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# Moving through Autonomy toward Interdependence: A Framework for Examining Student Perceptions of Development in a Hybrid Model Study Abroad Program

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## Abstract

Examining how students develop abroad within a given study abroad program model can provide insight into their experiences and how to best support them. This study explores the experiences of students who studied abroad through one of Midwest College's five hybrid study abroad programs during the 2016-2017 academic year. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine students to determine the participants' perceptions of their personal development, using Chickering and Reisser's (1993) third vector of student development, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, as a theoretical framework. The findings revealed that participants perceived they had grown in all three areas of Chickering and Reisser's third vector: instrumental independence, emotional independence and interdependence, providing new insight and perspective into the growing body of research regarding student development in study abroad program models.

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**Keywords:**

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**Introduction**

In the United States, the number of university students studying abroad has increased 52 percent in the past ten years. Over 325,000 university students studied abroad in the 2015-2016 academic year (IIE 2017). Despite the prominence of initiatives to increase study abroad numbers, many scholars (Vande Berg et al. 2012; Wiedenhoef 2011; Stearns 2009) have repeatedly emphasized that it is not the number of students who study abroad that is significant, but rather that the quality of the experience and the richness of the outcomes are most important.

Researchers such as Stearns (2009) have found that undergraduate students who choose to study abroad often describe it as a life-changing experience, “affecting... outlooks for decades after the visits ended” (p. 65). Specifically, growth in intercultural competence has been repeatedly listed as a prominent student outcome (Sol 2017; Salisbury et al. 2013; Paige et al. 2012; Vande Berg et al. 2012; Brockington & Wiedenhoef 2009; Williams 2009; Engle & Engle 2003). Profound student development that occurs abroad can result in lasting global impact, which is why the quality and depth of the study abroad experience is more meaningful than the sheer number of students who participate. As these numbers continue to grow, practitioners need to understand the impact of study abroad on student development.

In analyzing student development, distinguishing among the different abroad models can be helpful. According to Norris and Dwyer (2005), three primary study abroad models are nationally recognized in the US: full-immersion, island, and hybrid programs. Island model programs are characterized as a site of the home institution in a foreign country. In full-immersion programs, students are enrolled directly into a foreign university. Finally, a hybrid model program falls in the middle of the spectrum between island and full-immersion program models. These models are discussed in more depth later.

Some researchers (Vande Berg et al. 2012; Norris & Dwyer 2005; Engle & Engle 2003) claim full immersion programs are the best option for students because they result in the highest levels of student development. However, other research (Scally 2016; Woolf 2007) suggests that common characteristics in hybrid model programs, such as fellow national students and guided support, contribute positively to students’ development and experience abroad.

As participation in hybrid models continues to grow, understanding whether hybrid programs can contribute to student development in beneficial ways is important. However, a gap exists in the qualitative research available when examining student development in hybrid programs. Based on Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Seven Vectors of Student Development, this study focuses on the third vector, *moving through autonomy toward interdependence*, and investigates students' perceptions of their own development during their time abroad. Specifically, this research examines autonomy and interdependence through the three main factors laid out by Chickering and Reisser (1993): emotional independence, instrumental independence, and interdependence.

Midwest College, a private liberal arts college in the midwestern United States, administers five hybrid model study abroad programs. Using Midwest College (a pseudonym) as a collective case study, nine students who participated in one of these programs were interviewed after their return to learn about their perceptions of their growth in terms of autonomy and interdependence during their abroad experience.

Some of the terminology used in this research requires definition. The phrase "home country" describes the country from which the students originate; the "home institution" is the higher education institution where the student is earning their degree in the United States. "Host country" is the foreign country the student is studying in for a fixed period of time. "Co-nationals" refers to fellow US students who are studying abroad on the same program. "Visiting students" are those who are enrolled at a US institution for their undergraduate degree, but also chose to study abroad through a different university as a partner institution (Heisel & Kissler 2010).

## Study Abroad Program Models

The growth in study abroad has resulted in the development of a seemingly limitless variety of study abroad programs (Engle & Engle, 2003). This research focuses on the three primary models mentioned earlier (island, full immersion, and hybrid) in order to maintain the scope of this discussion (Norris & Dwyer 2005; Hanouille & Leuner 2001). Researchers (Vande Berg et al. 2012; Wiedenhoef 2011; Woolf 2007; Engle & Engle 2003) assert that the type of program a student chooses can directly impact their experience abroad and their developmental outcomes. IES Abroad (Institute for the International Education of Students) conducted a longitudinal survey of 17,000 alumni of their programs, and found that "the same lasting, important benefits are gained from all three education abroad program models: island, hybrid, and total immersion in a foreign university" (Dwyer 2004, p. 20).

Island model programs are generally run by the home institution specifically for its own students. The curriculum is designed by the home institution and taught in English. Housing is typically independent

accommodation rented by the home institution (The Forum on Education Abroad 2011). Additionally, cultural excursions and events are included in the program. Cumulatively, these characteristics often result in little to no contact with host country students (Engle & Engle 2003). Direct support services are provided through on-site program directors and staff, which are considered the primary strengths of this model (Heisel & Kissler 2010). The main critique of the island program is the tendency for the students to isolate themselves from the host culture in favor of their co-national students and home culture. Therefore, Engle and Engle (2003) argue that island programs do not necessarily provide enough immersion to result in as much positive student development as other program models might.

Full immersion, or direct enrollment, programs contrast the island program. Full immersion programs directly enroll students into a foreign institution. Students are enrolled in classes with the host school and are usually placed in that institution's student housing or with a host family, allowing students to have direct contact with the host culture (Engle & Engle 2003). The strength of the full immersion program is that students have greater opportunity for cultural immersion and acculturation (Norris & Dwyer 2005). The primary critique is the potential lack of student support as the American institution must rely on the host institution for support services, which can vary widely, meaning some students may not have assistance in transitioning or immersing into their host culture (Woolf 2007).

Finally, the hybrid model combines various aspects of the island and full immersion models. The actual makeup of these programs varies as institutions choose what is best for their students. The biggest advantage of the hybrid model is that it allows for immersion while still maintaining control over student support (Twombly et al. 2012). A critique of this program is that it does not allow for total immersion into the host culture and students often observe the host culture from the sidelines (Vande Berg et al. 2012).

Some universities and education abroad organizations have invested substantially in hybrid model programs in host countries, including considerable human and physical resources, to meet the needs of their students abroad. Understanding the impact of the hybrid model on student development would allow these universities to potentially develop, change, or enhance support structures in place to ensure that students get the most from their education abroad.

## Student Development as a Theoretical Framework

Erik Erikson's eight stage identity development theory has become the foundation to understanding student development for student affairs professionals. Psychosocial theorists, like Erikson, are concerned with contextual challenges and changes that occur in an individual's life. They

recognize separation and individuation as key components to identity development (Erikson 1968). Separation refers to physical distance, while individuation refers to psychological distance, or becoming independent and relying on the self for support (Chickering and Reisser 1993). Separation and individuation often occur at college. Traditionally speaking, first-year university students leave their families and parents (often for the first time), a significant step in establishing autonomy (Paige 1993). Living at university is the first degree of separation. Studying abroad can be viewed as another degree of separation because the students are placed in a foreign environment, which can lead to challenges that could result in further development in autonomy and interdependence.

Using Erikson's pioneering research as an underpinning, Chickering (1969), and later Chickering and Reisser (1993), expanded on Erikson's theory. This resulted in Chickering's Seven Vectors of Development, which were created using research specifically based on university student development. The vectors are as follows: 1) developing competence, 2) managing emotions, 3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, 4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, 5) establishing identity, 6) developing purpose, and 7) developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser 1993). These Seven Vectors are not necessarily a linear progression; rather they are recognized as overlapping and interconnected phases that can be returned to at various times over the lifespan (Evans et al. 2010).

This study uses Chickering and Reisser's (1993) third vector, *moving through autonomy toward interdependence*, as a theoretical framework to inform the research and to determine student outcomes in study abroad. The key concepts in Chickering and Reisser's third vector are used to examine student perceptions of their experience abroad and if any relationships exist between the study abroad program design and the third vector (Bell 2010).

The *moving through autonomy toward interdependence* vector involves balancing the tension of possessing autonomy, while still acknowledging the need to belong (Kegan 1982). It consists of three primary components: (1) instrumental independence, (2) emotional independence and (3) interdependence. Figure 1 explains each of these components and how they relate to students in the study abroad context. Chickering and Reisser (1993) assert that study abroad experiences may lead to greater development in autonomy and interdependence, thus this study seeks to understand how these vector components manifest in students' perceptions of their experience abroad.

**Figure 1. Components of Moving through Autonomy toward Interdependence (Vector 3) and Its Application to Study Abroad**

Component	Definition (Chickering & Reisser 1993, p. 117)	Application to Study Abroad
Instrumental Independence	“The ability to carry on activities and solve problems in a self-directed manner, and the freedom and confidence to be mobile in order to pursue opportunity or adventure”	Students demonstrate physical mobility while also making their own decisions allowing them to thrive while abroad.
Emotional Independence	“Freedom from continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection or approval from others”	Students may not be able to rely on affirmation from their home network, which can result in increased confidence as they explore new surroundings on their own.
Interdependence	“An awareness of one’s place in and commitment to the welfare of the larger community”	Students gain global competence, gaining awareness of one’s self in a global context, which directly correlates with growth in interdependence (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). Relates to global citizenship, which includes intercultural competence, global knowledge, and engagement on local and global scales (Deardorff 2009; Lewin & Van Kirk 2009).

## Student Development and Study Abroad in Past Research

Chickering and Reisser’s Seven Vectors have inspired a significant amount of research in student development over the past several decades, mostly through quantitative data collection methods (Winston et al. 1999; White & Hood 1989). Despite the significance of Chickering and Reisser’s theory, researchers have not thoroughly considered it within the context of study abroad. However, Wiedenhoef (2011) evaluated study abroad program design and personal development with quantitative instruments. The results demonstrated that “seniors who had returned a year ago on study abroad scored higher on the [quantitative measure] than juniors who just returned from study abroad” (Wiedenhoef 2011, p. 111). These findings suggest that the impacts of study abroad may not come to fruition until a significant amount of time has passed since returning from abroad.

However, Wiedenhoef's (2011) study did not find any statistically significant findings that connected personal growth with particular elements of study abroad program design. Lanthrop (1999) also measured growth in students who attended hybrid model or immersion programs, against a control group of foreign language studies students who did not study abroad. Again, no statistical difference was found in terms of emotional autonomy, instrumental autonomy, and interdependence.

The amount of qualitative research between student development theory and study abroad is lacking. Additionally, while research suggests that immersion models offer growth opportunities for students (Engle & Engle 2003), particularly in the area of intercultural development (Vande Berg et al. 2009), hybrid programs have gained in popularity (Twombly et al. 2012; Norris & Dwyer 2005). With study abroad practitioners' commitment to supporting development in their students, understanding whether hybrid programs cultivate student development outcomes in relation to Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of *moving through autonomy toward interdependence* is important.

And while some studies have addressed the impact of program design on student outcomes (Sally 2016; Wiedenhoef 2011; Bolen 2007; Carlson et al. 1991), more research is necessary to understand the complexity of study abroad programming in various theoretical contexts. Therefore, the primary research question driving this study is: How do students perceive their development in terms of autonomy and interdependence during a semester abroad through a hybrid model study abroad program?

## Methodology

This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, described by Newton Suter (2012) as "the understanding of a whole phenomenon via the perspective of those who actually live it and make sense of it (construct its meaning and interpret it personally)" (p. 344). In this research, the "whole phenomenon" is the study abroad experience through a hybrid model program. The research aims to understand the experience of student participants from their own perspective (Hennink et al. 2011; Merriam 1998). The study's goal is to discover how students perceive their development of their sense of autonomy and interdependence while abroad on a hybrid model program.

## Institutional Case Study

A case study is a phenomenon with a bounded context that drives both the process of the research and the end product (Yin 2014; Merriam 1998). In this study, the bounded system is that of Midwest College's five hybrid model study abroad programs during the 2016-2017 academic year. Within these boundaries, the connections between the phenomenon of student development abroad and the real-life context of a hybrid model study abroad program are

scrutinized by “aim[ing] to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon” (Merriam 1998, p. 29).

Midwest College’s hybrid programs run across Europe and North America, located in Vienna, Austria; London, England; Mérida, Mexico; Granada, Spain; and Bangor, Wales. All five locations fall within the top 25 study abroad locations for American students (IIE 2017). While the details of each location vary, they all represent various aspects of hybrid programs, and they all have resident program directors (see Figure 2). This study therefore examines the overall impact of the Midwest College hybrid program model on student development, regardless of location or language.

**Figure 2. Characteristics of Midwest College Hybrid Study Abroad Program Locations**

<b>Program Features</b>	<b>Granada, Spain</b>	<b>London, England</b>	<b>Mérida, Mexico</b>	<b>Bangor, Wales</b>	<b>Vienna, Austria</b>
<b>Accommodation</b>	Host family	Midwest College private accommodation	Midwest College private accommodation	Welsh university flat accommodation	Viennese university flat accommodation
<b>Coursework at local university</b>	Optional	Optional	Optional	Yes	Yes
<b>Language of Instruction</b>	Spanish and English	English	Spanish and English	English	German and English
<b>Internship/Service Learning</b>	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional	Optional
<b>Resident Director</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Required Cultural Excursions and Coursework</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Average length of program</b>	4 months	4 months	3 months	4.5 months	5 months
<b>Average Number of Students per Semester</b>	12	15	10	20	8

## Sampling and Research Participants

The participants in this study are students who studied abroad through Midwest College at one of the five locations for one semester (either fall or spring) during the 2016-2017 academic year. A participant recruitment email was sent out by Midwest College's Assistant Dean of International Education to the 125 students who had studied abroad during the 2016-2017 academic year. An incentive was offered in the form of a \$10 Amazon gift card upon the completion of the interview, which encouraged participation among the students. Twenty students indicated interest for a response rate of 16 percent. Of these participants, a quota sample was selected that most accurately represented the Midwest College study abroad student population during this academic year.

Three characteristics were used in defining the quota: sex, location of study, and visiting students. The Midwest College study abroad student population during the 2016-2017 academic year consisted of 31% males and 69% females, which aligns closely with national statistics. According to the Institute of International Education (2017), 66.5% of study abroad students are women. Therefore, seven female (66.6%) and three male (33.3%) participants were contacted for the interview. Not only is this a representative sample, but it allowed for examination of how men and women develop differently while abroad as suggested in previous research (Gilligan 1982; Josselson 1996).

Next, a representative participant sample of each of Midwest College's five locations was determined. This allowed saturation to be achieved within each location sub-group (see Figure 3) (Hennink et al. 2011).

**Figure 3. Sample Population Based on Midwest College Statistics**

Location	Bangor, Wales	London, England	Granada, Spain	Mérida, Mexico	Vienna, Austria
<b>Total percentage of Students who Studied at Location during the 2016 - 2017 Academic Year</b>	30%	24%	20%	15%	12%
<b>Number of Research Participants who Studied at Location (Percentage)</b>	3 (33.3%)	3 (33.3%)	2 (22.2%)	0* (0%)	1 (11.1%)

\* One participant did not respond to the invitation to interview; this student was the only respondent that had studied abroad in Mérida, Mexico

Finally, the quota selected the percentage of students enrolled at Midwest College versus the number of visiting students. Visiting students are

those who are enrolled at a different institution for their undergraduate degree, but who have chosen to study abroad through Midwest College as a partner institution (Heisel & Kissler 2010). Research has suggested that visiting students show more positive development while abroad compared to students who study abroad through their own institution (Stebleton et al. 2013). At Midwest College, 22% of the study abroad population were visiting students during the 2016-2017 academic year; therefore, a sample of two (22.2%) visiting students was used.

Based on the discussed demographics and the 20 volunteer respondents, 10 student participants were chosen to be interviewed to create a sample representative of Midwest College study abroad demographics. In the end, nine of the quota participants responded to the invitation to be interviewed and all nine interviews were completed (see Figure 4). One participant did not respond to the invitation to interview; this student was the only respondent that had studied abroad in Mérida, Mexico. The final sample was as follows: 66.6% females, 33.3% males; 78% Midwest College students, 22% visiting; and the following from each location: Bangor, Wales (33.3%); London, England (33.3%); Granada, Spain (22.2%); Vienna, Austria (11.1%); Mérida, Mexico (0%). The sample of sex and visiting students were still representative. The saturation of each location was slightly altered, as there was no representation of the student experience in Mérida, Mexico, the only location outside of Europe. This sample is not representative within each location. Furthermore, 88% of the participants are White, which is slightly higher than the national average of approximately 71.6% (IIE 2017). This higher ratio of White participants can be explained by the overall demographics of Midwest College, which is predominately White.

**Figure 4. Research Participants**

Pseudonym	Class Rank*	Sex	Home/Visiting Student	Study Abroad Location
<b>Anna</b>	Junior	Female	Home	London, England
<b>Beth</b>	Senior	Female	Visiting	Granada, Spain
<b>Connor</b>	Junior	Male	Home	Bangor, Wales
<b>Derek</b>	Junior	Male	Home	Bangor, Wales
<b>Katie</b>	Junior	Female	Visiting	Granada, Spain
<b>Liz</b>	Junior	Female	Home	Vienna, Austria
<b>Madison</b>	Sophomore	Female	Home	London, England
<b>Matthew</b>	Junior	Male	Home	Bangor, Wales
<b>Sarah</b>	Junior	Female	Home	London, England

\*In the United States, there are four years of study for an undergraduate degree, the class ranks are categorized as follows: Year 1: Freshman; Year 2: Sophomore; Year 3: Junior; Year 4: Senior. The class ranks listed reflect the year the participants were whilst abroad.

In order to mitigate bias, the first author acknowledges that, through her previous employment at Midwest College, she had formerly met one participant, (Anna). Furthermore, Beth is not an American-born citizen; she was born in Costa Rica, having moved to the United States when she was 12. She currently has dual citizenship in the United States and Costa Rica.

## Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to determine the “how” and “why” behind the participant experience (Denscombe 2010). The questions were focused on the concepts of autonomy and interdependence, as well as the various aspects of the hybrid model, in order to determine how students developed in these areas while abroad. At the time of each interview, two to six months had passed since the participants’ return to the United States, which allowed time for the students to reflect and process their time abroad (Kortegast & Boisfontaine 2015; Wiedenhoef 2011). Participants were made aware of that the interviews sought to understand their perceptions of their personal development while studying abroad. Due to scheduling issues, some interviews were conducted via video chat as not to inconvenience the participants. Virtual interviews are potentially less effective because they limit natural rapport (Shuy 2002); however, as they have gained in popularity, the positives and convenience of video are emerging, particularly given the current generation of university students’ comfort with technology (Cohen et al. 2011). All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

## Analysis Methods

To avoid bias based on the theoretical framework of the study, an open analysis was initially used to ensure that all coding possibilities emerged from the data (Gibbs 2007). This involved reading and coding the transcripts and allowing the perspectives of the subjects to speak for themselves (Coffey & Atkinson 1996). Secondly, the interviews were coded using a focused thematic analysis by determining “patterned regularities in the data” (Wolcott 1994, p. 33). This round of coding involved the identification of keywords and themes connected to characteristics of the following aspects of the theoretical framework: autonomy, emotional independence, instrumental independence, and interdependence (Kortegast & Boisfontaine 2015; Gibbs 2007). The coding process allowed for all of the data to be broken into smaller, more meaningful segments from which to produce and identify significant findings (Hennink et al. 2011). The coded data was then interpreted to produce thematic findings that are supported by the data and past literature (Creswell 2014). As a qualitative case study, the goal was to end with descriptive, heuristic findings from the analysis.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was gained through Anglia Ruskin University's Departmental Research Ethics Panel following the standards of the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018). Additionally, Midwest College and the gatekeeper granted approval to complete this research and access their study abroad student population. Several ethical methods were employed to provide protection to the participants and clearly communicate the expectations of the study (Newton Suter, 2012). Both Midwest College and the student participants were assigned pseudonyms to enhance anonymity (Kortegast & Boisfontiane 2015).

## Findings

The participants all agreed that studying abroad is a once-in-a-lifetime experience and expressed a sense of gaining independence while abroad. The following sections explore the major findings of each of the components (i.e. instrumental independence, emotional independence, interdependence) identified in Chickering and Reisser's third vector, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, as well as how aspects of Midwest College's hybrid model programs were beneficial to the students' development.

### Instrumental Independence

Instrumental independence encompasses a student's ability to problem solve critically on their own, and to act appropriately on the ideas generated (Chickering and Reisser 1993). Students with instrumental independence should be able to find information they need and be autonomously mobile. All of the participants mentioned examples of instrumental independence. Sarah expressed how during her time in London she had to "provide everything for myself;" stating that she had to problem solve if she wanted to eat, get around the city, or find ways to entertain herself. The act of figuring out how to do these things and then accomplishing them encapsulates the idea of instrumental independence. Three primary aspects of instrumental independence emerged from the data: cooking, traveling, and overcoming language barriers.

#### Cooking

At their home institution in the United States, all of the participants, including the visiting students, live in residence halls and have access to a cafeteria for most of their meals. When the students moved abroad, all of the participants (with the exception of the two participants who stayed with host families in Spain) lived in flat accommodations where they were responsible for grocery shopping and cooking for themselves for all their meals. Five students specifically mentioned this during their interview. They felt they had grown

because they learned to navigate grocery shopping, cooking, and budgeting for themselves in a new culture and environment. Several of them specifically mentioned that they now feel better prepared for adulthood after graduation. As Connor explained:

The biggest shock for me when I was going over there was going to the grocery store for the first time... You cook for yourself three weeks straight and then you start to realize I can do this, I can handle [this].

The growth in instrumental independence appears from these students' ability to problem solve their need for food, including traveling to the grocery store, buying food, and cooking.

### Traveling

For all of the participants, the opportunity to travel was one of the main reasons they chose to study abroad. This experience led to the development of increased instrumental independence as they planned international trips and navigated cultural differences. Four of the participants had no previous international travel experience; the four who had travelled had done so on a short-term basis and were not responsible for planning any aspect of the trip. One student had previously lived in Costa Rica.

Katie said, "The trips that I took, that I planned and the places that I traveled to. Just seeing other cities in Spain helped me gain a lot of independence." She continued by explaining that the process of planning the logistics of the trips and determining a backup travel plan helped her gain independence. Her ability to determine that she wanted to travel to a certain city and following through on that desire gave her confidence. Many students reflected and shared examples of how they had gained freedom in personal decision-making, a key attribute of instrumental independence.

Six of the nine students traveled on trips by themselves while they were abroad. These solo excursions increased their independence as they had to navigate foreign countries on their own, planning and problem solving without the help of others. Several of these students also experienced a level of emotional independence (another component of moving through autonomy toward interdependence) through traveling solo as they were unable to rely on others for emotional support. Liz said:

There were a few trips I did just completely on my own and that's a different experience than when you go with people. I found that really rewarding because you're off on your own and you realize that when you get back that if you can do something like that on your own. You just come back more confident and just excited about certain things.

An increased sense of instrumental and emotional independence indicates developmental growth through travel while studying abroad.

### Language Barrier and Cross-Cultural Communication

Overcoming the language barrier and learning to communicate cross-culturally is an instrumental skill that many students expressed pride in. Katie, who studied in Spain, described her experience:

Gaining independence in being able to communicate with people and having the confidence to be able to speak in another language, even though I know I probably have a weird accent when they hear me. Just go[ing] for it.

The students who studied in the United Kingdom also felt they experienced growth through overcoming language barriers during their travels, despite studying abroad in an English-speaking country. Madison, who studied in London, explained, "I feel like I've become a lot more independent and lot better at problem solving because [of]... traveling and trying to figure out the language barriers."

Finally, Katie, who studied in Spain, felt that her primary area of development was in her academic independence. She explained how her classes were taught completely in Spanish, which required her to overcome barriers through extensive studying, stating, "I also think it just made me a better student when I came back." While not completely related to Chickering's idea of student development, an overlap of academic independence links with instrumental independence in this respect.

### Emotional Independence

Chickering and Reisser (1993) describe emotional independence as a diminishing need for approval and affection from support networks like family and friends in order to pursue their own interests or convictions. Participants did not mention examples of emotional independence as often as instrumental independence, though many students mentioned increased confidence and self-reliance. Through the coding process, the complex impact that relationships had on the student experience abroad became evident. In particular, participant relationships with the other American students within their cohorts and relationships with family and friends back home influenced their development.

### Confidence and Self-Reliance

For some students, studying abroad taught them that they do not need to be as reliant on reassurance from others. Anna stated she did not feel as reliant on her relationships and would not be afraid to move far away from family and friends. Furthermore, Liz, who studied in Vienna, explained:

I've never spent so much time on my own. At school [in the United States] you're always around your best friends. You constantly have feedback from other people and there are a lot of times you're over there [in Vienna] and I didn't have that constant feedback. So just having that alone time and having to come up with that feedback on your own helped me grow... a lot.

The students on the Bangor, Wales program all mentioned the impact of the Outdoor Pursuits, a class offered by Midwest College that involves visiting national parks in Wales and experiencing nature through activities such as surfing, hiking, and kayaking. Conner explained the impact of this class on his emotional independence:

I really just learned a lot about myself, what my limitations are and what my limitations might not be. A lot of that had to do with Outdoor Pursuits. I honestly just [learned about my] mental limitations, and then I felt that I broke down my limitations.

## Relationships

All the participants mentioned relationships in various capacities. Two main patterns emerged. First, the other students in the Midwest College study abroad cohort influenced participants' emotional independence. Second, relationships back home had the power to hinder growth in emotional independence. We look at each of these in turn.

### Midwest College Study Abroad Cohort

Every participant discussed the friendships they had developed with the other U.S. students in their Midwest College study abroad cohort. Seven of the nine participants were not friends with any of the other students prior to leaving the United States. Many expressed they were nervous about making friends prior to the program starting. Through the experience of studying abroad, many students made close friendships and have maintained them since returning to the United States. They expressed that creating new friendships allowed them to grow. Connor, who did not know any of the other Bangor students, explained:

I would say it was more worthwhile not knowing anybody going over there. If you had brought a whole group of your friends, I just feel like that stunts your personal growth just being with the same [people]. Then you're basically just going to [Midwest College], just at a different location.

Anna had a close friend on the London program with her but explained that she and her friend intentionally did not room together and were aware of doing things separate of one another. Liz, who studied abroad in Vienna with

her sister, specifically stated, “I don’t think it stopped any of my growing there.” Both did not view knowing someone as counterproductive to their growth.

Although most students expressed the positive aspect of being able to make new friends and create lasting relationships with the American cohort, several participants were also aware of the negative impacts. For example, many students wish they would have had more contact with students from the host country but felt at times it was difficult to get to know locals. Sarah, who studied in London, described her Midwest College cohort in the following way: “Sometimes we were in like a little bubble and we just traveled around like we are the American pack.”

### Family and Friends Back Home

Approximately half of the participants felt they had regular or healthy communication with people back home and that it had little impact on their experience. However, for the other students, their relationships with friends and family back in the United States had complex implications for their abroad experiences. Three examples include Derek, Katie, and Matthew. First, Derek expressed regret in how frequently he talked with family and friends back home, citing that he spoke with his girlfriend back in the United States daily. He perceived his experience might have been a lot different had he not talked to her so much. He felt it would have been healthier for him to immerse himself more in his present circumstances.

Additionally, both Katie and Matthew are examples of how living abroad made them realize how much they want to be near family and friends. As Katie said, “One thing I learned was just the importance of family and friends and keeping in contact with them. If I ever was living abroad again, I think it would be really important to have my family or friends with me.” Matthew specifically mentioned his affection for his hometown. Before he left to study abroad, Matthew thought that the experience may reveal to him that he would like to live abroad for an extended period of time. However, his experience made him realize how much he likes his hometown and US culture; he no longer has a desire to travel. He further explained, “I think that I really learned about things that are important to me. I learned how much my friends back home mean to me and how much I like America. I respect how things go around here more.”

Furthermore, several students acknowledge that deciding to go abroad was a difficult decision for them because they did not want to miss a semester at their home institution with their friends. For example, Connor demonstrated independence because he chose to study abroad despite the internal debate, he had prior to making the decision. He said:

[The thing] holding me back [from deciding to go abroad] was all the time I was going to miss [Midwest College]. It was real to me that everyone else

back here has lives for the six months when I'm gone. They keep moving; they don't stay in the same place when I left.

## Interdependence

The concept of interdependence, according to Chickering and Reisser (1993), embraces the idea of better understanding the connectedness of our relationships while respecting each other's autonomy. Ruth, who studied in Spain, said "[Studying abroad] has helped me realize that there is a world out there and that I need to go see it." This statement was echoed by most of the participants; they felt they had gained global understanding. Six of the participants explained their increased interdependence by sharing their increased understanding of being a US American.

## Global Awareness

All of the students perceived that their perspective of the world has been broadened. Sarah explained, "I feel more independent since studying abroad. I definitely feel like my mind has been more open to different cultures and what other people are experiencing." This was echoed by Katie who said:

It just gave me a lot more respect for Spain as a country. It's really eye-opening to see that this is someone else's home too. That's their way of life and they wouldn't change that for the world, just like we wouldn't change where we live.

While the participants claimed their internal perspective had changed, most did not list any changes in their actions that demonstrate global citizenship. Primarily, students described how their plans for the future have changed because they studied abroad. For example, three students are planning on studying or moving abroad again in the future. As part of the Granada, Spain program, the students take a trip to Morocco where they met students unable to travel to the US due to visa restrictions; Ruth reflected on that experience:

I'm back to normal, but I'm not doing anything about it. I'm not like, "Oh my God! Let's liberate these people, let's get them to the US" I'm not doing anything like that. When I was there, I was like, "Oh my God, I want to help these people, I want to change this; we need to do something about it." Now I'm just like, "I'm sorry."

## Being American

The students studied abroad during and directly after the controversial 2016 United States presidential election. Six of the participants mentioned that the election significantly impacted their global worldview. They explained that it increased their understanding of the

interconnectedness of the world. Anna indicated that her global awareness had increased:

Especially because the election was going on, I didn't ever really think how connected we [Americans] were to the world and how much we impacted other people as well until all these people were having political conversations with me and they were really passionate about it.

Connor was another student who felt a greater awareness of himself as an American. He explained that his awareness of the United States and the role it plays in international relations increased; he felt he was able to figure out what being an American meant to him. Madison, who took classes at a host university in London, labeled herself the "token American," meaning that the other students in the class often looked to her for the general U.S. perspective. Liz also reflected on her experience:

We were also there during the election, which was kind of impactful on your overall perspective because everyone talks about American politics there. That really broadened even just my American view; I thought about my home culture differently after being there and it just opens your mind to seeing all the things that are out there and opportunities.

### Hybrid Model Program Characteristics

Amongst the previously discussed findings, the participants mentioned several components being beneficial to their development abroad that are characteristic of the hybrid model program. First, the US cohort, an aspect of the hybrid model, impacted their development as discussed earlier. Students also indicated that the internship placements and resident directors were valuable. For the three students who completed internships abroad, they all indicated that these internships had a major impact, increasing their awareness of their field abroad.

Additionally, six of the participants stated that having the support of the resident directors was helpful and taught them to explore and experience more of the culture, thus expanding their interdependence and reflection. Sarah, who studied in London, explained:

[The resident director] is always trying to get us to go see different things. I would've never thought to go see symphony or a football match or anything like that. He makes it very easy to transition in and transition out [of studying abroad]. He always wants to get your ideas out about how you're feeling and what you're missing.

Other aspects mentioned, though less significantly, were homestays for the students in Spain, as well as the planned excursions and the classes offered through Midwest College, which helped students branch out and experience new things.

## Discussion

All of the participants in this study perceived some personal growth and development in line with the vector components of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) autonomy and interdependence through their semester abroad in a hybrid model program. However, the data does not clearly delineate whether this development is directly related to the characteristics of a hybrid model program or if independence and interdependence are outcomes of studying abroad regardless of the program type.

While students did mention several hybrid model aspects as impactful to their time abroad, determining whether these isolated program characteristics had a direct impact on development abroad is difficult. As mentioned earlier, Wiedenhoeff's (2011) quantitative study did not find any statistically significant findings that connected personal growth with particular elements of study abroad program design. Furthermore, the Study Abroad Evaluation Project (Carlson et al. 1991; Opper et al. 1990) examined 82 study abroad programs across five countries during the 1980s. "They speculated that complex settings more than single, isolated characteristics of individuals, programs or experiences are more likely to shape learning outcomes" (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005, p. 317). Therefore, the findings are inconclusive on the impacts of single characteristics of hybrid models on student development.

## Recurring Themes

Several major and recurring themes emerged from the presented findings: instrumental autonomy, relationships with the cohort, and a sense of American identity. These themes demonstrate the complex impact of studying abroad on student development and how these students perceived this development.

### Instrumental Autonomy

Participants unanimously perceived development in their independence, especially instrumental independence, while studying abroad through Midwest College's hybrid model programs. General studies on students' freedom and growth in autonomy over the course of the undergraduate experience have been examined in a variety of forms. Chickering and Reisser (1993) describe developed independence: "When students can rely on their own ability to get the information they need, move toward goals of their own choosing, and

navigate from one place to another... they can function as responsible adults” (p. 117). Through the living arrangements, Midwest College’s study abroad programs allow students to learn these adult responsibilities, such as cooking and money management. Furthermore, the independent travel encouraged through the program cultivates growth in instrumental autonomy, which is supported by Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) student development theory.

Black and Duhon’s (2006) study on personal development in business students who studied abroad for a summer in London found their independence grow significantly. Furthermore, Thomlison (1991) found that students perceived growth foremost in their “confidence in traveling abroad,” followed by development in their “sense of personal independence” (p. 24). The findings here reflect this as the students felt their travel experiences increased their independence. Additionally, Williams’s (2005) study supported the claim that study abroad students grow in their development of intercultural communication skills, identifying effective cross-cultural communication as a characteristic of independence. Most of this study’s participants indicated growth in independence from overcoming language barriers, both foreign languages and differences in regional English usage.

## Relationships

The most complex findings emerged around the impact of relationships on development. The findings indicated that the participants perceived that their friendships with the cohort impacted their experience and independence in both positive and negative ways. Chickering and Reisser (1993) identify friendships and student communities as key influences on student development. While past research has been conclusive regarding increased autonomy from parents during the college years, independence from peers and the influence of friendship networks has been inconclusive (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). The importance of strong interpersonal relationships cannot be overemphasized, especially during transitional phases in life. Friendships have been identified as the primary means for the adaptation, acculturation, and satisfaction of international students (Hendrickson et al. 2011). These relationships relate to the participants in this research because their cohort gave them the opportunity to reflect and define their growth with students experiencing those same changes.

Vande Berg et al. (2009) found, “Students who took courses alongside other US students, or in classes featuring a mixture of US, host culture, and other international students, showed greater IDI [Intercultural Development Inventory] gains than students who studied in courses made up entirely of host country students” (p.21). The participants in this research all took courses alongside their cohort as a requirement of the Midwest College hybrid model program, as well as spending time together outside of class. The ability for the

participants to establish new relationships with their cohort positively influenced their independence.

Conversely, participants indicated that they felt they would have been able to immerse more fully if they had the opportunity to meet more people from the host country. A weakness of the hybrid model is that it can make it more difficult than full-immersion model programs to develop lasting friendships with host country citizens (Vande Berg et al. 2012), similar to island programs.

### Being American

Six of the participants indicated that their perceptions of their identity as a US American changed, impacting their interdependence and global understanding. This sense of US identity is an aspect of social identification and is important to consider when designing study abroad programs (Savicki & Cooley 2011; Dolby, 2004). The hybrid model offers unique opportunities in this design, since students have exposure to other US students, while also interacting regularly with host nationals. Savicki and Cooley (2011) conducted a quantitative study comparing students who studied abroad to students who did not. They found that the study abroad experience impacted the students' US identity and increased their levels of intercultural adjustment abroad. Interaction with a foreign culture can increase home culture identity.

Dolby's (2004) study argued that the "encounter with an American self" (p. 151) was the most significant impact from the research participants' experience abroad. Increased national identity influences students' global awareness and understanding of interdependence. Students studying through Midwest College demonstrated awareness of their nationality by both interacting with other Americans in their program, while also encountering their host country through external classes and internships, which they stated increased their awareness of the US place in the global context.

### Implications for Study Abroad

This study did not produce decisive evidence towards which specific program characteristics influenced student development. How these factors interact to produce ideal student outcomes is a complex issue that requires further research. However, based on the students' perceptions of their development in autonomy and interdependence, a few implications have emerged in light of the data.

Vande Berg et al. (2009) found that having intercultural mentors on site of the study abroad program helped students make greater gains. The participants of this research felt the resident directors pushed them outside their comfort zone and encouraged students to try new experiences. This could indicate the importance of an on-site resident director, common in hybrid

model programs. This links back to the importance of Sanford's (1966) challenge-support theory which, if applied in study abroad, could improve the student experience by providing the correct amount of support to maximize development. Specifically, the resident director can engage students in intentional conversation and reflection, create purposeful cultural excursions, and set up meaningful internship placements.

As previously discussed, the findings here indicate that having a US cohort while abroad positively contributes to student development in many ways. Perhaps study abroad practitioners need to work harder towards finding a balance in student interactions with the cohort and host citizens, as both are beneficial in different ways. The US cohort allows for reflection, while friendships with host citizens allow for increased interdependence (Hendrickson et al. 2011).

Finally, travel deeply impacts student development. Study abroad practitioners can provide the opportunity to travel through intentional programming of excursions and trips, which encourages students to explore new areas and may increase awareness of interdependence. In addition, practitioners can equip students with resources and tools for independent travel, in order to assist students in developing instrumental independence. Vande Berg et al. (2009) and Dwyer (2004) both concluded that beneficial student outcomes are derived regardless of program model. All of these findings point to the importance of intentional program intervention regardless of the program model.

## Conclusion

Understanding the limitations of any study helps understand its context and where to go next. The findings of this study are not generalizable, being limited to the experiences of the participants through Midwest College. While this does limit the application of the findings, the interviews provide in-depth information. Further research might use a broader focus of students or investigate other hybrid model programs to look for similarities. Another critique could be the reliance on the self-assessment and perceptions of students on their own growth. Some researchers have pointed out that this is not the most reliable way to determine development in students (Paige and Vande Berg, 2012). However, students' own perceptions are still valid because this interpretivist study is investigating experiences. Additionally, researchers have found no reportable difference between self-perceived student growth and externally assessed development (Paige, Harvey, and McCleary 2012).

In the growing and complex field of study abroad, this brief inquiry has brought more questions to the surface. Further research recommendations include the examination of the various types of study abroad models. For example, a more comparative quantitative approach would prove beneficial to

determine if isolated program characteristics contribute to student development in specific ways. This study examined one of Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors of Student Development as it relates to hybrid model programs. Additional research could be conducted based on the other vectors, such as how an American cohort in a hybrid program influences vector four, *developing mature interpersonal relationships* (1993). Finally, future research could include exploring the variable impact of home and host culture relationships on student development while abroad and could delve further into the growth and change in US American identity in the hybrid model context.

In hindsight, several opportunities were missed to ask participants to expand on different aspects of their time abroad; however, the data produced provided saturated findings for the scope of this study. Secondly, the scope of this study limited how far the students reflected upon their experiences (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2000). Furthermore, having a participant who studied in Mexico for the quota sampling of all of Midwest College's hybrid programs would have increased the accuracy of overall representation. Finally, if the research time frame had been longer, it would have been advantageous to employ another method of data collection, such as collecting reflective writing from the students, or even quantitative data. Multiple methods of data collection would have provided more thorough data and have allowed for validity in the form of triangulation (Newton Suter 2012).

The goal of this study was to provide insight into how students perceived their development in a hybrid model study abroad program, using Chickering and Reisser's (1993) third vector of autonomy and interdependence as a conceptual framework. The purpose was to explore the student experience from the participant perspective and context. The data showed that students who study abroad through Midwest College's hybrid model programs perceive growth in their instrumental and emotional independence, as well as their interdependence, indicating the significance of program intervention in study abroad.

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