

“I can navigate the world”: Student Reflections on Study Abroad - Evidence from One University Campus

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Participation in study abroad continues to grow on U.S. campuses with 332,727 students completing programs in the 2016-2017 academic year, a 2.3% increase from previous years (www.iie.org, 2018). Initiatives such as “Generation Study Abroad” established by the Institute of International Education and launched in 2014, serve to mobilize resources and commitments of support with the goal of doubling the number of U.S. students studying abroad by the end of the decade (www.iie.org). These efforts are in response to the growing need for university graduates to develop skills necessary to function effectively and successfully in a global workplace. Many research studies have shown the benefits of study abroad, such as personal growth, including confidence, resilience and persistence, as well as professional skills such as interpersonal communication and intercultural competence, all of which are required of graduates entering into an increasingly diverse and global work environment (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009; Cai & Sankaran, 2015; Costello, 2015; Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012; Curran, 2007; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Doerr, 2015; Lee, Therriault, & Linderholm, 2012; Savicki, 2010). Therefore, understanding how university students process and construct meaning from their learning and development through study abroad is crucial.

In addition to other skills, education abroad can result in increased curiosity about the world and its people, defined by Mendenhall (2015) as “the desire or inclination to know or learn about people who are culturally different” (p. 215). Researchers agree that cultural curiosity is important but over the past decade the field has moved towards finding ways that educators can encourage and sustain it (Curran, 2007; Jackson, 2015). Since students who participate in study abroad self-select for such programs, it can be assumed that they possess some degree of curiosity about the world. Furthermore, researchers regard curiosity as a step towards intercultural competence, defined by Deardorff (2015) as “communication and behavior that are

both effective and appropriate cultural interactions” (p. 218). Intercultural competence, also understood as “global learning,” is a problematic term for some (Thomas & Inkson, 2009; Novinger, 2001), as it requires that actors in social or professional situations not only be sensitive to differences in communication and interactions but also have the tools to respond appropriately. Individuals who are effective intercultural communicators are considered to possess global dexterity, which Molinsky (2013) describes as the “capacity to adapt your behavior, when necessary, in a foreign cultural environment to accommodate new and different expectations that vary from those of your native cultural setting” (p. 9). Though an increasingly important trait to develop in students, there is little standardization for evaluating this quality even in study abroad programs where global dexterity is clearly a learning outcome.

Although education abroad provides an optimal opportunity and environment for students to develop intercultural competence, they must first contend with the immersion experience itself, which can be both exciting and overwhelming. Nonetheless, the “intercultural wonderment,” defined as “how often students intentionally push themselves outside of their comfort zones, immerse themselves in the culture of the host country, explore new habits and behaviors, and interact with residents of the host country outside of the classroom” (Engberg, Jourian, & Davidson, 2016, p. 23), ameliorates the potential shock of intercultural immersion; indeed, students often refer to study abroad as life changing or even the best experience of their lives. Although current scholarship seeks to uncover why students describe study abroad in these terms (Wright & Larsen, 2012), there is a gap in the extant literature addressing how students perceive the effects of the experience on their learning once they return to campus. While the benefits for language learning have been demonstrated (Elola & Oskoz, 2008), other benefits of study abroad remain understudied (Miller-Perrin & Thompson 2014) beyond simply identifying what they are.

Literature on this topic shows that participation in a study abroad experience more often leads to careers in a culturally diverse work environment (Mastroianni & Kelly, 2013). Various studies indicate that students who study abroad increase their knowledge in interpersonal accommodation, global interdependence knowledge, cultural sensitivity, awareness of diversity, and intercultural competency (Smith & Yang, 2017; Mastroianni & Kelly, 2013; Montgomery & Arensdorf, 2012). Not only do study abroad “veterans” benefit from their time overseas but their experience also benefits the wider campus community when it is shared (Dean & Jendzurski,

2013). However, colleges and universities rarely take advantage of the post-abroad experience. While some may offer activities for returning students to share their experiences (e.g., serving as representatives or ambassadors of a particular program), universities typically do not investigate the ways in which their students have changed, how their learning was shaped by the experience, and whether or not they apply the skills learned abroad to their campus life, both socially and academically. Trower and Lehmann (2017) found that students were either unaware or largely uninterested in the potential academic or career benefits of study abroad as did Waters and Brooks (2010). Students' perspectives on study abroad reveal that they participate for reasons of personal growth and to "escape from everyday frustrations of being an undergraduate student" (p. 275), rather than to benefit their future careers. Regardless, "escaping" while studying abroad also provides additional returns, though it remains unclear whether or not decisions to study abroad by students reflect a career-benefit strategy (Trower & Lehmann, 2017). Such information would be valuable to institutions in terms of academic advising, career counseling, and even in helping students choose the type of study abroad program best suited to their needs.

Strange and Gibson (2017) examine "holistic" outcomes of study abroad, "which reflect the intellectual, social, and emotional growth of a student" (p. 85). They propose two possible theoretical frameworks to study the question. First, Transformative Learning Theory, which states that "through reflection, active learning, and placing ourselves in uncomfortable situations, students are able to develop their understanding of the world of and of themselves, allowing a potential change to their perspectives and frames of reference" (p. 86). The second theory, Experiential Learning, or learning "whereby knowledge and meaning are contextualized in actual experiences, as often found in study abroad programs" (p. 86) is also discussed. The authors argue that experiential learning ultimately leads to transformative learning. If transformational learning is the goal of study abroad, the problem becomes its multifaceted meaning. A study abroad experience can influence more than one dimension of a student's life, and yet not every experience abroad is transformational.

While there is ample literature published on the importance of study abroad for post-secondary students in terms of the development of inter- and intrapersonal skills (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009; Quezada, 2014; Rodriguez, 2011; Byram, 1997) and the importance of accessing the faculties required to develop intercultural competence, such as curiosity, inquisitiveness, and adaptability (Jackson, 2015; Salisbury, 2011), the question of how and to

what extent education abroad participants experience and recognize the development of these skills remains. The current study fills a gap in the extant research that, to date, has not examined student learning outcomes on a macro-university level. The following research question has been developed for this purpose: how do students from a large, Midwestern public university perceive their learning outcomes from participating in a study abroad program?

Theoretical Framework

Walls (2016) presents a theoretical framework that lends itself well to research on education abroad. This framework is comprised of four dimensions: process, person, context, and time. The process dimension, which focuses on a student's interaction with the learning environment, can be discussed through the lens of a student's experiences while participating in a study abroad program. The person dimension, defined as elements of variability in each learner, provides insight such as if a student has previous international travel experience and their motivation for studying abroad. The third dimension, context, examines the environment where learning takes place. In the case of study abroad, context represents the country where a student completes a program. Finally, the fourth dimension, time, considers that student learning is a dynamic process that takes place over time. In the context of study abroad, this serves as a lens for examining the immediate and long-term learning outcomes of participating in a program. This framework provides a theoretical foundation for studying the learning outcomes of university students participating in education abroad programs.

Methodology

The present research uses a case study approach. A case, as defined by Merriam (1998), is a "bounded system," and by Miles and Huberman (1994) as a "phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 25). Case study research is appropriate as study abroad fits the definition in the sense that it represents the intersection of a particular time and space. Furthermore, the study focused on the student population of one post-secondary institution with the aim of informing practice on campus and abroad.

Participants

The participants were students at a large, public Midwestern university that had completed a study abroad program in the 2014/2015, 2015/2016, and 2016/2017 academic years. The participants represented all six colleges within the university, including Applied Science and

Technology, Arts and Science, Business, Education, Fine Arts, and Nursing. The participants had completed study abroad programs in different parts of the world, ranging from short-term, faculty-led programs, to more traditional semester- and year-long programs. The participants were identified through the study abroad office on campus. See Table 1.

Table 1

Participants by College and Major

Major Represented in Study Abroad Participants by College N=151					
College of Arts and Sciences (n=71)	College of Education (n=27)	College of Business (n=21)	College of Fine Arts (n=15)	College of Applied Science and Technology (n=9)	College of Nursing (n=8)
Communication Sciences and Disorders (10)	Elementary Education (13)	International Business (6)	Art (5)	Recreation & Park Administration (3)	Nursing (8)
English (9)	Bilingual Elementary Education (5)	Accounting (5)	Theatre (3)	Exercise Science (2)	
English Education (2)	Early Childhood Education (4)	Management (4)	Theater Education (2)	Agriculture (1)	
Spanish (6)	Childhood Education (4)	Finance (3)	Arts Technology (2)	Fashion Design (1)	
Communications Studies (7)	Middle Level Education (3)	Actuarial Sciences (1)	Technology (2)	Interior Design (1)	
History (7)	Special Education (2)	Business Administration (1)	Art Education (1)	Food, Nutrition, and Dietetics (1)	
History Education (2)		Business Information Systems (1)	Music (1)		
Biological Sciences (5)			Music Therapy (1)		
Biology Education (1)					
Geography (4)					
Public Relations (4)					
Mass Media (3)					
Mathematics (3)					
Mathematics Education (1)					
Journalism (2)					
Psychology (2)					
Anthropology (1)					
Chemistry (1)					
French (1)					

Data Collection

To begin data collection, an initial email was sent to 1,523 students who had completed a study abroad program in the last three years. The email invited the students to complete an online survey about their motivation for study abroad and their perceived learning outcomes. A total of 151 participants completed the survey. Of the participants completing the survey, 23 took part in one of five focus groups conducted by the researchers, comprised of 19 female students and 4 male students. These numbers are representative of national statistics indicating that more women participate in study abroad than men, according to the Open Doors research by the Institute of International Education (Institute of International Education, 2018).

The survey used a compilation of two instruments created by the researchers for their own study abroad programs. Both original instruments had been utilized in multiple iterations of the two programs and were considered to be valid and reliable. The researchers identified similar themes and ideas addressed in both surveys and consolidated the questions to create the instrument used in the present survey. The survey included Likert-scale items, such as identifying specific skills developed through study abroad as well as items about the participants' majors and year of study abroad program (see Appendix A). The survey also included open-ended questions, which invited participants to identify three things they took away from their experience and their perceived areas of personal and academic growth.

These ideas were further explored with the participants during the focus group sessions. The focus group format followed a modified version of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988). Based on Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning, the Gibbs cycle examines learning through experience as iterative, rather than as a one-time event. The participants were asked to reflect on what had happened during their study abroad experience, their feelings and thinking processes at different times in the program or in response to events, good and bad aspects of their experiences, and to analyze their overall experience. The final two stages of the Gibbs cycle, the conclusion and action plan, were modified in the sense that participants were asked how they had experienced their return home and to campus, rather than asking what they would do differently if they were to study abroad again. In this sense, the cycle was modified as it prompted participants to consider how they had incorporated their learning and new behaviors into their lives at home as a result of their time abroad.

Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the quantitative survey data to identify patterns and perceived learning outcomes of the participants. The researchers analyzed the qualitative data from the survey and the focus groups using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the three-level coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), including open, axial, and selective coding. The researchers performed the open coding by reading through all the data sets individually to identify emerging themes. After the initial readings, the researchers compared their findings and used axial coding to group and categorize the themes. Finally, the researchers used selective coding to determine the core themes that emerged from the data.

Results and Discussion

The survey data showed that most of the participants had finished their education abroad within a year of survey being distributed. Half of the participants completed their study abroad program in 2017, with almost 30% completing their program in 2016, and the remaining 15% and 1% in 2015 and 2014 respectively. Another 5% of the participants indicated that they had completed more than one study abroad program between 2014-2017. Half of the participants completed faculty-led study programs averaging between 2-6 weeks while 42% completed a semester-long exchange program. Only 5% of the participants had completed an entire year abroad. This suggests that students are primarily interested in short-term programs where a faculty member is both leading the program abroad and teaching the course(s) associated with it. See Table 2.

Table 2

Year and Length of Study Abroad Program Participation

Year Participated in Study Abroad N=151					
2014 (n=1)	2015 (n=21)	2016 (n=41)	2017 (n=71)	Multiple (n=7)	
.01	.15	.29	.50	.05	
Length of Time Spent Abroad N=151					
2-3 Weeks (n=26)	4-6 Weeks (n=49)	One Semester (n=63)	One Year (n=5)	Spring Break (n=8)	
.17	.33	.42	.03	.05	

Most of the participants (72%) identified Northern, Central, and Southern Europe as the primary location of their study abroad programs, with only 12% completing programs in Central and South America and 8% in Asia. These data are consistent with the Open Doors data report (Institute of International Education, 2018), which shows that Europe continues to be the preferred region for U.S. students in education abroad programs. See Figure 1.

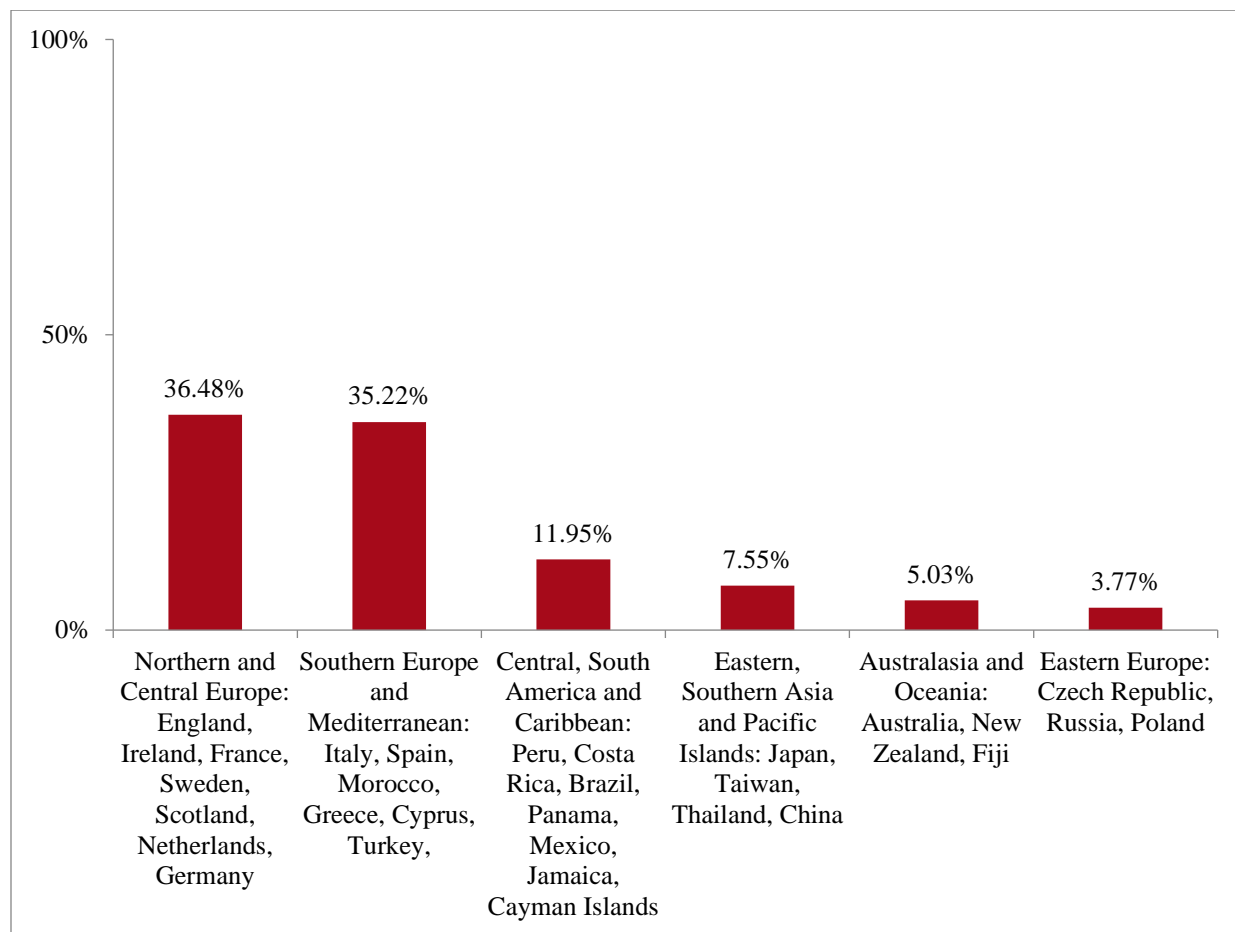


Figure 1. Location of study abroad. This figure shows where the participants completed their study abroad programs by world region and then specific countries as identified by the participants.

The survey also showed that the participants had a variety of reasons for studying abroad, including a desire to see the world (21%), to gain a greater understanding of a different culture (19%), an opportunity to enhance their resume or increase job opportunities (16%), and to experience an increase in self-awareness (14%). While these were the four most frequent motivations to study abroad, there was no single reason that was consistent across all participants. Notably, only 11% indicated that they were interested in an international experience in their major, and 8% wanted to improve foreign language skills, while another 8% chose to study abroad because of the courses offered. See Figure 2. These results indicate that the participants were more invested in the personal development, and to a lesser degree, the

professional development that study abroad has to offer rather than as an academic endeavor, as cited by Trower and Lehmann (2017).

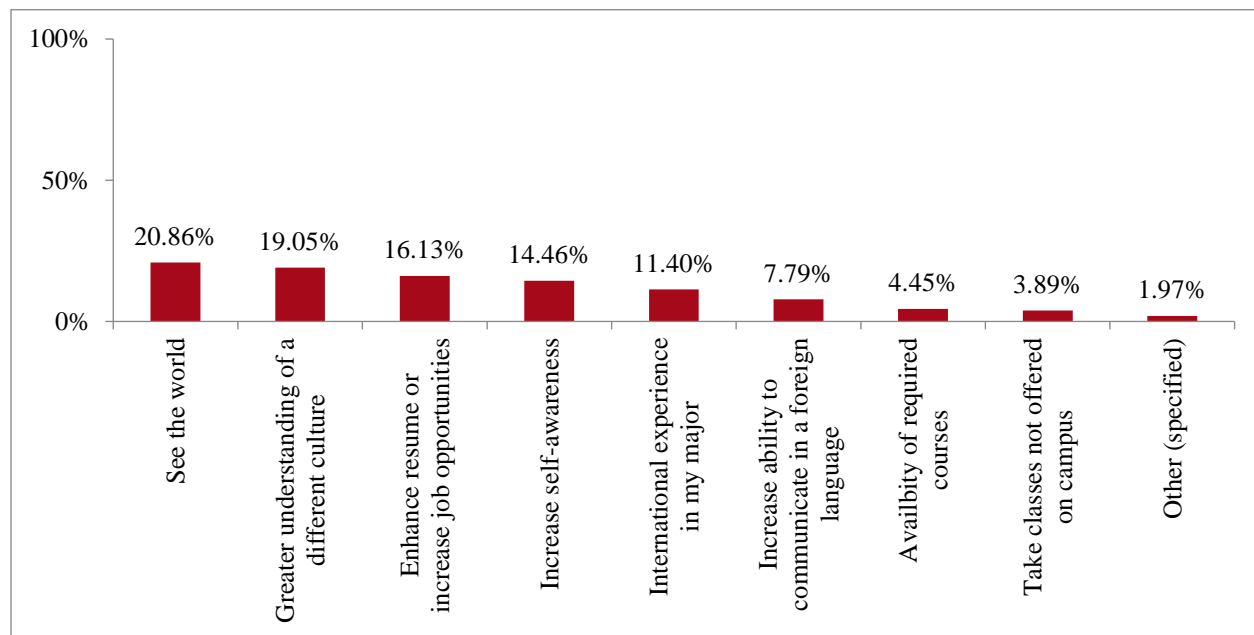


Figure 2. Reason for studying abroad. This figure shows the participants' primary motivation to study abroad.

According to the survey, the participants perceived their development of certain skills as a result of their education abroad experience. See Table 3. The participants identified an increase in independence (93%) and confidence (89%) following their time abroad, consistent with the findings of Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill (2009). The data also showed that the participants perceived an increase in their ability to engage in intercultural communication (95%) and negotiating cultural differences (84%), as did Mastroianni and Kelly (2013). The participants also identified being able to work with others (86%), problem-solve (96%), and take on a leadership role as a result of their study abroad experience.

Table 3

Perceived Increase in Skills as a Result of Study Abroad

Item	Much More	Moderately More	About the Same	Moderately Less	Much Less
Independence	.76	.17	.07	.00	.00
Confidence	.62	.27	.10	.00	.01
Intercultural communication	.55	.40	.05	.00	.00
Negotiating cultural differences	.47	.47	.06	.00	.00
Working with others	.41	.45	.09	.05	.00
Problem-solving	.39	.57	.04	.00	.00
Leadership	.29	.58	.13	.00	.00
Budgeting	.24	.55	.21	.00	.00

The participants recognized other areas of development through their time overseas. The participants selected *strongly agree* in response to being curious about other cultures (77%), enjoying exploring new places (85%), and being comfortable interacting with people from backgrounds other than their own (65%) as a result of their study abroad (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009). Although students voluntarily elect to study abroad and may therefore already possess these attitudes, the survey showed that the education abroad experience strengthened these attitudes for the participants. The participants selected *agree* to having a good understanding of international issues (69%), being able to apply information from one context to another (68%), and being comfortable in unfamiliar situations (65%), similar to Strange and Gibson (2017). Although there was no area in which the participants strongly disagreed, the results showed that the participants had a largely positive view of the influence their study abroad experience had on their development beyond confidence and independence. See Table 4.

Table 4

Perceived Development as a Result of Participating in Study Abroad

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I like to explore new places.	.85	.14	.01	.00	.00
I am curious about other cultures.	.77	.23	.00	.00	.00
I am comfortable interacting with people having backgrounds different from mine	.65	.33	.01	.00	.01
I am confident in my ability to navigate a new place.	.50	.44	.03	.03	.00
I can identify appropriate behaviors based on observing the people around me.	.44	.53	.02	.01	.00
I am not afraid to talk to new people.	.41	.51	.03	.05	.00
I have a good understanding of my own culture.	.36	.64	.00	.00	.00
I now incorporate multiple perspectives in my decision making.	.36	.60	.03	.01	.00
I can apply information from one context to new, broader contexts.	.30	.68	.01	.00	.01
I am a leader in group situations.	.25	.64	.06	.04	.01
I am comfortable in unfamiliar situations.	.24	.65	.06	.05	.00
I have a good understanding of international issues.	.15	.69	.11	.05	.00
I feel anxious when I don't understand something right away.	.07	.42	.15	.32	.04

The qualitative data gathered through the open-ended survey questions and focus groups revealed several themes regarding the participants' personal development, perceived academic learning, and the development of new skills. These findings further supported the quantitative survey data and provided additional details and examples as to how the participants perceived their learning and development while abroad.

Personal Development

The participants reported increased levels of independence and autonomy, confidence and self-efficacy, and a greater desire to be adventurous as a result of their study abroad experiences. The vast majority of the participants responded that their study abroad experience either greatly or moderately increased their sense of independence and confidence. Respondents also believed that they had improved in their ability to navigate new places, to talk to new people, and to feel comfortable in unfamiliar situations. This new sense of independence bore itself out in practical situations, such as navigating train stations and airports alone, and in the desire to try new things, such as seeking out new opportunities and participating in new activities. Participants also reported that self-confidence was an important outcome of their time abroad; when they were faced with new or challenging experiences, they learned that they could handle those situations and, sometimes, even come to enjoy what had previously been intimidating. Participants were asked to identify three things that best summed up their personal development as a result of being abroad. One participant identified the following: “Confidence being alone, ability to stick up for myself and do what I want to rather than just go with the group, and an understanding that having different values is okay.” This acknowledgement of growth in terms of confidence and autonomy has also been found in previous studies and is indicative of a typical education abroad experience (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009; Smith & Yang, 2017; Montgomery & Arensdorf, 2012).

The participants repeatedly emphasized that their study abroad helped them to build new life skills, problem-solving skills, and persistence in difficult or trying circumstances. The participants reported developing new skills navigating travel situations, budgeting in a foreign currency, and adapting to a new learning environment. Each accomplishment in these areas further boosted the participants’ confidence, causing them to be more willing to try new things. Therefore, the participants reported not only growth in their confidence and the acquisition of new skills, but they also developed a sense of tolerance for, and even came to embrace, challenging situations. This led the participants to consider multiple and different perspectives before making decisions or judgements. As one participant noted, “I learned that sometimes it's okay to feel uncomfortable at first because usually the experience you get out of it is well worth the discomfort.” The idea of being “uncomfortable” came up often in both the online survey and

the focus groups and was universally recognized as being essential to learning (Strange & Gibson, 2017; Engberg, Jourian, & Davidson, 2016).

Overall, the personal growth reported by the participants was more profound than simply learning how to use public transportation. The experience of being overseas also shaped their approach to understanding different situations and making decisions for themselves. In the words of one participant, “I used to accept whatever viewpoint was presented to me, but now I do not take everything at face value. I feel more compelled to question lines of thinking and search for different perspectives.” The autonomy the participants experienced while in-country returned home with them and, notably, changed their outlook and how they make sense of various issues and situations.

Reconstructing Cultural Mindset

The participants also revealed that their study abroad experiences caused them to develop a broader understanding of the world and their place in it; that is, they understood that other cultures are distinct from U.S. culture. The participants discussed development in their ability to recognize and negotiate cultural differences and had a clearer understanding of their own culture as a result of studying abroad and having the opportunity to examine it through a different lens. Furthermore, the participants discussed how it was not until they were actually in a different context that they were able to observe and make sense of this. One participant described how, “social norms are different in different cultures, immersing yourself into a different culture is the best way to learn a language, being in a different culture makes you respect others.” For these participants, learning about cultural differences first-hand was something that they could not have done to the same extent in the U.S. (Mastroianni, & Kelly, 2013; Montgomery & Arensdorf, 2012).

As much as the participants learned to recognize differences in culture where they studied abroad, the experience also brought their own culture into clearer focus. The participants began to recognize their own culturally-specific behavior and understand what characteristics and stereotypes that members of other cultures have of people from the United States. For instance, one participant reflected that, “If you say, “Oh my God,” everyone immediately notices you’re American. My roommates would tell me, “You’re so *typique* American.” These moments of recognition occurred in various settings but most commonly in quotidian events, although those

participants who visited classrooms abroad also made note of different teaching styles and conditions. In the words of one participant, “I was more self-aware of all of the things that have been given to me because I am an American.” Being able to see and consider one’s own culture as a result of being outside of it is a powerful tool in developing intercultural competence as well as self-awareness (Montgomery & Arensdorf, 2012) and bringing a critical eye to its less than favorable aspects (Doerr, 2017).

Interpersonal Dynamics

The participants discussed the ways in which their study abroad experiences allowed them to develop empathy for others, and to be more open-minded and patient. The participants also recognized that their time abroad helped them to better work with others and to more keenly observe the behaviors of others. Especially for those participants who had had little international experience before their study abroad, experiencing first-hand what it feels like to be “a fish out of water” caused them to develop empathy with others who find themselves in different or unfamiliar circumstances. This ranged from deciding on evening plans, problem-solving when plans went awry, and generally negotiating differences between others in their peer groups or in their living situations. Since education abroad can be an intense experience, especially when students are living in close proximity to others who are not part of their regular friend group, such issues often arise. Nonetheless, the participants reflected that it was important to “be open to new ideas” and to “make new friends and connections.” An important aspect to this element of study abroad is the extent to which students are willing to go beyond their own comfort zone (Engberg, Jourian, & Davidson, 2016) and the quality of the experiences that both encourage and challenge students to continue to do so (Savicki, 2010). The majority of the participants in the current study were able to persist in engaging in such experiences throughout their programs.

Connected to interpersonal dynamics, another significant theme that the participants discussed was the development of language and communication skills. The participants reported increasing their foreign language skills, learning to negotiate language barriers, and developing their overall capacity to communicate with others. Although only 8% of the participants sought out a study abroad experience in order to improve their foreign language skills, the participants spoke often of the many ways their ability to communicate was challenged, and often how it improved. Again, these experiences varied in terms of context, such as working with university

instructors in a different academic environment, communicating needs in various transactions, or simply trying to communicate with new friends. As one participant reflected, “You don’t ...realize... how much you take [communication] for granted until you can’t talk to people.” Consistent with Costello (2015), the participants found that communication comes in many forms and contexts, and that they have, or had, developed the skills to communicate effectively. Such issues of communication were not limited to vocabulary but rather explaining and understanding cultural references that they took for granted or were experiencing for the first time. Through these interactions, the participants developed empathy for others who are similarly unable to communicate easily, such as international students on their home campus. In the words of one participant, “I feel even more sympathy for people in this country who are treated bad because they don’t know the language.” This learning indicates that the participants were moving beyond their experiences being solely about themselves to also identifying how others may be in similar situations and how they might respond (Deardoff, 2015; Doerr, 2017; Molinsky, 2013).

In addition to developing skills in communication and foreign language, the participants believed that their ability to connect with others and to develop professional connections while abroad had also increased. These relationships were formed on two fronts. First, the participants identified friendships that had been forged with fellow students in the program, many of whom were not only from different places in the United States but also from different parts of the world. Such relationships enabled the participants to consider multiple perspectives beyond those that they themselves were experiencing in their host country.

Second, the participants developed relationships with their host families and local peers. These relationships caused them to greatly increase their knowledge of another culture and language. While developing new friendships was a primary outcome for the participants, several also made professional connections. These new connections helped the participants to view language learning as a skill with a direct link to their future careers (Carley, Stuart, & Dailey, 2011; Kamdar & Lewis, 2014). For instance, one participant stated, “I got experience interview[ing] people from many different contexts on pressing issues, I made several new friends in Peru, and I got to practice speaking Spanish.” However, some of the participants discussed this as a more transactional skill that had been developed that would provide more professional opportunities, which may or may not include developing rapport or deeper relationships. This was reflected in the words of one participant who said, “I’m like really

starting to see now that speaking another language is going to open a lot more doors for me professionally.” Nonetheless, overall the participants recognized the value of the personal interactions they experienced with different people during their time abroad. Whether connected to confidence or the ability to communicate more effectively, the participants overwhelmingly recognized their study abroad experience as life-changing. As one participant stated proudly, “I think I’m more culturally competent. I can connect with people. So whichever avenue I pursue, I will be confident that I can navigate the world.”

Academics and Learning

Participant responses to queries about their academic development, both while on study abroad programs and the effects of the experience long term, were polarized. While some participants recognized a significant impact on their academic learning, others dismissed any effect at all and viewed the experience primarily as one of social engagement and fun (Waters & Brooks, 2010). Participants who completed major-specific programs abroad, such as nursing, teacher education, or foreign language, were able to make direct connections between their academic experience abroad and their academic progress on their home campus. This may be a result of such programs typically being faculty-led and with more directed and guided experiences and learning in the context of their future careers.

Those participants who elected to study abroad with faculty from their home campus recognized the importance of familiarity with their instructors as a motivation to choose a given program. While there was no evident difference when compared to participants that did not, apart from the direct professional connections, having an established relationship or connection to the faculty leader proved to be important for the participants. These programs provided extensive reflection and opportunities for the participants to process their experiences, which may have had a more significant effect on how they perceived their learning. Even in these circumstances, though, the participants continued to put more value on the personal growth that they experienced abroad than on their academic experiences or the applicability of that experience to degree progress at home. That sentiment was even stronger for the participants who took part in General Education or non-discipline specific programs. Several participants, in fact, stated unequivocally that their experiences abroad had no effect on their academic progress or performance whatsoever. They were seemingly unable to connect their substantial personal

growth while abroad with their performance as a student or future professional. As one participant stated, “It didn't really affect my learning that much just because my major doesn't really have to do with different cultures.” These findings were somewhat troubling in the sense that while some participants did make connections to their learning, others did not, nor did they see the value in even trying to understand how it might be possible. This outcome of study abroad is limited in the extant literature and is worthy of future study.

Nonetheless, those participants who took courses with faculty native to the international campus were able to compare academic settings they experienced, to negotiate those academic differences while abroad, and to tie their abroad experiences back to their work on campus in the U.S. The participants discussed that they had to adjust to different educational systems and approaches, for instance a final course grade being the result of one final exam, or even instructional approaches in the classroom. The participants also described differences in the teacher-student relationship abroad, with some appreciating these differences, and others being happy to return to their U.S. classroom settings, consistent with Costello (2015). Regardless, the education abroad experience did affect the majority of the participants in a positive and transformational way. For one participant, it changed their trajectory completely: “It significantly changed the direction of my academic career. I wrote a thesis based on the experiences. And, basically, I dedicated my undergrad to learning about Middle Eastern politics and geography.”

Implications

The survey data revealed that while some of the participants were able to discuss the academic importance of their time abroad, the larger percentage reported on the benefits gained in intercultural competency, self-confidence, and overall personal growth. The participants were less focused on the academic learning outcomes than they were on personal growth. Since the participants placed personal growth ahead of academic concerns while abroad, study abroad program development needs to recognize the importance that students place on their personal development. However, the data also showed that many of the participants failed to make a direct connection to their future professional selves or their academic learning, which indicates that bringing this aspect of study abroad to their attention must be intentional and incorporated throughout a program, if not through pre-departure preparation, then after students return home and resume their lives on campus. Given that half of the participants from this university had

selected faculty-led study abroad programs, this may be easier to implement and incorporate in the program design.

While some students reported on professional experiences abroad (visiting classrooms, internships etc.), the majority of respondents were unaware of any potential relationship between their experiences abroad and their future careers. They were unaware of how intercultural competency might increase their professional capital and marketability. Study abroad programs, therefore, should be designed to help students make those connections between their personal growth and the benefits to their future careers in non-academic terms.

Limitations

The primary limitation to the study is that it represents one campus community, and the findings may or may not be applicable to other contexts. Second, the study relies on data gathered through self-reporting. Kamdar and Lewis (2014) have argued that because current scholarship relies on self-reporting, it limits the quality of analysis. Although self-reported data undoubtedly presents problems for the researcher, it remains an effective means to understand the student experience. Researchers, therefore, can collect data through multiple measures that provide greater triangulation and allow for more in-depth responses from participants. Keller-Dupree and Van der Hagen (2015) suggest that journaling might also mediate self-reporting, given that students then have a chance to process their experiences through narrative. In this instance, the researchers gathered participants for focus group sessions to support the quantitative survey data and to delve more into the topics and issues that arose from it, consistent with Dean and Jendzurski (2013), who emphasize the importance of post-travel debriefing and exploration. Future iterations of the study may include contacting students prior to their departure to collect pre-experience data and then to follow up with the survey and focus groups upon their return.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the benefits of holistically evaluating student experiences in study abroad programs across fields of study and of variable durations. First, the researchers agree with Kamdar and Lewis (2014) that post-experience assessment should inform how programs are developed, including pre-experience preparation and on-site curriculum, and the

study abroad learning experience should continue on the home campus. Clearly, students are primarily interested in short-term programs where a faculty member is both leading the program abroad and teaching the course(s) associated with it. The personal growth, connections, and knowledge gained by students abroad should become part of the wider institutional curriculum. Second, the findings presented here show that most of the learning on a study abroad experience occurred in the realm of personal and emotional growth, including an increased capacity to communicate, to tolerate stress and ambiguities, and to develop a critical understanding of one's social and cultural location. In the vast majority of responses, academic outcomes were less valuable to the students than their personal development. In some cases, students failed to see any connection between personal and professional outcomes. Therefore, the conclusion is that university study abroad programs need to develop curricula that recognize personal development, but also support and encourage students in connecting their experiences to academic goals and learning. Finally, educators on study abroad programs need to help students make connections between their personal development and their academic and professional lives.

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Appendix A

Semester / Year you completed study abroad: (for instance, Summer 2016)

Country:

Major:

1. Why did you choose to study abroad?

Choose all that apply:

see the world

increase self-awareness

take classes not offered on campus

availability of required courses

enhance resume or increase job opportunities

increase ability to communicate in a foreign language

greater understanding of a different culture

other [Box]

2. Before you left, what do you want to get out of this experience (i.e. of studying abroad)?

3. We all develop ideas about foreign people and places based on what we read about in books, see on TV, or find online. What did you understand about your host country before you left?

4. The study abroad experience meet my expectations.

Strongly agree

Agree

neither agree nor disagree

disagree

strongly disagree

5. What were your top three takeaways from this experience (personal and/or professional)?

6. How did your study abroad experience influence your learning once you returned to campus?

7. How did your study abroad experience support you in your major?

8. Did your study abroad experience influence you to choose more courses with an international emphasis once you returned to campus?

9. Did your study abroad experience influence you to seek out international students when you returned to campus?

10. How did study abroad help to develop the following skills:

[skills on a scale – budgeting, problem solving, working with others, leadership, negotiating cultural difference, intercultural communication, personal independence]

As a result of your study abroad experience...[Strongly disagree- Strongly Agree]

1. I am good at conveying ideas to others.
2. I am a leader in group situations.
3. I have a good understanding of my own culture.
4. I am not afraid to try new things.
5. I am confident in my ability to navigate a new place.
6. I have a good understanding of international issues.
7. I now incorporate multiple perspectives in my decision making.
8. I now interact well with people who hold different interests, values, or perspectives.
9. I can identify different ways in which people communicate.
10. I can identify appropriate behaviors based on observing the people around me.
11. I am resourceful in solving problems.
12. I am comfortable being by myself in new places.
13. I can apply information from one context to new, broader contexts.
14. I am flexible in adapting in situations of change.
15. I am comfortable interacting with people having backgrounds different from mine.
16. I like to explore new places.
17. I am curious about the world around me.
18. I am not afraid to talk to new people.
19. I am curious about other cultures.
20. I am comfortable in unfamiliar situations.
21. I feel anxious when I don't understand something right away.
22. Would you be interested in participating in a focus group regarding this study? The focus group will take approximately one hour and students who complete the focus group activity will be entered to win one of ten \$30 gift cards.