

The relationship between international study and civic virtues

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Abstract

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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.

Current Study

The study examined how factors such as international students' first language, English language fluency, and the duration of their residence in the United States relate to civic virtues. We hypothesize that international students with greater English fluency and who live in the United

States for a longer period of time will score higher on civic virtues, as students with higher fluency may feel more confident and able to engage in community activities and social settings. However, it is unclear whether different native languages would interact with this. Given that language differences are related to cultural differences, it may be the case that English competence alone may not be significant. We hypothesize that non-English-native speakers may score higher on civic virtues than students who are native or heritage bilingual speakers of English, maybe because navigating a foreign environment in a non-native language may require greater effort and adaptation, fostering civic virtues. Additionally, we also examined the possible interaction between first language and English fluency to investigate whether non-native English speakers who are more fluent in English score the highest civic virtues.

Method

Participants

A survey was adapted from Boulware et al. (2023). 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 composition of student backgrounds as detailed in Table 1.

Measures

A survey will be 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's (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

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

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., 2009). 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 will compare international and American students on each measure of civic virtues (civic attitudes, civic behaviors, and civility) and other related constructs. These comparisons will indicate whether international students, as a group, exhibit different levels of civic virtues compared to their American peers. Given the interrelated nature of some of these measures, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) will be conducted to account for relationships among the dependent variables and provide a more comprehensive analysis. To address the second hypothesis, multiple regression analyses will examine the relationships between English language proficiency, residency duration, and first language on civic virtues within the international student population. Separate models will be run for each dimension of civic virtues and related measures to determine how strongly these factors are related to different aspects of civic engagement. To address the third hypothesis, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) will be conducted to examine differences in civic virtues among first-language groups (English-native, non-English-native, and heritage bilinguals). Moreover, an interaction term (First Language \times English Fluency) will be included in regression analyses to determine whether the relationship between fluency and civic virtues varies across language groups.

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.

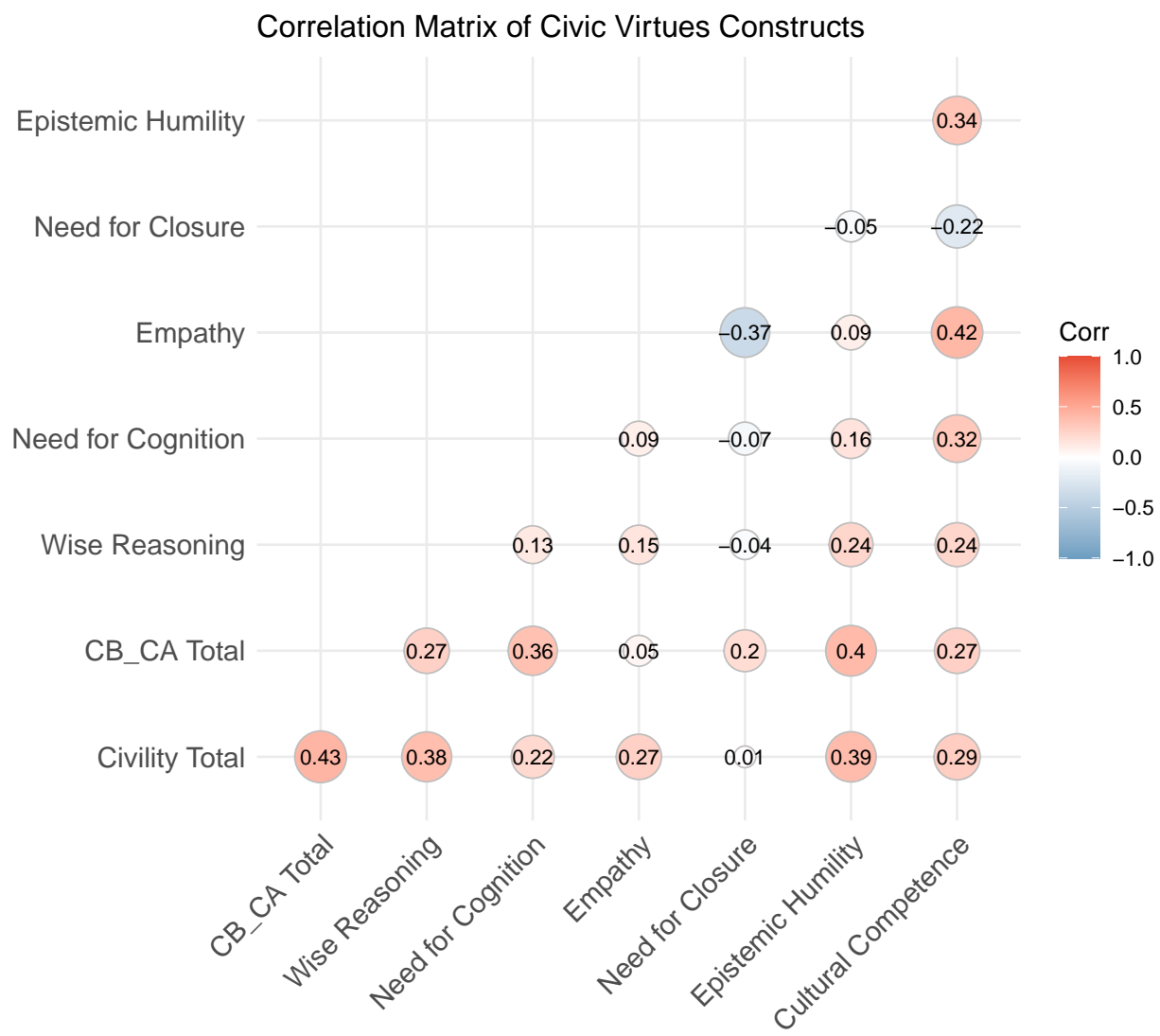
Figure 1*Correlation Matrix of Civic Virtues Constructs*

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.

Figure 2

Comparison of Civic Virtues Constructs between American and International Students

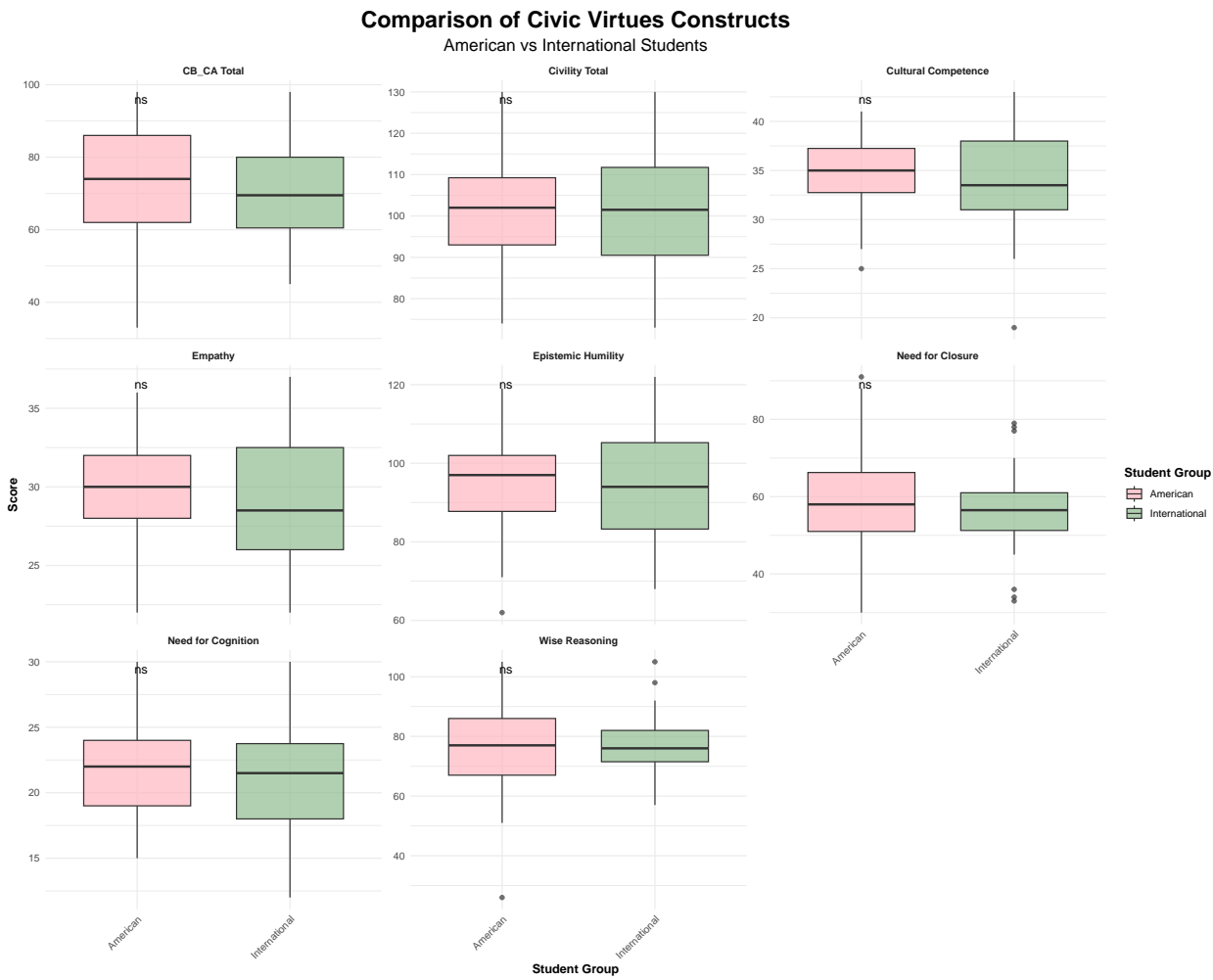


Figure 3

Differences in Civic Behaviors and Civic Attitudes Between International and American Students

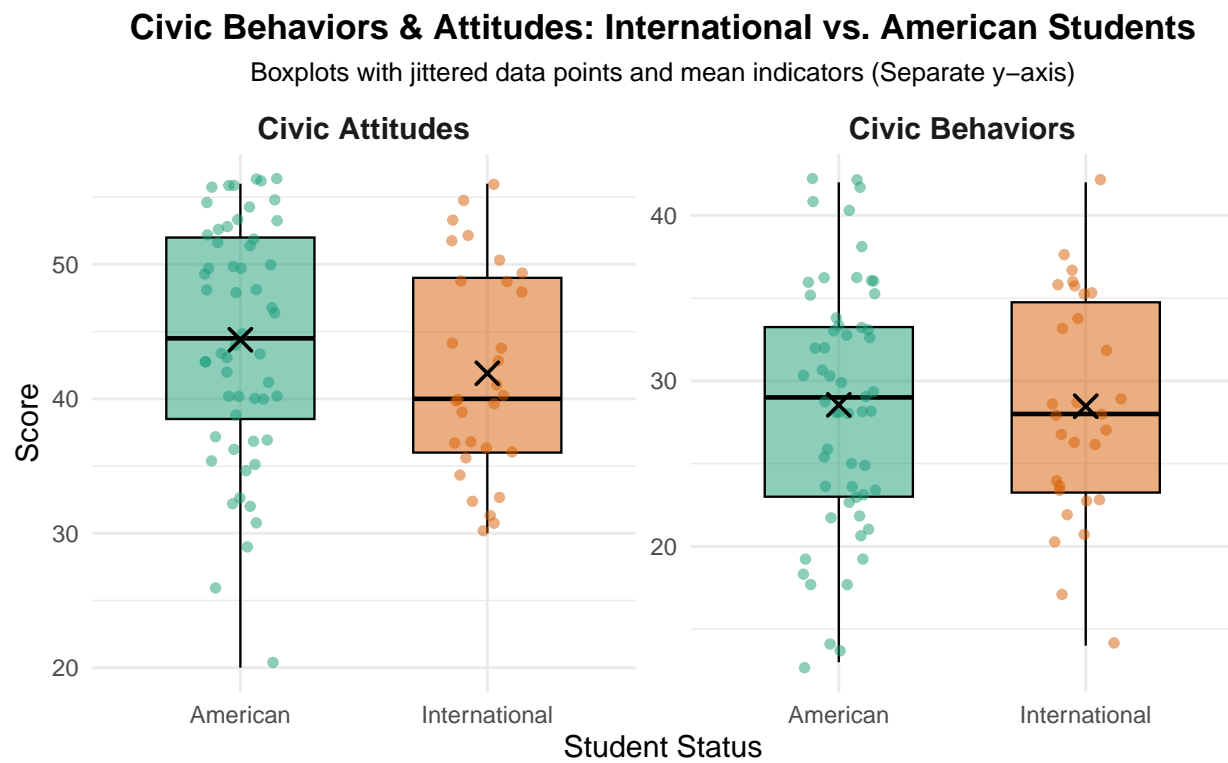
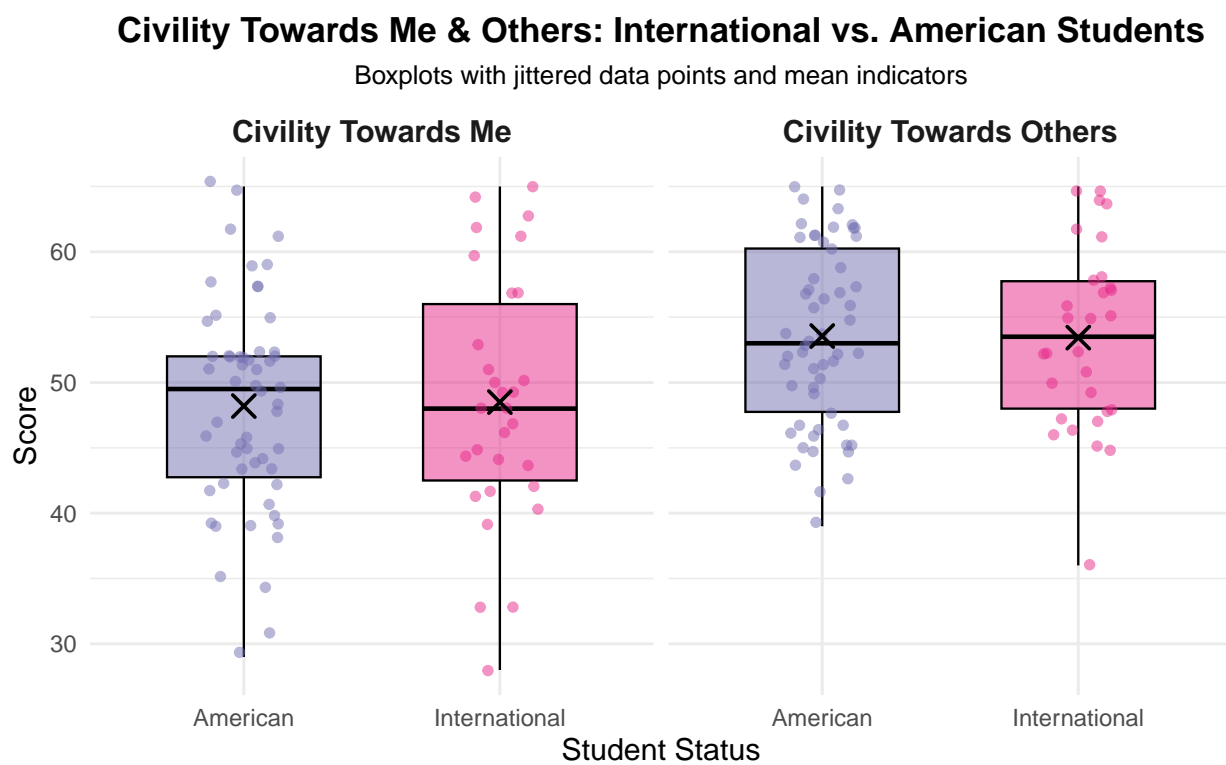


Figure 4

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



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