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# An Amplified Experience: A Phenomenological Study of Studying Abroad During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

COVID-19 largely brought U.S. education abroad to a halt. As universities and education abroad organizations bolstered risk management policies, students slowly returned to study abroad programs. Our phenomenological study explored the meaning that students who studied abroad during the pandemic gave to their experiences. We found that the essence of the phenomenon was an amplified version of the meaning that students gave to pre-pandemic study abroad experiences.

## Abstract in German

Der Ausbruch der Covid-19-Pandemie hat US-Austauschprogramme weltweit nahezu zum Erliegen gebracht. Nachdem Universitäten und Austauschorganisationen ihre Richtlinien für ihr Risikomanagement verschärft haben, kehrten Studierende langsam zum Angebot von Auslandsaufenthalten zurück. Unsere phänomenologische Erhebung hat die Bedeutung untersucht, die Studierende, die während der Pandemie im Ausland eine Hochschule besucht haben, ihrer Auslandserfahrung zugeschrieben haben. Wir sind zu dem Ergebnis gekommen, dass jene Studierende dem Format eines Auslandsaufenthalts eine noch größere Bedeutung beigemessen haben als es Studierende bereits vor der Coronakrise getan haben.

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**Introduction**

“If I could study abroad during COVID, I could do anything.” (Jay)

In spring 2020, COVID-19 swept the world, leaving immediate and significant change in its wake, impacting the field of international education at its core. Students studying abroad were forced to truncate their experiences, evacuate, and seek alternative means to complete their educational responsibilities while reeling from the blindsiding onset of a global pandemic. In the subsequent two years, education abroad was mostly on pause.

As the world began adapting to the pandemic’s persistent presence, students slowly returned to the international arena. With a mix of courage, uncertainty, intentionality, and determination, students ventured abroad to achieve their goals despite complexities and obstacles. Along with posing innumerable challenges with which we (international educators) are now familiar, the pandemic provided the chance to study the lived experience of students re-entering the world of international education within the remarkably unique context of a global pandemic.

The purpose of our phenomenological study was to better understand the meaning that students who studied abroad during the pandemic gave to their experiences. The students’ reflections provide a snapshot look inside a historic era. In many ways, what the students reported learning paralleled commonly seen student development in pre-COVID study abroad experiences (e.g., increased independence, better navigational skills, more linguistic confidence). At the same time, their lessons were amplified and thus distinctive given the pandemic backdrop that profoundly influenced their time abroad.

We begin with an exploration of the literature that focuses the effects of COVID-19 on U.S. higher education, students’ mental health, and U.S. education abroad. We continue with an overview of our research methods with special attention to the Vancouver-School of Doing Phenomenology. We present the four themes that capture the essence of the phenomenon under study, share our

interpretations of these findings, and then conclude with several practical recommendations for international educators.

## Literature Review

The pandemic wreaked worldwide havoc, and U.S. higher education could not escape its path of destruction. Even before the pandemic, enrollment at U.S. universities and colleges was declining (Saul, 2022), and COVID-19 accelerated this trend. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021) reported that fall 2021 enrollment declined 2.6% from fall 2020 and 5.8% from fall 2019. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) highlighted that COVID-19 impeded access to higher education for many students, and especially for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students and students with disabilities. The department added that during the 2020-2021 academic year, the enrollment declines at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Minority Serving Institutions, and Tribal Colleges and Universities outpaced declines at predominantly White institutions.

The financial impact of COVID-19 on U.S. institutions of higher education has been tremendous. Friga (2021) estimated the total impact to be \$183 billion: \$85 billion in lost revenue, \$24 billion for COVID-related expenses, and \$74 billion in anticipated future decreases in state funding. This financial stress resulted in hiring freezes and furloughs, reductions in wages and benefits, no-travel policies, strict purchasing regulations, and reduced curricular and co-curricular programming. Some institutions—Lincoln College, Mills College, Concordia College, and MacMurray College, just to name a few—made the difficult decision to permanently close.

### Effects of COVID-19 on Students' Mental Health

In the same way that the pandemic exacerbated enrollment issues, COVID-19 negatively affected college students' mental health. The Healthy Minds Network, a research initiative based at the University of Michigan and Boston University, shares research on the mental health of young people in the U.S. Using data from its Healthy Minds Study, the Network (2021) drew attention to the top two issues that college students face: depression (41% of students) and anxiety (34% of students). Lipson et al. (2018), who analyzed data from the Healthy Minds Study over the 10-year period from 2007 to 2017, found that the rates of treatment and diagnosis increased significantly, while mental health stigma decreased over time.

The pandemic intensified several issues that had already been affecting U.S. college students: housing and food insecurity, financial hardship, a lack of social connectedness, uncertainty about the future, and access to wellbeing and support services (Jehi et al., 2022). The Healthy Minds Network and the American College Health Association (2020) noted that 60% of students found it more difficult to access mental health care during the pandemic. Further, between fall 2019 and spring 2020, the prevalence of depression increased, and a higher percentage of students reported that their mental health negatively affected their academic performance.

Tasso et al. (2021), who analyzed data from 257 students at a small private university in the U.S. as part of a larger global study, sought to clarify how the pandemic affected the mental health of college students. The participants in their study drew attention to fears about contracting COVID-19, concerns about people in their social network contracting COVID-19, academic-related distress related to the shift to remote learning, and struggles with interpersonal disengagement, motivation, and boredom. In Lederer et al.'s (2021) mixed-methods study on the effects of the pandemic on the mental health of 195 students at a large public university in the U.S., 71% of students indicated increased stress and anxiety due to the pandemic and 44% of students reported experiencing an increased level of depressive thoughts. The participants in the Lederer et al. (2021) study suggested that many of the same factors that surfaced in the study by Tasso et al. (2021) contributed to their negative mental health.

Jehi et al. (2022), who conducted a literature review of 37 studies on the effect of COVID-19 on anxiety in university students, identified additional factors. The researchers noted that being a female, living in rural areas, facing financial hardship, working full-time, having the uncertainty of the future, and having reduced sleep quality also increased anxiety during the pandemic. As this stress and anxiety increased, academic motivation, sense of belonging, and belief in online social distance learning decreased (Marler et al., 2021). Compared to students without mental health issues, students with mental health issues were more likely to experience financial hardships, food insecurity, and housing insecurity; more likely to experience challenges with the transition to virtual learning; less likely to live in safe environments free from physical, emotional, drug, or alcohol abuse; and less likely to agree that the campus supported them during the pandemic (Horgos et al., 2020).

Some research has drawn attention to the nuanced effects of COVID-19 on students' mental health. Hoyt et al. (2021), who found that women reported worse well-being compared to men among traditionally aged (i.e., 18- to 24-year-

old) undergraduate students in the U.S., added that transgender, gender diverse, and sexual minority youths reported worse outcomes than their cisgender, heterosexual peers. Examining the effect of COVID-19 on 477 LGBTQ+ students on U.S. campuses, Gonzales et al. (2020) pointed out that nearly half (46%) of LGBTQ+ students had immediate family members who did not support or know about their LGBTQ+ identity. They also found that roughly 60% of LGBTQ+ students experienced stress, anxiety, and depression during the pandemic.

Gopalan et al. (2022) added that underrepresented racial/ethnic minority and first-generation students in the U.S. reported relatively lower sense of belonging during the pandemic compared to their peers. Trammell et al. (2021), who further explored racial/ethnic disparities in COVID-19 among roughly 400 undergraduate students in the U.S., found significant differences related to the psychosocial effects of the pandemic (e.g., Asian students experienced more discrimination than White students), but not to mental health or health behaviors.

Although our study concentrates on U.S. students, there is a parallel strand of research that examines the effects of COVID-19 on international students. For example, Lai et al. (2021) conducted a phenomenological study that explored the experiences of 20 students from Hong Kong who studied abroad in the U.S. and the U.K. during the pandemic. The researchers found that the personal, interpersonal, and environmental stress from the pandemic negatively affected the students' mental health. Interestingly, Lai et al. (2021) added that the students enhanced their problem-solving skills by overcoming myriad challenges caused by COVID-19. In a study that engaged 261 Chinese students at U.S. universities, Song et al. (2021) also found that factors associated with the pandemic (e.g., academic plans, economic pressures, and health status) were significantly associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among participants.

### Effects of COVID-19 on U.S. Education Abroad

In the 10 years before the pandemic, the number of U.S. college students participating in education abroad programs increased significantly from 260,327 students in 2008-2009 to 347,099 students in 2018-2019 (Institute of International Education, 2021c). During the following academic year—the first affected by the pandemic—participation decreased by 53% with just 162,633 U.S. students studying abroad.

In their October 2020 State of the Field survey, The Forum on Education Abroad (2020) examined the effects of this unprecedented change. Out of the 211 members who responded, 40% reported staff reductions and 80% noted budget cuts. In terms of programming, 72% of institutions began advising online and 54% of institutions introduced new virtual offerings. In a June 2021 follow-up survey, 57% of institutions reported additional budget cuts in the months that followed the initial survey (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2021). Additionally, on average, the members' fall 2021 enrollments were just 38% of their typical pre-COVID numbers. A report by NAFSA: Association of International Educators (2020) paralleled these findings. NAFSA also estimated that U.S. higher education lost roughly \$1 billion due to shortened or canceled education abroad programs.

In the same way the participation in U.S. education abroad programs rebounded after the SARS, Ebola, and Zika virus epidemics (Institute of International Education, 2019), the worst seems to be over as international educators navigate the "new normal." Throughout the pandemic, many institutions and organizations enhanced their risk management policies and procedures and engaged in strategic planning efforts for the post-COVID era. In response to an April 2021 survey administered by the Institute of International Education, roughly 50% of the 414 respondents anticipated an increase or stabilization in education abroad enrollment in 2021-2022 (Martel & Baer, 2021). More than half of institutions (54%) planned on running in-person study abroad programs by the spring 2022 term.

We understand the broader effect of COVID-19 on the field of U.S. education abroad, and we have specific personal accounts of the on-site experience from international educators like Gibbs (2022). However, we know very little about how the pandemic has affected U.S. study abroad students. In one of the first studies on this topic, Pedersen et al. (2021) qualitatively investigated the unique experiences of roughly 600 students who were evacuated from their programs during the spring 2020 term. When COVID-19 disrupted the global higher education landscape, the researchers modified their original study on risky drinking and sexual violence among U.S. study abroad students. Pedersen et al. (2021) found that these students faced myriad obstacles, including the logistical challenges of returning to the U.S.; complex emotional reactions during the readjustment period (e.g., anxiety, fear, depression,

loneliness, anger, confusion); and feelings of personal, academic, social, financial, and professional loss. At the same time, these students asserted that the evacuation from their study abroad programs made them mentally stronger and better prepared for adversity, mirroring what Lai et al. (2021) found. Bista et al. (2021) added more breadth to this research by exploring the experiences of international students, perspectives of faculty and staff, and comprehensive internationalization across multiple global contexts.

As the pandemic lingers—the “long COVID of American higher education” as characterized by Adler (2021)—international education professionals require a better understanding of the lived experiences of U.S. students who study abroad during the pandemic. During the spring 2021 semester, we embarked on a study to explore this phenomenon. New insights gained from this inquiry can help international educators—in the U.S. and at program sites abroad—better support students during this crisis and as part of future crises.

## Methods

The following research question guided our phenomenological study: What meaning did students who studied abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic give to their experiences? We focused on eight U.S. undergraduate students who participated in education abroad programs with the University Studies Abroad Consortium (USAC) during the spring 2021 semester.

### Phenomenology

Phenomenology is used to capture the essence of a phenomenon among a small group of individuals (Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2014). Halldorsdottir (2000) added that phenomenology is appropriate for studying the ordinary, everyday lived experiences of human beings. With these assumptions in mind, we were confident that this methodology would help us better understand the phenomenon of studying abroad during the pandemic. The 12 basic steps of the Vancouver-School of Doing Phenomenology informed the structure of our study (Halldorsdottir, 2000):

1. Choose participants who have experienced the phenomenon
2. Ponder the phenomenon by means of reflective silence
3. Collect data from the participants
4. Begin data analysis alongside data collection

5. Code and begin considering the essence
6. Construct the essence of the phenomenon for each participant
7. Verify the case construction with each participant
8. Construct the essence of the phenomenon from all the cases
9. Compare the essence with the data
10. Interpret the meaning of the phenomenon
11. Verify the essence with some participants
12. Author the findings

### Site Selection

Established in 1982, USAC is a U.S.-based, nonprofit education abroad provider with programs in more than 25 countries. We both have a professional connection to the organization—as the CEO/President (Alyssa) and the Resident Director for USAC’s programs in England (Jeremy). Because qualitative research aims to better understand the lives of human beings (Jones et al., 2014) and describe a phenomenon that has not been fully appreciated (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), we were curious to explore the meaning that students gave to their study abroad experiences at such a unique time.

### Participants

Due to the strict COVID-19 restrictions that prohibited student mobility at the institutional and global level, USAC’s spring 2021 cohort consisted of just 70 students on in-person programs and 39 students on virtual programs. These figures—an extremely small percentage of USAC’s pre-pandemic enrollment—clearly illustrate the pandemic’s tremendous effect on the field of education abroad.

We recruited our participants after receiving approval from our institutional review board. We invited all 45 students who had not yet started their spring 2021 in-person programs to participate in our study, and 14 students expressed initial interest. When we administered our participant consent form, two students elected not to participate, and four students did not respond.

In the end, our research study included eight U.S. undergraduate students who studied abroad with USAC during the spring 2021 semester. Phenomenological research typically employs five to 15 participants (Halldorsdottir, 2000) with particular attention to a sufficient range of



experiences with the phenomenon and a saturation of information as reported by the participants (Seidman, 2006). Table 1 provides a summary of our participants. To respect confidentiality, we asked the participants to select pseudonyms.

Name	Program Location	Age at Start of Program	Gender	Race
Amira	Chiang Mai, Thailand	20	Woman	Black / African American
Beth	Montevideo, Uruguay	20	Woman	White
Cassidy	Seoul, South Korea (A)*	19	Woman	Multiracial
Marcello	Chiang Mai, Thailand	24	Man	Hispanic / Latinx
Jay	Seoul, South Korea (B)*	19	Woman	Hispanic / Latinx
Jenna	London, England	21	Woman	White
Joy	Seoul, South Korea (A)*	20	Woman	White
Vera	Gwangju, South Korea	18	Woman	White

\* USAC partners with more than one host university in South Korea. Cassidy and Joy studied at University A, and Jay studied at University B.

TABLE (1): PARTICIPANTS

### Positionality Statement

After securing the participants, researchers conducting a phenomenological study must engage in a period of reflective silence. Central to this methodology is bracketing, or setting aside personal experiences, understandings, and biases as much as possible (Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2014). Bracketing creates a space for researchers to contemplate the phenomenon and think critically about the ways that their identities intersect with the research study.

Considering our roles with USAC and the effect that COVID-19 had on our professional identities and daily work, it was incredibly challenging to suspend our preconceptions about the student experience. We were consumed by the responsibilities of USAC's response to the pandemic. As the CEO/President of USAC, I (Alyssa) was responsible for guiding an organization through an

unprecedented and unpredictable global pandemic. Since COVID's onset in spring 2020, I (Alyssa) was challenged with balancing the needs of our students and their supporters, staff, and partner universities with the evolving COVID regulations in more than 25 countries. As the Resident Director of USAC's programs in England, I (Jeremy) evacuated the spring 2020 cohort when the pandemic first began and then quickly shifted to online rather than field-based work.

Also, we recognize our privileged perspective, having remained employed and in leadership positions during this most unexpected, trying time on the world and on the field of international education. We acknowledge that our positions and employment with USAC allowed us a unique internal perspective and opportunity to complete this research project.

## Data Collection

Researchers conducting a phenomenology need to ask two broad questions: 1) What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? and 2) What contexts affected your experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013)? A researcher achieves this by building a bridge into the participants' world, and then crossing it (Halldorsdottir, 2000). The methods that we employed—five written journal entries and an oral interview—brought us into our participants' worlds and provided us with the data needed to answer our research question.

## Journal Entries

We emailed five journal prompts to the participants throughout their semester-long study abroad programs. Because the participants' programs had various durations and start/end dates, we crafted a customized schedule for the distribution of the journal prompts for each participant. For example, a participant on a 16-week program received the prompts in weeks 2, 5, 8, 11, and 14. We asked the participants to email their roughly 500-word journal entries to us by a specific date. The themes for each journal entry are outlined below, and the full prompts can be found in the appendix.

- Journal 1: Study abroad decision-making process
- Journal 2: Quarantine and cultural adjustment
- Journal 3: Academic experiences
- Journal 4: Cultural experiences
- Journal 5: Growth and change

## Interview

We conducted one interview via Zoom with each participant. The interviews, which lasted 40 minutes on average, took place roughly one month after the end of our participants' programs once they had returned to the U.S. Seidman (2006) reminds us that interviewing is both a research method and a social relationship, and we were mindful of this balance when we crafted our semi-structured interview protocol. Although the journal entries provided us with insight into our participants' lives, we began by asking our participants to paint us a picture of their study abroad program. We continued by collecting narratives of their lived experiences abroad and the meaning of these experiences. Our goal was to expand what we had already learned from our participants' journal entries, aiming for a richer, deeper, and more nuanced understanding of our participants' experiences. Following these conversations, we transcribed each interview, which helped us get acquainted with the data in an intimate manner.

## Data Analysis

The aim of phenomenological data analysis is to capture the overall essence of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013). Because the Vancouver-School calls upon researchers to sharpen their awareness of the participants' words (Halldorsdottir, 2000), we began by simply reading the journal entries on multiple occasions with no analysis. Once we completed the data collection process, we read and reread each participant's journal entries and interview transcript for a sense of the whole. We continued by identifying key statements and themes that aligned with these statements. We built the essential structure of the phenomenon for each case, and then constructed a meta-synthesis of the eight case constructions. We continuously moved between the data, single-case constructions, meta-synthesis, and our reflections until we landed on the themes that described the meaning that our participants gave to the phenomenon.

## Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to confidence in the research findings (Jones et al., 2014). In our study, credibility—the extent to which findings are congruent with reality (Guba, 1981)—was achieved through member checking and peer debriefing. Relying on the structure of the Vancouver-School, we shared an initial draft of our findings section with five of

the participants. We asked the participants to determine the extent to which they could recognize their own experiences within the structure of the phenomenon, and the feedback that we received confirmed the accuracy of our interpretations. Additionally, two peer reviewers—a university administrator who has conducted phenomenological research and a USAC colleague—reviewed an early draft of our manuscript. The feedback from our peer reviewers further confirmed our findings and helped us more closely align our research question, findings, and discussion.

## Findings

The data analysis resulted in four interconnected themes that capture the essence of the phenomenon. We found that studying abroad during COVID-19 meant 1) overcoming barriers and risks (that were worth it), 2) searching for normalcy, 3) focusing on mental wellness, and 4) experiencing a unique view of the host culture. Because the Vancouver-School calls upon researchers to amplify the voices of the participants (Halldorsdottir, 2000), we showcase the words of the students and provide a rich description of their experiences in this section. Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) explained that readers who have experienced the phenomenon should be able to position their own reality within the identified themes.

### Overcoming Barriers and Risks (That Were Worth It)

The participants highlighted three key barriers and risks that they faced before the start of their study abroad programs. First, the participants commented on the fragility of studying abroad during the pandemic. The participants navigated their pre-departure journey at an incredibly turbulent time. Their home universities reconsidered international travel policies, study abroad program sites explored the viability of running programs, and governments introduced and modified travel restrictions. Vera explained that “my choice to study abroad was so dependent on the COVID-19 crisis.” Amira’s comments bring life to Vera’s remark: “I was willing to undergo all of the work (i.e., speaking with my departmental advisors, reaching out to USAC, taking extra classes to get ahead on credits, etc.), but I also had come to peace with the fact that, despite all of my hard work, my program might get cancelled anyway.”

Second, the participants drew attention to the complexity of studying abroad during the pandemic. Following the guidance from NAFSA: Association

of International Educators and the Forum on Education Abroad, the field of education abroad prioritizes health, safety, and security. Although the central goal is to minimize risk, these efforts often lead to additional requirements for students, especially at the pre-departure stage. Vera pointed out these complexities: “months of preparation, safety discussions, briefings on quarantine measures, local health ordinances, a mountain of paperwork, [and] special permissions.” Jay noted, “I fought for this chance. I struggled for this. I had to jump through so many hoops.” She added, “With COVID, it just made everything harder because I had to get approvals on approvals.” At the same time, the robust focus on risk management reassured some of the participants. Jay stated, “If it weren’t for all of the preparation, I would never have considered studying abroad during COVID.”

Third, some of the participants faced skeptics who questioned their decision to study abroad during a pandemic. Vera remarked, “People were like: ‘Are you sure you should be going in a pandemic?’ There were also a lot of people who just couldn’t simply understand my want to study abroad.” Joy also recalled that some of her friends were “uncomfortable” with her decision to study abroad. At the same time, several participants shared stories of their wide support network. Amira captured this point: “I would have given up so many times because there were so many bumps in the road. And like, so many times I had to go back to the drawing board and start from scratch just because [of] COVID affecting things like cancelations in terms of like my school said I couldn’t travel in the fall even though I spent the entire year preparing to study abroad in the fall. So, having to go back to the drawing board, I felt so defeated. I was going to give up so many times.” She continued, “If I hadn’t had support back home, I don’t think I would have been able to like make it abroad.”

Despite the fragility and complexity of studying abroad during the pandemic, the participants strongly asserted that it was worthwhile. Beth exclaimed, “I had the best time in Uruguay and despite the restrictions and complications, I wouldn’t change anything.” She added, “Study abroad during COVID was the best decision I made last year.” With a more modest tone, Cassidy shared, “While coronavirus has definitely affected my time in Korea, I don’t think it’s necessarily for the worse. Sure, it’s different, and I wish the situation was under better circumstances, but I don’t believe that this was a wasted experience.”

Beyond simply stating that they made a worthwhile decision to study abroad during the pandemic, the participants articulated the ways that their experiences affected them. Although many of the participants completed most of their coursework online while abroad, they still built interpersonal connections with local and international students at their host university and in their host city. Cassidy highlighted her global friend group and the positive effect it had on her: “Not only have I made Korean friends, but I have also made plenty of friends from other countries like France, Germany, and Indonesia, who have each taught me new things from their home countries.” At the same time, online classes and COVID-19 restrictions that limited group sizes presented interpersonal challenges to the participants. Jay drew attention to this challenge: “Making friends in online classes is basically impossible when there are no group projects and the teachers do not make break-out rooms.” Vera added, “Not being able to gather in a group of more than four means I only know a handful of the other students in my classes, do most of my traveling solo, and spend most of my meals with one or two people or completely alone.” Nevertheless, this was not always couched as a negative factor by the participants.

We also observed significant intrapersonal growth throughout the semester. For some, like Jay, navigating a study abroad experience during a pandemic made them more resilient. She explained, “When I finally was able to do it, I realized that I was like, ‘I am a fighter. I’ve got this. If I could study abroad during COVID, I could do anything.’” The strict COVID-19 regulations in some countries also created opportunities for the participants to become more independent. Jenna reflected on this growth: “Navigating certain experiences like modules and exploring London on my own allowed for the perfect balance of introspection and self-motivated connection with the relatively restricted space around me.” The participants also became more flexible. As the pandemic evolved, the participants’ host countries and study abroad programs introduced new regulations or scaled them back. Vera stated:

It threw me off some of the time. I felt kinda strange. It was like—I’m someone who’s very routine-oriented, schedule-oriented. And while I’ve definitely learned to be more flexible when I was studying abroad, in some ways, it did throw me for a loop.

## Searching for Normalcy

One factor that helped the participants overcome these barriers and challenges was their strong desire for normalcy. The participants struggled when their U.S. home universities shifted from in-person to online learning prior to their time abroad—a transition that decreased their motivation to learn and robbed them of opportunities for development. Beth's comment captures this lived experience: "I needed a break and a return to normalcy. When I was offered a chance to come to Montevideo, my answer was an automatic yes, even if it meant taking some risks."

Amira craved an academic environment that served as a catalyst for growth. She explained that in the U.S., "we were doing the whole online learning thing, like asynchronous thing. So, there was no push for me to kinda do any type of personal development. I mean, I could just like get up, get on my laptop, do my school, and then just go back to sleep or hang in my room." Amira, who had originally wanted to study abroad during the fall 2020 term, turned to study abroad for an experience that would challenge her. Despite the instability of the pandemic, Amira found normalcy and opportunities for growth. "The relative normalcy of the schooling experience through my USAC program has been one of the best parts of my education since the pandemic began. Little things like being able to go to campus and have class in an actual classroom rather than completing online classes has made my educational experience here in Thailand much more enriching than my online classes in the U.S. have been."

Other participants shared similar stories about their academic experiences in the U.S. prior to studying abroad. Cassidy, an art major, critiqued the quality of her online classes. "It was just a disaster because all of them just felt like middle school or high school arts and crafts, you know? Just was not the same." Joy, another art major, added that taking online courses through her U.S. home university "put pressure on students to create their own structure and motivation," an environment where she did not thrive.

In addition to the academic challenges that the participants faced before studying abroad, they shared stories of their frustration with their home environments. Having moved from her New York City residence hall to her home in Sacramento, California, Beth even characterized her home as "oppressive." She clarified, "Just being at home all the time was not healthy for me because if I do not have things to do, I can stay in my room all day every day."

I did that for nine months, and it is not healthy for me.” Despite being a high-achieving and engaged student, the shift to online learning left Beth feeling unmotivated. “I just didn’t want to learn. I was just so tired, and I didn’t want to do anything. And it made me really sad.” Beth decided to break free from this oppression and study abroad. “I wanna get out of here. I want to see the world.”

Marcello found himself in a very similar situation. “I was in a bad place with just being trapped in the house, not being able to go anywhere, not being able to do the things I like to do, not being able to go be active.” We observed that the participants used this frustration as fuel for overcoming the challenges of studying abroad during the pandemic. The participants viewed studying abroad as an escape from their stale learning environments and as an outlet for normalcy. Cassidy reasoned that “there is a comfort in normalcy for me.”

From our perspective, the participants’ study abroad programs were not “normal” in a traditional, pre-COVID sense. Many curricular and co-curricular activities were modified or canceled to adhere to government regulations and best practices in risk management. Yet, the participants found enough normalcy to satisfy their craving. Marcello, who noted that he “definitely didn’t have that much drive to do things” while taking online courses offered by his U.S. home university, celebrated his study abroad experience. He commented, “I feel like I’m living a normal life here, and it is very relieving.” Joy, who seized the opportunity to take two in-person art classes at her Korean university despite a significant language barrier, explained, “I feel so inspired here so I have lots of ideas I want to work on.” She added, “I believe with my art classes this is the first time I felt inspired in a class. Maybe that is also due to the fact the two art classes are in person.”

Beth shared that “when I applied to study abroad with USAC, I was in a really bad place in regard to school.” In reflections that she authored from her program site in Uruguay, she wrote, “I have been taking in-person classes for seven weeks. They have been the best seven weeks of the last year.” She continued, “The fact that I am still taking in-person classes is amazing and I’m trying to savor every minute.” Moreover, we discovered that the participants found normalcy in simple activities: attending in-person classes, using public transport to travel to the university, doing homework at a café, and visiting outdoor markets. Jenna reflected on what this normalcy meant for her: “COVID



has made me more grateful for any small moments of normalcy in that I appreciate each interaction so much more than I might have otherwise.”

### Focusing on Mental Wellness

In addition to crossing national borders, the participants in this study crossed the borders of their comfort zone. The students exhibited a strong desire to exchange atypical environments that did not foster growth for experiences that they characterized as “normal.” By overcoming COVID-related barriers and (re)discovering a sense of normalcy, many of our participants enhanced their mental wellness during their study abroad semester. For some participants, this journey was intentional, and for other participants, it was unexpected and organic.

In accordance with the COVID-19 restrictions of their host countries, all of the participants were required to quarantine up to 14 days. Some of the students completed this self-isolation period in their regular semester-long housing, such as in the U.K. and Uruguay, and others stayed at a government-approved hotel, such as in Thailand. We anticipated that this would challenge the participants’ mental wellness, but we learned that the self-isolation period assisted most students with their transition to a new culture and provided them with a sense of stability. Cassidy explained, “I am a naturally anxious person, so having the time in quarantine was actually kind of relieving for me. I had a chance to breathe and adjust to being in a new space before having the entire city open to me. I had time to look up how things worked and figure out practical things without time commitments to my school or other people. It also allowed me the time to do research on things I wanted to see or do.” Jay, who spent her quarantine period participating in a virtual summit offered by Goldman Sachs, exclaimed, “I actually enjoyed quarantine a lot!”

We were also surprised by the positive strides in mental wellness that many of the participants made during a semester defined by COVID-19. The students shared that the initial months of the pandemic prior to studying abroad negatively affected their mental wellness. Beth noted that “the past year has been hard, especially for my mental health.” When her home university shut down on-campus operations in March 2020, she explained, “A lot of the [mental health] issues went unresolved. A lot of problems just were kinda pushed on the back burner because there was other stuff going on.” Living and learning at

home rather than on campus was also difficult for Marcello: “I was very stressed out and introduced to high anxiety levels back home.”

As part of his study abroad experience, Marcello made a purposeful choice to focus on his mental wellness. “I didn’t have the strongest mindset being back in the States and being cooped up in my room as it is, so I decided to really focus on my mental health.” Marcello enrolled in a Mindfulness and Mindfulness-Based Intervention course in Chiang Mai, and he highlighted the benefit of starting this course during his self-isolation period: “Being able to take the mindfulness course really helped not only learn what to expect from the culture, but also go into the quarantine with a stronger mind.” Throughout his semester in Thailand, the course served as a compass for positive mental wellness and “how to deal with everyday life.” When we asked Marcello to detail one of his proudest accomplishments during his semester abroad, he answered, “The fact that I am able to control my emotions.”

Beth’s mental wellness journey was less calculated. She described the semester that preceded her time in Montevideo as “a combination of anxiety, claustrophobia, and stress.” Although Beth admitted that she needed a change in environments, her path to enhanced mental wellness was more organic than Marcello’s. Rather than relying on the structure of a class, Beth found comfort in normalcy, such as taking in-person classes, socializing with other students, and engaging with her host culture in Spanish. In one of her written reflections, Beth proudly stated, “This semester I have felt in control of my life and my mental health for the first time since the beginning of college.” In our interview with Beth following the end of her program, she clarified, “I was in such a good place mentally and emotionally that this was by far the best semester of my college experience. I was able to breathe. My anxiety, which has been kinda a constant for me since middle school, kinda disappeared last semester.” She added, “I really was able to do a lot of healing and come to terms with what had happened [during the pandemic].”

Some of the other participants also shared stories about an organic mental wellness journey. At the beginning of Cassidy’s study abroad experience, she characterized herself as “a very anxious person” who “always needs a plan, and then a backup for that plan in case it falls through.” Cassidy described studying abroad during the pandemic as an experience that shook her—largely in part to the unpredictability of the virus and worldwide regulations. She

clarified that she has now “experienced something so extreme” that she can now “face uncertainty with a little more enthusiasm and excitement rather than being immediately overwhelmed.” Pointing to this growth, Cassidy admitted, “Naturally, it’s not as if my anxiety has just vanished, but I feel as though my mental fortitude and independence has greatly improved since first arriving.”

### Experiencing a Unique View of the Host Culture

Finally, the participants expressed how studying abroad during a global pandemic allowed them to experience a unique view of their host culture. Although they bemoaned the missed opportunities, the participants acknowledged that studying abroad during the pandemic presented more intimate and authentic experiences in their host community.

The missed opportunities ranged from curricular and co-curricular activities to local festivals and independent travel. Amira, who had wanted to volunteer in a local school in Chiang Mai, noted, “I do feel a bit sad that I was unable to volunteer in a classroom during my time here in Chiang Mai since an internship or volunteer experience was something I was looking forward to the most.” Marcello, who also studied in Chiang Mai, expressed disappointment that his Thai cooking class and program field trip to a Hill tribe community were canceled.

The participants who completed their coursework online discussed the lack of classroom-based social opportunities. Cassidy highlighted the difficulty of meeting local students: “The only instance I feel that I haven’t been able to experience in the fullest is school in Korea. Since classes are still almost entirely online, I don’t often find myself on campus and talking to my fellow students.” Jenna, who only knew her faculty members and peers via WhatsApp and Zoom, explained that she felt “out of place” while in London. She clarified, “I am sure that I am missing out on events through school and connections with classmates that would otherwise be commonplace.”

The global pandemic also limited engagement with cultural events and independent travel. Joy noted, “I wish I could have gone to a concert, Sokcho, a public bath, and so much more,” but “due to time and COVID, those desires did not happen.” Similarly, Amira was unable to participate in Songkran, or Thai new year. She added, “One of the biggest things I wanted to do during my semester abroad was to travel across Thailand and Southeast Asia. There is a

rich history in this region, and I felt that visiting these places firsthand would have been culturally and intellectually enriching experiences, but COVID-19 prevented me from doing that, unfortunately.” Marcello, who also studied in Thailand, had hoped to travel throughout Southeast Asia, as well. He noted, “To explore more cultures here would’ve been an awesome opportunity,” but “I wasn’t able to due to USAC advising us not to do so due to the state of COVID-19 there.”

Vera envisioned a semester abroad during which she “would be out seeing all the museums, spending weekends across the country, going to classes full of people from different cultures and making friends from all sorts of backgrounds.” She admitted, “Because of the pandemic, I would honestly have to say I’m getting about half of the cultural interaction I was expecting.” She added, “It’s been a struggle to engage with my host culture when having to stay far away from one another or having to be constantly conscious of each region’s rigorous list of rules because of COVID.” Yet, Vera and the other participants articulated the ways that they experienced a unique or different side of their host country and how it was a surprising benefit they had not expected.

Amira suggested that the significant reduction in tourism exposed her to a more authentic side of Chiang Mai. “I get to experience a quieter side of Chiang Mai. Life is more ordinary here, and at times mundane even.” She added, “Now that I have experienced a very unique side of Thailand (one without a big tourist industry), I think it has affected my understanding of the host culture.” Marcello shared similar reflections of life in Chiang Mai. As a result of the drop in tourism, he admitted, “I felt as if I was able to engage in the culture probably a little more than I would in a regular semester.” Marcello admitted that if he had studied in Chiang Mai before the pandemic, he would not have focused as much on his academic, mental, and spiritual wellness. He clarified, “Being able to go during COVID where everything’s very relaxed and there’s not so many tourists, I think I was able to grow in many different ways [more] than I would in a non-COVID environment.”

Beth, who studied in Montevideo, also drew attention to the ways that the pandemic introduced her to a unique or different side of her host city. She explained, “The Uruguay I am experiencing is almost an alternate version of the one that normally exists, as everything is both as it should be and completely different.” Pointing out that she could not attend concerts, theater performances,

and cultural events like Carnival, she proudly stated, “While many things about this semester have been different, I feel very strongly that I have been able to engage with Uruguayan culture and society in distinct and memorable ways.” She thoughtfully added, “I do not think for a moment that what I have learned and seen is invalid or inaccurate just because of the overarching context of the times we live in.”

Reflecting on her study abroad experiences in Seoul, Cassidy asserted that “I have been able to experience a Korea most won’t be able to.” Seoul’s regulation that capped social groups at four individuals at the time helped Cassidy better understand social dynamics. She explained:

Studying abroad during a pandemic, or in the face of a pandemic, kind of made life so different than what it normally would be. And so, seeing the Korean people through that lens was something that I don’t think you’ll be able to see again.

Jay, who studied at a different university in Seoul, also shared her observations on interpersonal relationships in South Korea during the pandemic. “I learned about people in general, ... and I also saw how people got into groups and how they stay in these groups and how they kick people out of these groups.”

Studying abroad during a global pandemic illuminated the meaning of immersion for Jenna. Because local regulations and travel restrictions for entering and exiting England were so strict, she explored her local community. When she positioned her semester in London against two earlier, pre-COVID study abroad semesters, Jenna explained, “Those moments of really connecting with this neighborhood, if not [with] many of the people in it, felt like the most fully immersed I’ve ever been in one single location.” She added, “I know [my neighborhood] so well and can name so many other areas (with directions to get there!) in a way that would have slipped my grasp had the experience been ‘typical.’ The relative abnormality of the world in which I experienced my semester in London ended up being the best thing for me. ... We all had experienced so much more of an immersive kinda environment than we would have in any other period of time.”

## Discussion

There is no doubt that the students who participated in this study grasped the reality of their profoundly singular experience studying abroad during a global pandemic. They knew before arrival, or came to realize on site, the importance and uniqueness of what they were doing. It was not an average, typical semester (neither at home nor abroad), and the students knew that they were part of something special and different. The following quote from Vera underscores that studying abroad and studying abroad during COVID-19 are similar but not the same:

A lot of people also say, ‘Talk to the people who previously studied abroad.’ And I have to shoot back and say, ‘Did they study abroad in COVID?’ And if the answer is no, it’s hard to connect with them in the same way. Because you experienced the same place, but in very different circumstances.

The participants discovered and lived a multi-layered experience. First, they wrote and spoke about what could be deemed as “more common” or “more typical” growth and development as a result of their time abroad. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), who provided a synthesis of the literature from 1989 to 2002 to capture how college affects students, explained that “most research on study abroad finds increases in students’ intercultural awareness and tolerance” (p. 316). More specifically, studying abroad has been found to promote positive attitudes toward cultural pluralism and world-mindedness, greater tolerance and acceptance of others, increased appreciation of what it means to be different, increased interest in international issues, decreased use of stereotypes, and greater empathy for others (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Indeed, the participants articulated this growth that often occurs in a study abroad experience not defined by a pandemic. Some of the participants reported linguistic gains, which aligns with Kinginger’s (2009) research on language development in the context of study abroad. Beth proudly stated that her “Spanish improved significantly,” and Cassidy celebrated “taking a class in an entirely foreign language [Korean].” Many of the participants also explained that they became more self-confident during their semester abroad, which parallels the findings from Slotkin et al. (2016). Jay explained, “One of the biggest accomplishments that I have experienced in my study abroad time has been

gaining more confidence.” For Joy, this confidence was “more about independence and survival skills.” For Vera, it related to “my ability to look out for myself, to manage my own finances, and honestly, to simply be an adult.”

Similarly, many of the participants expressed how cross-cultural experiences served as a catalyst for a greater appreciation of different cultures, a nuanced topic explored by Salisbury et al. (2013). Cassidy, reflecting on her growth at the end of her study abroad program, even characterized her development as “cliché.” She explained, “People should value these simple lessons that experiences like studying abroad can give you. They are important to teaching people about other cultures, and it’s these kinds of encounters and experiences that teach tolerance and understanding.” Vera also drew attention to this growth: “My most notable accomplishment this semester was getting to open my eyes to a handful of different cultures.” She added, “I will return home with a more holistic understanding of Korea that I would have never understood without being here.”

However, a second layer of complexity was also revealed. Much more vividly the students recounted their realization of deeper learning that took place: the fact that they were living through a study experience under very different circumstances than those who had come before them—and likely different from future participants post-pandemic. Considering the relative infancy of COVID-19 and the dearth of studies on the lived experiences of students who studied abroad during the pandemic, these findings do not appear in the extant literature. Cassidy explained, “It’s kind of the ideology that now [that] you’ve experienced something so extreme, what you experienced before isn’t so bad by comparison.” Cassidy exited her study abroad experience with a more resilient outlook. “I’m now able to face uncertainty with a little more enthusiasm and excitement rather than being immediately overwhelmed.” She added, “I feel as though my mental fortitude and independence has greatly improved since first arriving.”

With two study abroad semesters behind her—a multi-destination program and a semester in Santiago, Chile—Jenna was no stranger to study abroad. Still, in her final journal entry, Jenna celebrated the “beauty that was hidden” in a study abroad experience largely defined by COVID-19. Drawing attention to circumstances caused by the pandemic, she explained, “While some might think of growth and challenge as being catalyzed by the unknown and

language or cultural barriers, I found the most discomfort yet in a semester that was characterized by the English language and relatively tame travel experiences.” This discomfort, however, created a space for growth that Jenna did not experience during her previous two programs. “The relative abnormality of the world in which I experienced my semester in London ended up being the best thing for me. ... Navigating certain experiences like modules and exploring London on my own allowed for the perfect balance of introspection and self-motivated connection with the relatively restricted space around me.”

The lived experiences of students like Cassidy and Jenna represent a departure from what we commonly see in the literature (e.g., Lederer et al., 2021; Song et al., 2021; Tasso et al., 2021) about the negative effects of COVID-19 on college students’ mental health. Instead, the participants shared stories of resilience and strength similar to those that surfaced in Lai et al.’s (2021) phenomenological research and Pedersen et al.’s (2021) study. The participants experienced their host cities and campuses in very different circumstances—both a) different than what they had expected (or had imagined how their time abroad would look) and b) different from their predecessors’ experiences. Through practical examples from their daily lives abroad, the participants learned quickly and personally about the fragility and complexity of studying abroad. The fact that they remained positive and complimentary of their overall experiences and their decision to study abroad speaks volumes to the power of the study abroad experience—regardless of the context.

## Implications for Practice

From the rich results of the study, what can we learn and consider implementing in our institutional or organizational planning? What might we consider applying to future study abroad programs—which, ideally, will not be impacted by COVID-related limitations?

- 1) **Build time into programming as a buffer:** The participants appreciated the relief and “extra” time that quarantine afforded them as part of their transition into the host culture and study abroad experience. Organizers may want to consider adding time to the program schedule, especially at the initial arrival stage for a “soft” entry and transition.



- 2) **Combine flexibility and structure:** We were surprised by the participants' positive assessment of their mandatory quarantine period—a time that they used to begin acclimating. At the same time, the participants also appreciated having some form of structured activities or expectations built into that time. The structure may be formatted either by the organizers (e.g., daily virtual meetings, academic assignments, mini language or culture lessons) or by the participants (e.g., regular time to exercise or meditate, virtual calls with family and friends, books to read, academic or personal activities to complete). Practitioners would benefit from taking this combination of factors into consideration when designing program schedules.
- 3) **Prioritize risk management:** The participants were encouraged and comforted knowing that risk management and wellness were prioritized before departure and on site. The Forum on Education Abroad and NAFSA: Association of International Educators offer robust resources that help practitioners align their policies and procedures with the standards of good practice in education abroad. Practitioners are encouraged to showcase these measures at the pre-departure phase to attract and retain students. This attention and support should be matched on site.
- 4) **Support mental wellness:** Special attention needs to be dedicated to mental health and wellness support for students. Today's students are attuned to this topic and aware of the need for increased support and resources. The field has also seen a drastic increase in the number of students reporting mental health issues and requesting support before departure and on site. As a student's mental wellness journey is unique to the individual, and their growth in this area may occur organically, practitioners would do well to develop intentional support and programming specific to this topic. Practitioners should also consider addressing the concept of "escape," which we revealed as a motivation for some of the participants in our study.
- 5) **Convert skeptics to supporters:** Some of the participants drew attention to the skepticism that they faced for studying abroad during the pandemic. Even when we remove COVID-19 from the equation, some

students will continue to face this skepticism during the study abroad decision-making process and pre-departure stage. International educators should consider devising a balanced approach to recruitment and advising that includes a) empowering participants to address this skepticism and b) converting skeptics into supporters.

- 6) **Encourage and integrate student reflection:** Throughout the study, many of the participants informally mentioned that they found the five written reflections to be a helpful way to track and articulate their growth. Practitioners would help in this process by building independent and group-based reflective activities throughout the study abroad lifecycle to help students contemplate the deeper meaning of their experiences.
- 7) **Create opportunities for students to explore unique parts of the host culture in the context of appropriate travel policies:** The participants recognized the value of exploring their host culture, both virtually and in person, and particularly the less typically experienced parts of the host culture and city. Practitioners are encouraged to facilitate curricular and co-curricular activities that introduce students to unique elements of the host culture and location. Institutions and organizations may also contemplate their on-site travel policies, as students' time away from the host city has the potential to detract from the learning outcomes of the education abroad program. At the same time, many students seem to expect travel—both local and more distant—to be a part of their experience abroad.

As COVID-19 subsides and many students once again seek out the “normalcy” of a “more traditional” study abroad experience (which for some may include significant travel while abroad), how do we as practitioners plan to respond? We observed the deep benefit students felt by developing an intimate connection to their host city and neighborhood, yet we also heard students lament the loss of the opportunity to travel and explore on a much wider scale. How do we determine and encourage a balance between these points on the spectrum? How do we assist students to reconcile and recognize the benefits of both a) staying close to their host location and developing a meaningful connection, and b) wider exploration of the geographic region both for personal pleasure and academic motives? Practitioners would do well to discuss with

their students the potential benefits and drawbacks which travel might have on the study experience.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Our findings must be interpreted with caution, as there are several limitations associated with this study. We acknowledge that our findings are highly influenced by the study population. The participants exhibited resilience and curiosity in their decision to study abroad during a pandemic *and* engage in a research study with five journal entries and one interview. It is possible that the nature and experiences of the participants differ from individuals who elected not to participate in the research study or in a study abroad program during the pandemic.

Additionally, the participants were U.S. students who studied abroad with USAC across just six study abroad programs within a broader portfolio of more than 50 programs. A high percentage (75%) of our participants studied in Asia, which is typically the third most popular region for U.S. study abroad students after Europe and Latin America (Institute of International Education, 2021a). This creates a space for researchers to explore the lived experiences of students with diverse nationalities who participate in programs managed by other institutions and organizations in different global contexts.

Also, our participants were traditionally aged undergraduate students. The overall U.S. undergraduate population is comprised of roughly 27% non-traditionally aged students (i.e., students aged 25 and above; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019), and their voices are not included in this research. Similarly, seven of our eight participants identified as women. Although females (67%) outnumber males (33%) in U.S. study abroad (Institute of International Education, 2021b)—data that parallels USAC’s spring 2021 cohort of 72% women and 28% men—our research does not capture the gender diversity that is seen on U.S. campuses.

We also offer suggestions for future research. Researchers who would like to study the experiences of student participants could add depth and breadth by exploring more diverse program models (e.g., exchanges, direct-enroll programs, faculty-led programs, virtual programs), durations (e.g., year-long, short-term), destinations, and participants. Higher education professionals would also benefit from a better understanding of the decision-making process

of students who chose not to study abroad during the pandemic and students who were accepted to a study abroad program but did not participate. Researchers could also use the structure of this study to amplify the voices of higher education professionals who supported students throughout the pandemic. Similarly, because COVID-19 is not the only crisis that disrupts universities and organizations, researchers could examine the meaning that higher education professionals give to their experiences within other crises.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 has affected every corner of campus and every stakeholder. As universities and education abroad organizations recalibrate, U.S. students are returning to study abroad programs. Our phenomenological study, which followed the journey of eight students who studied abroad during the pandemic, offers clarity and hope. Our findings illuminate the unique and amplified experiences of students who navigated challenges, pushed themselves outside of their comfort zone, and flourished during a semester-long study abroad program defined by the pandemic. At the same time, our study signals that students and international educators are ready to thrive (again) in the post-pandemic era.

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## Appendix: Journal Prompts

### Journal Prompt #1: Your Decision-Making Process

In roughly 500 words, reflect on your study abroad decision-making process. Use the following prompts to guide you:

- When did you first start thinking about studying abroad?
- Did your original plan include studying abroad in the program location during the Spring 2021 term or did you need to change your plans as a result of COVID?
- To what extent did COVID regulations abroad (e.g., restrictions, protocols, quarantine) affect your final choice in a study abroad program?
- Describe why you made the decision to study abroad during the Spring 2021 semester, a semester deeply affected by COVID.
- To what extent were your home university, family, and friends supportive of your decision to study abroad during the Spring 2021 semester?

### Journal Prompt #2: Quarantine & Cultural Adjustment

In roughly 500 words, reflect on your experiences with quarantine (self-isolation) and your initial adjustment to your host culture. Use the following prompts to guide you:

- Describe the structure of your quarantine experience. Where did you stay? How long was the quarantine? What were the main regulations?
- How did your quarantine or self-isolation experience make you feel? What contributed to these feelings?
- In what ways has the quarantine or self-isolation period affected your ability to adjust to your host culture?

### Journal Prompt #3: Academic Experiences

In roughly 500 words, reflect on your academic experiences. Use the following prompts to guide you:

- Describe the structure of your academic experiences. Are you taking your courses online, in person, or as a hybrid? Are you combining your USAC studies with other academic experiences?
- Before you arrived, what goals and expectations did you have for your academic experiences abroad?



- To what extent have you been able to achieve your goals in the context of studying abroad during COVID?
- In what other ways has COVID affected your academic experiences abroad?

#### Journal Prompt #4: Cultural Experiences

In roughly 500 words, reflect on the opportunities that you've had to engage with your host culture. Use the following prompts to guide you:

- Before you arrived, how did you envision engaging with your host culture?
- To what extent have you been able to engage with your host culture during a semester deeply affected by COVID?
- In what other ways has COVID affected opportunities for you to experience your host culture? What opportunities has it created? What opportunities has it limited or eliminated?

#### Journal Prompt #5: Growth

Take a holistic look at your Spring 2021 study abroad experiences. In roughly 500 words, reflect on what you've accomplished, what you wish you would/could have done, and how you've changed and grown. Use the following prompts to guide you:

- Describe one of your major accomplishments (during your study abroad experience) that makes you proud.
- What do you wish you would/could have done during your semester abroad? To what extent did COVID affect what you wish you would/could have done?
- Keeping in mind that we change in negative and positive ways, how have you changed during your study abroad experience?
- Articulate the ways that studying abroad during COVID affected these changes.

## Author Biography

**Jeremy R. Doughty** serves as the resident director for USAC's education abroad programs in England. Jeremy has worked in the field of international education since 2005 in roles that range from an English instructor with the Peace Corps in Ukraine to the director of study abroad at a liberal arts college in Wisconsin. Jeremy received his Ph.D. in higher education administration from Bowling Green State University.

**Alyssa Nota** was named CEO/President of USAC in 2017, after 17 years as onsite Director and expanding USAC's Italy programs and additional programs across Europe and Asia. Over more than 25 years in international education, she has been active in international program design and implementation, curriculum development, negotiation with international universities, student support, and teaching. Alyssa received her Ph.D. in education/curriculum and instruction from Boston College.