

The relationship between international study and civic virtues

Yangyue Li

MA Program in the Social Sciences, University of Chicago

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Yangyue Li, MA Program in the Social Sciences, University of Chicago, 1155 E 60th St., Chicago, IL 60637, USA, Email: yangyueli28@uchicago.edu

Abstract

The study investigated civic virtues among international and American undergraduate students to examine potential differences in psychological constructs associated with civic development. We compared 86 students from a single university across multiple measures of civic virtues, including relational civility, civic attitudes and behaviors, empathy, epistemic humility, and cultural competence. Independent samples t-tests and one-way analyses of variance found no statistically significant differences between international and American students across these constructs. The findings suggest that the contemporary university experience may promote comparable civic development trajectories, regardless of students' international status.

Keywords: civic virtues, empathy, wisdom, civility, international studies

The relationship between international study and civic virtues

In an interconnected world, civic virtues are crucial for fostering responsible citizenship and encouraging individuals to prioritize societal well-being over self-interest (Sherrod et al., 2002). U.S. universities, as diverse microcosms, bring domestic and international students together, offering unique contexts for civic engagement and understanding the values of others. Domestic American students may develop civic engagement through strong ties to their local communities and the American education system, while international students may bring perspectives shaped by cross-cultural experiences and adaptation to a new cultural environment. Undergoing the same admission process and sharing similar college life on campus with their American peers, international students may still differ in civic behaviors. These contexts raise critical questions about the factors that foster civic virtues and motivate individuals to engage in civic-minded behaviors. How do experiences in a foreign and culturally different environment influence civic virtues and related psychological characteristics such as empathy and cultural competence? Do international students differ on these psychological aspects from US students?

Literature Review

Education and Civic Virtues

Civic engagement may foster a sense of belonging, purpose, and responsibility within a community, and may empower individuals to contribute to a common good (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Research suggests that civic education - educational experiences that are directed at increasing civic virtues - happens mostly during adolescence, but can continue into young adulthood (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Sherrod et al., 2002). Much of this experience occurs in educational settings, particularly colleges, which offer structured opportunities through coursework, extracurricular activities, community service programs, and student organizations (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). These experiences could help young adults develop civic virtues and social responsibility.

Besides formal instruction in character education and civility (Jeynes, 2019; Torney-Purta, 2002), non-didactic and informal experiences have important implications for the development of

civic virtues as well. Indeed, research highlights that youths who are involved in community-based organizations or extracurricular activities are more likely to be civically active (Zarrett et al., 2021). Furthermore, a study suggests that participating in community service or volunteering is associated with adolescent civic beliefs about considering similar types of civic engagement behaviors (Metzger et al., 2019). Similarly, Vézina and Poulin (2019) found that prosocial/community-based activities are related to a greater likelihood of being in the high-sustained civic engagement trajectory.

Additionally, recent research suggests that study abroad programs may increase some aspects of civic virtues and related psychological capacities. Living and studying in a foreign cultural environment provide opportunities for students to interact with people from diverse backgrounds, fostering skills related to civic virtues such as empathy, open-mindedness, and perspective-taking in a non-didactic way (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). Research indicates that even short-term study abroad programs enhance student's empathy and open-mindedness toward diverse perspectives, and foster a deeper sense of responsibility as global citizens (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). Black and Duhon (2006) assessed the impact of a month-long business-focused study abroad program in London on students' cultural awareness and personal development. Consistent with previous findings, students showed significant improvements in cross-cultural empathy and understanding of global perspectives. A more recent study examined the relationship between studying abroad and civic virtues (Boulware et al., 2023). The results suggest that undergraduate students who have gone abroad via one particular set of study abroad programs in undergraduate studies demonstrated higher levels of empathy, civic engagement, and civility toward others, compared with students who do not have these experiences or have no interest in them.

International Students and Civic Virtues

Universities in the United States enroll a substantial number of international students annually, yet the benefits for this population remain underexplored in respect of non-curricular benefits. Research on a variety of different psychological capacities wisdom, bilingualism, and

cultural adaptation may offer insights into the interaction of personal and contextual factors that could shape civic virtues among international students. As Staudinger et al. (1998) point out, virtues are a fundamental component of wisdom, with openness to experience and social competence serving as critical predictors of wisdom-related performance (Baltes & Smith, 2008). Similarly, (Grossmann, 2017) illustrates how contextual factors, such as cultural and experiential environments, shape wisdom-related reasoning and behaviors. International students, who frequently navigate diverse cultural and educational settings, may adapt their civic engagement to align with situational demands.

Current Study

Although international students represent a substantial portion of the US college population and can play an important role in civic life, there is little research on how this experience relates to civic virtues. This study aims to investigate civic virtues among international students studying in the United States. The primary goals are to answer the key research question: do international students, due to their unique experiences in a foreign country, exhibit similar or differing levels of civic virtues compared to American students? Given that study abroad experiences can positively influence one's civility, we hypothesize that international students may exhibit higher levels of civic virtues than American students with no experience studying abroad. This would be comparable to US students who study abroad suggesting that living in a foreign country may be an important experience related to civic virtues. Alternatively, international students may score higher on some psychological characteristics related to civic virtue development, including epistemic humility, empathy, need for cognition (NFC), and cultural competence, while showing comparable levels of civic attitudes and behaviors.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through the Psychology Department's SONA system during the winter quarter in 2025 as well as through campus advertisements. The total sample consisted of 86 participants, with 30 international students and 56 domestic students, representing a diverse

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Label	Level	American	International
Age (years)	Mean (SD)	19.39 (0.89)	19.77 (1.10)
Gender	Female	38 (67.9%)	14 (46.7%)
	Male	17 (30.4%)	14 (46.7%)
	Prefer not to answer	1 (1.8%)	2 (6.7%)
Ethnicity	Asian	21 (37.5%)	18 (60.0%)
	Black or African American	5 (8.9%)	NA
	Not specified	1 (1.8%)	NA
	Prefer not to answer	2 (3.6%)	2 (6.7%)
	Prefer to self-describe	2 (3.6%)	2 (6.7%)
	Two or more races	6 (10.7%)	1 (3.3%)
	White	18 (32.1%)	7 (23.3%)
	NA	1 (1.8%)	NA

composition of student backgrounds as detailed in Table 1.

Measures

A survey was adapted from (Boulware et al., 2023), and distributed through the Psychology Department's research participant recruitment system during the winter quarter in 2025.

Civic Virtues

We will use two measures to assess civic virtues. The first is Doolittle and Faul (2013) 14-item Civic Engagement Scale. It includes the 8 civic attitude subscale (e.g., "I feel responsible for my community", 1 = *disagree*, and 7 = *agree*) and 6 civic behavior items (e.g., "I am involved in structured volunteer position(s) in the community", 1 = *never*, and 7 = *always*). The second one

is based on the Workplace Relational Civility scale, tailored for student population. It includes 13 items assessing civility towards others and 13 items assessing civility experienced by participants (Di Fabio & Gori, 2016). Sample items include “I was able to express my values and my beliefs calmly to others” and “Others were able to express their point of view without being disrespectful toward me” (1 = *not at all*, and 5 = *a great deal*).

Other constructs related to civic virtues

We will use a scale developed at the Center for Practical Wisdom at the University of Chicago to assess epistemic humility (Hoeckner, 2011, personal communication). Sample items include “I accept that many good and bad things happening to me are beyond my control” (1 = *strongly disagree*, and 8 = *strongly agree*). We will use the 8-item Empathy Quotient to measure empathy towards others (Loewen et al., n.d.). Sample items include “I find it easy to put myself in somebody else’s shoes” (1 = *never*, and 5 = *always*). We will use the 6-item NFC short form scale to measure the tendency to engage in cognitive effort (Lins De Holanda Coelho et al., 2020). Sample questions include “I would prefer complex to simple problems” (1 = *extremely uncharacteristic*, and 5 = *extremely characteristic*). We will measure cultural competency based on a set of questions provided by the Study Abroad program at the University of Chicago. For international students, we will have questions asking them to report their first language, English proficiency (indicated by the Test of English as a Foreign Language or a self-report scale), and duration of their residence in the United States. American students will indicate whether they have studied abroad.

Data Analysis

To test the first hypothesis, independent t-tests compared international and American students on each measure of civic virtues (civic attitudes, civic behaviors, and civility) and other related constructs. These comparisons indicated whether international students, as a group, exhibit different levels of civic virtues compared to their American peers. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be conducted to account for relationships among the dependent variables and provide a more comprehensive analysis.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Civic Virtues Measures

Variable	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max
CB_CA Total	72.05	14.34	72.0	33	98
Civic Attitudes	43.52	8.51	43.0	20	56
Civic Behaviors	28.52	7.18	28.5	13	42
Civility Total	101.81	13.36	101.5	73	130
Civility Towards Me	48.30	8.57	48.5	28	65
Civility Towards Others	53.51	6.86	53.0	36	65
Cultural Competence	34.16	4.39	34.5	19	43
Empathy	29.41	3.65	30.0	22	37
Epistemic Humility	94.52	12.88	95.5	62	122
Need for Closure	57.88	12.35	57.0	30	91
Need for Cognition	21.71	3.87	22.0	12	30
Wise Reasoning	76.59	12.81	76.5	26	105

Descriptive statistics for the key measures of civic virtues are presented in Table 2. The sample exhibited varying levels of psychological constructs related to civic engagement. *Civic Attitudes* showed a mean of 43.52 ($SD = 8.51$), with a range from 20 to 56. *Civic Behaviors* displayed a mean of 28.52 ($SD = 7.18$), suggesting moderate levels of community engagement.

The variability across different civic virtue measures suggests potential differences in how participants conceptualize and enact civic engagement. *Epistemic Humility*, for instance, ranged from 62 to 122, with a mean of 94.52 ($SD = 12.88$), indicating considerable individual variation in this construct.

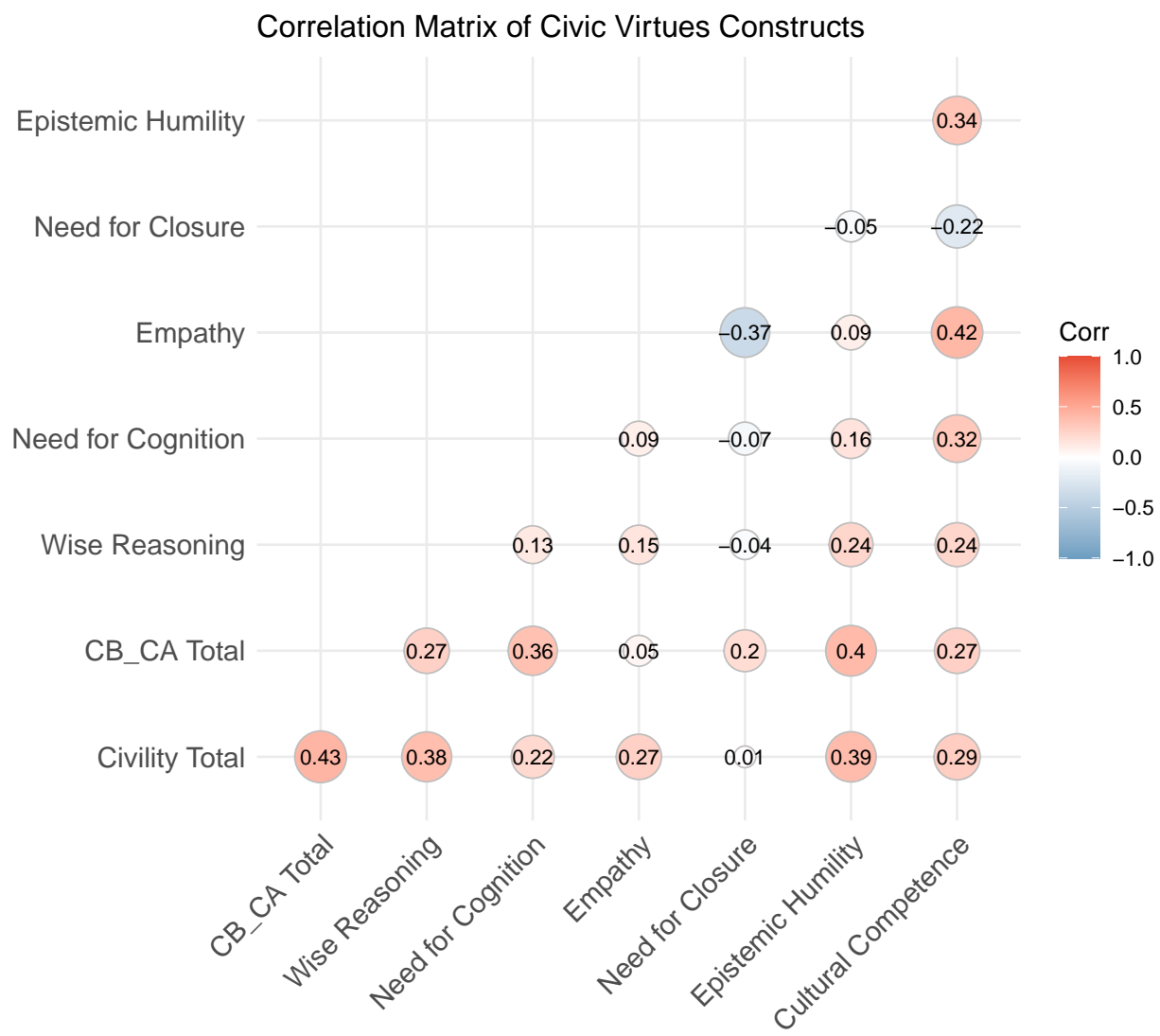
Figure 1*Correlation Matrix of Civic Virtues Constructs*

Table 3*Bivariate Correlations among Civic Virtues Constructs*

Variable	Civility Total	CB_CA Total	Wise Reasoning	Need for Cognition	Empathy	Need for Closure	Epistemic Humility	Cultural Competence
Civility Total	1.000	0.433***	0.377***	0.215*	0.272*	0.014ns	0.394***	0.294**
CB_CA Total	0.433***	1.000	0.273*	0.359**	0.05ns	0.195ns	0.404***	0.272*
Wise Reasoning	0.377***	0.273*	1.000	0.128ns	0.146ns	-0.042ns	0.239*	0.24*
Need for Cognition	0.215*	0.359**	0.128ns	1.000	0.089ns	-0.075ns	0.161ns	0.32**
Empathy	0.272*	0.05ns	0.146ns	0.089ns	1.000	-0.367**	0.093ns	0.416***
Need for Closure	0.014ns	0.195ns	-0.042ns	-0.075ns	-0.367**	1.000	-0.048ns	-0.215*
Epistemic Humility	0.394***	0.404***	0.239*	0.161ns	0.093ns	-0.048ns	1.000	0.34**
Cultural Competence	0.294**	0.272*	0.24*	0.32**	0.416***	-0.215*	0.34**	1.000

Bivariate Correlations

The correlation matrix presented in Table 3 and visualized in Figure 1 provides a comprehensive view of these intricate relationships. *CB_CA Total* was moderately correlated with *Wise Reasoning* ($r = 0.273$, $p = 0.011$), suggesting an interconnection between behavioral and cognitive aspects of civic engagement. *Empathy* showed notable correlations with several constructs. It was moderately correlated with *Wise Reasoning* ($r = 0.146$, $p = 0.181$), and significantly associated with *Epistemic Humility* ($r = 0.093$, $p = 0.393$). These relationships highlight the potential interconnectedness of psychological characteristics related to civic virtues. *Cultural Competence* demonstrated interesting associations, including a moderate correlation with *Need for Cognition* ($r = 0.32$, $p = 0.003$). The significant correlations, marked with asterisks in Table 3, indicate the complex interplay between different psychological constructs related to civic engagement.¹

T-tests

The dataset includes a total of 3 student groups. However, in this study, we only compared American students with international students. To examine differences between American students (including those with study abroad experience) and international students, a series of independent samples t-tests were conducted across key civic and civility constructs. The results

¹ Significance levels are indicated as follows: $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.001$.

Table 4

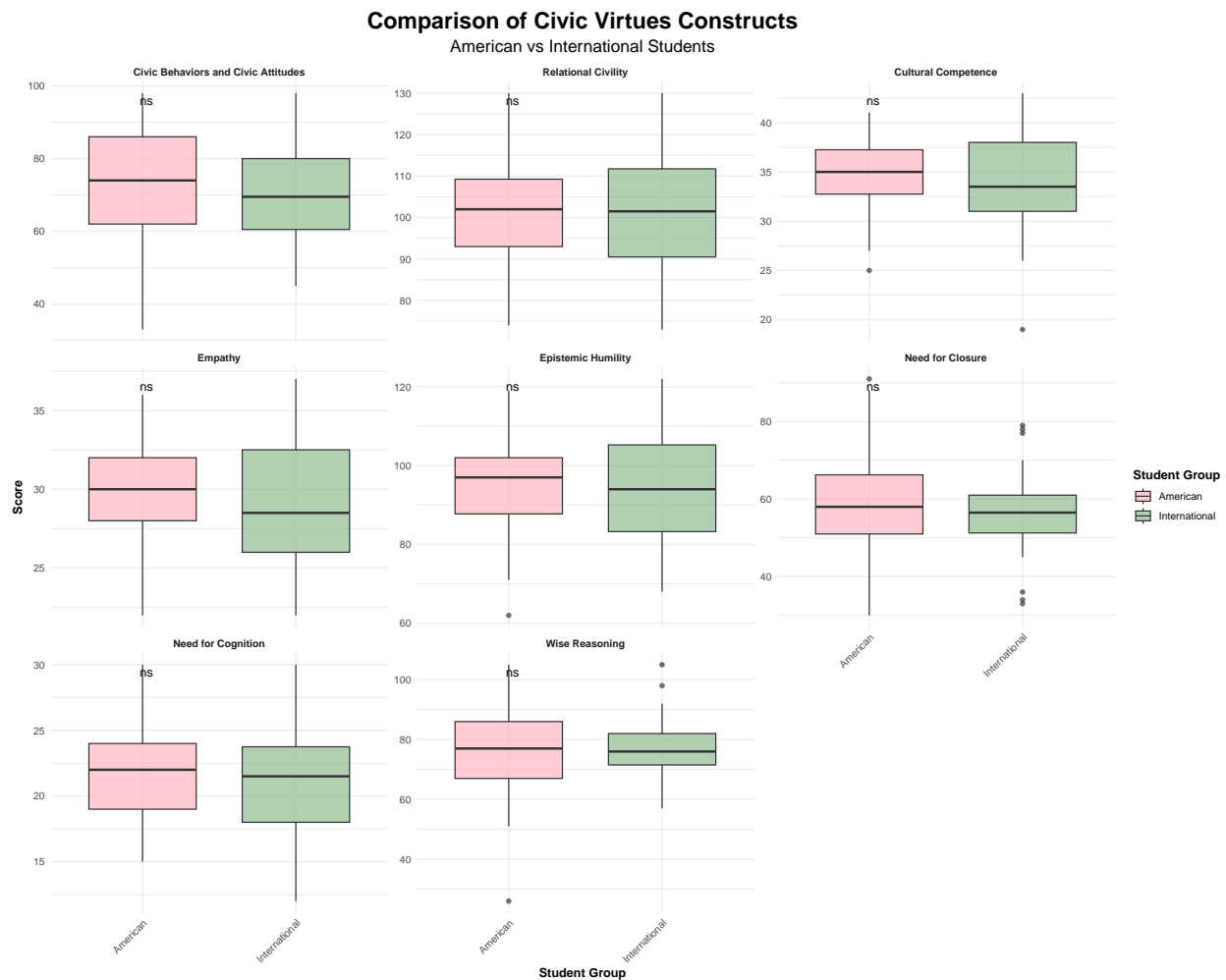
Comparison of Civic Virtues Constructs between American and International Students

Variable	t	df	p	M (American)	SD (American)	M (International)	SD (International)
Civility Total	-0.060	84	0.952	101.750	12.457	101.933	15.131
CB_CA Total	0.794	84	0.430	72.946	14.916	70.367	13.265
Wise Reasoning	-0.285	84	0.777	76.304	13.622	77.133	11.349
Need for Cognition	0.133	84	0.895	21.750	3.684	21.633	4.255
Empathy	0.943	84	0.348	29.679	3.454	28.900	3.994
Need for Closure	0.703	84	0.484	58.571	12.823	56.600	11.530
Epistemic Humility	0.257	84	0.798	94.786	12.036	94.033	14.521
Cultural Competence	0.610	84	0.544	34.375	3.840	33.767	5.328

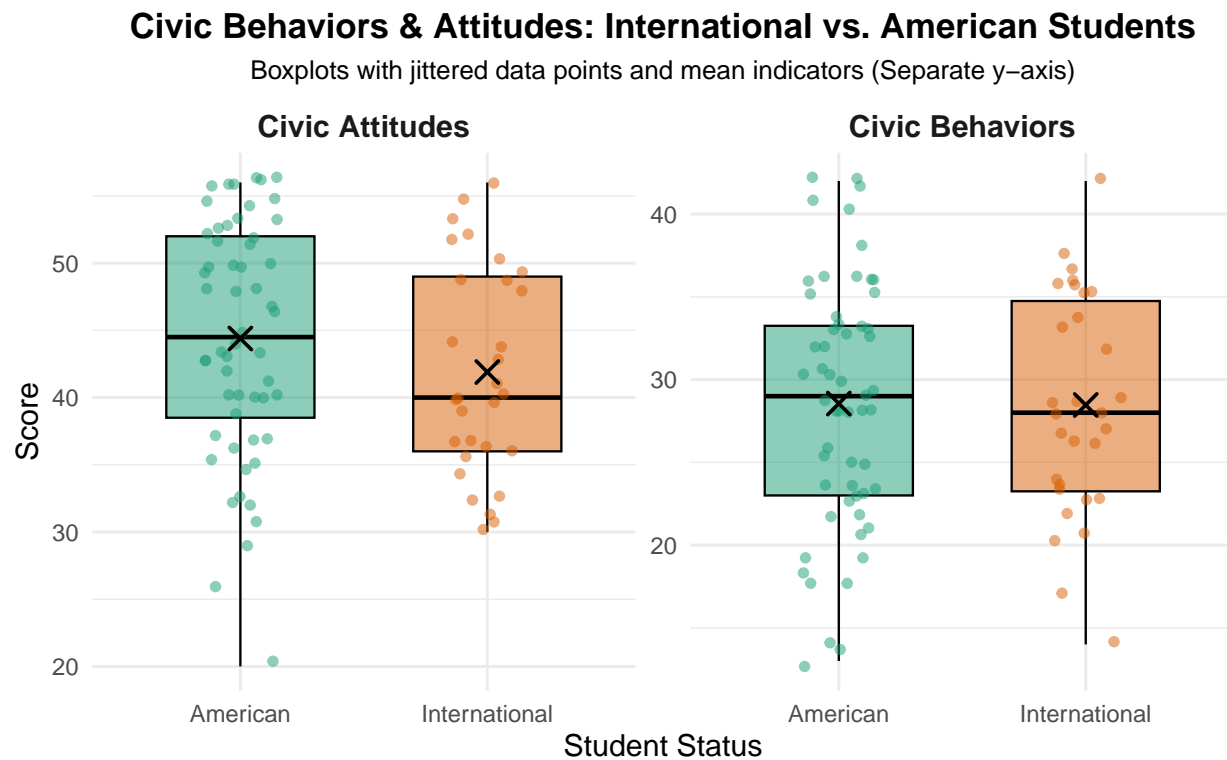
are summarized in Table 4 and Figure 2. No significant differences were found in all of these constructs. An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine differences in Civic Attitudes (CA) and Civic Behaviors (CB) between American students and international students. Results indicated no significant difference in Civic Behaviors, $t(84) = 0.05$, $p = 0.958$, with American students ($M = 28.55$, $SD = 7.45$) and international students ($M = 28.47$, $SD = 6.76$) reporting similar levels. In contrast, a slight but non-significant difference was found for Civic Attitudes, $t(84) = 1.3$, $p = 0.197$, with American students ($M = 44.39$, $SD = 8.81$) scoring slightly higher than international students ($M = 41.9$, $SD = 7.78$). Overall, these results suggest that while Civic Behaviors and Civic Attitudes collectively do not significantly differ between groups, there is a slight trend in Civic Attitudes favoring American students. These patterns are further illustrated in Figure 3, which visualizes the distribution of Civic Behaviors and Civic Attitudes across groups. Additionally, detailed differences in civility towards me and civility towards others was visualized in Figure 4.

ANOVA

A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to examine potential differences in civic virtue constructs across student groups (International, Domestic, and Study

Figure 2*Comparison of Civic Virtues Constructs between American and International Students*

Abroad). The analyses included multiple psychological measures: Civility Total, Civility Towards Me, Civility Towards Others, Civic Behaviors, Civic Attitudes, Wise Reasoning, Need for Cognition, Empathy, Need for Closure, Epistemic Humility, and Cultural Competence. The ANOVA results showed no statistically significant differences between student groups across the examined constructs. Post-hoc Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) tests further confirmed the lack of significant variations among pairwise group comparisons. Specifically, no significant group differences were observed in any of the measured psychological characteristics. The absence of statistically significant differences suggests that, within this sample, international, domestic, and study abroad students exhibited comparable levels of civic virtues and related

Figure 3*Differences in Civic Behaviors and Civic Attitudes Between International and American Students*

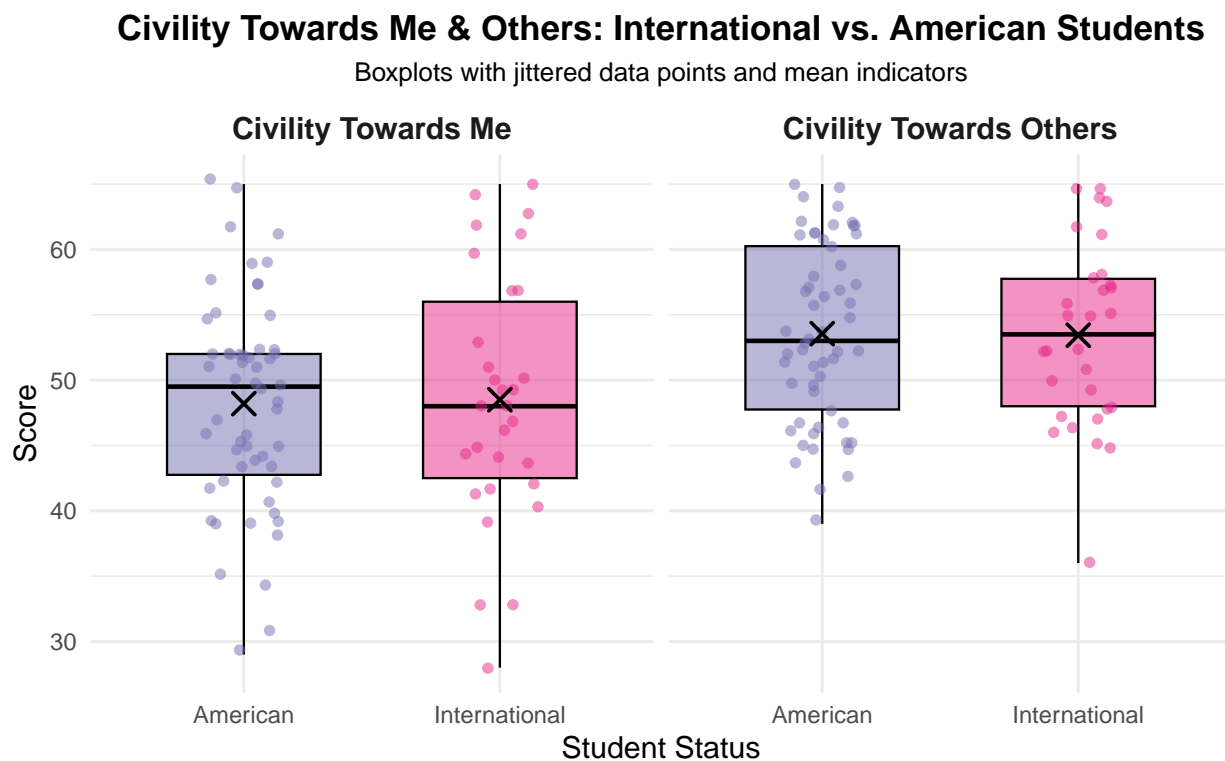
psychological attributes. These findings imply that the student experience, regardless of international status, may promote similar developmental trajectories in civic-minded characteristics. The results challenge initial expectations of substantive differences between student groups and highlight the potential homogeneity of civic virtue development in a university setting.

Discussion

The current study aimed to explore whether international students, due to their unique experiences in a foreign country, exhibit similar or differing levels of civic virtues and related psychological constructs compared to their American peers. Independent samples t-tests comparing American and international students across key civic virtues revealed no significant differences between the groups on measures of relational civility, civic behaviors and attitudes, wise reasoning, need for cognition, empathy, need for closure, epistemic humility, and cultural

Figure 4

Differences in Civility Towards Me and Civility Towards Others Between International and American Students



competence. These findings suggest that international and American college students in this sample exhibited comparable levels of civic-mindedness and associated psychological characteristics. The observed similarities in civic virtues among student groups could be attributed to factors such as shared experience of the college admissions process and campus life, which may create a common context for civic development. Engaging in coursework, extracurricular activities, and community service opportunities provided by the university may equally contribute to students' civic growth, regardless of their international background (Zarrett et al., 2021). Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. The sample size, particularly for American students with study abroad experiences, was relatively small, and participants were drawn from a single university. Future research should also employ longitudinal designs to track civic development over time and explore potential mediators and moderators of

the relationship between international experiences and civic outcomes. Additionally, the broad categorization of international and American students may obscure important within-group variability. Future studies should consider factors such as English language proficiency and duration of their residence in the United States to better understand the nuances of international students' civic development.

References

- Baltes, P. B., & Smith, J. (2008). The Fascination of Wisdom: Its Nature, Ontogeny, and Function. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(1), 56–64.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2008.00062.x>
- Black, H. T., & Duhon, D. L. (2006). Assessing the Impact of Business Study Abroad Programs on Cultural Awareness and Personal Development. *Journal of Education for Business*, 81(3), 140–144. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JOEB.81.3.140-144>
- Boulware, J. N., Kim, Y., Nusbaum, H., & Henly, A. (2023). Stranger in a strange land: The role of study abroad in civic virtues. *Journal of Moral Education*, 52(1), 34–42.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.2139668>
- Chieffo, L., & Griffiths, L. (2004). Large-Scale Assessment of Student Attitudes after a Short-Term Study Abroad Program. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10(1), 165–177. <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v10i1.140>
- Di Fabio, A., & Gori, A. (2016). Assessing Workplace Relational Civility (WRC) with a New Multidimensional “Mirror” Measure. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00890>
- Doolittle, A., & Faul, A. C. (2013). Civic Engagement Scale: A Validation Study. *Sage Open*, 3(3), 2158244013495542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013495542>
- Flanagan, C., & Levine, P. (2010). Civic Engagement and the Transition to Adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 20(1), 159–179. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0043>
- Grossmann, I. (2017). Wisdom in Context. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(2), 233–257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616672066>
- Jeynes, W. H. (2019). A Meta-Analysis on the Relationship Between Character Education and Student Achievement and Behavioral Outcomes. *Education and Urban Society*, 51(1), 33–71.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124517747681>
- Lins De Holanda Coelho, G., H. P. Hanel, P., & J. Wolf, L. (2020). The Very Efficient Assessment of Need for Cognition: Developing a Six-Item Version. *Assessment*, 27(8), 1870–1885.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191118793208>

Loewen, P. J., Lyle, G., & Nachshen, J. S. (n.d.). *An eight-item form of the Empathy Quotient (EQ) and an application to charitable giving.*

Metzger, A., Ferris, K. A., & Oosterhoff, B. (2019). Adolescents' Civic Engagement: Concordant and Longitudinal Associations Among Civic Beliefs and Civic Involvement. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 29(4), 879–896. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12423>

Sherrod, L. R., Flanagan, C., & Youniss, J. (2002). Dimensions of Citizenship and Opportunities for Youth Development: The What, Why, When, Where, and Who of Citizenship Development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6(4), 264–272.

https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0604_14

Staudinger, U. M., Maciel, A. G., Smith, J., & Baltes, P. B. (1998). What predicts wisdom-related performance? A first look at personality, intelligence, and facilitative experiential contexts. *European Journal of Personality*, 12(1), 1–17. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0984\(199801/02\)12:1%3C1::AID-PER285%3E3.0.CO;2-9](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0984(199801/02)12:1%3C1::AID-PER285%3E3.0.CO;2-9)

Torney-Purta, J. (2002). The School's Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6(4), 203–212. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0604_7

Vézina, M.-P., & Poulin, F. (2019). Investigating civic participation developmental trajectories among Canadian youths transitioning into adulthood. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(1), 59–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1301816>

Zarrett, N., Liu, Y., Vandell, D. L., & Simpkins, S. D. (2021). The Role of Organized Activities in Supporting Youth Moral and Civic Character Development: A Review of the Literature. *Adolescent Research Review*, 6(2), 199–227. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-020-00142-1>