

## OVERVIEW OF AFS RESEARCH

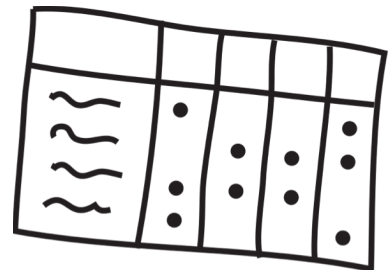
Since AFS ambulance drivers returning from the Second World War transformed AFS from a wartime volunteer humanitarian aid program into a groundbreaking intercultural programs organization, AFS has led and participated in research efforts that are focused on achieving a deeper understanding of the impact of our exchange programs. This ongoing commitment to assessment enables AFS to provide students, host families and volunteers with highly effective learning experiences through our programs.

AFS has a long-standing history of significant contributions to the field of intercultural education, often working in partnership with leading institutions and notable researchers. By exploring a wide range of relevant topics—from the ways that technology affects cultural adaptation processes to the interplay between personality and culture— these research initiatives help identify a variety of factors involved in intercultural learning.

### IMPACT STUDY (1985)

One of the earliest studies on the impact of cultural exchange programs conducted by AFS began in 1980 and completed in 1985. Thousands of AFS students were interviewed at different points during their exchange programs to measure their learning and personal growth across 17 different variables:

1. Awareness of Opportunities;
2. Adaptability;
3. Non-Materialism;
4. Communication with Others;
5. Critical Thinking;
6. Understanding Other Cultures;
7. Exchange of Ideas;
8. High Standards for Personal Relationships;
9. Independence - Responsibility for Self;
10. Foreign Language Appreciation and Ability;
11. Personal Growth and Maturity;
12. Awareness and Appreciation of Home Country and Culture;
13. Appreciation of Own Family;
14. Awareness and Appreciation of Host Country and Culture;
15. International Awareness;
16. Open-Mindness;
17. Self-Confidence.



The findings were substantial, as subjects showed significantly **greater increase in understanding other cultures, awareness and appreciation of host country and culture, foreign language appreciation and ability, international awareness, and adaptability.** The AFS experience also seems to help students become less materialistic, more independent in their thinking, more aware of their home country and culture, better able to communicate with others and to think critically. Still regarded as one of the most significant pieces of research

on the subject, the *AFS Impact Study* has been reproduced in several formats, and numerous scholarly journals have published articles based on the results.

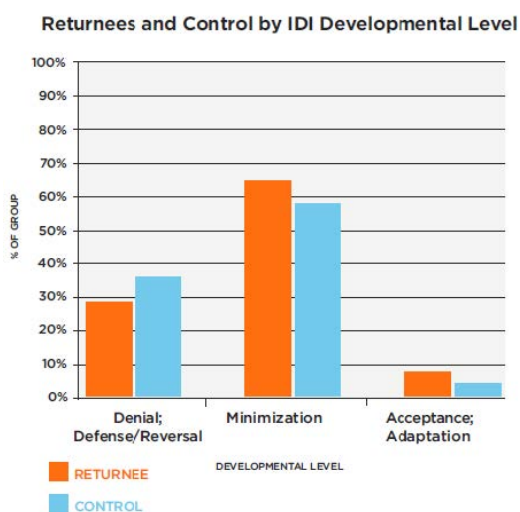
## EDUCATIONAL RESULTS STUDY (2004)

As a follow-up to the pioneer *AFS Impact Study* conducted in the 1980s, in 2002-2004 Dr. Mitchell Hammer, with the support of AFS, conducted research titled the *AFS Study Abroad Experience* or the *AFS Educational Results Study*. A total of 2,100 teenagers from 9 different countries participated in the research. In this group, 1,500 were students who recently returned from AFS exchange programs and 600 were a control group composed of friends of the AFS students who did not go on exchange.

The study was based on Dr. Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), a framework that aims to explain the reactions of people as they engage with cultural differences. Participants' levels of intercultural sensitivity were measured within the DMIS framework through the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a validated tool for assessing intercultural sensitivity designed by Dr. Milton Bennett and Dr. Mitchell Hammer. The subjects were evaluated before, during and after an experience abroad. Compared to the control group, AFS students made significant improvements **showing increased language fluency, knowledge of other cultures and ability to forge intercultural friendships**.

The results of the research confirmed that AFS study abroad year programs are remarkably effective across a number of important benchmarks to develop intercultural sensitivity: intercultural competence is improved, knowledge of the host culture increases, intercultural anxiety decreases, cross-cultural networks expand, friendships increase upon return home, and strong gains in host language fluency result. These results are directly due to the AFS program, as similar gains did not result when students remained at home.

## LONG-TERM IMPACT STUDY (2008)



This large-scale study was conducted in 2007 and 2008 by AFS in order to determine the long-term impact of an intercultural learning experience. The study, led by Dr. Bettina Hansel (former Director of Intercultural Education and Research at AFS Intercultural Programs) compared AFS alumni to their peers, 20 to 25 years after their participation in an exchange program. Nearly 2,000 AFS alumni participated in the survey and each person who responded was also asked to nominate two high school friends to complete the survey as the control group.

The study used biographical data and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). The results demonstrated that AFS program alumni are **more likely to be fluent in several languages, have higher**

**levels of education and be more comfortable in different cultural settings, both professional and personal**, compared to their peers who did not have an intercultural exchange experience.

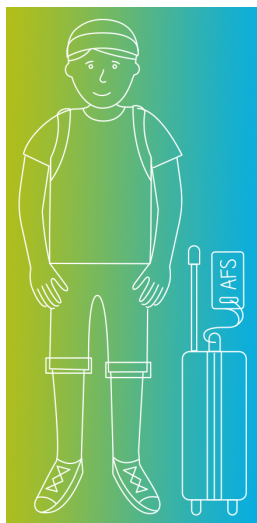
## THE IMPACT OF LIVING ABROAD PROJECT (2012)

In 2008-2012, AFS participated in a major longitudinal study in partnership with Dr. Nicolas Geereart and Kali Demes, cross-cultural psychology researchers at Essex University, UK. *The Impact of Living Abroad Project* (also known as *The Kaleidoscope Project*) was designed to explore the different factors that affect exchange participants' ability to adapt to new environments. The study gathered 2,480 AFS exchange students from 48 different countries, and over 500 of their friends who had not taken part in exchange programs, who served as a control group. All research participants completed up to 9 surveys over the course of 18 months; for the exchange students, these surveys were distributed before, during and after the year abroad.



Among the results, the study identified that the exchange students showed **increased knowledge and understanding not only of their host country but also of their home country** following the exchange. They also **developed a more complex identity by being part of a host culture and experienced increased self-esteem and decreasing levels of intergroup anxiety** over the exchange year. The research also reinforced what was already indicated in previous studies regarding the advanced level of fluency in host language acquired by AFS students and their development of greater awareness of intercultural competencies.

## THE EDUCATIONAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT PILOT (ongoing)



Launched in 2015, the *AFS Educational Impact Assessment Pilot* aims to identify concrete evidence of AFS students' development in 7 of the 16 **AFS Educational Goals for Students** (self-awareness, motivation and self-confidence, empathy, flexibility, building intercultural friendship, cultural knowledge and awareness, and foreign language skills and non-verbal communication). The primary goal for the pilot is to provide AFS students with tools to track learning and intercultural competence development throughout the AFS Student Learning Journey. By using a digital portfolio and assessment framework, students have a chance to reflect on their own experience through learner-centered activities such as surveys, questionnaires, journal writing, posting of videos, photos and other forms of digital media.

The proposed framework will allow students (and AFS) to **understand their personal, interpersonal, intercultural and global development; before, during and after their exchange experience**. At the same time

AFS will be able to follow their students' growth and take necessary interventions if the desired objectives are not being met. After the pilot phase, AFS plans to make this initiative a standard part of the AFS Student Learning Journey. The project is being led by the Education & Intercultural Learning Department at AFS Intercultural Programs with the support of Dr. Jason Lee as the Lead Researcher and an Advisory Committee formed by Dr. Bettina Hansel, Dr. Bruce La Brack, Dr. Darla K. Deardorff, Dr. Nagesh Rao and Dr. Shingo Ashizawa.

As a leader in the intercultural education field, AFS continues to conduct research studies and form meaningful partnerships in order to enhance the understanding of the value and implications of intercultural experiences in a globalizing world. With more than 12,500 student participants in study abroad programs and over 40,000 volunteers who facilitate their experiences, AFS is committed to contributing to the field of intercultural research.



#### AFS RESEARCH...

- ✓ shows that the AFS experience helps students develop several intercultural competencies, such as increased ability to adapt to new environments and decreased levels of inter group anxiety;
- ✓ identified that AFS alumni develop increased levels of intercultural sensitivity compared to those who don't go on AFS exchange programs;
- ✓ is essential to continue understanding the value and implications of intercultural experiences.

#### LEARN MORE...

- ✓ **AFS Research 1980-93 Summary**  
[www.afs.org/afs-and-intercultural-learning/research](http://www.afs.org/afs-and-intercultural-learning/research)
- ✓ **AFS Educational Results Study**  
[www.afs.org/afs-and-intercultural-learning/research](http://www.afs.org/afs-and-intercultural-learning/research)
- ✓ **AFS Long Term Impact Study Overall Findings**  
[www.afs.org/afs-and-intercultural-learning/research](http://www.afs.org/afs-and-intercultural-learning/research)
- ✓ **The Impact of Living Abroad Project**  
[www.ilaproject.org](http://www.ilaproject.org)



**AFS Intercultural Programs** is an international, voluntary, non-governmental, non-profit organization that provides intercultural learning opportunities to help people develop the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to create a more just and peaceful world.

**ICL for AFS & Friends** is a series of short, insightful articles on important intercultural topics featuring AFS's point of view. There are intended for staff, volunteers, educators and all others who either are or would like to become involved with the AFS mission. For more information, contact the AFS Education & ICL Team: [icl@afs.org](mailto:icl@afs.org)