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Eastern Kentucky University

The Exceptional European Experience: An Analysis of Education Abroad's Impact on College  
Students and the Field of Nutrition and Dietetics

Honors Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the  
Requirements of HON 420  
Spring 2023

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Abstract:

The Exceptional European Experience: An Analysis of Education Abroad's Impact on College Students and the Field of Nutrition and Dietetics

McKenna Moore

Dr. Rachel Harrington, Department of Applied Human Sciences

Education abroad has become a very popular avenue over the past century for college students from the United States to be immersed in a culture different from their own and experience significant growth, personally and professionally. Italy is a country that has a culture different from that of America and the contrast becomes even more evident after time abroad. United States citizens desire immediate satisfaction and this desire is accompanied through services such as drive-thrus, delivery services, and online shopping. Americans also often revolve their food experience around quantity and speed at which it is served. Italians, on the other hand, focus their lifestyle around quality and experience, also reflecting this into their food behaviors, influencing Italians to consume a diet that is more generally healthy compared to Americans.

Not only does education abroad impact college students generally, but it also has a specific impact on dietetic college students that travel to Italy. Dietetic students, pursuing the credential of Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN), are taught about how to optimally care for and counsel clients through the entire realm of nutrition. These students are not only receiving the personal and professional growth that comes with studying internationally, but they are also learning in a country that has a strong food culture centered around quality social experiences and the consumption of whole, fresh foods. For these reasons, education abroad should be

considered as an integral part of undergraduate curriculum for universities in the United States that offer an accredited dietetics program.

*Keywords and phrases:* college, education abroad, Italy, food, nutrition, dietetics.

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## **Introduction**

United States citizens are known for wanting immediate satisfaction: requesting goods and services easily and hoping to receive them quickly. Fast food drive-thrus, grocery pick-up orders, food delivery services, bank ATMs, and online stores are just a few examples that demonstrate that Americans are accustomed to and enjoy receiving what they want at a moment's notice. This is especially true in regard to foods and beverages. However, this "hurried, give-it-to-me-now" lifestyle is not as common in other parts of the world. The Italian population, in particular, would be appalled to experience the ways in which many Americans prepare, serve, and eat food. In Italy, the consumption of food and beverage revolves around the priorities of quality and experience, rather than quantity and speed at which it is served.

The differences between these two cultures become especially apparent when completing an education abroad experience, and therefore, being immersed in the culture for a longer period of time not often experienced by vacationers. Studying abroad has become an increasingly popular avenue for college students to receive academic credit and to grow in several ways, personally and professionally. According to the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA): Association of International Educators, although education abroad participation across the nation showed a decrease during the 2019-2020



and 2020-2021 school years due to the COVID pandemic, there were 349,700 students from the United States that participated in a study abroad program during the 2018-2019 academic year. The number of students participating in education abroad is expected to return to pre-pandemic rates as borders open and travel restrictions are lifted.

Considering that Europe is drastically the most popular host country for U.S. students, hosting over 60% of the U.S. students studying abroad in 2020-2021 (NAFSA), this thesis delves deeper into European culture and its impact on students, personally and professionally. More specifically, because the topic of analysis is education abroad and nutrition and dietetics, Italy is the country of focus due to its strong food culture that is centered around social experiences and the consumption of whole, fresh foods.

Dietetics, very similarly, is a field and career that is centered around food, eating behaviors, and the consumption of whole, fresh foods. Within this field include several career opportunities, with the most sought-after credential being a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN). The field of dietetics and the RDN continues to become more respected and acknowledged in the healthcare field and is considered a critical component of the healthcare team. Perhaps the esteem for these professionals is due to the challenging and lengthy pathway of acquiring these credentials. To become an RDN, a student must complete a stimulating undergraduate curriculum within a program accredited by the Accreditation degree in higher education, complete a supervised practice requirement, and, finally, pass the national Commission on Dietetic Registration exam

(eatright.org). Through these requirements, students undergo classroom education but are also given hands-on experiences that help the student apply ways in which they can properly care for and counsel clients in assisting them with achieving appropriate, centralized nutrition goals to reach a better quality of life. An RDN can apply these skills in several different settings including hospitals, food service, long-term care facilities, school systems, community setting, and health departments.

The research and analysis within this thesis show that education abroad in Italy has the potential to prepare these future dietitians in a notable way that cannot be achieved only in the United States. Implementation of an education abroad course, specifically in Italy, into nutrition and dietetics curriculum throughout the United States would allow for these future health professionals to become more culturally competent and prepare them for the diverse world of healthcare. It would also allow for a better understanding of their own food perceptions and eating behaviors before treating clients in their respective career field.

### **American vs. European Food Cultures and Health**

There is a major difference between the general health status of Americans when compared to the health status of Italians. Along with Americans' desire for immediate satisfaction, the U.S. culture is widely dependent on time and money. Goods and services are likely to be chosen based on convenience and efficiency such as deciding what to eat and where to shop. The results of this lifestyle

become evident when looking at the overall health of the United States.

According to Megan McCrory et al., in a research article about fast food offerings in America, around 40% of American adults between the ages of 20 and 74 years old were affected by obesity in 2016, and obesity was the 4th leading risk factor for mortality. During this time, between the years 2013 and 2016, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) determined that approximately “36.6% of adults consumed fast food on any given day” (2018). As of 2023, the CDC also released data stating that the percentage of Americans that are affected by obesity jumped to 41.9% of adults. The CDC also included that 19.7% of children are also affected by obesity (2023).

One influencing factor that plays into the declining health status of the United States is the eating habits of Americans. In regard to the realm of nutrition in which RDNs are well versed, there can be a misconception with what is truly considered “healthy” or “unhealthy” eating. Depending on the source, healthy eating can be described very differently between a coach, a teacher, or an online influencer. Ultimately, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, it means “following a healthy eating pattern that includes a variety of nutritious foods and drinks [and] getting the number of calories that’s right for you” (2022). This variety of foods includes whole grains, vegetables, whole fruits, proteins, low-fat or nonfat dairy products, and oils (DHHS, 2022). In the United States, these recommendations are most often not met on a consistent basis, in part, due to the traditions and culture that influence the “what” and “how” meals are eaten. Eating outside of the home, away from the family dinner table, and on-

the-go has become more prevalent over the past 50 years as society has transitioned to a more fast-paced, demanding schedule. Fast food and dine-in locations have become widespread and have grown in popularity as this way of life has been adopted. Between the years 2007 and 2010, fast food accounted for 11% of Americans' total daily caloric intake (McCrory, 2016). These types of restaurants commonly offer meals that are high in calories, sodium, saturated fat, trans fat, and added sugars (McCrory, 2016). These meals are also often in portion sizes larger than recommended (McCrory, 2016).

On the other hand, European and Italian cultures are structured quite differently. The Country Health Profile of 2019 states that obesity (based on a Body Mass Index, or BMI, of  $>30$ ) among adults in Italy is only 11%, compared to America's 40%. The vast difference in health can be somewhat attributed to the difference in eating behaviors. Italy prioritizes and honors the social experience and quality of a meal, rather than the speed of its preparation, the quantity served, and the price. Although fast food restaurants similar to those in America exist in Europe (e.g., McDonalds, Burger King, and Subway), they are less prevalent locationally, and the addition of a drive-thru is also not as common. Instead, Italians traditionally follow a more generally healthful diet, the Mediterranean Diet, and often eat meals in the home or at sit-down restaurants with others. The influence of the Mediterranean Diet is one reason for their healthier profile in comparison to the United States. This diet includes a major focus on the consumption of whole grains, vegetables, fruits, legumes, and unsaturated fats, a focus on less consumption of red or processed meat and dairy products, and often

includes wine in moderation (Herbold & Geagan, 2002). In addition to their specific diet preferences that influence their eating behaviors and health, according to Carole Counihan, Italy founded the Slow Food Movement in 1986. The purpose of the Slow Food Movement is to shape the politics around food and enforce meaning and value into the products that are bought and consumed (Counihan). Mark Wexler and other authors of an article titled, “The Slow Food Movement: A ‘Big Tent’ Ideology,” written in 2017, state that this cultural movement, along with the Slow Food International Organization, was launched after the first McDonald’s was planted in Rome, Italy. The main two principal tasks include “promoting local producers and businesses and campaigning to deter the process of globalization in agriculture” (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 10). With this foundation, the Italians wanted to combat the potential growth and power behind fast food so that their local restaurants, traditional cuisine, and overall culture would withstand the advancements of the modern world that was to come. Therefore, this movement, along with other traditional Italian lifestyles and diets, supports the consumption and purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables and quality meals to result in a healthier population on average.

### **Eating Behaviors of American College Students**

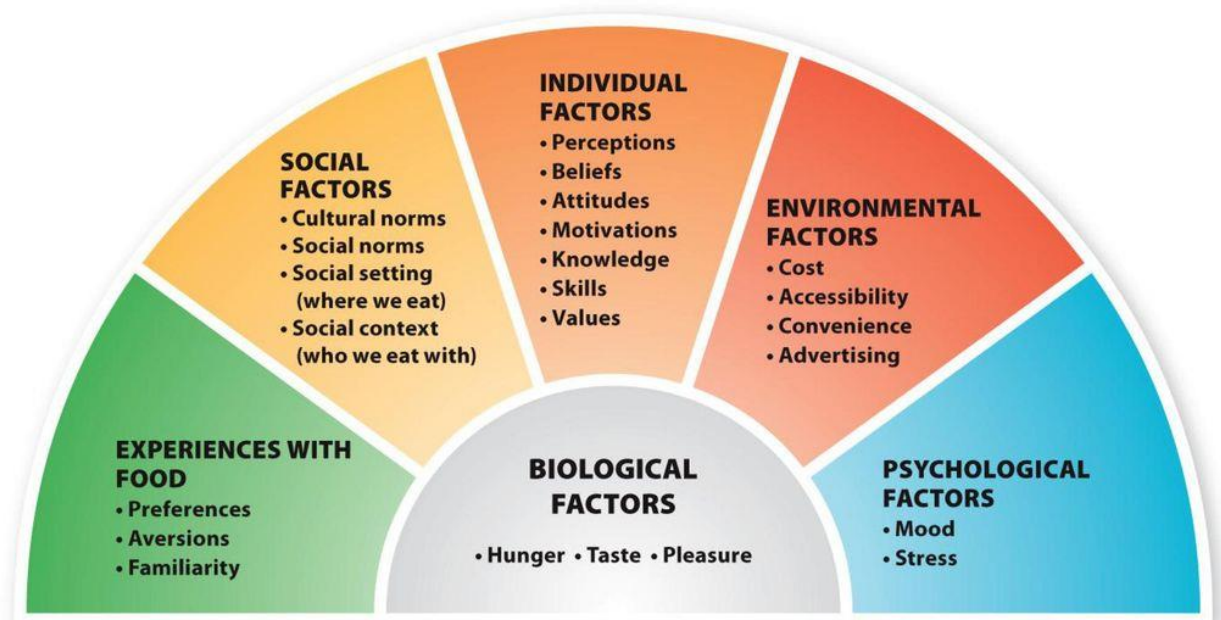
Delving deeper into the health of all Americans, college students are of particular interest when discussing eating behaviors and food perceptions. At this stage in life, the majority of students are experiencing their first “tastes” of independence. One of the freedoms of being a college student revolves around food and nutrition: “University is a critical period for young adults regarding food

choices and their relationship with weight gain” (Sogari et al., 2018, p. 2). However, this independence does not often lead to healthy food choices. Influences including living arrangements, money, accessibility, stress, and knowledge all contribute to college students’ eating habits and perceptions of the foods they consume. According to Sam Abraham and other scholars, college students typically make food choices based on time, taste, convenience, and price, further influencing them to consume more processed and pre-packaged foods (2018). In a book titled, *Nutrition for a Changing World*, by Jamie Pope et al., there is an entire chapter written about “The College Years.” Within this section, a model, that is included below in Table 1, is used to outline the variety of factors that can influence a college student’s diet. These factors include biological factors, such as hunger and taste, experiences with food, like a student’s preferences, social factors from friends, individual factors, such as knowledge and attitudes toward food, environmental factors, including cost, and psychological factors, like mood or stress (Pope et al., 2016). In addition to the generally unhealthy diet that a college student consumes, their physical changes, such as body weight mentioned by Giovanni et al., are significant results from those habits. The “Freshman 15”, a term discussed by Pope et al. in this book, is “a popular term used to describe the pattern of weight gain associated with the first year of college” (2016, p. 441). It is true that around 75% of college students, on average, gain weight during their freshman year, however, the amount of weight ranges between 3 to 4 pounds, rather than 15 (Pope et al., 2016).

Resolving these issues in American college students' health behaviors is difficult and complicated due to the several influencing factors and the Western/American diet that is so strong in the U.S. culture. However, it has been shown that a significant, positive influence on a student's intake of foods including vegetables, whole grains, fruits, and overall diet quality can come after taking a basic nutrition course in college (Pope et al., 2016). Similarly, studying abroad is an intervention that has shown influence and deserves more attention for its impact on young adults in regard to their food perceptions and eating habits, and in their personal and professional growth that will be discussed in depth further (Wertz, 2021; Sikora, 2018).

**Table 1: Factors That Influence Food Choices**

## Many factors influence our food choice and eating behavior.



(Pope et al., 2016)

### **The History of Education Abroad**

From its beginning, in the United States, exactly 100 years ago, education abroad has had an immense impact on the growth and development of students all across the globe. The first accredited study abroad program originating out of the United States was established in 1923, sponsored by the University of Delaware (“History of Study Abroad,” 2023). However, the initial groundwork that encouraged the foundation of this program out of the University of Delaware began thousands of years ago.

In an article published by Megan Lee in 2012 and edited in 2015, it was discussed that a man named Emo of Friesland traveled from northern Holland to Oxford University and truly paved the way for international education. Following Emo’s adventure during the late 1700s was a key moment in the foundation of education abroad as well. This point in time fell within the Napoleonic Wars and rule of Louis XVI where Napoleon himself, and a French educator, Marc-Antoine Jullien advocated for peace and trust between all nations (Lee, 2012). Because of their advocacy, Napoleon and Jullien supported the meeting of representatives from the U.S., Germany, France, and England where an international organization, responsible for international education, was discussed and established in 1876 (Lee, 2012). While these exciting turns of events were occurring in Europe, the States were welcoming their first international travelers and scholars. In the 1830s, John Diomatari, a resident of Psara, Greece, studied



and graduated from the University of Georgia, and Indiana University began hosting small trips internationally to Switzerland, France, England, Germany, and Italy for students to study history, language, and culture (Lee, 2012). All of these events cultivated the transformative opportunities that were to come in the 20th century.

Similar to Europe during the Napoleonic Wars, the United States' international perspectives shifted as the first World War was concluded. Lee says that toward the end of World War I, "American colleges, religious groups, and peace-promoting organizations started to explore creative ways to inspire their students to learn more about the world outside of U.S. borders" (2012). With the intention of building peace and understanding between nations, education abroad gained popularity and attention. Nobel Peace Prize winners, Nicholas Murray Butler and Stephen Duggen, created the Institute of International Education and sponsored the first accredited study abroad program in 1923 (Lee, 2012).

Following these vital turning points, Megan Lee describes that education abroad had its ups and downs with participation and funding through different global and national events, such as wars, recessions, and epidemics. However, the notable popularity and participation in study abroad that is known today has been achieved through goals of wanting to reach a sense of peace, grow in cultural knowledge, and gain respect for other nations (Lee, 2012).

### **Methods of Research**

Funneled research about the direct impact that education abroad has on college students, more specifically, dietetics students, and how education abroad could affect the future of the career is discussed further in this thesis.

Multiple research databases, along with multiple websites and textbook publications were used to collect information regarding these few topics. The particular databases included EBSCO Host, Academic Search Complete/Ultimate, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, CINAHL Complete/Ultimate, Family Studies Abstracts, MEDLINE, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Google Scholar, and the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

All database and reference searches were conducted beginning on August 30th, 2022 and each database was searched using every combination of the following terms. For the concept of education abroad: education abroad OR study abroad OR study away OR foreign study OR international education were used. For the concept of college students: college students OR university students OR undergraduates were searched. For the concept of dietetics: dietetics OR dietitian OR nutrition OR nutrition professional were used. From these databases, 11 total scholarly articles, studies and theses were extracted regarding these search topics and their results were applied to this project.

## **Results**

### *Education Abroad's Impact on the College Student*

Participating in education abroad, a rising program at several universities across the nation and globe, is proven to be an incredibly beneficial experience for

students of all ages, but especially for those that are college aged. Being immersed in a different culture, learning a new language, and eating new foods are a few experiences students will encounter during an education abroad trip. All of these encounters in a foreign country contribute to personal and professional growth. The age range of 18 to 24 is a ripe time of adjusting to independence, new environments, different friend groups, higher education, and much more (Pope et al., 2016). Several experiences occur during this time that build upon individuals' personalities, characters, likes, and dislikes.

A study by Nancy Herman, conducted at the University of Connecticut determined that a student completing an education abroad program “will be more assured and confident and display a greater objectivity toward his or herself and the world” (1996, p. 34). On a nutritional level, education abroad has the potential to impact college students' personal perception of food and choices related to nutrition. As students are immersed into a new culture, especially with new foods and eating habits, there is likely to be an influence on thoughts, feelings, and possibly behaviors following the experience.

Perceptions and knowledge of healthy foods were studied by Brooke Sikora using students from the University of Oregon. More specifically, this study was conducted using a pre- and post-survey disseminated to study abroad participants during the 2018 summer term to collect information regarding topics such as body image, food urges, U.S.-focused health perceptions, and the definition of healthy food (Sikora, 2018). The survey answers had statistically significant results that showed improvement in nutrition knowledge after students

participated in an education abroad program. These results proved that following the education abroad experience, 71.4% of the participants decided that healthy food is without artificial ingredients, preservatives, and additives, 48.2% of the participants determined that food is healthy if it is low in unhealthy components, and 64.3% of the participants realized that minimally processed food is healthy (Sikora, 2018). In addition to improvements in nutrition knowledge, this study also showed positive, significant results in survey questions regarding food behaviors or perceptions. The collection of answers from these questions showed that there was a significant increase in interest to learn about health for those participating in education abroad, and there was a significant decrease in impulsively eating the easiest and most convenient foods (Sikora, 2018).

Eating behaviors, food identity, food quantity, and quality were studied by Kaitlyn Wertz who performed a case study incorporating Kent State University students that had studied abroad in Florence, Italy. Wertz performed her research using a study that was designed via Qualtrics and distributed the survey to study abroad participants via email to students that had a history of enrolling in at least one class in Florence, Italy. Specifically, the survey addressed a range of topics including demographics, food experience in Florence, food experience after returning home, and the influence of food on the entire program experience (Wertz, 2021). These survey results showed that the majority of the participants discussed behavior changes including cooking more, trying new foods, eating healthier, and desiring fresh foods and produce after a two month and a six-month follow-up. Wertz collected data displaying that 40 participants from the study, out

of 174 total, discussed behavior change, such as cooking more and trying new foods, after 2 months of returning home, and 49 participants discussed behavior change after 6 months (2021). In addition to behavior change, there were 30 participants after 2 months and 26 participants after 6 months that declared they made healthier choices including desiring/eating fresh foods and drinking more water (Wertz, 2021).

Professional development continues to occur following education abroad because students are able to grow in their studies, investigate international academic courses, and see their career or study interests in a new light. A student who studies abroad has the opportunity to learn about the logistics of international and domestic travel, preparing them for future business trips that could occur via airline. Another benefit and “takeaway” from education abroad experiences that can be of most importance and application in the career field is an enhancement in cultural competency. As our world is becoming more diverse, it is imperative that students are prepared to enter into and thrive within a multicultural workforce. These words have been spoken even in 1996, when Nancy Herman wrote about the impact of education abroad on the psychosocial development of students: “What employers desire is the ability of employees to succeed in an increasingly culturally diverse and internationally interdependent workplace” (p. 38).

Cultural competence, more specifically, has become quite the “buzz word” over the past ten years with how diverse our world is becoming. This is especially true and applicable within the healthcare field. On a personal level, someone with high cultural competency is aware of and appreciative of their own culture,

actively considerate of other cultures that could be different from their own, and open to learning about new cultures that are unfamiliar. On a professional level, channeling this type of quality is essential for someone practicing in healthcare. According to Carolyn McCabe et al., the term can be defined as “a comprehensive awareness of cultural practices, norms, and beliefs across diverse groups of individuals that allow health professionals to jointly make effective decisions that benefit population health and patient outcomes” (2020, p. 1198). Cultural competence is also not a skill that can be acquired easily. Marie A. Boyle, author of *Community Nutrition in Action: An Entrepreneurial Approach*, says that “learning to communicate across cultures is an evolutionary process and requires practice, time, and effort” and “practitioners need to continually assess their own cultural competence as well as the organization/system in which they work and the environment as a whole” (2017, p. 606). This evaluation can be completed using two models: the cultural competence continuum and the Campinha-Bacote cultural competence model (Boyle, 2017). These models are displayed in Tables 2 and 3, outlining the different stages or constructs along with their descriptions.

<b>Table 2. Cultural Competence Continuum</b>	
<i>Stage</i>	<i>Description</i>
Cultural Destructiveness	Attitudes, practices, and policies are destructive to other cultures.
Cultural Incapacity	Paternalistic attitude toward the “unfortunates.” No capacity to help.
Cultural Blindness	Belief that culture makes no difference. Everyone is treated the same. Approaches of the dominant culture are applicable for everyone.

Cultural Pre-competence	Weaknesses in serving culturally diverse populations are realized, and there are some attempts to make accommodations.
Cultural Competence	Differences are accepted and respected, self-evaluations are continuous, cultural skills are acquired, and a variety of adaptations are made to better serve culturally diverse populations. Situations can be evaluated from multiple frames of reference.
Cultural Proficiency	Engages in activities that add to the knowledge base, conducts research, develops new approaches, publishes, encourages organizational cultural competence, and works in society to improve cultural relations.

<b>Table 3. Constructs of the Campinha-Bacote Model of Cultural Competency</b>	
<i>Cultural Construct</i>	<i>Description</i>
Awareness	Health care providers become appreciative of the influence of culture on the development of values, beliefs, lifeways, practices, and problem-solving strategies. A basic requirement for cultural awareness is an in-depth exploration of one's own cultural background, including biases and prejudices toward other cultural groups.
Skill	Health care providers learn to perform culturally sensitive assessments and interventions.
Knowledge	Health care professionals develop a sound educational foundation concerning various worldviews in order to understand behaviors, including food practices, health customs, and attitudes toward seeking help from health care providers. They also acquire knowledge of physical needs, such as common health problems and nutrition issues of different cultures.
Encounters	Providers seek and engage in cross-cultural encounters and reflect on experiences allowing integration of cultural competence

	constructs.
Desire	To appear genuine and to be effective cross-culturally, the health care provider must have a true inner feeling of wanting to engage in the process of becoming culturally competent.

(Boyle, 2017 pg. 607)

### *Education Abroad's Impact on the Dietetic College Student*

Nutrition and dietetics is a growing field within the realm of health sciences. The demand for higher education and proper licensing in this career has increased its respect and professionalism on a national level. As other healthcare professionals and the public begin to see the great value of the RDN, there also comes a higher demand and attraction for a distinguished level of cultural competency in a future dietitian. Emily Merklin and Kara Wolfe, authors of “Assessing Cultural Intelligence and Study Abroad Experiences of Dietetic Students and Professionals,” confirm that there’s a “gap between demographic characteristics of dietitians and the patients and clients they care for” and concludes that participation in a study abroad program was correlated with high mean CQ [cultural intelligence]. (2020, p. 964). Additionally, a study conducted by Laura McArthur and other scholars supported this gap existing between dietitians and their clients, but more specifically in regard to their cultural knowledge. In their article, “A Quantitative Assessment of the Cultural Knowledge, Attitudes, and Experiences of Junior and Senior Dietetics Students,” it was concluded that 40% of the participants believed that clients should be counseled by nutrition professional from their respective culture, and around half



of the participants stated they would rather counsel a client from the same culture (McArthur et al., 2011). These elements of separation in cultural intelligence and demographics, along with the events of racial injustice that surfaced in the summer of 2020 were key factors in the implementation of new student objectives within the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND).

ACEND is the council that oversees educational content being taught and applied within the spectrum of dietetics programs: dietetics coordinated programs, dietetics internship programs, dietetics didactic programs, dietetics technician programs, and dietetics education programs. These new objectives, pertaining to the topic of cultural intelligence and diversity, equity and inclusion, were proposed in 2020 by the ACEND Board and were then published in the 2022 Standards (Hopkins, 2020). They serve to prepare students, at the undergraduate and graduate level, to be able to practice as a future Registered Dietitian Nutritionist with respect and knowledge of other cultures and backgrounds. Table 4 below highlights these specific objectives. The first two columns list the competencies and standards of Future Education Model graduate programs (FEM), while the third column lists the corresponding core knowledge and competencies for the multiple undergraduate ACEND accredited programs.

<b>Table 4. Crosswalk of Future Education Model Reformatted Standards with 2022 Standards for RDN Competencies with Core Knowledge</b>		
<i>Competencies: FEM Standards</i>	<i>Performance Indicators: FEM Standards</i>	<i>Core Knowledge and Competencies 2022 Standards</i>

<p>1.7 Integrates the principles of cultural competence within own practice and when directing services.</p>	<p>1.7.1 Demonstrates knowledge of the cultural competence models.</p>	<p>Required Element 3.1 - 16 Cultural humility, self-reflection and diversity, equity and inclusion.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>KRDN 2.6 Demonstrate cultural humility, awareness of personal biases and an understanding of cultural differences as they contribute to diversity, equity and inclusion.</p>
	<p>1.7.2 Applies knowledge of foods, eating patterns and food trends.</p>	<p>CRDN 2.11 Show cultural humility in interactions with colleagues, staff, clients, patients and the public.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>CRDN 3.14 Develop and evaluate recipes, formulas and menus for acceptability and affordability that accommodate the cultural diversity and health needs of various populations, groups and individuals.</p>
	<p>1.7.3 Identifies challenges that arise when different cultures, values, beliefs and experiences exist between clients/patients and</p>	<p>KRDN 2.6 Demonstrate cultural humility, awareness of personal biases and an understanding of cultural differences as they contribute to diversity, equity and</p>

	nutrition and dietetics professionals.	inclusion.
	1.7.4 Identifies and implements strategies to address cultural biases and differences.	CRDN 2.12 Implement culturally sensitive strategies to address cultural biases and differences.
	1.7.5 Applies culturally sensitive approaches and communication skills.	CRDN 2.11 Show cultural humility in interactions with colleagues, staff, clients, patients and the public.
	1.7.6 Develops awareness of one's own personal beliefs, values and biases to better serve clients/patients of different cultures and backgrounds.	

(ACEND, 2022)

The application of these objectives within the curriculum is to expose students to topics such as food taboos, traditional celebrations, fasting periods, beliefs about food in health promotion, and other topics that are imperative for an RDN to know during counseling sessions and interventions with clients or patients of different cultures. The Didactic Program in Dietetics (DPD) offered at Eastern Kentucky University, for example, implements each of these objectives and topics within its entire curriculum. On-campus courses including Introduction to Food Composition and Preparation, Nutrition Education and Counseling, Field

Experience in Quantity Food Production, Medical Nutrition Therapy, Community Nutrition, and Food Culture and Systems all incorporate different lessons about the variety of different food cultures, beliefs, and perceptions.

The implementation of these culturally centered objectives, however, are not only applicable and influential on the campus level. The preparation occurring within Eastern Kentucky University's dietetics program, among other undergraduate programs on campuses in the United States, can also be expanded to an international level. An article titled, "Assessing Cultural Intelligence and Study Abroad Experiences of Dietetics Students and Professionals," by Emily Merklen and other colleagues discusses the impact of international study on students and professionals within this field. Results from their study, conducted on current dietetics students and practicing professionals, showed that out of the 760 participants, one-third had participated in a study abroad experience before and the majority had traveled to Europe (Merklen et al., 2020). Merklen and her colleagues also found that the participants that had studied abroad before were the ones to show higher cultural competence scores or CQ scores (2020). The conclusion drawn from this was one in favor of incorporating an education abroad experience for future dietitians: "Both current dietetic students and practicing dietitians may benefit from participation in study abroad programs and international travel as it may equip them with nutrition counseling and intervention skills, and knowledge of food systems, population-specific diseases, and culturally appropriate resources to use when practicing professionally in a culturally diverse community" (Merklen et al., 2020, p. 967).

## Discussion & Application

### *Education Abroad and the Future of Dietetics*

The evolutions in curriculum and the rising respect of this field in healthcare that have been discussed above are important to consider for what lies ahead. As the world is becoming more culturally diverse, it is crucial that the future healthcare professionals, specifically future dietitians, are able to accommodate whoever is to walk into their office or be admitted into their facility. Skills including intercultural communication, hospitality, and food and nutrition knowledge are needed for a dietitian to successfully care for and counsel a client from a different culture than their own. As previously mentioned, studies have shown that there is a gap, demographically, between the dietitians and patients that they care for that has the potential to be bridged through an education abroad experience. This type of experience has been proven to increase students' cultural competence or knowledge regarding different groups' food taboos, outlook on nutrition in health, preferences, religious acknowledgements, and others. Education abroad has also shown promise in influencing a student's own eating behaviors, thoughts, and preferences. Time abroad, centered around food, nutrition, and intercultural interactions could also satisfy the student objectives regarding the same topics that are taught in the classroom, however, with an advanced experience in another part of the world. For these reasons, all undergraduate dietetic programs in the United States should consider implementing an Italy-bound study abroad experience that is centered around its strong food culture.

*EKU's "Food, Fashion, Family in Florence" Program Evaluation & Growth*

Not only have these research studies shown significant results from college students and future dietitians traveling to Italy through programs sponsored by Oregon and Kent State universities, but Eastern Kentucky University also has an admirable study abroad program called "Food, Fashion, Family in Florence." Generally speaking, Eastern Kentucky University has had an immense improvement of their entire study abroad culture over the past decade according to McKinley Cole, author of the thesis titled, "Study Abroad Success for Students." Cole delves deeper into this topic stating that Eastern Kentucky University's Study Abroad Department does an excellent job at providing a variety of programs specific to majors and multiple marketing events, scholarship opportunities, and pre-departure preparation sessions that encourage a student to make the commitment of traveling abroad (2017). This Florence, Italy- bound program, specific to the students within the Applied Human Sciences Department, includes majors such as Food & Nutrition, Child & Family Studies, and Family Consumer Sciences Education and directly incorporates different learning experiences to accommodate for each specialty. In addition to the content, "Food, Fashion, Family in Florence" is a 3-week program in length occurring over the winter term. Positive quotes and experiences were collected from the trip that took place during the 4-week summer term of 2022, as the 2022 winter term was not ideal due to rising COVID-19 cases. Students were greatly impacted personally, learning more about themselves, their own culture, and Italian culture. In reflecting journal entries that were posted following the trip, one student wrote

that they “most definitely have a different appreciation for the U.S. [and they] have planned to bring some parts of Italian culture back home with [them].” Two students wrote about their desire and appreciation for fresh produce following the trip; one said that they are “now determined to find a new farmers market in America that [they] can go to and get local fruits and vegetables.” Finally, a student took note about the sustainable side of Italians’ ways of life: “I saw how Europeans prioritize sustainability: they buy local food each day, they separate their garbage, and their portion sizes of food and drinks are smaller than those in the U.S.”

### **Conclusion**

The contrasts between the United States and Italy in regard to culture, lifestyle habits, and overall health are notable ones. American adults and college students are accustomed to living a life of quantity and speed that includes dependency on drive-thrus, delivery services, and online ordering, which influences them to eat more fast food, meals higher in portion control, and foods containing more sodium, fat, and processed ingredients. The health of U.S. citizens has decreased as many experience the ill-effects of obesity. On the other hand, Italy sees life and food through a different lens. Italians hold fast in their strong food culture that has a foundation on the consumption of whole, fresh foods and quality mealtimes with others, resulting from the mindset of “slow” living and leading to a healthier population on average. These perspectives on food and nutrition are beneficial for college students to witness in person, but they

are certainly beneficial and relatable for dietetic students to witness as a way to grow personally and professionally for the diverse healthcare field.

Education abroad has been proven to have profound effects on students of college age. Studies have provided results that say education abroad influences college students, generally, and dietetic students in ways such as influencing their eating behaviors, their self-confidence, their own food pallets and perceptions, and their cultural knowledge of the world. Dietetic students are of main focus because they are being trained and educated, through a rigorous undergraduate and graduate curriculum, to become Registered Dietitian Nutritionists and ultimately care for and counsel clients within the entire realm of nutrition. With dietitians being a critical component of the multicultural healthcare field, a high cultural competence is also vital. These professionals must have the ability to communicate with and treat people of different backgrounds effectively, while realizing what food preferences, religious affiliations, and cultural values could affect the avenue of nutrition interventions.

Furthermore, for its popular label around food and multiple studies showing that the destination is significantly influential on dietetic students, the implementation of Italy-bound education abroad programs within curriculum should be considered for all universities across the U.S. that offer an accredited undergraduate dietetic program. International experiences that hone in on Italy's food culture, people, and traditions could prepare students in learning how to interact with others from a culture different from their own and witness a population that encourages healthy eating, through food and social interaction.



The research collected and applied through this thesis shows significant support for this specific, centralized conclusion. However, this project is based on limited research and its purpose is to encourage further investigation. Although Italy has shown significant results in the studies that were researched, it is not the only destination to be considered. It is this author's hope that this work will ignite scholars to explore other countries, larger, more diverse populations, and other specialties within the healthcare system while studying this proposal. Incorporating education abroad into undergraduate curriculum has significant promise to change the way in which we learn in America, but further, more generalized research must be done before it can become a reality.

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