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Study Abroad: Perspectives from Historically Underrepresented Student Populations

Meghan Ecker-Lyster
University of Kansas, meecker@ku.edu

Nadzeya Kardash
University of Kansas, nadia@ku.edu

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Study Abroad: Perspectives from Historically Underrepresented Student Populations

Cover Page Footnote

The authors listed above certify that they have no competing interests.

Study Abroad: Perspectives from Historically Underrepresented Student Populations

ABSTRACT

Research clearly outlines the many positive benefits associated with study abroad programs (e.g., Arghode et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2019). Unfortunately, the majority of undergraduate students who participate in these experiences are from affluent backgrounds. To increase access to study abroad opportunities for all students, including historically underrepresented student groups (e.g., first-generation college student, lower-income background), higher education institutions need to offer affordable study abroad options. To aid institutions with this task, the current qualitative investigation provides critical insights into students' perceptions of an affordable, abbreviated study abroad model. The findings from this study highlight the overall program model as a key driver in a student's decision to pursue a study abroad experience. Specifically, students indicated that a short travel experience designed specifically for underrepresented student groups was an ideal model, as this structure was affordable and welcoming.

Keywords: study abroad, underrepresented students, qualitative research

Preparing students for their transition from college into the “real world” is an essential task for higher education. Unfortunately, many college graduates report that they lack the necessary experiences and network connections to successfully make the transition from a college student to a gainfully employed adult (Murphy et al., 2014). This concerning lack of perceived preparation is especially prevalent among historically underrepresented student populations (Pulliam et al., 2017). To mitigate these concerns, higher education institutions should provide hands-on experiences and opportunities that are intentionally designed



Authored by
Meghan E. Ecker-Lyster (*University of Kansas*)
Nadzeya Kardash (*University of Kansas*)

to serve and meet the unique needs of underrepresented students at their institution. To aid institutions in this pursuit, this paper provides an in-depth investigation of students' interactions with and perceptions of a study abroad career exploration program.

Institutional Benefits of Study Abroad

Research has identified study abroad as an important strategy to increase postsecondary retention and completion rates. Students who participate in study abroad programs are more likely to persist in higher education and secure their postsecondary degree (Twobmly et al., 2012; Engel, 2017). For example, 93% of students within the Florida State System who participated in study abroad earned their degree compared to only 64% of non-participants (Posey, 2003). Similarly, students in Texas who studied abroad had a 60% chance of graduating in four-years compared to non-participants who had only a 45% chance (Barclay-Hamir, 2011). The benefits of study abroad transcend racial inequalities often seen within higher education, as research has documented the positive benefits of study abroad for diverse populations of students. For example, researchers examined the impact of study abroad within the University System of Georgia and found that the effects of participating in a study abroad



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program was especially pronounced for students of color whose graduation rates were 18% higher than their peers with alike demographic characteristics who lacked similar experiences (Redden, 2010). Given the significant impact study abroad has on retention and graduation rates, it is not surprising that this strategy is often cited as a high-impact practice within higher education (Kuh, 2009; Stebleton et al., 2013). This strategy not only serves to increase the desired higher education outcomes, but also provides an outlet for students to deepen their academic and personal development.

The Impact of Study Abroad on Student Development

Many undergraduate students choose to participate in a study abroad program as a method to enrich their college experience. Research supports the notion that study abroad can enhance students' academic and personal growth and development (e.g., Arghode et al., 2020; Tillman, 2012; Movassaghi et al., 2014; Lokkesmore et al., 2016). Students who engage in a study abroad experience are provided an opportunity to compare their cultural norms and values to those of the host country, which helps students broaden their perspectives and cultural awareness (Soto, 2015). This expanded worldview can positively influence student's decision-making skills, as it provides them alternative perspectives to consider during the decision-making process (Norris & Gillespie, 2008). Study abroad can

also expand student's social network and enhance their social capital. During a study abroad experience, students are exposed to peers and instructors from a wide range of backgrounds, and as a result, the interactions and friendships built through study abroad can serve as an avenue to broaden students' social networks (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Horn & Fry, 2013). Furthermore, Petersdotter and colleagues (2016) found that a high number of social contacts made during a study abroad experience served as a mediating factor that influenced the developmental trajectory of student's self-efficacy.

Study abroad has also been found to have an impact on students' career choices, career adaptability, and career satisfaction (Arghode et al., 2020; Meyer-Lee & Evans, 2007; Franklin, 2010). For example, the networking opportunities created through study abroad experiences often spur interest in international careers (Murphy et al., 2014; Tillman, 2012). To better understand the long-term impact of these experiences, Franklin (2010) surveyed study abroad alumni a decade after they participated in a study abroad experience. Franklin's study found that the majority of the respondents attributed their career choices and interests to their study abroad experience. This finding was consistent across the various study abroad formats (e.g., semester, yearlong, etc.). In addition to impacting career interests, study abroad experiences also enhanced students' overall employability prospects after graduation (Di Pietro, 2015; Murphy et al.,

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2014; Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Tillman, 2012; Kratz & Netz, 2018).

Study abroad experiences are especially salient for historically underrepresented minority groups because these experiences provide an opportunity to potentially explore their heritage and develop a deeper understanding of their cultural and racial identities (Lee & Green, 2016). Such experiences may also help to develop a stronger national identity because minoritized students and students of color are first perceived as Americans when traveling abroad (Sweeney, 2013). In a study examining the perceived benefits of study abroad among historically underrepresented student populations, Milton (2016) found that growth in independence and the ability to step out of your comfort zone were the most valuable qualities cited from the study abroad experience. Not only do underrepresented students perceive themselves as more open-minded and autonomous after engaging in a study abroad program, but they also report stronger feelings of being better prepared to solve problems and understand global matters (Smith et al., 2013). Given the many advantages of study abroad education, it is necessary that this opportunity is accessible to any college student who may be interested, regardless of their socioeconomic status or background characteristics (e.g., first-generation college student, racial/ethnic minority).

Disparities in Study Abroad Participation

During the 2018-2019 academic year over 345,000 U.S. college students participated in a study abroad experience, which accounted for nearly 2% of all students enrolled at institutions of higher education within the U.S. (NAFSA, 2021). Unfortunately, the majority of students who are participating and subsequently benefiting from these opportunities are predominately white students (NAFSA, 2021). Roughly only 7% of study abroad participants are African American/Black, 11% are Hispanic, and less than 1% are American Indian/Alaska Native (NAFSA, 2021). There are many reasons that contribute to this unequal distribution of engagement with study abroad experiences. Socioeconomic status (SES) is one of the most pronounced factors that influence whether or not a student will participate in a study abroad program. The impact of SES is illustrated by the fact that high cost associated with study abroad experiences is one the primary reasons students cite for not participating in these types of experiences (Brux & Fry, 2010; Lörz et al., 2015; Presley et al., 2010; Relyea et al., 2008; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Lingo, 2019). As a result, students from lower SES backgrounds are significantly less likely to seek out study abroad programs as part of their undergraduate experience (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Thrush, 2016). Students from lower SES backgrounds have a palpable financial disadvantage compared to higher SES peers as they may incur not only a high

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program cost but face the opportunity cost of forgoing earnings while studying abroad (Gordon et al., 2014).

The literature also highlights family obligations, concerns around a lack of cultural and social capital needed to successfully navigate these experiences, and limited access to information about how to access these opportunities as other common barriers that preclude many students from pursuing study abroad (Brux & Fry, 2010; Salisbury et al., 2009; Salisbury et al., 2011; Lingo, 2019; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Thrush, 2016). A recent study on social stratification in study abroad participation (Lingo, 2019) found that the level of parental education plays a role in a student's decision to seek study abroad opportunities. Students whose parents have college degrees are significantly more likely to engage in study abroad practices compared to first-generation college students (i.e., students whose parents or guardians did not earn a postsecondary degree). Since many students from lower SES backgrounds are also first-generation college students this specific subgroup of students tends to encounter a combination of these barriers (e.g., lack of parental knowledge/support, limited finances) making it very difficult for them to access study abroad opportunities. As a result, many students from historically underrepresented backgrounds often report feeling unwelcomed or unprepared to participate in study abroad programs (Lingo, 2019).

Due to financial constraints and high costs associated with studying abroad, institutions are seeking new, creative ways to offer opportunities specifically designed to meet the unique needs of students from lower-income, first-generation, and/or ethnic minority backgrounds. The duration of the study abroad program has often been cited as a consideration for whether or not a student will partake in the experience. Many students from lower-income backgrounds report that they cannot participate in a traditional semester or yearlong experience due to family and job responsibilities, along with concerns about the high cost associated with a longer-term program (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Thrush, 2016). To address this concern postsecondary institutions have begun to offer short-term study abroad opportunities (e.g., a few weeks during the summer or winter terms). Research indicates that these short-term study abroad experiences are also highly beneficial to students with regards to enhancing student's self-confidence and widen their career outlook (Nguyen et al., 2014; Slotkin et al., 2012). Given these positive benefits, an abbreviated study abroad model is one way institutions can mitigate the financial and job-related concerns often associated with the longer-term models as a method to provide a more accessible option for all students. By offering students an opportunity for self-exploration in an unfamiliar environment and a possibility to investigate international career prospects at a lower cost, these programs could be instrumental in closing the opportunity gap

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that currently exists with study abroad programs.

An Abbreviated-Study Abroad Model

The referred study abroad program included in this study was specifically designed to meet the needs of historically underrepresented student populations (e.g., low-income, first-generation, and minority college students) attending a predominately white institution (PWI). The program (i.e., International Careers Program) was developed as a collaborative effort between the University's Career Center and TRIO Student Support Services Program (TRIO SSS). The University's Career Center provided the expertise and infrastructure necessary to develop the career exploration side of the program, and the TRIO SSS program served as the vehicle to recruit students and provide support. Students' TRIO program advisors provided one-on-one guidance and advising to help students navigate the study abroad process. The program was delivered as a two-part sequence: the first part required students to enroll in a career exploration course for college credit during the spring semester followed by a ten-day travel abroad experience that occurred right before the summer term began. The course curriculum introduced students to international careers and provided them the skills and resources needed to navigate traveling abroad. The second half of the program was aimed at providing students an opportunity to learn more about careers abroad through an

immersive travel experience. The travel experience was held in Costa Rica, and students were provided structured opportunities to network with employers in the region, as well as international peers who were studying at the local universities and colleges.

Purpose of Study

This qualitative study examined students' perceptions and interactions with an abbreviated study abroad program focused on career exposure and exploration. The findings presented throughout this paper help extend the study abroad literature by highlighting how historically underrepresented student groups experience these opportunities. The primary goal of this study was to understand students' reflections on the impact of the short study abroad experience on their future career development and overall personal growth. The following research questions guided the development of this study:

- 1) To what extent did participation in the international career exploration program impact the participants' views about their future employment opportunities?
- 2) How do participants' think this experience influenced the development of their psychosocial skills?
- 3) What aspects of the program's structure and format were appealing to the participants?

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Methods

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a large predominantly white institution (PWI) located in the Midwest region of the U.S. All participants included in this study were active members of the university's TRIO SSS program (to be eligible for TRIO SSS students must meet one of the following eligibility criteria: qualify as a first-generation student,

meet the federal guidelines for low-income status, or have a documented disability that is registered with the university). Students were recruited for the International Careers Program through informational fliers and advising sessions with their TRIO program advisor. Ten students participated in the program and 80% of participants reported that they had never traveled abroad prior to this experience. Demographic information was collected through a self-report survey.

Table 1.
Socio-demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

	Name	Year	Major	Minor	Intended Career	Race	Gender
1	Linda	Sophomore	Pre-Nursing	Spanish	Nurse	African American	F
2	Elizabeth	Freshman	Political Science	None listed	Non-profit that works with low-income/minority populations	White	F
3	Tom	Senior	Psychology	None listed	Occupational Therapist	African American	M
4	Briana	Sophomore	Communication Sciences	Education	Speech Language Pathologist	Multiracial	F
5	Nick	Junior	Sports Management	Business	Sports Agent	African American	M
6	Olivia	Freshman	Business	Spanish	Undecided	African American	F
7	Sherry	Sophomore	Applied Behavior Science	None listed	Physician	African American	F
8	Anna	Sophomore	Anthropology	Religious Studies	Undecided	Multiracial	F
9	Sabrina	Freshman	Microbiology	Spanish	Pathologist	Multiracial	F
10	Aiden	Sophomore	Chemical Engineering	Biomedicine	Engineer	Asian	M

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Table 1 presents students' demographic information, year in college, major and minor degrees, and their intended careers. To protect students' privacy and ensure anonymity, all participant's real names were removed, and pseudonyms were assigned prior to analysis.

Data

The data used for this study were generated from three primary sources: student reflection essays, an online survey, and a focus group discussion. The ten students who participated in the program provided consent to participate in the evaluation study. All ten students completed the reflection essays; five students responded to the online survey; and four students attended the follow-up focus group session.

Procedures

The study utilized qualitative content analysis methodology (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to analyze the three data sources. Participants were asked to submit reflection essays within one week of returning from their travel abroad experience in Costa Rica. The essay format was designed to solicit student feedback on their perceptions of the experience, as well as how the experience impacted their career interests. The following excerpt highlights some of the open-ended questions that were used to guide student's reflections:

- Discuss your assumptions and expectations you had about the program before you participated. How was the actual experience similar or dissimilar from those assumptions and expectations?
- Describe your career choices before you participated in the program.
- Describe how, if at all, your career prospects changed as a result of participating in this experience.

In addition to the essays, students were asked to complete a post-survey designed to solicit feedback on their perceptions of how the experience impacted their personal growth and non-cognitive skills (e.g., self-efficacy, communication skills). Finally, three months after students returned from the travel experience in Costa Rica, they were invited to participate in a follow-up focus group. The focus group was intended to produce a richer data source that could be used to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions and interactions with the program. The focus group used a semi-structured protocol that was designed to obtain additional information on student's expectations and perceptions, as well as an opportunity to follow-up on key preliminary findings from the survey and essay submissions. Specifically, discussion prompts asked students to further reflect on their overall experience with the International Careers Program, as well as how the program influenced their career prospects and personal

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development. The data collected from the three formats were triangulated and analyzed to identify emergent themes and response patterns.

The authors independently reviewed students' survey entries and essay responses to identify emergent themes and patterns. Upon completion of the independent analysis, the authors met to discuss the outcomes and to compare their respective codes. When consensus was reached, the authors summarized the results and used that information to construct a focus group protocol. Questions included on the focus group protocol were intended to solicit additional feedback from participants to confirm key findings from the preliminary analyses of the survey and essay responses, as well as to provide additional details to further illuminate areas where preliminary findings were unclear. Four students participated in the focus group (Oliva, Linda, Elizabeth, and Sherry). The second author facilitated the focus group discussion, and the lead author took detailed observational notes. The focus group session lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded. Again, each author independently analyzed the focus group to identify emergent themes and patterns, and then compared findings and engaged in a discussions until a consensus was achieved regarding the final codes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analytic process member checks were conducted to confirm student claims. For the final analytic step, the authors triangulated all data sources

to understand student's perceptions and interactions with the abbreviated study abroad experience. Findings generated from the study were shared with key program stakeholders during a debriefing meeting to examine and verify the accuracy of the emergent themes and patterns.

Findings

In general, findings revealed that participants did not view the program as having an immediate or direct effect on their career decisions. However, the data indicated that the program had a larger impact on shaping students' perspectives and interactions with a culture different from their own. Three broad themes emerged from the data that provided insights into participants perceptions of the study abroad experience. First, participants reported that the program helped broaden their outlook and understanding of the world around them. Second, participants indicated that the International Careers Programs was a positive experience because of the group dynamics created by the program. Finally, participants acknowledged the structure, and the length of the program as a key driver in their decision to pursue a study abroad opportunity as part of their undergraduate experience. The following section organizes the findings based on these three key themes and provides an assortment of illustrative quotes drawn from the raw data as a vehicle to represent the authentic voice of the student participants.

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Global Perspectives

The first major theme that emerged from the data revealed that the International Career Program provided participants an opportunity to broaden their understanding and perspectives of another culture. The majority (80%) of participants reported that they had never traveled abroad before this experience. Because this was the first-time many participants were able to immerse themselves in another culture, a large portion of the conversation in the follow-up focus group and in the reflection essays was centered on describing and reflecting on the various cultural differences they experienced while they were abroad. For example, participants were surprised and overwhelmed by the road conditions and driving infrastructure they experienced in Costa Rica.

“A cultural shock for me was the driving. It stressed me out. They honk to say you can go, which is different. It seems like stop signs are optional. It was overwhelming.” - Aiden

Participants were also surprised to discover that familiar cultural institutions (e.g., McDonalds) had variations that reflected the local context.

“They even had rice and beans on the menu at McDonalds!” - Olivia

“The McDonalds had a bakery inside; we don’t have that at home.” - Sherry

During several of the group outings participants said they noted that the local Costa Ricans were very accommodating to foreign tourist. As highlighted in the quotes below, these experiences prompted participants to reflect on their own experiences as a U.S. resident:

“In the high tourist areas they really accommodate you. Like they speak English, like that’s what we expect them to do being from the United States. You go into another country and expect them to speak your language. It lets you know our privilege and entitlement. I’m sure that can be annoying.” - Tom

As part of the experience, participants were able to visit the local university where they had the opportunity to interact and network with college peers. Through these conversations participants said they realized that the undergraduate experience in Costa Rica was different than their experience. Many participants were surprised to find out that the students they spoke with in Costa Rica did not work while attending university.

“I found it empowering that they [local university students] thought working and going to school - they thought it was crazy. And for us it is normal, it’s an everyday thing.” - Linda

“Talking to students at the university in Costa Rica was really eye opening. They were asking us if we work and how expensive school is and stuff like that. It was like no

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one in their classes worked, they had to travel like 2 hours on public transportation to get to school and most lived with their families.

This is so different than what we do.”

- Elizabeth

“I want to work and go to school because my job gives me experience for what I want to do, but there are some semesters where I wish I could just go to school. But I don’t really have that option.” - Sherry

While the study abroad program had a well-thought out itinerary to guide the ten-day trip, participants noted several instances when things did not go according to plan (e.g., delayed flights, missed transportation). As a result of the external factors that impacted the travel experience, the consensus among participants was to embrace flexibility while traveling abroad. They all acknowledged that traveling abroad can be incredibly stressful as you learn the area and culture. The quotes below highlight how students coped with the unexpected interruptions to their study abroad experience:

“Use context clues in every situations. There will be times, mainly in the beginning, where you experience stressful situations because you are confused... you cannot expect to be around people similar to you all the time, so be preprepared to use all of your knowledge to address situations appropriately.” - Nick

“Adaptability and flexibility were traits that I have struggled with for the majority of my

life and not being in control was a challenge for me during some aspects of the trip. As time progressed, I learned to adapt and deal with what I cannot control and make the best of every situation I was placed in... this experience taught me that I am more mentally capable of handling adversity than I previously thought and I shouldn’t limit myself to opportunities within my comfort zone.” - Briana

Finally, a few students who participated in the program were minoring in Spanish and wanted to use the experience as an opportunity to practice their Spanish skills. Participants reported that they were surprised that their formal Spanish training did not always translate when they were attempting to engage in a conversation with a native speaker.

“Some of the things we learned in Spanish, that we’re taught, that’s more like their slang. Sometimes I’d say something and they’d [Native Costa Ricans] respond, and I’d think I thought that was something else.” - Sabrina

While students said they wanted to improve their Spanish skills through this experience, they indicated that the ten-day time period where they were abroad was simply not enough time to really impact the development of their Spanish skills. Additionally, participants indicated that many of the residents they interacted with in Costa Rica would speak English as a way to reduce the impact of the language barrier. The short time period coupled with limited opportunities

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where participants had to rely on their Spanish abilities resulted in little to no gains in this area.

"I was surprised that people here [Costa Rica] speak English so well... I am amazed by the fact that English is so common."
- Aiden

"We weren't there long enough for my Spanish to really improve. Also a lot of the people there spoke English really well and when they would interact with us they would just speak English. I wanted to try and practice my Spanish, but their English was a lot better than my Spanish so it made it easier for them to just talk to me in English."
- Olivia

Group Dynamics

The International Careers Program was specifically designed for historically underrepresented student groups, and as such, focused recruitment efforts on TRIO eligible students (i.e., first-generation, low-income, and/or have a documented disability). This strategic recruitment effort was well received by participants. The majority of participants reported that the group dynamics created by the program was a key factor that contributed to the overall success of the experience.

"I really liked that this program was specifically for students who are in TRIO [first-generation, low-income, and/or have a documented disability]." - Aiden

"Going through TRIO with people I knew, and from the same background as me. It was like oh for your first time studying abroad, I wanted that." - Sherry

The cohesive group dynamics helped create a supportive environment where participants felt supported and were able to express vulnerability during challenging disruptions during the trip (e.g., delayed flights, navigating the language barrier).

"Throughout the trip, I learned the significance of having patience and self-control. We went through so much together that could have been worse had we not been able to control ourselves." - Nick

The group structure also provided an opportunity for students to develop deeper connections with their home university peers as well as form relationships with new international peers.

"I was forced to talk to strangers, which helped me to make friends and be more independent." - Linda

Program Structure

The most salient finding from the current study centered around the program structure. Participants said the most important factor that influenced their decision about whether or not they could or would even want to participate in study abroad was the program's model. At the top of their list of

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considerations for participating in study abroad program was cost. All participants reported that money was the most important factor they considered when looking at study abroad opportunities.

"I chose this experience because of money. Realistically even with scholarships, I wouldn't be able to come up with the rest of it [to pay for a full semester study abroad experience]." - Olivia

"I wanted to study abroad, but obviously I couldn't afford to do that all semester. [My TRIO Advisor] recommended this to me as an alternative." - Elizabeth

"When I first saw the email about this program I basically put it in my junk folder and didn't really think too much about it. I never really wanted to study abroad because I knew it just wasn't possible for me. But when I found out that I'd be able to get scholarships and it would fit in my schedule I thought it might be a good opportunity for me to see another culture, I've never been abroad." - Linda

"They offered scholarships for us to even get our passport! They had all the resources we needed, made it super easy." - Sherry

"I never thought I'd be able to afford it or have time for it and therefore may have unconsciously made myself believe I had no interest in traveling out of the country." - Anna

The second most important factor participants considered was the length of the program. Many participants said a semester or yearlong experience would not be possible with their schedules (both class and work).

"Because I work and have summer classes it was a good time - only 2 weeks - because I have to take Organic Chemistry and work this summer, I couldn't do anything longer. That gap between spring semester and summer was perfect, it was really great." - Linda

Finally, several students reported that having the formal class offered during the spring semester and the trip abroad as the culminating experience was an ideal model.

"I liked having the classes prior where we could all discuss everything and get to know each other. The instructors were able to tell us about their experiences too, which was helpful. We didn't have to just read it out of a book." - Elizabeth

"We did a lot of the work before, so we were able to enjoy the moment when we were there [Costa Rica]. I had a friend who did a semester study abroad in India where she had to take classes and do homework while she was there. I liked doing all of that before we left and just being able to enjoy the trip and reflect on the actual experience while I was there." - Olivia

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Discussion

The data generated from this study provides insight into students' perceptions and interactions with an abbreviated study abroad model. Like previous research (Brux & Fry, 2010; Lörz et al., 2015; Presley et al., 2010; Relyea et al., 2008; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Lingo, 2019), participants reported that money was the main factor they considered when deciding whether or not to participate in a study abroad experience. Participants indicated that they selected this abbreviated study abroad experience specifically because it was an affordable option. Findings revealed that cost of attendance was not the only financial consideration they factored into their decision, but also the opportunity cost related to employment. For example, several participants indicated that they appreciated that the travel abroad component of the program was shorter in length and offered in the interim period between spring and summer classes. This was particularly appealing because many participants said they need to work throughout the year, and traditional study abroad programs would not afford them the same opportunities to earn an income while going to school.

Another key finding from this study was the impact of the group dynamics on participants experience. Previous research indicates that historically underrepresented students often feel unwelcome or uniformed about study abroad opportunities, which often precludes their participation in these types of undergraduate experiences (Lingo, 2019). The majority of participants in this study said they appreciated that this opportunity was specifically designed for TRIO students.

Students felt like the experience was more welcoming because it was specifically intended to serve student populations from similar backgrounds. Many participants said they felt more comfortable around this similar group of peers. Additionally, participants felt they were able to get the information and guidance they needed to successfully navigate the study abroad

process. Leveraging the TRIO office and student's respective TRIO advisors as a vehicle to recruit students served as a strategic method to increase accessibility to study abroad opportunities for historically underrepresented student populations.

Previous research has found that study abroad can be an influential strategy to shaping students' career development and interests (e.g., Arghode et al., 2020; Franklin, 2010; Murphy et al., 2014). A central tenant of



“Findings revealed that cost of attendance was not the only financial consideration they factored into their decision, but also the opportunity cost related to employment.”

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the referred study abroad program included in this study was centered on international career development and exposure. As previously mentioned, the study abroad program was a collaborative effort between the University's Career Center and a TRIO SSS program. The program was specifically designed to expose historically underrepresented student groups to international careers. The data generated from this qualitative study did not support the notion that the study abroad experience had a direct impact on participant's career development or interest. All the participants indicated that their career interests and plans had not changed over the course of their experience. Many of the participants indicated that they already had a strong understanding of their career interests prior to engaging with the study abroad program, and they already knew what they wanted to pursue as a career. This finding is interesting given that most of the sample were in the early years of their postsecondary experience. According to a study conducted by Strada Education Network and Gallup (2017) 51% of undergraduate students are not confident in their career path when they enroll in college, and more than half of students change their major at least once. While only time will tell if the students in the current study pursue the careers they described as part of this study, it was clear from participant's responses during the focus group session and reflection essays they had a strong sense of their career aspirations which were largely unrelated and uninfluenced by their study abroad

experience.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this qualitative study. Specifically, the sample size of the students who participated in the study abroad program was relatively small, and the data were collected using a convenience sampling method. Drawing on a readily available sample reduces reliability of the data and limits generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the sample exemplifies one geographic location in Midwest that also reduces generalizability. Finally, the data generated from this study relied on student's self-report analysis of the impact of the study abroad experience on their personal, academic, and career development. While the study offers a rich account of their perceptions of the impact of the program, future research should examine the impact of such a program using more direct assessment measures.


Future Research Directions

Despite the identified limitations the study adds to the existing literature on the value of study abroad experiences for underrepresented student populations. The study provides additional insights to understanding how an affordable, short-term study abroad opportunity can expand student's global perspectives and enhance their non-cognitive development (e.g.,

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practicing patience and adaptability). Future research using larger samples and geographical locations will allow for a more robust examination of the effects of various study abroad formats on student development and career choices for historically underrepresented student populations. Furthermore, quantitative methods may help illuminate the magnitude of the impact of study abroad on student's academic, career development, and personal growth. Finally, a longitudinal investigation of a short-term study abroad program specifically designed for historically underrepresented students could shed light on the potential lasting impacts of this type of program.

Conclusion

This study offers insights into how a well-designed and structured program can help students from underrepresented groups expand their global outlook by providing unique opportunities for students to gain self-confidence, personal growth, and cultural awareness. This study further extends the area of research on specific strategies and practices that higher education can leverage to help better prepare students for the college-to-work transition. 

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