

## **Jacks of All Hats: Role Complexity, Ambiguity, and the Experiences of Short-Term Study Abroad Faculty**

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### **Abstract**

*This study explores the experiences of short-term study abroad faculty at a liberal arts university in the Midwestern United States. We distributed a qualitative survey to all faculty who taught short-term study abroad courses at the institution, interviewed four short-term study abroad leaders, two short-term study abroad co-leaders, and reviewed the practices and history of the institution's study abroad office. Study participants' experiences were consistent with role complexity and ambiguity. Role-related challenges included preparing for the program and for reentry, managing the academic side of the course, monitoring students' and faculty members' physical and mental health, and facilitating group dynamics. Perceived benefits included cultural enrichment, professional growth, and the ability to enhance students' lives. Our study suggests that tolerance and the ability to handle complexity are critical leadership skills for faculty, and that short-term study abroad faculty need support and professional development to prepare for their multifaceted and complex duties.*

Keywords: Faculty, higher education, intercultural development, role theory, study abroad

### **Introduction**

World scholars promote global skills and competencies (Bourn, 2018; Camilleri, 2016; Moreno-Jimenez et al., 2014; Oomen et al., 2016). The need for students to strengthen global competencies before entering the workforce has led to a widespread expansion of study abroad higher education programs. Short-term experiences lasting less than eight

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weeks (Nguyen et al., 2018) are especially popular. Of the 347,099 U.S. students who studied overseas in the 2018/2019 academic school year, 65% chose short-term programs (Open Doors, 2021). For the 2020 year, the numbers declined by 91%, presumably due to the impact of Covid-19 (IIE, 2022).

Traditionally, faculty do not accompany students abroad during longer (one semester or more) study-abroad programs. Students travel to their host country alone and attend university classes while living on campus or with a host family. In contrast, faculty members in short-term study abroad programs hold multiple roles and participate in all aspects of the program. During the trip, they perform regular faculty duties such as designing and teaching academic courses, monitoring students' mental and physical health, addressing behavior issues, and managing group dynamics (Eckert et al., 2013). They also plan meetings, review logistical arrangements, and coordinate other details with local providers (Goode, 2007). Thus, short-term study abroad faculty wear multiple hats: professor, counselor, group coordinator, project manager, travel agent, etc.

Extant research on study abroad addresses the impact of the experience on students (Anderson & Lawton, 2011; Kishino & Takahashi, 2019), differences between short-term and long-term study abroad (Donnelly-Smith, 2009), and general best practices (Eckert et al., 2013; Liu, 2019). The literature is more limited, however, on the professors' perspectives. The main purpose of this case study was to bring short-term study-abroad faculty voices to the forefront. Our research explores many of the challenges that short-term study abroad faculty experience planning for and engaging in short-term study abroad.

Role theory focuses on the roles applying to distinct social contexts (Biddle, 1979). Key role theory concepts such as role complexity, overload, ambiguity, and conflict may relate to short-term study abroad faculty's "multiple hats" and shed a light on their challenges. We adopted role theory as our conceptual framework. Our overarching research questions were:

1. What roles do short-term study abroad faculty play?
2. Do short-term study abroad faculty experience role complexity, conflict, and ambiguity? If so, how do these experiences manifest themselves?
3. What are the overall experiences of short-term study abroad faculty?

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Background of the Study**

#### ***Study Abroad***

Living an experience rather than reading about it in a textbook is a more effective way to learn (Liu, 2019). Study abroad students develop an intercultural mindset (Lilley et al., 2014; Terzuolo, 2018), experience a sense of interconnectedness (Kishino & Takahashi, 2019), and strengthen their intercultural skills (Anderson & Lawton, 2011). Other student benefits include personal development, improved grade point average, increased diversity in friendships, and employer preference in job searches (Lilley et al., 2014; Liu, 2019; Petzold & Peter, 2015). Study abroad programs, however, benefit not only students but also participating staff and faculty. Liu (2019) uncovered four areas of growth for study abroad educators: enhanced awareness of historical contexts, a deeper knowledge of national policies, a stronger understanding of student development, and the opportunity to network with other international educators.

Study abroad programs are normally categorized as long- and short-term; long-term programs last at least eight weeks or, more commonly, a semester. Short-term study abroad programs last fewer than eight weeks. Shorter study abroad experiences tend to occur during academic breaks (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Gaia, 2015) and have become the most common type of study abroad experience in the United States. In the 1996-97 school year, only 3.3% of total students studying abroad

took part in short-term programs (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). That number jumped to 65% during the 2018-2019 academic year (Open Doors, 2021).

Two major factors explain the popularity increase of short-term programs. First, these opportunities are less costly for students (Gaia, 2015). Second, short-term programs require less time commitment. Students are, therefore, less likely to fall behind in their structured academic programs, extracurricular activities, and athletics (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Gaia, 2015) or worry about personal and family obligations (Gaia, 2015). Thus, a key benefit of short-term programs is an increase in student access (DiFrancesco et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018).

Despite the steady decline of long-term study abroad participation in the last decade (IIE, 2019), some scholars claim that longer programs are more beneficial to students. For example, Engle and Engle (2004) reported greater cultural sensitivity gains after a full-year study abroad program than after a semester-long experience. Other research, however, (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Gaia, 2015; Paige et al., 2009) supports the benefits of short-term programs. For example, in Paige et al.'s (2009) study involving over 6,000 alumni from twenty universities, program duration did not affect its impact on students.

Unlike long-term study abroad programs, which generally take place at host universities, a domestic faculty member often leads short-term study abroad experiences (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). The next section explores the intersections between role theory and short-term study abroad faculty work.

### ***Role Theory***

Role theory examines the roles human beings occupy as members of particular groups and the functions and behaviors related to such roles (Biddle, 1979). Role theorists borrow terminology from the theater world (Biddle, 1986). For example, Goffman (1959) adopts words such as *performance* (an action taken by a role incumbent to influence someone else), *audience* (the person or persons whom the role incumbent is trying to influence) and *setting* (the place where the performance takes place). Role performance follows certain established standards; non-compliant role incumbents may suffer negative consequences. Even audience members who do not observe a role performance may impose sanctions if they believe deviation from role expectations has occurred (Goffman, 1959).

Role theory observes five key principles (Biddle, 1979): People's behaviors are contextual and related to their roles, roles connect people's social identities, people are aware of the societal expectations for their roles, roles are nested, i.e., certain role identities are embedded in larger ones, and people are socialized to fulfill their roles.

Role theory concepts relevant to our study include role complexity, overload, conflict, and ambiguity. *Role complexity* refers to the level of breadth and coherence of a role. Breadth means the range of behaviors a role incumbent must show and coherence has to do with how well the components of a role relate to one another (Biddle, 1979). Role complexity may lead to *role overload*, which occurs when the demands on the role incumbent exceed available resources (Coverman, 1989). *Role ambiguity* means a lack of clarity in the role functions. Role ambiguity may result from inadequate cue clarity, where a *cue* (e.g. a uniform, a title) helps outside observers identify a particular role function (Biddle, 1979). Finally, *role conflict* occurs when individuals occupy more than one role, the demands of these roles are incompatible, and role incumbents cannot perform both roles at the same time (Biddle, 1979; Edmondson et al., 1986).

Even faculty who work in the main campus have complex roles that involve research, teaching, and service components (Boardman & Bozeman, 2007). Merging these responsibilities can lead to intra-role conflict (Richards & Levesque-Bristol, 2016). Researchers explored the impact of role conflict on faculty experiences (Olsen & Near, 1994; Richards & Levesque-Bristol, 2016). Comparable problems were identified in a study on Mexican faculty by Surdez Pérez, Magaña Medina, and del Carmen Sandoval Caraveo (2017). Further, faculty role conflict does not refer only to the intersection between research, teaching, and service. For example, faculty have reported conflict between familial and professional roles (Damiano-Teixeira, 2006; Park & Liao, 2000).

Interpersonal relationships between faculty and students may also lead to role conflict. On the one hand, professor-student relationships outside the class environment may benefit students. An early literature review on informal faculty-student relationships by Pascarella (1980) found significant correlations between faculty-student ties and positive student outcomes such as persistence, interest in furthering studies, academic achievement, and personal development. Some universities even encourage informal connections between faculty and students (Hattaway, 2019). However, when faculty take on roles that exceed those of traditional professors—for example, the role of a friend—one consequence could be classroom incivility (Chory & Offstein, 2016).

Faculty roles may be particularly complex in short-term study abroad programs. In longer-term programs, students are likely to enroll in another university (Coker et al., 2018), thus releasing the accompanying faculty from highly intensive teaching duties. Study abroad faculty, however, are on duty the entire trip, “on-call” even during the evenings. Further, they must demonstrate roles that go far beyond their training and expertise, such as pharmacist and tour guide (Burnside, 2023). Some of these roles are critical, such as providing immediate assistance if a student experiences serious mental health problems (Niehaus et al., 2020). Thus, role complexity and conflict are particularly relevant for this study.

### ***Ronan University’s Travel Seminar Program***

The university we selected for the study—henceforward called *Ronan University*<sup>1</sup>—is a private not-for-profit institution offering liberal arts and professional degrees to about 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The spacious campus features old buildings and residential units for freshmen and sophomores. While Ronan is in a town of about 200,000 people in the Midwestern United States, it welcomes students from most of the United States and over 42 countries.

Before 2013, Ronan offered two to four short-term faculty-led study abroad programs each academic year over spring break or summer. These programs were faculty-driven and planned, receiving minimal support from the Provost and the International Offices. Ronan approved a January term (J-term) in 2012 and the first J-term took place in 2013. The University then created a new position in the International Office to develop Ronan’s custom faculty-led study abroad programs. The International Office helped formalize processes (e.g. program approval, faculty training, risk management, budgeting, etc.) and support for faculty-led study abroad, establishing a “travel seminar” model. Travel seminars are short-term faculty-led study abroad and domestic programs for undergraduate students offered during J-term or early summer.

Since 2013, over 50 Ronan professors have offered travel seminars to 1,800 students. Each course enrolls 10 to 20 students and is led by two seminar leaders. The leaders have two options to divide their duties. In the first option, the lead instructor teaches the course and the co-leader plays a support role. Alternatively, both instructors co-teach and are equally responsible for the course. The primary reason for the two-leader requirement is safety; Ronan wishes to ensure that at least one university representative is available to facilitate seminar activities and assist the students in case of an emergency. As an additional safety precaution, Ronan encourages seminar leaders to work with third-party providers with expertise in the local environment. Third-party providers manage program logistics and provide on-site emergency support. Faculty considering a new travel seminar can also apply for a travel grant to conduct a site visit to a potential travel seminar location.

To propose a travel seminar, faculty complete a series of steps. First, they meet with the Director of Education Abroad to discuss their ideas and the program development process. Next, they complete a proposal form and submit a draft syllabus, a daily itinerary, and an academic credit calculation worksheet. The Department Chair and the Dean of the faculty member's unit must approve the proposal. New courses must also be ratified by the unit's Curriculum Committee. Finally, the Education Abroad Policy and Implementation Committee reviews all proposals and recommends the approved courses. The proposal is due 14 months before the start date of the travel seminar and seminar leaders work on proposals anywhere from 14 to 24 months in advance. Once faculty run a travel seminar, repeat offerings often require less planning.

The proposal process is just the beginning of the seminar leaders’ work. Before, during, and after the seminar, program leaders must coordinate the following additional tasks:

- Logistics—working with providers on program design, reviewing proposals with the International Office, and setting up other logistical arrangements
- Budget—assisting the International Office with the program budget, requesting travel advances, keeping track of expenses and receipts, and completing travel expense reimbursement documents upon return
- Risk Management—providing a final itinerary and a risk assessment form to Ronan International’s Risk Assessment Committee, attending the health and safety workshop, and reviewing emergency guidelines and incident reporting steps
- Marketing and Recruitment—creating promotional materials for the travel seminar, attending J-term or summer/fall study abroad fairs, holding information sessions, and responding to student inquiries
- Student orientation—developing and facilitating a minimum of three pre-departure meetings and one re-entry session with students
- Training—attending seminar leader training workshops on best practices

Ronan’s International Office offers faculty a series of training and development workshops. The workshop lineup includes one to two sessions for prospective seminar leaders. In the past, these new leader programs included panels of experienced travel seminar faculty, travel seminar planning workshops, and third-party provider discussions. Other workshops deal with post-approval topics such as general logistics, best practices for incorporating intercultural learning and critical thinking, active learning strategies, and student team dynamics. A final mandatory session covers health, safety, and risk management. At the end of the travel seminar experience, faculty and students complete feedback surveys and faculty leaders have individual debrief sessions with the International Office.

### **Study Design and Methods**

Our research followed a case study design, appropriate when the researchers wish to “catch the complexity of a single case” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). We classify our study as instrumental (Stake, 1995) because its purpose was to benefit not only the university where we conducted the study but also faculty and administrators at other institutions.

Following best practices in case study design, we explored the case holistically using various data sources (Yin, 2003). We distributed a mixed-methods survey, conducted in-depth interviews, and reviewed existing information. We further explored published materials available to short-term study abroad faculty and sought information from co-leaders, two students, the Executive Director of Global Engagement and International Programs, and the Director of Education Abroad.

### **Sample Selection**

First, we sent a mixed-methods survey (available at <https://tinyurl.com/RonanSurvey1>) to all 71 faculty members who led or co-led short-term study abroad seminars at the institution between 2014 and 2019. After a preliminary analysis of the data, we wrote interview protocols (available at <https://tinyurl.com/RonanSurvey2>) for both leaders and co-leaders.

Thirty participants answered our survey. The final sample comprised 16 females (53.33%), 13 males (43.33%), and one person who chose not to self-identify (3.33%). Participants’ ages ranged between 25 and 74 years. We received responses from full professors (20%), associate professors (37%), assistant professors (10%), and staff and administrators (20%). Thirteen percent of the participants were adjunct professors, “other,” or preferred not to identify their rank or position.

For the second phase of the study, we selected a purposeful sample of faculty from diverse disciplines who led study-abroad programs in various countries. We looked for short-term study abroad leaders and co-leaders with different ranks and university positions (Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Full Professor, Clinical or Adjunct Professor). The goal of the interviews was to collect rich information and elaborate on preliminary themes identified in the survey responses. We interviewed six people: four leaders and two co-leaders. Four of the interviewees were women and one was a male. The

interviewees represented various units on campus: Business, Pharmacy, Education, and Arts and Sciences. We also conducted an unstructured interview with the institution's International Office Executive Director. At that point, the institution's Director of Education Abroad joined the research team.

### **Subjectivities**

We cannot eliminate subjectivities in qualitative studies—just acknowledge and report these to the readers (Maxwell, 2012; Mosselson, 2010). This section addresses our experiences and how these may have affected our data analysis and interpretations.

The three authors work for the institution where the study was conducted. Therefore, all interviews involved conversations with co-workers. Our proximity to the study participants may have affected the interviewers' responses. In addition, we may have a positive bias for our employer, which could have affected our interpretations.

All three authors have either led or co-led study abroad programs at Ronan University. Two authors planned and led a short-term study abroad seminar in March 2020, right as the COVID-19 crisis was taking place. Two authors participated in study abroad experiences as students. As we analyzed the data, we may have paid closer attention to information that matched our personal experiences.

We were conscious of our biases and paid special attention to data that did not match our experiences. As recommended by Barusch et al. (2011), we reviewed negative cases that ran counter to our original interpretations. We also had multiple in-depth discussions, thoroughly reviewing all excerpts (please refer to the Data Analysis section).

Yin (2003) suggests that strong case studies include a review of internal documents. To access Ronan's internal documents so the researchers could review this research study holistically, the third author joined the research team. The third author has worked in education abroad for twelve years. For the last six of those years, she has worked at Ronan University on short-term faculty-led programs. She has led faculty training and provided resources to prepare travel seminar leaders. She is, therefore, invested in preparing faculty members for a positive experience. To minimize the impact of this author's positive bias, she focused on Ronan's internal documents. She did not take part in the faculty or student interviews or in the analysis of such data.

## **Data Analysis and Results**

### **Survey Responses**

The survey included demographic questions (e.g. gender, age, and rank) and the following question: The Cambridge Dictionary defines a role as “the position or purpose that someone has in a situation, organization, society, or relationship.” Given this definition, did you play any roles other than that of a professor during this trip?

Most participants (26 out of 30) said “yes.” Participants whose answer was “yes” were prompted to further explain their roles and provide examples in a qualitative question. Our qualitative data analysis included both survey respondents' qualitative answers and the interview data.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Two members of the research team coded the qualitative data. First, they reviewed the data to gain an overall sense of the results. After the two researchers met to review their preliminary findings, one researcher (“the coder”) identified relevant excerpts, created a list of codes and definitions, and assigned excerpts to the codes. Using Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software package, the coder created an inter-rater reliability test for the second researcher.

Next, the researchers reviewed the codes once again and addressed plausible reasons for discrepancies. The researchers met for the third time and identified problems such as technical glitches (the software eliminated one code from the test), human errors, and interrelated codes. Finally, after a series of in-depth discussions to reconcile the findings, the

two researchers agreed on the codes for all excerpts. Table 1 shows the identified challenges and benefits of short-term study-abroad faculty leaders. A larger part of our analysis involves exploring the challenges for the purpose of discovering improvements and making recommendations.

**Table 1**  
*Code Applications*

Role Experiences	
Role Complexity and Overload	106
Role Ambiguity and Conflict	79
<i>Total</i>	185
Challenges	
Preparation and Reentry	55
Taking It Seriously	31
Physical and Mental Health	24
Group Dynamics and Conflict	22
<i>Total</i>	132
Benefits	
A Positive Experience	41
Professional Impact	38
Cultural Enrichment	22
Making a Difference	17
Compensation	11
<i>Total</i>	129

### Qualitative Themes

We organized our results according to three major themes. These were Role Experiences, Challenges, and Benefits. Following are descriptions of each theme and a detailed review of each code including participants' representative comments.

#### *Role Experiences*

Short-term study abroad faculty members play complex and multifaceted roles. This theme includes general connections between participants' testimonials and role theory. The two main role-related themes were *Role Complexity and Overload* (the multiple hats worn by program leaders and co-leaders) and *Role Ambiguity and Conflict* (difficulties reconciling the study-abroad leader/co-leader roles and those of traditional faculty members).

#### *Role Complexity and Overload*

The code Role Complexity and Overload was present in 106 excerpts. This code refers to faculty perceptions of the complexity of their work and the feelings of exhaustion caused by the quantity of roles. Faculty-identified roles included professor, logistics manager, travel agent, tour guide, map reader, chaperone, mentor, friend, confidante, safe keeper, meal companion, conflict resolution expert, surrogate parent, disciplinarian, enforcer, safety officer, counselor, nutritional consultant, fitness consultant, first-aid supply keeper and administrator, doctor, nurse, and even unexpected (and humorous)

roles such as “money-lauderer,” “shoe advisor,” “late-night carouser,” and “fellow human hiking up a mountain.” Some roles required specialized training the faculty member did not have. As one participant explained:

[I played the role of a] counselor—even though I’m not a trained psychologist and technically should not play that role. However, students get anxious, they get depressed, they need help, and we can’t just say sorry, wait until I find you a trained psychologist speaking another language to talk to you.

Role complexity led to role overload, the perception that the professors lacked the resources to handle the multifaceted role challenges. Here is how one faculty member described the problem:

It is ten times the stress, and 20 times the work. I get much less sleep on travel seminars, and every moment of wakefulness brings decisions to be made, plans that need to be reworked, phone calls or texts that need to be written/read, people to speak with, and so much more. In three weeks we are not just faculty but a multitude of other roles and then in a few short days when we return we have to have the new semester’s curriculum ready to go and grade final projects from the travel seminar.

Participants described an intensive teaching experience and little time to rest. One professor explained:

“Often we are not ready for the sheer exhaustion that may take place. At home, we may go to our families and relax. There, we are on stage almost the entire time.”

The absence of downtime and the support of loved ones, therefore, contributed to faculty exhaustion. Being continually on stage also meant sharing with students moments of vulnerability, emotion, or distress. One professor contrasted the emotions students saw in her during the trip to the way she presented herself on campus:

“There were times when I got emotional—teary-eyed when learning about social injustices during a museum tour, for example—and it’s pretty rare that students get to see that raw emotion from me.”

### ***Role Ambiguity and Conflict***

Faculty described their roles as ambiguous and sometimes at odds with one another. For example, faculty reported difficulties reconciling a more traditional “judging” role (grading, enforcing the course rules) with that of a flexible and approachable facilitator. Here is how one program leader described the problem:

I think the biggest challenge. . . was that balance between needing to enforce rules and make sure people weren’t out of line with needing to also balance the fact that I’m your instructor and I need to be approachable so that we can engage in this material in a productive way.

Faculty described the grading process as tricky, arguing that travel experiences are hard to quantify or incorporate into traditional assignments. For example, one professor wondered how she could grade students while also asking them to “forget about grades and learn lessons [she could not] possibly test in traditional assessments.”

The proximity between faculty and students during the travel seminar increased, leading to a blurring of the lines between professor, travel companion, and friend roles. The groups found themselves in unusual situations, as they went snorkeling together or socialized after a day of excursions or meetings. One professor explained:

There’s an informal nature to travel; dressing differently than you would in a classroom, seeing one another in environments that you wouldn’t normally [eating, sleeping, swimming], creates a different dynamic between student and professor. Couple this with more extensive opportunities to learn about the personal lives of students lends itself to a more informal environment that nurtures friendship [meals, long hours on a train, etc.].



Such blurring of the lines, however, did not affect all professors equally. Some did not have difficulty keeping a distance. When asked whether the professor and the friend roles ever collided, one faculty explained:

I have never had trouble maintaining that distinction. The downside of that is I am not always as approachable as I could be, and thus some learning/growth/formative opportunities are missed, but generally speaking, students do feel comfortable enough with me to be themselves without incurring “parental” judgment and without the worry that I might be too familiar.

Role ambiguity also affected co-leaders, who felt uncertain of their responsibilities and roles. One co-leader reported imposter syndrome experiences:

I felt very weird. I didn't feel like I had authority and it wasn't so much that I needed to, but it was more just a weird relationship. The power dynamic was strange on the trip cause I felt like, okay [the program leader] is in charge, I'm here and I'm sort of in charge, but not really. So I had this weird relationship with the students where I was sort of a friend and sort of an instructor, but they didn't really look to me as their instructor. They look to [the program leader].

Arguably, professors' roles on campus are also ambiguous, involving not only teaching but also mentoring and advising students. Here is how one student interviewed for this study explained her expectations of a good professor:

I feel students are going through so much in their four years at college. Professors can be and should be someone that students can reach out to if needed and not just in a professional way or an educational way, but like be there for students personally too if they need it.

Study abroad program leaders and co-leaders, however, needed to be “there for students personally” for much longer periods of time. Further, program leaders teach in an unfamiliar environment, without the benefit of a classroom or a predictable daily schedule. Professors who have not led study abroad experiences often misunderstand these circumstances. One professor explained:

There are challenges explaining the inevitable committees back home that there's value in the experience that far transcends the typical academic papers. On the other hand, people who are not used to J-term trips want our syllabi to include the same “typical” assignments courses back home include.

### **Challenges**

The combination of role complexity, overload, ambiguity, and conflict results in a highly demanding experience for short-term study abroad faculty. This theme includes the following codes: *Preparation and Reentry* (preparing for the course and for the upcoming semester while also handling other responsibilities), *Taking it Seriously* (helping students reconcile the academic and the travel experiences), *Physical and Mental Health* (monitoring students' and faculty health during the trip), and *Group Dynamics* (handling cliques, student difficulties, and conflict between leaders or between the leaders and the hosts).

#### **Preparation and Reentry**

A frequent challenge reported by participants was the extensive preparation needed for the study abroad experience. The following is a representative participant comment: “They [the short-term travel seminars] were very rewarding and enjoyable, but also time-consuming to plan and physically and mentally exhausting to conduct.”

Participants also worried about the burden placed on students the semester preceding the travel seminar. Faculty acknowledged that meetings and activities held prior to the trip promoted group cohesion and helped the students get ready culturally and academically for the experience. Faculty expressed concern, however, at the excessive work for students:

Asking students to commit intellectual resources and time to complete readings, assignments, and other academic work in the fall prior to the travel seminar when most are already carrying a full load and/or working is ethically problematic. I want them to be prepared for the trip, but at the same time, it is unfair to add to their fall semester obligations and not give them credit for it.

A common preparation concern had to do with the decision to hire a third-party educational travel provider to handle most logistical problems. Here is how one participant explained the dilemma:

A travel seminar leader has two choices: (1) use a third-party provider so it is easier to put the trip together, but harder to populate because the trip will be expensive, or (2) build the course from scratch so the trip is more affordable, but it is very time-consuming to build a course from scratch. It is almost like having another three-credit course added to your teaching load while you are planning.

Many participants argued that planning a trip on their own was demanding. Third-party providers know the study abroad location well and coordinate logistics such as housing, transportation, and food. Engaging third-party providers, however, adds costs to the trip reducing student access and hindering recruitment. Some participants also suggested that third-party providers reduced faculty control over their course. Here is how one participant justified the decision to build his own trip: “The experiences are always richer, more 'real', and the trip doesn't feel like a checklist.”

Co-leaders expressed fewer concerns with preparation. One co-leader reported: “My colleague was basically in charge. He did all of the work, he set up the syllabus, the assignments, the schedule, everything. And I just basically had to go along to facilitate and to be with the students.” The co-leaders’ reduced workload, however, was a double-edged sword; they had less work but also missed the opportunity to help the leader plan a successful experience. Here is how one co-leader described the problem: “Because of how I came into this trip and I really didn’t help with the planning, I just was there as another body initially. I feel like the academic objectives could have been stronger throughout the entire trip.”

Some participants worried about the start of the spring semester. A representative comment was: “By the time you get back, you're pretty tired and the spring semester starts.” Preparation and reentry challenges seemed more severe for staff members who took on program leader or co-leader roles. These professionals were not “on break” during the January or May months when the short-term seminars took place. Instead, they continued handling normal administrative responsibilities during the travel experience. The work accumulated and made reentry difficult. One staff member recalled: “Things didn't just magically slow down when we got back, they actually ramped up. So having to finish all the grading and everything that goes along with just closing out a J-term course was really challenging.”

### ***Academic and Disciplinary Issues***

Participants' concerns with disciplinary issues and ensuring the academic integrity of the course varied. Some faculty reported no problems and said that students behaved in an exemplary way. Others shared concerns with alcohol or conflicts with the hotel staff in the host country.

Disciplinary concerns could be connected to the 24/7 nature of the short-term study abroad faculty role. When teaching on campus, faculty members do not feel responsible for what students do outside the classroom. One faculty member pondered:

I'm not their parent and I don't wanna play their parent, but it's also like I still have nervousness about their safety. We have a meeting of course before we leave and we talk about a lot of things, I tell them, "look, if you're drunk on the street in the middle of like this country, how the heck am I supposed to find you?" Normally I'm not responsible for their logistics, with them getting up and getting somewhere on time. But if you're not on the bus, we all can't go anywhere, you know?

### ***Physical and Mental Health.***

Faculty worried about students' health and safety. Here is how one faculty member recalled the experience:

I have had many, many students with stomach illnesses, from travelers' diarrhea to short-term, but serious seeming, food poisoning. It is always a challenge to know when the best thing is to take them to the clinic (usually my choice) and when to just give them Pedialyte and let them sleep it off. We once slept in a rainforest hut and when the sun went down the floor was covered in scorpions and spiders, and I thought the students were going to have heart attacks (we were in hammocks).

Another professor worried about students who forgot their medications and did not adjust well to the location: Students didn't take their asthma medication [and the travel seminar location] has a really high pollution and so they all needed their inhalers and none of them brought them. And so that becomes your problem then, right? You have to help figure that out for them.

Student mental health was also a reason for concern. Faculty reported a range of student mental health problems from the simple and mundane (homesickness, minor levels of stress) to more serious emotional issues such as severe anxiety and depression. In the meantime, faculty coped with their own health and energy problems. The word *exhaustion* appeared frequently in the data. Faculty felt, however, that they needed to role model resilience:

I'm tired. It's one o'clock in the morning and I get to sleep and everybody's stressed out. But you have to model how to act. They're all looking to you to see what you're going to do.

One example of resilience was hiding a physical problem from students to avoid affecting their travel experience. One faculty had a serious foot problem, causing severe pain as she walked. She recalled: "I was trying to manage my own pain but not communicate that to anybody because I didn't want them to know that I was struggling."

### ***Group Dynamics***

Faculty sometimes struggled to manage group dynamics such as student cliques or conflict. For example, one professor recalled: "Group dynamics are the most challenging. I had a student with an extremely negative attitude that jeopardized the dynamic for everyone." Others reported problems related to students' incompatibilities or frustrations with one another:

On-campus, students are in class together for 75 mins and then they mostly go their own way and often don't see each other again until the next class. On a travel seminar the people who don't click or get along see each other constantly, every day, all day, for a couple of weeks, and stuff always seems to boil over. While I try my best to let students figure things out on their own, I have had to step in on occasion.

Conflict emerged not only among students but also between the program leader and co-leader or between the faculty and the local providers. Problems included misunderstandings on each other's roles, personality differences, and labor division. One faculty member explained: "My co-leader is a great ideas person and not a great detail person. And so a lot of the administrative burden kind of fell to my side." Another professor recalled "conflicts between faculty members and organizers that happen behind the scenes."

### ***Benefits***

Despite the challenges, the faculty still found the overall experience worthwhile. This theme refers to the benefits experienced by professors during the short-term study abroad experience. These were coded as: *A Positive Experience* (general enjoyment of the experience), *Professional Development* (the perception that the experience impacts professors academically or enhances student-professor relationships), *Cultural Enrichment* (gratitude for the ability to travel and gain a global perspective), *Making a Difference* (the perception that the experience benefits students), and *Compensation* (comments on the compensation received).

### ***Personal Enjoyment***

Faculty recalled their experiences as pleasurable and worthwhile. We identified 41 instances of positive feelings and reactions in the qualitative data. Examples include: “I had the best time, I learned a lot, I had positive interactions with the people, the students were great,” and “At a personal level, I strongly feel this experience has taken away a few years out of my age [i.e. made me feel younger] and thus, may have added a few years to my life!” Another professor described the short-term study abroad teaching experiences as “not for the faint of heart” but “magical” and added: “I cannot think of too many experiences I've had as a professor that were harder and yet more rewarding.”

### ***Professional Development***

Faculty members felt that the experience benefitted them professionally. Many expressed becoming better professors, improving their relationships with students, or even seeing their students differently, both during the trip and back on campus. One professor explained:

I really enjoyed getting to know the students at that level. It's just such an intensive experience and you're spending so much time with people and I wish there was a better way on campus to be able to recreate that in an authentic way.

Another professor told a poignant story of how the study abroad experience helped him see a different side of students' lives. He understood the students' difficulties with time management and handling financial problems. As a result, when an on-campus student faced serious problems, he dealt with the situation differently.

I have a student in my class, she's a single mother. Every morning she's about 10 to 15 minutes late arriving in my class. She came up to me after the first class and said: I will be late every day because this is the only way I can get my daughter to the babysitting place. I had no difficulty saying, Oh, that's all right. And the next question she asked was, would it be possible for me to sit down with you and go over those things that I miss? And I very gladly offered her that time. I probably would not have done that [before the study abroad experience]. I would've said, that's your responsibility. Gotta be here at eight o'clock.

### ***Cultural Enrichment***

Faculty appreciated the cultural opportunities and enrichment afforded by the experience. Several participants felt that teaching an international course improved their cross-cultural competencies. One professor explained: “I did not have the opportunity to study abroad in my undergraduate experience. On a personal level, I got to fulfill something that was missing from my college experience.”

### ***Making a Difference***

Faculty welcomed the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in students' lives. These professors appreciated seeing students, many of whom had never traveled overseas before, have a life-changing experience. One professor encouraged other faculty not to “underestimate the power these trips have on the students.” Another faculty member added:

“I have seen students blossom during these experiences. I think they have begun to understand what it means to engage others in a cross-cultural experience.”

### ***Compensation***

Faculty members' perceptions of compensation as a benefit were mixed. Some felt the extra compensation was adequate and an incentive to teach a travel seminar. Others complained about “woefully inadequate” compensation for the duties performed. One participant was particularly critical and recommended: “Don't do it for the money because the compensation does not cover the hours needed to get it up and running.” A co-leader expressed resentment because “the lead professor was getting the full stipend to take care of everything. I was simply compensated at the level of a chaperone for the trip.” Yet another participant suggested that the only reasonable compensation was a course reassignment.

## **Discussion**

A study abroad experience may be a defining moment in one's life (Liu, 2019). The benefits of study abroad programs for students have been well documented by the literature (the reader is directed to Donnely-Smith [2009] and Gaia [2015]) and universities have a heightened interest in developing students' cultural competency (Mason & Thier, 2018). Short-term study abroad gains such as personal development, intercultural learning, and educational growth will remain after the experience is over (Donnely-Smith, 2009; Gaia, 2015; Liu, 2019).

The experiences of study abroad faculty, however, are less known or discussed in the literature. This study adds to the body of literature by bringing the voices of faculty and the benefits and challenges inherent to their complex, ambiguous, and sometimes conflicting roles. Faculty and staff who lead short-term study abroad courses wear multiple hats: professor, travel agent, parent, counselor, etc. Both role overload and exhaustion are possible consequences. The resulting faculty exhaustion could affect not only the faculty members' experiences but also their students'. After all, students on the trip need attention. Further, both before and during the trip, faculty must also attend to the needs of students back home.

Balancing students' needs and managing multiple responsibilities may not only add to faculty experiences of role overload but also prove impossible under conditions of distress. Faculty may thus face a vicious cycle. The role is complex, potentially causing exhaustion. Exhausted faculty members may be unable to handle the complex role.

The complexity of the short-term study abroad faculty role may lead to ambiguity and conflict. Professors struggled to reconcile roles such as travel coordinator and professor, disciplinarian, and team member. Some faculty also had trouble reconciling their roles abroad with traditional expectations of on-campus professors. Typical professor roles do not involve being available 24/7 for the students, teaching and grading in an unfamiliar environment, and interacting with students in casual settings. Further, the academic system of checks and balances requires curriculum committees to authorize international coursework. Professors reported problems having courses approved and misunderstandings of the uniqueness of the experience for students and faculty.

Preparation represented a significant hurdle for professors. Another obstacle was reentry and planning the following semester. Staff members reported even greater challenges balancing their regular workloads with study abroad preparation and teaching responsibilities.

A different angle, however, may be considered. The ability to effectively handle complexity is valuable in today's “VUCA” (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) environment (Shliakhovchuk, 2019). Switching roles, thus, enhances faculty leadership capabilities. In addition, complexity enriches faculty-student relationships by humanizing faculty in students' eyes (Burnside, 2022). During a study of students' perceptions of faculty roles in short-term study abroad programs, Burnside (2022) found that returning students were more comfortable interacting with faculty as “human beings.”

Short-term teaching abroad experience is indeed beneficial to faculty professional development. Those who coordinate short-term study abroad programs attest that these programs enrich their research and professional development

(Liu, 2019) and provide international contacts and networking opportunities (Raczkowski & Robinson, 2019). A short-term study abroad program can facilitate additional teaching experiences and research projects, supporting tenure and promotion efforts (Keese & O'Brian, 2011). Indeed, faculty participants in our study appreciated their short-term teaching experience and listed professional development as one of their greatest rewards.

### **Limitations and Topics for Future Research**

Since this study focused on faculty perceptions, we did not have the participation of other stakeholders such as students and local providers. Future researchers might expand their case studies to incorporate these voices. For example, the students may view their professors differently during the trip. Thus, short-term study abroad programs have the potential to affect the student-professor relationship upon reentry. Institutions could explore how the students view their professors before, during, and after the study abroad course.

Even though we sent invitations to all professors who taught short-term study abroad programs, the study sample may have been biased towards successful professors. It would be interesting to interview professors who led only one short-term trip and chose not to do so again. Failure stories often give us considerable insight on barriers and challenges that may have been overcome by successful role incumbents and then forgotten.

Our participants' responses suggested variations in personality traits, most notably extraversion and agreeableness. Extraversion involves sociability, friendliness, and comfort with people. Agreeableness refers to people's focus on their own versus others' needs and overall levels of trust and tact (John & Srivastava, 1999). Our study did not address personality traits or include a personality assessment. Future research on the personalities of short-term study abroad faculty might be helpful, shedding light on possible relations between personality and role manifestation. For example, a professor whose extraversion and agreeableness scores are high might have a harder time differentiating the friend and professor roles.

This study focused on one Midwestern liberal arts private institution. Researchers could replicate our study in other institutions, focusing on faculty experiences and the impact of role complexity, overload, ambiguity, and conflict. In particular, we recommend studies involving different regions and faculty and student demographics to explore issues pertaining to diversity and inclusion during short-term study abroad experiences.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

After reviewing the survey and interview data, we offer four recommendations for institutions engaged in short-term study abroad programs: (1) clarify the professional benefits for faculty or staff leading or co-leading a short-term study abroad course, (2) review and define the program co-leader roles and responsibilities, (3) ensure that program leaders and co-leaders expectations on the work requirements are realistic, (4) review the preparation offered to short-term study abroad leaders and co-leaders, and (5) implement a mentorship program.

Institutions should ensure that the benefits of leading a study abroad course are clear to faculty and staff. For example, does teaching a study abroad program help faculty applying for promotion and tenure? What professional rewards are available for staff and administrators? Further, the challenges and importance of leading study abroad courses and developing international curriculum work should be communicated to other institutional members, especially administrators and members of promotion and tenure committees.

Institutions should also review the co-leader's role and compensation practices. First, institutions could discuss faculty experiences and better define the leader and co-leader's roles. Stronger job descriptions could then be developed to help eliminate any issues of an unfair workload and improper compensation. Since compensation matters, the tendency is for leaders to take a major preparatory and teaching role (and, thus, justify the salary differences between leaders and co-

leaders). These compensation practices could create a difficult dynamic during the course and intensify co-leaders' perceptions of role ambiguity.

Institutions might pay special attention to the significant preparation work involved in short-term study abroad. Faculty and administrators should not underestimate the time needed not only to prepare for the short-term study abroad experience but also to recover from it and get ready for the following semester.

Finally, institutions should consider in-depth preparation for leaders and co-leaders in short-term study abroad courses. The multiple roles identified by faculty could guide such preparatory work. Pairing inexperienced faculty with experienced mentors might be beneficial. Implementing a mentorship program would facilitate providing new program leaders with support and useful advice.

Ultimately, short-term study abroad faculty are “jacks of all hats,” facing complex challenges, multifaceted responsibilities, and a difficult to define role. Despite these difficulties, our study participants still recommended the experience and found it worthwhile. “They are the best teaching experiences that I’ve had in my 20-plus years of teaching,” explained a faculty member, “because they are the most impactful experiences for my students.”

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