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# Unfolding of COVID-19 Crisis in a Study-Abroad Program: Voices of Stakeholders Involved in the Evacuation

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## Abstract

This qualitative case study documented the unfolding of the COVID-19 crisis that impacted a study-abroad program in Paris between December 2019 and May 2020, culminating in the urgent evacuation of U.S.-affiliated students from France. Framed by Complex Dynamic Systems Theory, chaos theory, and research on study abroad and crisis management, rich data from extensive interviews conducted with nine undergraduate students in the program and the four educational staff members responsible for them were triangulated with external correspondence (e.g., official university emails), local media sources, and governmental documents (e.g., White House statements). This merging allowed reconstructing the context necessary to capture the singular voices of these stakeholders, as they experienced threat, uncertainty, and urgency, filtered by the use of a foreign language and varying intercultural skills during the different phases of the crisis. Recommendations for the management of crises abroad and the future of study abroad are discussed.

## Keywords:

Crisis management, case study, COVID-19, France, double-abroad students

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# Introduction

In March 2020, study-abroad programs around the globe came to an unprecedented halt in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. 81% of U.S.-affiliated students were evacuated from their respective programs and returned to their home countries (Martel, 2020b). Programs had to immediately shift their methods of instruction to online language learning. The field of study-abroad was facing its largest crisis in the past century (Dietrich, 2020).

Researchers in crisis management have defined crises as chaotic, complex, and unpredictable disruptions of pre-existing social systems through which stakeholders (e.g., those experiencing a crisis) will face various degrees of threat, uncertainty, and urgency (Boin & 't Hart, 2007). Although study-abroad programs have faced localized crises in the past (e.g., the 2011 Japanese tsunami), the COVID-19 crisis differed in the sheer volume of its impact, with thousands of students being affected simultaneously worldwide (Martel, 2020a). As the crisis is so recent, little research has yet been conducted regarding its impact on the field of study-abroad. Studies thus far have only presented quantitative data that paint a global picture of students and programs affected. With this "unprecedented halt (…), the field of education abroad will have no choice but to reinvent itself" (Dietrich, 2020, pp. 7-8). To do so, it is our imperative educational responsibility to ensure that the voices of those at the epicenter of the crisis be fully heard.

This qualitative case study aimed to progress this line of research by investigating how the thirteen stakeholders of a study-abroad program in Paris experienced the unfolding COVID-19 crisis. The opportunity to conduct this study emerged in the midst of another research project, originally tracking the potential effects of smartphone use on the development of language proficiency and intercultural competence during study abroad. As it became evident that COVID-19 was impacting the program under study, the research methodology was modified to fully contextualize and capture the voices of its stakeholders as they experienced the crisis. The findings of the originally intended research will be presented elsewhere, as they fall outside the scope of the current study.

Following Faulkner's (2001) phases of escalation and recovery involved in crises, this developmental research documented the evolution of circumstances that led to the urgent evacuation of these U.S.-affiliated students from France, from December 2019 to May 2020. The study also aimed to provide concrete recommendations for study-abroad programs for navigating the long-term consequences of COVID-19.

# Literature Review

## Theoretical Framework

This study was framed by Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) and chaos theory. CDST is a transdisciplinary framework used in developmental research that aims at capturing the processes through which phenomena unfold dynamically, i.e., what changes occur over time (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). CDST is well-suited for the study of crises as it allows "researchers to trace and to describe how patterns emerge 'bottom up' from components interacting in dynamic systems in order to explain change and growth" (Larsen-Freeman, 2017, p. 15). Complementarily, chaos theory allows examining crises' development holistically by recognizing their "random, complex, unpredictable and dynamic nature" (Speakman & Sharpley, 2012, p. 70; see also, Ritchie, 2004). This study set to highlight patterns of changes as well as unpredictable episodes in the manner in which stakeholders experienced the unfolding COVID-19 crisis. It was further framed by research on crisis management and study abroad.

## Crises

While the term crisis encompasses a wide variety of adversity (e.g., terrorist attacks, epidemics, natural disasters), all crises are accompanied by three fundamental components: threat, uncertainty, and urgency (Boin & 't Hart, 2007). Indeed, crises can be defined as urgent threats – whether real or perceived – to an organization's core values or life-sustaining functions, which must be dealt with under uncertainty (Boin & 't Hart, 2007).

Several factors interact to determine the extent to which stakeholders in a crisis perceive threat, urgency, and uncertainty. Dombroski et al. (2006) argued that the extent to which people perceive and react to a threat is simultaneously influenced by their risk assessment to themselves or their loved ones, availability of resources, organization of an official response, and support or hesitancy from authorities or the media. Regarding the latter, the authors found that the "media strongly influence decision making" (p. 1682), and that experts "predicted about a 10% reduction in compliance [to shelter-in-place or evacuate] should the media be skeptical rather than supportive" (p. 1684). This is particularly important, as "the news media is saturated with stories about COVID-19, [which] has resulted in many people feeling overwhelmed, confused, and anxious" (Rhan, 2020, p. 7). This study integrated local news from France and the U.S. to better contextualize the media environment that may have conditioned stakeholders' singular reactions to the developing crisis.

Media and information provided by decision-makers can also contribute to uncertainty. Indeed, the sheer volume of information often provided coupled with "the dynamic and complex nature of the environment" ultimately results "in ambiguity of information" for stakeholders (Shapiro & Gilbert, 1975, p. 21). This study incorporated external correspondences from home universities and governmental documents to give insight into the type of information provided by decision-makers that structured stakeholders' responses.

Moreover, in a comparative study on management of influenza emergencies, Wei et al. (2018) established that "people's perceptions of different stakeholders are significantly correlated with their protective actions in response to pandemic influenza" (p. 52). Perception of higher credibility led to higher compliance with protective actions (e.g., hand washing and mask wearing) by those experiencing the crisis. Finally, as Speakman and Sharpley (2012) show, crises are usually "induce[d] by a trigger event" (p. 70), which results in "a strong pressure to make a quick response" (Shapiro & Gilbert, 1975, p. 24), and contributes to a sense of urgency. This study thus set to identify instances of perceived credibility of information by stakeholders, as well as the trigger event that escalated events into a crisis and led to a perception of urgency.

## Unfolding of Crises

Researchers have shown that crises are byproducts of escalation that develop from multiple causes, interacting over time to produce a threat with devastating potential (Boin & 't Hart, 2007). Faulkner (2001) theorized that this escalation process entails three phases: (1) the pre-event phase – when action can still be taken to prevent crises, (2) the prodromal phase – when it becomes apparent that a crisis is imminent and inevitable, and (3) the emergency phase – when the effects of the crisis have been felt and action must be taken. However, if a crisis is spread over a large geographical area (Ritchie, 2004), it "may be at different stages and hav[e] varying impacts at different locations. That is, the situation can change unexpectedly and evolve at differing rates and outcomes at distinct, separate destinations" (Speakman & Sharpley, 2012, p. 73). Then, the recovery process begins, divided into three other phases (Faulkner, 2001): (4) immediate recovery, (5) long-term recovery and (6) resolution. While the intermediate recovery phase involves addressing stakeholders' short-term needs (e.g., quarantining), the long-term recovery phase entails attending to less-immediate needs (e.g., counseling victims, debriefing to revise crisis management plans). Finally, the resolution phase refers to a restoration of routine.

## Study Abroad Overview

In the last decade, study-abroad programs witnessed a 71% increase in student mobility. Europe has historically been the top host region, welcoming 1.7 of the 5.3 million students mobile in 2017. That year, 258,380 students chose to study in France, and 35% of those settled in Paris. From 2013 to 2018, France also saw a 31% increase in U.S.-affiliated students hosted (Campus France, 2020). The present study thus focused on a study-abroad program for U.S.-affiliated students located in Paris.

Students choose to study abroad for many reasons, including to improve their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Over the years, goals for students in study-abroad programs have shifted from acquiring nativelikeness to becoming interculturally competent speakers able "to interact with 'others', to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives, to be conscious of their evaluations and differences" (Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2017, p. 37). Studies have found that students who are more involved with and have more social networks embedded into the local community are also those who gain the most linguistic and cultural knowledge while abroad (Mitchell et al., 2017; see also, Baker-Smemoe, Dewey, Brown, & Martinsen, 2014). The current study thus argued that opportunities and competence to engage linguistically and culturally with the local population may contribute to the singularity of the experience of a crisis unfolding amongst that population.

## Crises and Study Abroad

According to Choudaha (2017), study-abroad programs in 2013-2020 have been affected by three major events: the economic crisis in China, Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump. These changes will admittedly culminate in a turning point triggered by a fourth event: the COVID-19 crisis. Study-abroad programs have faced many crises in the past, from natural events such as earthquakes and tsunamis (Connell, 2012) to terrorist attacks (e.g., the Paris attacks of 2015). Despite these categorical differences, the notions of threat, urgency, and uncertainty remain the same. For example, in a qualitative report on the 2011 Japanese tsunami that led to the urgent evacuation of study-abroad students, Connell (2012) shows how the media and the U.S. Department of State contributed to further threat and uncertainty, resulting in unduly evacuating students despite safe conditions on site. The author reports that "many of the students wanted to stay. They had just gotten used to life in Japan, figured out how things worked, made life-long friends, and gained confidence" and that

they were frustrated with the "'fear-mongering' news media" that they felt "ruined a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" (p. 6).

As a result of these types of situations, study-abroad programs have had to prepare for the management of crises (Martin, 2017). Indeed, Friend (2012) argues that "hope is not a plan" and that programs must have a crisis management plan that is frequently revised and can be adapted to situations. When enacting a plan, Friend (2012) also explains that clear, concise, and immediate communication is necessary, especially towards students who might be noncompliant with procedures. Furthermore, strong leadership and having a single referent person who communicates information to students is imperative in reducing uncertainty (Shapiro & Gilbert, 1975).

### Present and Future of Study Abroad

As of October 2020, the long-term recovery of study-abroad programs amidst the on-going COVID-19 pandemic remains unresolved. 64% of undergraduate study-abroad programs have been cancelled for Fall 2020 and 97% of higher education institutions have anticipated a decline in study-abroad numbers for 2020-2021 (Martel, 2020b). Dietrich (2020) argues that "the field of education abroad will have no choice but to reinvent itself" (p. 8) and that "this year [will be seen] as a turning point around which education abroad was transformed" (p. 7). Study-abroad programs will need to adapt to the current long-lasting, far-reaching situation, notably with online strategies. As early as April 2020,

> data collection efforts and plans for survival and recovery as a field [were] already underway in the form of program cancellation tracking and quick pivots to online learning models to keep international and intercultural exchange alive even when students aren't able to travel to far-off lands (pp. 5-6).

## Research Question

The current study aimed to answer the following research questions: How did the stakeholders of the selected study-abroad program in Paris experience the unfolding of the different phases of the COVID-19 crisis that led to the evacuation of its U.S.-affiliated students, in terms of perception of threat, uncertainty, and urgency? How did language(s) and interculturality impact this experience and how were they impacted by this experience? Concrete recommendations for navigating future crises abroad, to ensure stakeholders' safety and educational well-being, will be provided in the Discussion section.

# Methods

## Context and Participants

This qualitative study emerged from a larger, multiphase, mixed-methods investigation on the impact of mobile phone during study abroad. As data for the initial study were being collected, it became clear in March 2020 that the COVID-19 pandemic would impact the program under scrutiny. The research methodology was thus modified to also explore how students and personnel experienced the unfolding crisis, documenting events running from December 2019 until June 2020.

The Paris program under study comprised 19 U.S.-affiliated undergraduate students – eight from a Midwestern university and 11 from a Southeastern one. The program fostered immersion by offering courses in French, providing immersive housing arrangements, and requiring that students volunteer within the Parisian community three hours weekly (e.g., assisting in nursing homes, working on urban farms, etc.). The 13 participants comprising this study were nine of these 19 students (Table 1) and four personnel members, selected through convenience sampling. Alias names are being used throughout to protect participants' anonymity.

Before going abroad, students' background was established via an online questionnaire and their onset French proficiency assessed via a 20-minute interview modeled after the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), administered by a certified tester. Likewise, their exit proficiency was assessed one week after evacuation. A second certified tester then blindly and independently rated all anonymized audio-recordings. Inter-rater reliability was strong ($M_{ICC} = .897$, $p < .001$).

Seven students came from the Midwestern university (Guillermo, Aria, Chloe, Sophia, Madison, Ben, and Aubrey) and two from the Southeastern one (Layla and Jade). All had arrived in Paris by January 13, 2020 for one semester, except Guillermo and Aria (year-long enrollment), who had arrived in September 2019. Students were 21.2 years old on average. All but two identified as female. They had spent 6.9 years on average learning French. Their proficiency ranged from Novice-Mid to Advanced-Low before the program (ACTFL, 2012). Two were non-native speakers of English (Ben: Mandarin; Layla: Spanish). All were multilingual learners of French. Five had chosen the homestay option while four had chosen to stay in a *foyer* (i.e., dormitory).

Three native French speakers comprised the on-site personnel: the resident director (Maurice), his assistant (Laura), and the graduate assistant (Capucine). Maurice and Laura had overseen the program since 2016 and had each over 20 years of experience in study abroad. Capucine, a doctoral student at the Midwestern university, was spending her second semester in Paris assisting the program. Finally, Dimitri, a nativelike speaker of French, was in the U.S. at the Midwestern university, serving as both program director for five years, and undergraduate advisor for both French and Italian students for three years.

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | L1 | Language(s) exposed to | | Years learning French | Housing | Program length | Proficiency | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | In family | At school | | | | Onset | | Exit |
| Guillermo | M | 22 | English | Spanish | Japanese | 6 | foyer | Year | AL | < | AM |
| Aria | F | 21 | | Spanish | -- | 5 | homestay | | AL | = | AL |
| Chloe | F | 20 | | Mandarin | -- | 6 | homestay | Semester | IH | = | IH |
| Sophia | F | 21 | | Hindi | -- | 10 | homestay | | AL | = | AL |
| Madison | F | 22 | | Vietnamese | Spanish | 7 | foyer | | IM | < | IH |
| Jade | F | 22 | | -- | Spanish, Mandarin | 10 | homestay | | IM | = | IM |
| Aubrey | F | 21 | | -- | Mandarin | 7.5 | foyer | | IM | < | IH |
| Layla | F | 21 | Spanish | -- | English | 10 | homestay | | IH | = | IH |
| Ben | M | 21 | Mandarin | English | -- | 1 | foyer | | NM | < | IL |

NM: Novice-Mid < IL: Intermediate-Low < IM: Intermediate-Mid < IH: Intermediate-High < AL: Advanced-Low < AM: Advanced-Mid

**TABLE (1):** STUDENTS' BACKGROUND

## Data Collection

This study comprised two datasets: (1) a primary dataset of semi-structured interviews conducted with all participants and (2) a secondary dataset including external correspondences, media sources, and official governmental documents.

As part of the initial study, students participated in 10- to 30-minute audio-recorded semi-structured pre-, mid-, and post-interviews in English. Upon realizing the potential impact of the COVID-19 crisis, additional questions were included in the mid-interviews (e.g., Could you tell me about any issue that has come up during your study abroad experience? Would you consider the coronavirus to be problematic?) and post-interviews (e.g., Do you think being a foreigner in a foreign country impacted how you experienced the crisis? Do you feel that experiencing these events through the filter of French impacted the way you perceived what was happening? What did this experience teach you about yourself?). Students' pre-interviews took place December 16, 2019 – January 10, 2020, mid-interviews March 2-9, 2020, and post-interviews March 25-27, 2020–after their evacuation.

Moreover, 35 to 66-minute audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with the four staff members April 9-22, 2020. Questions regarded the unfolding of the crisis (e.g., Could you give me a timeline of the different steps involved in how events unfolded regarding the COVID-19 situation that eventually led to the evacuation of study-abroad students from Paris? When did you first realize it may have an impact on the program?), their role in managing the crisis (e.g., How would you describe what your role was with the management of this crisis?), and potential consequences (e.g., What do you foresee will be the consequences of this crisis on the specific students you served and who got evacuated? What do you foresee will be the consequences of this crisis on the upcoming study-abroad students for the Fall 2020 and later?).

A secondary dataset comprising external correspondence (e.g., official university emails), local media sources from France and the U.S., and governmental documents (e.g., White House statements), was included to establish a frame of reference and external timeline of the events that led to students' evacuation.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim before undergoing two complementary analyses. First, two research assistants independently created a timeline of the unfolding crisis by triangulating key events and dates for each

stakeholder from both datasets. The timelines were compared – initial agreement was 88.10% – and merged. Second, the main researcher and one research assistant segmented all interview transcripts into units of meaning, eliciting 992 codable units, and applied three coding patterns: (1) incremental phases of response to a crisis, adapted from Faulkner (2001) (Figure 1), (2) fundamental components of crises, adapted from Boin and 't Hart (2007) (Figure 2), and (3) specific themes emerging from the interviews (Figure 3).

| **Code** | **Definition**<br>Period when: |
|---|---|
| Pre-event | Action could have been taken by university officials or personnel to mitigate the effects of the crisis on students and/or program; |
| Prodromal | It became apparent that the crisis would impact study-abroad programs in France; |
| Emergency | The crisis began impacting the program and action had to be taken to protect students; |
| Intermediate recovery | Immediate needs of students were addressed (e.g., evacuation), with a goal to restore some services (e.g., classes) |
| Long-term recovery | Less immediate problems were addressed (e.g., students mentally and financially recovering from evacuation); |
| Resolution | Routine was reestablished and improvements were made (e.g., decisions about the future of study-abroad programs). |

**FIGURE (1):** INCREMENTAL PHASES OF A CRISIS (ADAPTED FROM FAULKNER, 2001, P. 144)

| **Code** | **Definition**<br>Explicit expression of: |
|---|---|
| Threat | - Concerns related to health, well-being, pursuit of activities and/or academic goals; |
| Uncertainty | - Having incomplete, unclear, contradictory, or illogical information; |
| Urgency | - Any urgent behavior or something requiring an immediate action or response. |

**FIGURE (2)** FUNDAMENTAL COMPONENTS OF CRISES (ADAPTED FROM BOIN & 'T HART, 2007, P.44)

| Code | Definition<br>Explicit expression of: |
|---|---|
| Foreignness | - Notions of intercultural competence and notions of (non-) congruent ethnicity or citizenship. Cross-cultural events in/from different countries; |
| Languages | - The language(s) in which information was transmitted or the crisis's impact on their own language(s); |
| Retrospection | - Retrospective advice, lessons learned, training had or needed, expression of changes needed (or not needed) as a by-product of the crisis. Interpretation of events in hindsight with elements of comparison and reflection; |
| Sources of information | - Who is talking to whom to gain information about the crisis and with what consequences regarding decision-making; |
| Roles | - Functions, responsibilities, or actions specific to one or several stakeholders that played a role in managing the crisis. |

**FIGURE (3):** THEMES EMERGING FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Coding was done independently using MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2019). Initial inter-rater agreement was 74.48%. Disagreements were discussed until 100% agreement was reached, with memos to record discussions and ensure reliable ongoing coding of similar units.

# Findings

## Pre-Event Phase

This phase lasted 81 days (December 5, 2019 through February 24, 2020) and corresponds to the period when action could have been taken to mitigate the effects of the crisis on the students and program.

Although Dimitri had heard about the virus as early as December 2019 when Sciences Po Paris, who had an exchange program with the Midwestern university, asked to relocate upcoming East-Asian students, "it still was something that didn't feel as though it would impact [the Paris program]." It was not until the first week in January that news about a strange illness even started circulating, first in France:

> On Sunday, the Chinese authority have reported that 59 people were suffering from a mysterious pneumonia of unknown origin, yet refuted that SARS – the virus responsible for hundreds of deaths in 2003 – was at stake (AFP, 2020, as cited in Lopez, 2020).

In the U.S., CNN first reported on January 7 that "a mysterious virus [was] making China (and the rest of Asia) nervous" (CNN, 2020). As the first death was announced on January 11, students were heading to France, blissfully oblivious,

and ready to start orientation on January 13. Rather, their concerns related to the immediate logistical and cultural hurdles of having to navigate Paris during a historical public transportation strike, which had started on December 5, with no end in sight. Laura guided them through this confusion:

> Maybe [one reason why] this group was so mature is that right at the beginning of the semester (…), they had to manage to understand how the public transportation was working in a period of strike, so they were challenged and they had to develop this proficiency.

Classes had only been in session for four days when, on January 24, French Secretary of Health Buzyn (2020) reported that three cases of the mysterious pneumonia had been found and contained in France. Three days later, both U.S. universities' international security services emailed students reporting that five cases had also been found and contained on U.S. soil. The situation was considered under control. Except for encouraging students to take precautionary measures (e.g., handwashing), no sense of imminent threat was perceived on either side of the Atlantic.

On January 30 however, the World Health Organization (WHO) "declared the novel coronavirus outbreak (2019-nCoV) a Public Health Emergency of International Concern" (2020b), and, the next day, the Midwestern institution suspended all academic programs in China for the Spring 2020. As the illness more frequently made the headlines, students in the program remained oblivious, particularly since they could finally enjoy Paris fully when the public transportation strikes ended on February 2. Moreover, as Aria explained, the emergence of humoristic memes about the virus on social networks lessened the perceived gravity of the situation. In the early days of February, Laura remembered:

> I live with a scientist and, beginning of February, he was not going out of the apartment anymore. He was really limiting his trips in the Metro and telling me 'You don't realize. Look at the graphics! It's gonna be very big,' and I was like, 'Come on! It's a flu!'

Shortly after, Maurice told Laura: "Don't give too much this opinion. Don't say that to [the] students because it may get really much more important." On February 11, the WHO finally gave the illness a name: COVID-19 (2020a). Students remained unconcerned, despite it spreading throughout Europe, particularly in the neighboring provinces of Northern Italy (Tuscany and Venezia). Sophia actually started traveling around Europe, and Madison welcomed her family from the U.S. for an extended stay.

## Prodromal Phase

This phase lasted 16 days (February 24 through March 11) and corresponds to the period when it became apparent that the crisis would impact the program in France (Faulkner, 2001).

### Before Winter Break

On February 24, the Midwestern university's International Safety & Security services reported that Italian universities had just closed, with the possibility of bringing study-abroad students home. With only 20 cases declared in France at the time (Santé publique France, 2020), Maurice "did not think that students would be called back", but that the program might "have to change the way [they] organize[d] the courses". The threat he perceived was thus in relation to how classes were conducted but an evacuation was not a realistic menace. "I started to think about how to transform the courses into online courses and to have the students stay in their homestay." There was however no sense of urgency, as students were about to have a ten-day winter break, from February 29 until March 8. Nevertheless, guided by Maurice, Laura, and Capucine, the team of instructors started preparing to move their courses online.

The next day, as France's schools were about to go on winter break, the French Secretary of Education's office recommended against traveling to Italy, with a 14-day mandatory quarantine for anybody returning from there (Euronews, 2020). Maurice emailed the students immediately, asking that they change their travel plans if necessary. Fearing some would want to by-pass the new regulation, he rushed to hold one-on-one meetings, feeling a sense of urgency for the first time. "[The students] started to realize that it was serious when I said that I wouldn't make any exceptions and that if they would come back from Italy, I would ask them to go back to the U.S." He also reached out to his colleagues from *Association des Programmes Universitaires Américains en France* (APUAF), i.e., the professional organization of American universities in France, asking "Do you have students coming back from Italy? What are you gonna do with them? Would you be able to organize online courses if that becomes mandatory?"

Jade was one of the students whose travel plans got impacted. Nevertheless, she could maintain her 9-day tour of Europe, provided she cancelled the last leg in Italy. Another student, Laura recalled, had plans to host American friends and was worried about them "coming to Paris and being infected." Conscious that the situation was becoming critical, Maurice and Laura recalled: "We were not answering spontaneously anymore, we could not

improvise or take it lightly." Led by this realization, Laura took precautionary measures: "Usually, they have a travel form (…). But this time, it was already critical so we had a table to really know exactly where, when, the students were arriving, coming back, etc."

Additionally, the one-on-one meetings revealed that there were unexpected safety issues with the Paris homestays. A worried student, whose host family's son had just returned from Milan, Italy, confided in Maurice that he was "having dinner with [them] and they're not treating him differently." Maurice immediately contacted the local homestay agency to make sure they were handling the situation, only to realize nothing was being done. "They didn't even take that seriously. I made local partners aware that we [would] have to change the way we were working."

All students were following the situation unfold, primarily by reading French news on their phones, and in some cases listening to the radio or watching TV with their host family. A month and a half into their study-abroad experience, most students were "so far removed from the U.S., [they were]n't keeping up with U.S. [news]" (Sophia). Chloe, Aubrey, Madison, and Guillermo appreciated receiving information in French since it felt directly relevant to them and the general tone of the French media was reassuring. Being informed in French also contributed to their language growth, with Chloe and Madison feeling that the extensive reading required enhanced their comprehension, and Guillermo expressing pride in acquiring the new COVID-19 terminology in French before English. For others though, the filter of French had negative effects: it "heightened [Layla's] anxiety" and Ben's stress, "triggered more uncertainty and fear" in Aubrey, and simply "made things harder" for Jade and "more confusing and more complicated" for Aria. These negative feelings stemmed from a fear of either not fully understanding what the French government was communicating or not being able to communicate important information, should they get sick.

As the media reported that the virus originated from China, some students started perceiving episodes of racism, which Capucine unpacked with them: "I wanted to make sure students [with an Asian background] weren't facing any racist comments on the transportation, in the streets." Ben was one of them and confided:

> In China, we would wear facemasks to protect ourselves from catching the virus. But in France, people consider wearing a mask as if you're the one that's sick, which is exactly the opposite. So, this is where it caused a

> lot of misunderstanding, a lot of racism. And then they just behave negatively and sometimes cuss at people, beat people up. I just don't think it's okay to do that.

## During Winter Break

On February 29, as students went on break, the Midwestern university announced that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) had elevated Italy to Level 3, thus "requiring that all students depart Italy *at their earliest and reasonable opportunity*" (emphasis added). As the advisor of both French and Italian students at the Midwestern institution, Dimitri closely followed the unfolding of the Italian evacuation. Although timeliness was certainly important, no sense of urgency transpired from this evacuation. On March 2, all Midwestern students received an email from the International Safety & Security services announcing an evacuation from South Korea, and "offering all students on Study Abroad programs [around the world] the opportunity to leave [their] program and return to the U.S. or to [their] home country, if [they] wish[ed] to end [their] program at th[at] time." Yet, despite being given the possibility, means, and necessary support to leave, all students in the program chose to stay in Paris. The next day, on March 3, the personnel met as a task-force to divide the work in preparation for the evolving circumstances. As Capucine put it, although it felt like an "overreaction", the staff started acknowledging that students might have to return home any day and prepared accordingly. On March 5, despite paradoxically arguing that France was not going to close schools nationwide, Secretary of Education Blanquer shut down 120 schools in the three most problematic French clusters, one of which was 50 miles North of Paris (Marianne Magazine, 2020). Maurice understood what this meant, with an increased sense of urgency: "I knew that when the students would come back, they would have to stay in their homestay and follow classes online".

Meanwhile, students were on winter break. Chloe, Aria, Aubrey, and Madison stayed in Paris, with the latter's family still visiting. Guillermo and Aria headed to Marseille, France, with other students in the program. Sophia, Ben, Layla, and Jade visited different European countries, including Switzerland, Denmark, Spain, Hungary, and Austria. It is during that week that students were interviewed, and that the main researcher started grasping that the situation was escalating into a crisis.

Except for Chloe, who stated that she did not feel affected by the situation, a pattern of threat emerged amongst the rest of the students, who all spontaneously expressed being concerned or worried by the situation. For most, it was not related to health issues. In fact, Aria, Madison, and Sophia specifically

mentioned not being afraid of getting sick, particularly since they considered that the French healthcare system was better than the American one. Ben, however, expressed that a goal of his was to wear a mask to avoid becoming sick, and Aubrey was somewhat concerned as she reminisced that she "did get pretty sick one day and that was definitely the hardest." The most common type of threat shared was feeling "scared of" (Aria, Aubrey), "worried" (Guillermo, Madison, Sophia), or "anxious" (Layla) about the program potentially being terminated. Guillermo's and Aria's worries were exacerbated by being in contact through social media with fellow Midwestern students in Italy, whose program had just been cancelled. Aria also voiced concerns about the financial repercussions of an early termination, anticipating the extra cost of airfare fees and the unlikely refund of pre-paid study-abroad expenses. Sophia, Jade, and Ben lamented about how the broader European situation had limited their travel plans. All in all though, no real sense of urgency emerged, but rather a high sense of uncertainty regarding what would happen next.

Moreover, the students visiting Marseille experienced another threat. This time, racism was not just perceived, but actually experienced first-hand, as was later reported by Laura and Capucine:

> Three students went to Marseille and one of them was Asian American (…). An old lady arrived in the bus and she started to yell at them and she was looking at the Asian American [student]. It was racism. They were very upset. (Laura)

> One [student] was verbally and almost physically assaulted by a racist woman who was blaming her for the virus in France. (Capucine)

## After Winter Break

On Monday March 9, students temporarily returned to class, face-to-face. That same day, Maurice headed a meeting with them to convey that, although "the [French] government [had not yet taken] any security measures regarding the University level, since the secondary was affected, [they] would be next." A greater sense of urgency thus rose among students, particularly the next day, on March 10, when International Safety & Security "strongly advised to depart Europe and return to the U.S." Although "the University [was] not suspending programs at [that] time and [was still] not requiring students to depart their program", a clear mention was made that, should France reach Level 3, this latter option was likely going to happen. Feeling a pressing sense of urgency, students decided to make the most of their Parisian experience, as if it was their last days. As Sophia testified, "Monday [March 9], we went to the Arc de

Triomphe and then we walked to around the Champs Elysées and then we got drinks and I went out for ice cream with all my friends." This emerging pattern of perceived urgency was combined with a loss of linguistic momentum, as Guillermo, Aubrey, Sophia, and Jade admitted having lost the motivation to engage in French by that point.

## Emergency Phase

This phase lasted seven days (March 12 through March 18) and corresponds to the period when the pandemic impacted the program to such an extent that it became necessary to take action to protect students (Faulkner, 2001).

### The Trigger

A pattern of unpredictability emerged alongside the trigger point of the crisis. Although all participants expected an evacuation to happen when France reached Level 3, it was actually another event that precipitated the crisis. At 2am (Paris Time) on Thursday March 12 – or 9pm (Eastern Time) on March 11 on U.S. soil – the American President was addressing the nation "On the Coronavirus Pandemic", and declared:

> To keep new cases from entering our shores, we will be suspending all travel from Europe to the United States for the next 30 days. The new rules will go into effect Friday [March 13] at midnight [Eastern Time] (…). Anything coming from Europe to the United States is what we are discussing. These restrictions will not apply to the United Kingdom (Trump, 2020).

The address was in response to the WHO's earlier declaration that day, that, due to "the alarming levels of spread and severity, and (…) of inaction, COVID-19 [could] be characterized as a pandemic" (2020b). That night, Capucine could not sleep:

> I'm the one who realized it (…). I was just browsing on Facebook and I saw that Donald Trump was closing the borders. So, I texted Maurice at like 2am (…) He messaged me back and was like 'OK we have to cancel the program'.

After verifying the information, Maurice urgently responded and:

> gave [Laura and Capucine] the responsibility to contact all the students, [including] directly on the [homestay's] landline if they had to, to tell

> them [they] would need to fly as early as possible, and that everybody had to leave between Thursday [March 12] and Friday [March 13].

Despite being awakened around 3am with "aggressive, alarming news" (Laura) and being told they had to upfront the money to change their plane tickets, as Aria had feared, no student panicked, and most proceeded to immediately change their flights and pack. Meanwhile, Maurice contacted the international offices of both the U.S. institutions to inform them of the impending evacuation.

The presidential address triggered an imminent threat for students who were not U.S. citizens and a profound uncertainty for those who were. Concerning the former, both Capucine and Laura insisted to Maurice: "We need to tell our two international students that they need to leave right now because they aren't going to be able to enter the U.S. anymore," Capucine warned. Laura noted that one of them was from South Korea – a hotspot that the Midwestern university had evacuated just 10 days prior. The threat thus also related to ensuring students were not being sent into a known COVID-19 hotspot. Focused on this urgency, the team did not immediately realize that a third international student was also threatened by the imminent closing of borders: Capucine herself.

For U.S. citizens, Maurice proceeded to call two colleagues, also resident directors. All three concurred that the presidential address was unclear regarding whether American citizens could be prevented from re-entering the U.S. after the March 13 deadline, resulting in a consequential pattern of uncertainties for the stakeholders: "We looked at the press release. [It] was stating clearly 'everyone coming from Europe,' so we had a big interrogation mark. We decided to see with the American embassy if we could have more accurate information." By 5am on March 12, Maurice and his two colleagues arrived at the American embassy:

> We put the guy in a delicate situation: 'We don't have any more information for the moment. But (…) it is difficult for me to understand how legally they could stop citizens from coming back home. We could force [them] to apply to a certain number of rules after they come back but we can't leave them out of the country'.

Immediately thereafter, Maurice concluded "there [was] so much instability (…), [he needed] to plan for the worst" and requested that all students meet on campus at 10am.

## Setting the Evacuation in Motion

By the time of the 10am meeting on March 12, two students were already heading to the airport to catch 1pm flights. During the meeting, Maurice discovered another unanticipated threat to the urgent evacuation: "I was surprised to see that many students didn't have a return flight." Capucine also highlighted that "not everyone could change their flight because they [had] booked [it] through a third-party, so they had to buy a new ticket, and sometimes, it was $3,000." Uncertainties also remained "about how [students] would be treated once they were back on [U.S.] soil," Maurice noted. "We didn't know if a forced quarantine would be applied to them, if that quarantine consisted of being on campus, out of campus, [or] with their family." As details were discussed, although "there was a lot of emotion and it was hard to [keep] social distances, [students] were listening very calmly [and] were really mature," Laura described. Yet, Maurice and Capucine also reported: "Some were in denial. One student just wanted to stay an extra week because her mom was visiting and they were hoping to be able to visit Paris together." Nevertheless, by 12pm, all students had their return flights booked and it looked like they would all be evacuated before the deadline.

The next day, however, Maurice learned that "two students [had] missed their flights in Paris and couldn't have another flight before Wednesday [March 18]. So [they were] urged to take the Eurostar to go to the U.K. to take a flight from London," taking advantage of the U.K. exception mentioned in the presidential address. On March 16, while the two students were transiting through the U.K., French President Macron (2020) announced a national lockdown would begin the next day at noon. By Wednesday March 18, all students that had chosen to return to the U.S. were back on American soil. The South-Korean student went back to his home country. As for Capucine, once she knew all students were taken care of, she started considering her own health and decided to stay in France:

> I knew that if I were to get sick in the U.S., I would just not go to the hospital right away because I just can't afford it, even with the student insurance. The health system would not allow me to get good care, so I just decided to stay in France.

## Engagement Interrupted

With these urgent departures came an abrupt interruption of all the activities students had engaged in. Guillermo, Layla, and Aubrey regretted not being able to say goodbye to the friends they had made. Guillermo was

particularly saddened to not see the Japanese church-goers with whom he had bonded and to not attend conferences on French linguistics. Aria had to tell her host family she could not go to Normandy with them for their next vacation. Another student confided in Laura that she had to end a relationship she had just started with a man she met in the Jardins du Luxembourg. Madison also regretted that she would not be able to compete in the Paris marathon that she was preparing for. Sophia was sorry she had to stop volunteering at an elderly home. Finally, Jade felt that the bond she had just started forming with her host mother had gotten severed abruptly.

## Intermediate Recovery Phase

This phase lasted six days (March 18 through March 24) and corresponds to the period when, once the immediate need for evacuation had been addressed, the main goal was to help students prepare for the restoration of classes (Faulkner, 2001).

### Returning to the U.S.

The flight home gave students time to start processing the potentially "traumatic" situation (Capucine). The hindsight the flight provided led the three most proficient students, who had all achieved Advanced proficiency, to perceive a greater threat, with intercultural insights. Guillermo confided:

> Being outside of my normal safety net made me a little nervous as to what was going to happen to me if, one, I got infected in France, or two, I got infected on the way back home. Those are the things I was thinking about while I was on the plane for 13 hours.

Aria commented:

> We weren't taking it as seriously as it had to be taken. We were worried about our program vs. the general health. I feel like I have been going through the stages of grief. One, we were in denial [of how serious it was] and then we were getting angry at the university for cancelling the program, and then it was acceptance.

Sophia reflected:

> Of course, I [was] very fortunate that I [was] coming home to a nice, warm house and food and my parents. But it made me feel like [I was] having the experience of somebody who is afraid of getting deported. I've never been in a situation where I had no control over where I was.

> And when you are living there for two months, under the impression that it is your home, and to be pulled from [it], it's really heart breaking.

Aria later echoed this sentiment in a reflection paper:

> Il est difficile d'être arraché d'un environnement auquel vous commencez à vous habituer et à un endroit que vous commencez à appeler [votre] chez vous. [It is hard to be uprooted from an environment you were starting to get used to, a place you had started to call home].

Guillermo expressed a similar sentiment and summarized the realization most students had: "It wasn't France telling us to go back. It was America telling us to go back."

### American Threat

Upon landing in the U.S., the main threat faced by students was getting caught in a hotspot. Indeed, as many students transited through Chicago O'Hare Airport, alongside thousands of travelers returning urgently from Europe, they were "packed in close quarters […] waiting to be screened for the virus at customs" (Behm & Wittich, 2020). Next, per federal requirement, students self-isolated for 14 days. Laura's fear of students being in hotspots resurfaced as they were scattered around the country: "One was in New York [City] and she told me she was hearing the ambulances and that it was very stressful. Another one [was] in Detroit" – the two biggest U.S. hotspots at the time. And, indeed, the fear was justified. Dimitri later confirmed "one student suffered both physical and mental setbacks. Upon her return, she became sick," and Maurice concurred that "she [was] having all the symptoms of the coronavirus." Capucine kept checking on all students and reported: "Some of them experience[d] anxiety, some of them [were] feeling down, some of them [were] just disappointed that they couldn't stay."

## Long-Term Recovery Phase

This phase started on March 25 when classes resumed online, and is an extension of the previous phase, with less immediate issues being attended to. At the time when this article was written, the phase had been going on for over five months.

As the undergraduate advisor, Dimitri disclosed that four students had had to seek independent studies supervised by U.S.-based professors as a substitute for the advanced classes they were taking in Paris. Guillermo was one of them and was worried about co-validation of credits and earning his French degree by the end of the academic year. For the others, classes resumed online

with “all of [their] professors still in France, [which was] definitely a weird feeling” (Jade), considering the up-to-8-hour time-zone difference students now had to navigate. Regarding engagement, Dimitri also noticed that students had had “trouble reintegrating emotionally and academically. There [was] a lack of academic motivation and mental resiliency being back here.” Indeed, “upset” is a qualifier that most students used to described themselves a week after their evacuation, together with having an unsettling impression of shift or void. Jade and Aubrey highlighted the toll their mental health had taken, with the latter notably worried about “now [being] in a country where the situation [was] worse.” Aria and Madison mentioned missing the freedom they had experienced in Paris. Layla and Sophia discussed missing the cultural and linguistic immersiveness that had allowed their French to thrive. Yet, some encapsulated the proverbial saying that “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” Sophia and Madison redirected the research project for their Engagement in Paris module to investigate the impact of the pandemic on the health of the French elderly and on migrants and refugees in France.

By mid-April, when Maurice, Laura, Capucine, and Dimitri were interviewed, uncertainty remained about the Fall 2020. Capucine was pessimistic, projecting that enrollment would be so low that the program would not be able to afford a graduate assistant. Conversely, Dimitri reported having been approached by 11 prospective students, eager to go to Paris. Maurice, Laura, and Dimitri continued working together toward solutions, understanding that the decision about whether the program would be maintained would come late, triggering a new form of urgency incompatible with the lengthy process of visa seeking. Thinking outside the box, the team considered shortening the program’s on-site component to less than 90 days to circumvent the need for a visa, and substitute the instructional time lost with pre- and post-online classes. Despite their efforts, news broke on April 22: all study-abroad programs for the Fall 2020 were cancelled.

## Resolution Phase

This last phase of the cycle – when routine is reestablished – has not started. At the time when this article was written, the program remained cancelled due to border restrictions between the U.S. and the E.U., and the unresolved COVID-19 crisis.

# Discussion

## Short-Term Consequences

Arguably, the evacuation process described here had "the less physical, psychological, financial, and emotional impact possible" (Maurice). Unlike the 2011 evacuation following the Japanese tsunami (Connell, 2012) or the 2015 one following the Paris attacks, a consensus emerged among stakeholders that this evacuation had been well-timed, duly undertaken, and safely conducted. Nevertheless, it did not leave stakeholders unscathed. One student suffered from COVID-19. Most had some degree of mental health issues. Financial losses were incurred in the form of forfeited pre-paid study-abroad experiences, but they were limited by the refund of evacuation expenses (e.g., airfare). Motivation for pursuing French studies temporarily wavered in some students but peaked up again for all but one. No student lost academic credits needed for their French degrees. Substantial linguistic and intercultural gains were made in only half the time initially allotted, but then stagnated. No anti-French feelings emerged among students and desire for returning to France increased. Finally, as the program remains cancelled, its sustainability and the well-being of its personnel are at risk.

## Proficiency and Interculturality

Students' varying levels of proficiency came into play at two key moments as the crisis unfolded. First, during the prodromal phase, higher proficiency was associated with a lesser perception of threat, due to a greater ability to handle the complexity and uncertainty communicated by governments and media sources. Crises experienced abroad more vividly illustrate what is encapsulated in one of the criteria used to define Advanced proficiency, namely, the ability to verbally "deal with a social situation with an unexpected complication" (ACTFL, 2012). Conversely, during the intermediate recovery phase, higher proficiency was associated with a greater perception of threat. It was connected with deeper and more vivid emotional reactions to the intercultural and geopolitical aspects of the crisis, as demonstrated in Guillermo's, Aria's, and Sophia's strong testimonies, comparing their experience to grief and to deportation.

Moreover, it appeared that public transportation often served as a nexus of meaningful, intercultural events. This manifested itself first with the strike that forced students to problem-solve as soon as they landed in Paris, then with the Metro that became the first sanitary threat mentioned early February by Laura's partner, then with the bus where acts of racism were expected to

happen and did happen, and finally with the flight back home perceived as a potential health threat, yet also serving as the place where retrospection and processing could happen. As language instructors prepare their students to go abroad, it will be important to recognize public transportation not just as modes of transportation that take people from point A to point B, but also as loci of important intercultural encounters and events that need to be navigated with skills and care.

## Crisis Management Recommendations

One of the most successful aspects of this crisis management regarded the handling of uncertainties. Indeed, at the onset of the prodromal phase, 17 days before the trigger event, the program personnel had sufficiently taken the measure of the harmful potential of the crisis to engage in methodical management of information communicated to students. This included understanding that governmental communication could be the source of uncertainties (Maurice, Capucine, Ben, Sophia, Aria, Chloe, Jade). These were alleviated by establishing a tight web of communication with local and international actors (e.g., local homestay agency, APUAF, U.S. embassy) to inform them and be informed by them of emerging threats (e.g., traveling in Italy) or viable solutions (e.g., using Dimitri's experience evacuating the Italy program to inform the evacuation of the French program). It also entailed ensuring that one single referent point – Maurice – had initiative of verified, unambiguous information, later relayed by his assistants – Laura and Capucine. Indeed, Maurice explained how he conceived of this role, which arguably had led to the type of necessary credibility documented in Wei et al.'s (2018) influenza study and to the type of communication Friend (2012) and Shapiro and Gilbert (1975) recommended:

> This is a moment when you deal [in] actions. You need to tell people what to do, you need to ask the questions if people hesitate about their own actions, and you need to guide. Hesitant, reluctant people would not follow the procedure as efficiently as people who are convinced that this is the right way to proceed. But you also need to untrigger every panic. You need to soothe anything that may become dramatic or traumatic. You need to foresee difficulty and obstruction.

The unforeseen difficulty and obstruction occurred during the emergency and the intermediate phase. First, all four program personnel regretted the one-size-fits-all approach adopted by both the American government and the home institutions, which failed to "foresee how their

[evacuation] plans would affect domestic and international students [differently]" (Dimitri). Indeed, U.S.-affiliated students abroad have never been more diverse, with an emerging and under-researched trend of double-abroad students, i.e., international students affiliated to a given institution who choose to study abroad in yet another country, who have represented 12.31% of the study-abroad population at the Midwestern institution under study since 2015. It is critical to understand that varying immigration statuses might call for different methods of evacuation and that double-abroad students require particular attention. Second, Maurice, Laura, and Capucine observed that airfare would require better monitoring in the future, including avoiding that students undergo third-party booking and ensuring that they have a return flight at the onset of the program, to facilitate urgent changes and limit extra costs. Third, as the three on-site personnel expressed their fear of sending students into known COVID-19 hotspots, it is important to recognize that evacuation plans ought to entail not only where students are evacuated from but also where they are evacuated to ensure their well-being.

Finally, based on the testimonies gathered in this case study, the following guidelines are recommended to protect students abroad in case of future public health crises: (1) "provid[ing] orientation information that includes local expertise, puts health in a social-cultural context, and provides sufficient comparative information about health systems, health status, and public health," (2) "provid[ing] students with information about infectious diseases endemic to the host community and any potential health risks that students might be exposed to," (3) "confirm[ing] vaccine requirements," and (4) "clearly articulat[ing] policies that protect the health and safety of students in the event of an outbreak or other health risks" (Forum for Education Abroad, 2018, pp. 8-12).

# Conclusion

This study advanced research on the impact of COVID-19 on study abroad through an innovative complexity and chaos theory approach, making it, to our knowledge, the only qualitative study that has yet documented the crisis from the inside as it was experienced by both students and staff at the epicenter of the event. It also explored what factors contributed most to students' successful evacuation to provide recommendations for future study-abroad programs.

While the stakeholders considered the evacuation to be well-conducted, it was not without consequences. Students suffered health and financial

setbacks, and they lost the opportunity to continue making linguistic and cultural gains. However, the current study found that having a single referent person for communication of information, taking into account students' diverse backgrounds, and monitoring students' airfare were crucial to successfully managing the crisis.

Moreover, although this study captured rich data through stakeholders' testimonies, it is not without limitations. As this was an opportunistic study, participants' mid-interviews were not originally intended to capture the evolving situation and might therefore lack valuable insight from these earlier days of escalation. Furthermore, the testimonies in the current study represent a small number of stakeholders in a U.S.-affiliated program and are not necessarily indicative of how study-abroad students experienced the crisis globally.

It is our educational responsibility to assess the type of complex issues that have been unveiled in this case study to better inform the future of study abroad programs and ensure their stakeholders' safety and educational well-being. Future research should expand upon the current study by examining how COVID-19 impacted study-abroad programs in other settings, to obtain a more holistic understanding of how the crisis has influenced the field. Moreover, it will also be imperative to explore how to best serve double-abroad students in crises while being mindful of immigration statuses and safety of their home countries, should evacuation of a study-abroad program be necessary.

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## Authors Biographies

**Aurore P. Mroz** is an Assistant Professor of French at The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. With a concentration in second language acquisition, teacher education (SLATE), she specializes in mixed methods studies related to Computer-Assisted Language Learning. Her award-winning research project on the impact of smartphone use on the development of proficiency and intercultural competence in study abroad students led her to document the unfolding of the COVID-19 crisis that affected her research participants.

**Tricia Thrasher** obtained her PhD from the department of French and Italian at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is currently the Research Manager at Immerse, a VR language learning company, and conducts research on Computer-Assisted Language Learning.