Student Perceptions of the Impact of their Diverse Study Abroad Experiences

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Abstract
Study abroad is a complex and dynamic topic, with many interesting implications on society as the world becomes more globalized. Study abroad programs vary based on many structural factors such as length of stay, location, quality of institutions and language immersion. Student experiences associated with such programs are influenced by these structural factors as well as personal factors including the student’s personality and goals for the trip. This study examines students’ perceptions of the impact of their experiences studying abroad. The research questions included: How do students perceive the personal impact of their study abroad experience? What factors shape these perceptions? What motivates students to study abroad? And what are the students’ anticipated short and long-term impacts of study abroad? We used narrative inquiry methodology to obtain in-depth personal profiles detailing the perceptions of five undergraduate students at Penn State regarding their experience and how to make meaning of it. The study specifically focuses on what motivates students to participate in study abroad, how students perceive the personal impacts of their international experience, what factors shape these perceptions and the short and long-term impacts of this perception. The results of the study showed that all the interviewed students expressed intrinsic and extrinsic factors which they believe motivated them to study abroad. Each student also shared at least one goal they strived towards during their study abroad. Students’ perceived expectations of their study abroad experiences were extremely varied and influenced the outcomes of their trip. Every student shared at least one short-term effect and believed that their experience abroad is impacting their life and will continue to do so in the future. This research highlights important themes for future analysis of the impacts of studying abroad.

Keywords: study abroad, self-perception, student learning, meaning making

Introduction
Many undergraduate students in the United States elect to spend some time during their college experience studying abroad. During the 2010-2011 academic year, 273,996 US students studied abroad to receive academic credit (Institute of International Education, 2012). Over the past two decades, the number of US students participating in study abroad programs has more than tripled (Institute of International Education, 2012). Universities offer students a variety of ways to study abroad. At The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), students can select a wide variety of programs in countries all over the world. The Penn State University Office of Global Programs (UOGP) advertises 156 programs for undergraduate students.

Students in colleges of agriculture across the country, including those at Penn State, are going beyond the borders of the United States to learn more about other cultures, emerging agricultural sectors and contemporary issues in the industry from the perspective of local citizens in other countries. This experience may, at first blush, seem like a fun trip for an undergraduate student, but this type of global exposure is critical to getting the next generation of agriculturalists to broaden their own viewpoints, develop empathy for other global citizens and communities, and more fully embrace the challenges and opportunities that come with feeding a developing and growing world.

In 2014-15, 181 students in the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State traveled to 29 countries (College of Agricultural Sciences Senior Survey, 2015). These students participated in embedded courses (one to two weeks), short-term trips (two to three weeks), summer abroad activities (six weeks) and full semester

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abroad programs (12 to 13 weeks). In most instances, the travel aligned with the student’s major or specific areas of interest, however other trips were group experiences for student organizations like the Food Science Club or the Dairy Science Club. Through this travel to other countries, students embrace a higher level of self-sufficiency (especially when in countries where English is not the primary language), a stronger understanding of cultures outside of Pennsylvania and their own local communities, and an enhanced sense of place for the area visited. Additionally, students are able to more fully compare agriculture in that region with that which they are familiar, breaking down barriers that lead to agricultural ethnocentrism or biases against other ways of producing food. This global exposure is important to move students beyond what they know, or think they know, and to get them to better understand what is at the global level.

Additionally, global travel as an undergraduate, gives students the rare opportunity to build a network of industry allies around the world, rather than the more typical scenario where they get to know only local alumni well. This interaction with leaders in other nations can lead to internship opportunities, career options, or even further exploration of a topic of interest to the student. As students look for career opportunities following their undergraduate education, these trips and experiences not only make them stand out as top candidates, but also put new/younger employees on track to additional opportunities because of the potential for them to relocate to other countries with the growing number of multinational agribusinesses (Vorhauer-Smith, 2013). Many companies will share that they have an expectation that college has prepared students with the fundamental knowledge they need to receive even more training and guidance as a professional. What makes students stand out to employers are the soft skills, including cultural awareness, team dynamics, self-motivation, that will make them a high functioning member of the organization. Increasingly, for many firms high functioning employees have the capacity to work overseas or at the very least to work on cross-cultural assignments.

More and more high school students are coming into college with international experience for the same reasons, an increased world view and the ability to be more competitive in a global economy. Reading about other countries or using technology to engage with international partners is not enough to give students a robust understanding of what is happening globally. It is imperative that future global leaders actually go abroad and get that sense of place that can come only with sharing meals, experiences and new cultures with partners around the world and their fellow students traveling with them (Vorhauer-Smith, 2013).

Research indicates that studying abroad benefits student development through attaining increased foreign language proficiency, intercultural understanding, knowledge of the host country and, “a more realistic appraisal of their capabilities.” (Chieffo, 2000, p.2). As the global community establishes more connections across borders and nationalities, international education becomes an invaluable resource for undergraduate students in navigating professional careers and personal lives.

Studying abroad is unique to each student and does not necessarily follow a predictable path or result in the same outcomes for all individuals (Mendelson, 2004). Much research has focused on an attempt to generalize about outcomes associated with studying abroad, but this experience also lends itself to analysis at the individual level. In-depth narrative analysis of individual students’ experiences can add detail, richness and personality to the body of literature on studying abroad. The purpose of this research is to study individual students’ self-perceptions concerning how their study abroad impacted their life and what factors are involved in the level of impact.

The lead author of this manuscript studied abroad twice in her undergraduate education and both of her experiences abroad had substantial impacts on her life, mostly in the long-term but in the short-term as well. This led her to ask if other students also feel that their studies abroad have impacted their lives, whether it has shaped their career path, living location, academic major, personal interests or other life decisions. This research was the emphasis of the author’s honors thesis.

This case study is useful to improve the development and organization of study abroad programs, solidifying study abroad as an important part of students’ education in the global society. The overarching question guiding this research question centers on student self-perceptions of their study abroad experience. Two more specific questions address what factors influence students’ perceptions of how their experience impacted them in the short-term and how they anticipate it will impact them in the long-term. The research questions are: How do students perceive the personal impact of their study abroad experience? What factors shape these perceptions? What motivates students to study abroad? And what are the anticipated short and long-term impacts of study abroad?

In the following section, we provide the literature review and conceptual framework to examine these research questions. Next, we include the qualitative narrative inquiry case study methodology, followed by the results and discussion. Finally, in the last section we present a summary of the research findings.

**Literature Review**

Much research focuses on both personal and global reasons why students elect to study abroad. Miller (1993) claims that there are several personal reasons why students choose to study abroad. First and most commonly, students travel abroad because they want to refine their foreign language skills. Second, they desire to promote awareness and significance of other cultures
within their respective majors. Third, students seek to establish international contacts. Anderson's (2003) work uses the Study Abroad Goals Scale to reveal three other common personal reasons students indicate for studying abroad. The three factors include: enhancing cross cultural skills, becoming more proficient in their subject matter and socializing. The purpose of Kitsantas’s (2004) study was to show how students’ goals influence their achievement of these outcomes.

Anderson (2003) discusses how many students go abroad in search of a transformative and authentic international experience. “Students personalize their perceptions of other nationalities after having the experience of living in a different country,” (Anderson, 2003, p.48). Once personal perceptions have been developed, individuals can relate to another culture on a new and familiar level. This embodies the idea of intercultural sensitivity which is defined by the emotion that people bring to intercultural interactions. It requires a person to have a positive attitude toward those from other cultures (Forgues, 2005, p.6). Although intercultural sensitivity is not a direct reason to study abroad, this idea and other global trends and theories suggest large-scale influences for why students study abroad.

Internationalism refers to the advocacy of cooperation between nations and suggests another impetus for students to study abroad. Forgues (2005, p. 1) states that internationalism is so important to student success in life that it must be incorporated into the curriculum…. that our students require a perspective that is broader than that offered on one campus in one country. Society is becoming increasingly diverse and in order to succeed, students need to receive a multicultural education, which Forgues (2005, p. 14) defines as: A structured process, designed to foster understanding, acceptance and constructive relations among people of many different cultures. Ideally, multicultural education encourages people to see different cultures as a source of learning and to respect diversity in the local, national and international environment.

These concepts of intercultural sensitivity, internationalism and multicultural education are all related to the larger trend of globalization. The world is getting smaller as more and more connections develop between nations’ communications, cultures and economies (Friedman, 2008). This reality increases the need for students to be able to work in a diverse society, thus placing further importance and value on study abroad programs.

When exploring literature on the impacts on student development from study abroad, common themes emerge that include, “expectations, contrast, understanding/not understanding, language, identity, regional associations and change” (Miner, 2008, p.iii). These themes are evident in research that focuses on the entirety of the student’s international experience. For example, Miller (1993) divides the experience into the time prior to the trip, the stay itself and then the reentry stage. Different themes exist within each of these stages and some themes are evident in all three. Expectations, or students’ expected outcomes from the experience, occur prior to the trip and then are constantly being contrasted and evaluated during the stay. Students also form different levels of understanding with regards to their experiences, language skill and cultural competency throughout their stay in another country. In the reentry stage, students evaluate if and how they have changed as a result of their time abroad as well as revisit the expectations they had prior to the trip.

Theoretical Framework

We ground our theoretical framework for this research in the cognitive theory of motivation (Bandura, 1989) as well as the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) in order to analyze how motivations, expectations, goal-setting and self-efficacy influence a specific behavior, in this case, studying abroad. The cognitive theory of motivation helps to understand the ways in which students perceive the personal impacts of their study abroad experience. This theory explores how a person can motivate themselves to engage in a certain behavior. Bandura’s theory asserts that people’s expectations guide their behavior; one will act in ways they believe will produce an outcome they desire (Bandura, 1989). It also distinguishes between two different types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to the drive to fulfill inner potential and interests (Bandura, 1989). Extrinsic motivation is the desire to achieve tangible rewards such as praise or money (Whitbourne, 2011). Another aspect of this theory is the idea of self-efficacy, a concept that indicates an individual’s confidence level of successfully achieving an outcome. If an individual believes they will be successful, they generally have higher goals and stronger commitment (Tollefson, 2000). This theory asserts that expectations relate to behavior.

If expectations and desired outcomes lead to certain behaviors, then students pursue various experiences in order to achieve certain outcomes or expectations. Studying abroad is one of these experiences which students frequently choose to engage in during their undergraduate education. The factors that result in the decision to study abroad have the potential to be different for each student, indicating that an in-depth understanding of an individual’s motivations may help to add greater nuance to the current understanding of student motivations for engaging in study abroad experiences.

The theory of planned behavior complements Bandura’s cognitive theory of motivation. Ajzen (1991) asserts that studying behavior must account for variability across situations rather than relying on aggregations of data and information. His is, “a theory designed to predict and explain human behavior in specific contexts” (Ajzen, 1991, p. 181). A general tendency under this theory is that if an individual has strong intentions for a behavior, it is more likely that they will perform this behavior and achieve their desired results (Ajzen,
However, the existence of strong intentions does not guarantee that the individual will initiate a particular behavior. Factors such as availability of resources and opportunities influence and potentially limit whether an individual will perform a given behavior. Therefore, behavior is affected by motivations as well as ability, referred to by Ajzen (1991) as behavioral control.

Together, the cognitive theory of motivation and the theory of planned behavior demonstrate that the connection between motivation and behavior is complex and specific to each individual. Expectations, motivations and self-efficacy influence a person’s behavior (Bandura, 1989) but the impact of these influences is subject to variability (Ajzen, 1991). The inquiry focuses on the effect of students’ motivations on the behavior of studying abroad. Specifically, we reviewed the student narratives to determine the factors that influenced their behavior, in this case, the choice to study abroad. In light of these theories, Figure 1 models how these elements interact.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations impact each other and feed into a person’s self-efficacy and expectations of an experience. A person’s self-efficacy and expectations influence their chosen behavior. Finally, the person reflects on the alignment of their expected and actual experiences and the results of reflection may impact the future motivations a person may have.

Methods

This research examines students’ motivations for studying abroad and self-perceptions of the impacts of their study abroad experience. The research objectives include learning more about individual students’ experiences abroad and providing future students and faculty involved in study abroad programs a useful resource to analyze student experiences. Given the nature of the research topic, qualitative methods are the most appropriate.

Peters et al. (2010) utilize and describe the method and rationale of narrative inquiry. The goal of this method is not to establish a statistically significant relationship, but rather to detail in-depth experiences and contribute insights that enrich the dialogue about a topic. Given this goal, the narrative inquiry approach focuses on the construction, interpretation and analysis of first-person interviews and narratives. Each person is interviewed and their interview transcript is edited into a profile which provides a unique and expansive account of their experience abroad (Peters et al., 2010). The method’s focus on story-telling allows for interviewees to explore the dynamic nature of their own experiences and communicate naturally with the interviewer. Story-telling is a universal human trait, across culture and throughout history, which people use to educate, communicate, persuade and connect (Hsu, 2008).

Narrative inquiry was chosen because it provides deep and detailed experiences of individual students who have studied abroad. This method enhances the base of information about studying abroad, which will hopefully facilitate future program development and organization, encourage other students to study abroad and reiterate the importance of studying abroad in a global society.

Research Procedures

We developed this research in light of Maxwell’s (2005) Qualitative Research Design to ensure its success and quality. We chose a small, purposeful sample of five Penn State undergraduate students who studied abroad. The study was cross-sectional, occurring at one point in time due to time restrictions. We chose students who have completed study abroad programs because the study focuses on the impacts of students’ experiences abroad and students are only able to reflect on the entirety of their experience after completion. All research was conducted with approval from Penn State’s Institutional Review Board.

We began this research by contacting current undergraduate students at Penn State who have studied abroad. We interviewed an African American male liberal arts student, a white female health and human development student, a Chinese female geography student, an African American female agriculture student and a white male landscape architecture student. These students studied in Central America, South America, Europe, Africa and Oceania. The five chosen students vary in major, gender, race and study abroad location. While the emphasis was not on a large, broad sample to make statistical conclusions, we sought substantial variety of characteristics between the five students to broaden the likelihood of capturing a diverse set of motivations and perceptions.

Each interview took place in a quiet study room in the Penn State library. Each interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcription service. We edited each transcript into a profile narrative. The editing process involved editing for grammar mistakes as well as arranging the document into a coherent and cohesive narrative. After we edited the profiles, we sent them back to the student for member checking (Maxwell, 2005). Once we received each student’s edits and comments, we made appropriate revisions. Then, according to the conceptual framework, we evaluated and cross-analyzed the profiles to understand their motivations and how these students perceive the personal impact of their experience abroad.
Validity

There are two main concerns to the validity of this research. First, due to the potentially subjective nature of storytelling, there could be misinterpretation of stories and perspectives. In order to combat this, we used member checking; one of the best ways to rule out misinterpretation of informants’ language and perspectives (Maxwell, 2005). Second, we had pre-existing relationships with the participants who were interviewed. This was helpful throughout the interviews because the participants felt more comfortable sharing stories with us, rather than a stranger. This enriched the information obtained in the interviews. However, the interviewer’s knowledge of the participants could have an impact on interpretation of the data. Member checks address this potential threat to validity by ensuring proper interpretation of the interviews. Also, professional interview protocols were followed in conducting the interviews.

Method Strengths and Weaknesses

The main strength of the narrative inquiry method is the emphasis on story-telling. This method captures the personal and unique attributes of each individual’s study abroad experience. The ability to verbally transport someone to a place they have never been through descriptive words and images is an important skill. Through stories, we can learn about and better understand people we have never met or places we have never travelled.

As with all methods, this method has weaknesses. Five students were interviewed, rather than surveying a large population. Many people assume that studies must have a conclusive answer to specific research questions or definitive proof or disproof of hypotheses. That is not the goal of this research. Each interview and narrative provides different individualized personal insights into the topic of study abroad experience. This method is also time-consuming, thus limiting the number of interviews that can be conducted and narratives that can be processed, within a given time frame. Overall, analysis of individual narratives will benefit the base of study abroad literature by providing documentation of actual lived experiences.

Results and Discussion

This section includes the data and analysis from the interviews conducted with five Penn State students who engaged in study abroad experiences. We used pseudonyms and changed the students’ locations of study to protect the anonymity of the students interviewed. Mark studied abroad for a semester in Santiago, Chile. Morgan studied abroad in Madrid, Spain, for a summer program. Evan traveled to Belize for a week with a professor, participated in a summer program in Kenya and studied abroad in Munich, Germany, for a semester. Teegan considers herself to be studying abroad for all four years at Penn State since she is from China and she also studied abroad in Mozambique for a semester. Finally, Elizabeth studied abroad through direct exchange in Australia for a semester.

Each student profile is complex, unique and reflexive. Together, the profiles provide insight into motivations for studying abroad and how the students interviewed for this research perceive studying abroad has already and will continue to influence their lives. The findings raise questions and suggest further research that should be pursued on this topic by interviewing more students at Penn State and at other universities as well. Information was synthesized and gleaned from the interviews about student motivations, expectations and outcomes of their time abroad, as well as their sense of the meaning and significance of their international experiences. Taken individually, the interviews are in-depth and reflexive accounts of five students’ experiences studying abroad. Taken collectively, these invite others to join the discussion about studying abroad via these student profiles and stories.

Motivations

Evan declared in his profile, “I wanted to go abroad and see firsthand how cultures interact...not through movies or documentaries or reading. You need to live it.” Several other students echoed this statement by expressing their personal beliefs in the importance of lived, authentic and new experiences in other countries, with people of different cultures. In today’s world, people are connected through technology and trade to almost every part of the world. Some individuals are no longer content to hear about other countries on the news or see pictures online; they want to experience it firsthand. The students interviewed explained various personal attributes or tendencies which they believe motivated them to study abroad and pursue a firsthand international experience. What follows explores why authentic lived experience is so important to these students.

Intrinsic Factors. Several common themes emerged among the students regarding why they believe they chose to study abroad. Each student mentioned their desire to travel. Teegan said, “I’m a traveler, so I want to experience every continent.” Evan also expressed a similar goal: to travel to every continent by the time he is 30. Mark described his knack for traveling. Elizabeth grew up as a military child and she said, “all the traveling...played a big role in my development and I want to continue that and broaden my knowledge of the world through travel.” Lastly, Morgan said, “I think my intrinsic desire to see the world and learn more about other cultures was a big factor.” Not all the students explained where their desire for travel comes from, but each of them recognized it was a major motivator for them to study abroad.

The “knack for traveling,” as each student expressed, leads into another theme, appreciation for new cultures and the desire to experience them in an immersive and authentic way. Several of the students indicated they sought opportunities that would drive them off the beaten path and enable them to have some truly unique and genuine cultural experiences. Morgan described how her study abroad program helped her pursue authen-
tic experiences. Her program planned many trips for the students and arranged for local guides to teach them about the city of Madrid. She said that she was able to learn things that she would never know if she went to Madrid as a tourist. Certainly, the program structure has a significant impact on what opportunities are available, but the student’s goals and desires for the trip are incredibly important to determine whether or not they will elect to take advantage of opportunities. For example, Morgan explained that a lot of other students chose not to attend the planned trips and in response to that she said, “I went on all the trips and tried to have as many of the cultural experiences that were offered to me.” Evan explained that he sees the bigger picture in life and he enjoys seeing how cultures interact and how different people live their lives. In one of his stories, he described an experience getting to know the city of Zurich with a local citizen. He said “All three days that I was there with him, he showed me around. I got to see some stuff that I wouldn’t have seen if I had gone by myself or just looked at a tourist map.” Both Morgan and Evan indicated the value of learning from local citizens. Mark talked about his love of Spanish-speaking culture, which encouraged him to study abroad in Chile so he could immerse himself in the language and culture every day. The desire to pursue culturally authentic and non-touristy experiences encouraged several of these students to study abroad.

Another common attribute among some of the students interviewed was their perceived need to “change scenery.” Elizabeth described this by saying, “I studied abroad the spring of my sophomore year because by then I was getting really antsy and wanted a change of scenery.” She accredits her desire for a change of scenery to her military upbringing; she was accustomed to moving every two years. In a similar vein, Mark said, “I am the type of person that needs a change of scenery every now and then. I’m a person who likes to mix things up.” This quote suggests that there is a certain type of person who for varying reasons needs to experience a change of place and pace every once in a while. Studying abroad can fulfill this urge to find new scenery and provide this type of student with the mobility they seek.

There were many unique personal motivations among the students as well. For example, Teegan studied abroad in Mozambique through Penn State. She desired to pursue this additional international experience in order to get to know Americans and develop meaningful relationships with other Penn State students. Evan conveyed another unique motivation, his appreciation of nature. He explained his love of natural environments and said, “I’ve always been attracted to the natural aspects of different areas.” In several of his stories from Germany, Kenya and Belize, he included many details on the natural environments and recounted various meaningful experiences he had discovering a place’s natural beauty. We mention these motivations in order to reiterate the uniqueness of each student’s international experience.

Extrinsic Factors. Among the students interviewed, there was a great variety in the extrinsic factors they believe influenced their decision to study abroad. As displayed in the conceptual theory of motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic factors influence each other. The extrinsic factors that led these five students to study abroad are unique and since they influence the extrinsic factors that encourage students to study abroad, it is logical that there would be variety among the extrinsic factors as well. Additionally, each student described different extrinsic factors because of the distinct and unique nature of each student’s undergraduate experience. Given these two main reasons, it is difficult to generalize the wide variety of extrinsic factors that motivated these five students to study abroad.

However, there are several broad themes that emerged from the students’ interviews regarding the importance of goals. Each student mentioned that they wanted to study abroad to meet some type of academic goal. The specific goals varied among the students. For example, Evan chose to travel to Belize and study abroad in Kenya because he wanted to learn and apply what he was studying at Penn State to real-world situations. Elizabeth chose her program in Australia so that she would be able to take interesting classes not offered at Penn State and use them for the specialization required in her major. Teegan chose to study in the US so she could study psychology and get a degree from an American university.

Several of the students interviewed specifically mentioned they wanted to study abroad to improve their language skills. Morgan and Mark both wanted to get better at Spanish and Teegan desired to gain skills and confidence in speaking English. Overall, each student interviewed desired to engage in new cultures and experiences in the context of their undergraduate experience and chose international programs that allowed for involvement, engagement and pursuit of new opportunities as well as met the requirements of their degree programs.

Expectations and Outcomes

Similar to the motivations of these five students to study abroad, their perceived expectations of their study abroad experiences are also extremely varied. The most common expectations among these students are culture shock and impact. Most students expected they would experience culture shock over the course of their study abroad program in one form or another. Students varied in their preparation for what to expect; much of this variation is due to what information the program offered before the student began the program. For example, both Mark and Morgan received packets of information to brief them on some cultural differences they should be aware of before they traveled to their study abroad destinations.

Several of the students expected that they would experience adventures during their time abroad. For example, Elizabeth mentioned that she was anticipating
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a lot of opportunities to explore Australia and have adventures. Evan also indicated that for all three of his study abroad experiences, he was expecting to have unique and exciting opportunities. Every student expected that their time abroad would have some impact on their life. The following sections of analysis will discuss this topic more in depth.

Personal Goals. Several of the students interviewed described goals that they set for themselves regarding their study abroad experience. The three most commonly expressed goals include experiencing cultural immersion, venturing outside of one’s comfort zone and learning a language. Morgan said that her goal of cultural immersion encouraged her to participate in all the activities offered by her study abroad program. Other students who sought to experience cultural immersion made efforts to engage in local activities and traditions as well as discuss various cultural concepts with local people. Mark explained that through learning more about Chile from various experiences throughout the program and living with his host family, he gained, “his own sense of Chilean pride.”

Students who desired to get out of their comfort zones articulated that studying abroad was the perfect opportunity to participate in a new culture, learn or refine a language, eat new foods and visit new places. Each student pursued this desire through various means, but each of the five students reflected that leaving their comfort zone was a personal goal and that it somehow influenced their behavior abroad. Teegan chose her study abroad program in Mozambique because she wanted a challenge. She set goals for herself that pushed her to interact with American students and become better at speaking English. As Teegan indicated and we have already reported in the section on extrinsic factors, many students set goals for themselves to improve their foreign language skills. Mark declared, “I went to Chile with learning Spanish as my main priority…that was the most important thing.” Morgan also made learning Spanish one of her main goals.

The connection between goal-setting and behavior is valuable to analyze because many scholars have reported a strong positive correlation between goal-setting and achieving desired behavior. However, self-efficacy also affects whether the individual will successfully achieve their goal. For example, Morgan expressed her desire to improve her Spanish but also said that the language barrier was much harder than she expected and that she did not have much confidence in speaking Spanish. This also demonstrates how expectations influence behavior. She did not expect that speaking Spanish would be so difficult, so she felt discouraged in her attempts to speak Spanish.

Challenges. Most students encountered at least one challenge during their time abroad. Some students described how difficult it was to be separated from family, friends and significant others during their time abroad. Evan recalled a few instances throughout his trips abroad where he greatly missed his girlfriend. He told of a trip he and several others made to a sandbar and said, “That isolation made me think of my girlfriend and realize how far away we actually were and how much I missed her.” Mark also expressed how much he missed his girlfriend, as well as his family and friends at Penn State. Another challenge previously mentioned was the language barrier; Mark, Morgan and Teegan all cited this as a major difficulty. Elizabeth enlightened us about the challenges she faced by being a racial minority in Australia. She said, “I realized when you’re outside the US or even in some parts of the US, people see you as the color of your skin and that is always how it’s going to be.” This was not a challenge Elizabeth was expecting to face and the following section explores how expectations may influence outcomes.

Outcomes. In this section, “outcomes” refer to specific events or experiences that happened during each student’s time abroad, not as broader results from their experience (this will be discussed in the next section). Every student had certain expectations, both specific and general, regarding their study abroad experience. Regarding culture shock, Evan was not as overwhelmed by the cultural differences he witnessed in Kenya as he had expected he would be. Mark and Morgan had opposite reactions. They both indicated that no amount of briefing could have prepared them for experiencing cultural differences. Regarding the interpretation of time in Spain, Morgan said, “It’s so much different to expect something than to experience it. You can read about it but it’s different when you actually need to get somewhere a half hour late, because you’re not going to get there on time.” This could imply that no amount of preparing or expecting will affect the outcomes of an individual’s experience abroad.

Everyone’s expectations uniquely influenced outcomes of their trip, however there is not a clear correlation; the importance of expectations also depends on many of the previously analyzed aspects of a study abroad experience. For every student, many of their expectations were met, some were not and many unexpected outcomes occurred. Although that is a simple and straightforward assessment, due to the uniqueness of each student’s expectations and experience, it is not possible to make assumptions about how expectations affect outcomes.

Meaning and Significance

Each student was asked to reflect on their time abroad and how they perceive their experience has and will continue to impact their lives. The questions encouraged them to discuss ways their study abroad experience influenced them immediately upon their return home, how it is still influencing their life today and how they perceive it will affect their future. Each student addressed these questions thoughtfully and reflectively.

Short-Term Impacts. There were several broad themes regarding how students perceive their time abroad influences their life in the short-term. Initial
impacts that students noticed after their return from studying abroad include habitual changes, new interests, changing relationships, desire to advocate for study abroad programs and new ways of thinking about their home country. To cite a few specific examples, Evan explained that in Germany, “If you eat right-handed, you are supposed to cut with your right hand too. You’re not supposed to switch utensils, so I learned to eat with my left hand. I still do that every time I eat.” Morgan noticed that she has been a lot later for events and appointments than she was before her trip; she has become more laidback. Elizabeth adopted a love for rugby. Mark knew that his relationship with his girlfriend was more serious when he returned. He said, “I told my mom that if things worked out with my girlfriend Ally, I was going to marry her.” Each student said that after their trip, they recognized the importance and significance of studying abroad and began to encourage others to study abroad. Teegan reflected on the differences between Mozambique and China and could critically analyze environmental policies and practices in her country.

**Long-Term Impacts.** This question prompted many long responses because this is the phase each student is in now; they are reflecting on how their experience abroad is impacting their life now and will affect their life in the future. Several students said that their time abroad made them very conscious of their own wasteful practices and initiated or encouraged a desire to live in a more environmentally-conscious manner. Almost every student indicated that their experience has influenced future plans for their life such as where they want to live and what sort of career they will pursue. Inspired by the work she did in conservation, Teegan began to research careers in China that focus on conservation and environmental preservation. She said, “It gave me a new idea of what I can do in the future.” She is not alone in this response. Evan discussed the idea of living abroad, or in an urban area, which he had not considered before spending a semester in Germany. Morgan and Elizabeth also expressed interest in an internationally focused career.

The students were asked to specifically reflect on any impacts that their experience abroad has had on their personality, attitude, or beliefs. In various ways, every student underwent personal growth during their time abroad. Several broad themes include becoming more comfortable with new experiences, practicing independence and gaining soft skills such as improvisation or flexibility. Evan and Teegan both described how through their time abroad and engaging in new activities and witnessing different cultures, they became more comfortable with new experiences. For Teegan, her experience in Mozambique radically affected her personal development; it gave her much more confidence speaking English and interacting with Americans. Mark explained many ways in which he grew personally, especially in independence, during his time abroad. He said, “Being in Chile has been part of my development into a man and some personal epiphanies.” Elizabeth spoke about various soft skills she gained from her time in Australia that have helped her while interviewing for jobs.

Each student was able to identify many short and long-term impacts they believe resulted from their experiences abroad. The reflective nature of the interview encouraged students to analyze their own experience and discover some truths about themselves and their experiences that they may not have fully understood before. We benefitted immensely from hearing each student’s story and hope that Mark, Morgan, Evan, Teegan and Elizabeth all found their interviews beneficial as well.

**Summary**

Our research pursued the questions: How do students perceive the personal impact of their study abroad experience? What factors shape these perceptions? What motivates students to study abroad? And what are the students’ perceived short and long-term impacts of study abroad? We utilized narrative inquiry methods to develop the case study to explore these research questions. We interviewed five undergraduate students from Penn State University, who participated in a study abroad experience. From these interviews, we created individual narratives which we organized into themes according to the conceptual framework (see Figure 1). We examined student motivations for studying abroad, student expectations and outcomes, and the meaning and significance students ascribe to their experience in terms of how they perceive study abroad has impacted them in the short-term and long-term. In the next several paragraphs, we review the highlights of the findings in a similar structure as the Results and Discussion section. We summarize the motivations, expectations and outcomes, and meaning and significance of these five students’ experiences abroad.

All the interviewed students expressed intrinsic and extrinsic factors which they believe motivated them to study abroad. The motivations vary among each student due to the uniqueness of each student’s undergraduate experience but there were some similarities, such as the desire to travel and an appreciation for experiencing new cultures in an immersive and authentic way. Each student also shared at least one goal they hoped to achieve by studying abroad and pursued opportunities to help them meet this goal, or strive towards it. The three most-cited goals include immersing oneself in a new culture, having experiences outside of one’s comfort zone and learning a new language.

Each student interviewed had a unique experience with studying abroad. In fact, millions of students from all around the world have unique experiences studying abroad. As with the theme of unique experiences, students’ perceived expectations of their study abroad experiences were also extremely varied. Most students anticipated they would experience culture shock and impact; much of this anticipation stemmed from what information the program offered before the student began the program. The individual’s expectations influenced the outcomes of their trip, even though some
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expectations were not met and many unexpected outcomes occurred. For example, each student had some type of a challenge whether they expected it or not.

In response to the interview questions, each student reflected on their time abroad and how it influenced them. Every student expressed at least one short-term effect such as habitual changes, new interests, changing relationships, desire to advocate for study abroad programs and new ways of thinking about their home country. Also, each student shared that their experience abroad is impacting their life and will continue to influence their life in the future, including future plans for where to live and what sort of career to pursue. Other broad themes include increasing their comfort with new experiences and gaining soft skills like improvisation and flexibility.

Based on these research findings, there are several recommendations for future research. Further research should be done to understand how students perceive the personal impacts of their study abroad experiences. It would be valuable to conduct a longitudinal study where the researcher would interview students before and after their time abroad. This would add an interesting dimension to the study: for example, being able to compare more accurately what the student expected before the trip and what actually happened. The students interviewed were able to discuss their expectations prior to the trip, but their assessment is not extremely precise since they had already returned from their trips. Additionally, it would be very valuable to interview faculty and staff involved in study abroad programs, as experience suggests that they also learn and change through their experiences with study abroad programs.

Studying abroad shapes students, not just individually but also in terms of society and what type of citizens these students will be in the future. This could be another opportunity to complete a longitudinal study to follow certain students before, during and after their study abroad experience in order to see what career paths they follow, where they live and so on. Given the reality of globalization, individuals are connected to people and places all over the world, so it is essential for university students to learn about different people and places in order to be fully engaged and informed citizens in the global society.

Study abroad is an important phenomenon to study in today’s world of increasing globalization as these experiences have the potential to foster mutual understanding and global conversations between individuals and nations. Within the context of this research, we have seen how studying abroad creates globally-minded and more culturally-aware students. Based on this research, studying abroad is a fantastic tool to enhance student learning and can greatly enhance a student’s undergraduate experience. The research results indicate that the motivations of and effects on students vary widely and are personal in nature. When orienting for and engaging with students throughout their international experiences, the findings of this study suggest that emphasizing the expression of individual motivations, expectations and impacts may help students to rectify cognitive dissonance with regards to their expectations and experiences. Additionally, these individual expressions may help educators tailor curricula, in-country events and re-entry reflections for participants to increase student learning and satisfaction.

Literature Cited

The Pennsylvania State University College of Agricultural Sciences. 2016. Fall 2015 senior student (gradu ate) survey.

