). She studied abroad eight years out of eleven years of post-secondary education and what was at the beginning abroad eventually became home for her. Currently, she is the Assistant Director of Fellowships and Undergraduate Research at Rice, where she advises students on international scholarships and research opportunities. Madalina Akli is the author of a book in French studies and articles in international education.