INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES ON HOW EMPLOYABILITY CAN BE INFLUENCED BY STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES AS AN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT AT THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

A Dissertation in
Workforce Education and Development

by

Jamie Weaver

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The dissertation of Jamie Weaver was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Mark D. Threeton
Associate Professor of Education
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

Wesley Donahue
Professor of Education (Workforce Education and Development)

Hyung Joon Yoon
Assistant Professor of Education

John Ewing
Associate Professor of Agricultural and Extension Education

Susan M. Land
Professor of Education
Head of the Graduate Program in Workforce Education and Development
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how skills gained through study abroad at the Pennsylvania State University influence individuals’ employability as they enter the workforce. Potential participants were invited to complete a qualification survey that gathered initial demographic and study abroad information. From the responses, eligible participants were selected and invited to a one-hour recorded interview session. During the interviews, the participants described specific situations that they encountered and how they navigated living and studying in another culture. The participants also provided insight into their current job placement, the hiring process, and how study abroad was discussed. The findings of this study provided insight into the employability of study abroad students and the application of Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory with the programs. Findings include a comprehensive list of skills gained as described by the participants and the lack of reflections being incorporated into study abroad programs. Practitioners can gain a clear understanding of the effects of study abroad on their students and how to better integrate Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory into programs provided.
Table of Contents

List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... vii
List of Tables ........................................................................................................................... viii
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1
  Historical Perspective ...................................................................................................... 2
  Problem Statement ........................................................................................................... 5
  Significance of the Study ................................................................................................. 6
  Research Questions .......................................................................................................... 9
  Limitations ....................................................................................................................... 9
  Assumptions ..................................................................................................................... 10
  Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................... 11
  Definition of Terms .......................................................................................................... 14
  Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................ 15

Chapter 2 Review of Related Literature .................................................................................. 17
  Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 17
  Methodology .................................................................................................................... 19
  Literature Review ............................................................................................................. 20
    Skill Development and Employability ..................................................................... 21
    Student Motivations ................................................................................................. 23
    Effects on Employability .......................................................................................... 25
      Positive Effects ......................................................................................................... 26
      Negative Effects ............................................................................................... 32
    View of Employers ................................................................................................... 33
    Discussion ................................................................................................................ 35
    Conclusion and Implications .................................................................................... 36
    Limitation and Direction of Future Research ........................................................... 38

Chapter 3 Method .................................................................................................................... 39
  Purpose of the Study ........................................................................................................ 39
  Restatement of Research Questions ................................................................................. 39
  Design of the Study .......................................................................................................... 40
  Population and Sampling ................................................................................................. 41
    Population ................................................................................................................ 41
    Sampling ............................................................................................................. 43
  Instrumentation, Data Collection and Data Analysis ....................................................... 44
    Instrumentation ........................................................................................................ 44
    Data Collection ....................................................................................................... 45
    Data Analysis .......................................................................................................... 47
  Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................ 49
List of Figures

Figure 1. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory Model. .......................................................... 13
Figure 2. Study Abroad Reflection Model.............................................................................. 104
List of Tables

Table 1. Studies on Employability Skills Developed .............................................................. 22
Table 2. Studies on Student Motivations for Going Abroad .................................................... 25
Table 3. Summary of Positive Effects of Study Abroad on Employability ............................. 30
Table 4. Summary of Negative Effects of Study Abroad on Employability ........................... 33
Table 5. Employer’s View on the Value of Study Abroad ....................................................... 35
Table 6. Ideal Participant Criteria ............................................................................................ 42
Table 7. Interview and Research Question Alignment ............................................................ 46
Table 8. Detailed Study Process .............................................................................................. 49
Table 9. Participant Demographic Information ....................................................................... 51
Table 10. Summary of Study Data .......................................................................................... 53
Table 11. Summary of Housing Options ................................................................................ 54
Table 12. Summary of Program Structures .......................................................................... 57
Table 13. Summary of Internship Data .................................................................................. 59
Table 14. Summary of Structured Reflection Data ................................................................. 61
Table 15. Summary of Skills Gained ....................................................................................... 61
Table 16. Career Impact Summary .......................................................................................... 89
Table 17. Guiding Questions for Reflection Model .................................................................. 105
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Chapter 1

Introduction

My research seeks to explore students having international experiences prior to entering the workforce. Specifically, it focuses on the experiences gained through study abroad by undergraduate students at a four-year public university. Once achieved, these experiences may not only benefit individuals financially but also challenge and enhance their experiences with future employers. International experiences are life-changing, and they can be easily acquired by employees after entering the workforce. It’s important to note that opportunities of this nature are usually covered by employers once an individual has joined the workforce. However, there are possible advantages to students who study internationally prior to entering. Study abroad experiences have proven to increase students’ knowledge and exposure to new cultures and to give them greater appreciation for and openness to new experiences (Martin et al., 2015).

As students transition into the workforce, international experiences speak volumes to employers. They communicate that some students are independent, goal-driven, and not afraid to take risks when job responsibilities get difficult. It is often stated within the field of international education that students with international experiences are 97% more likely to find a job within 12 months of graduation (personal communication, March 15, 2017). This leads to the assumption that students are more employable as a result of a study abroad experience.

Employers have a great need for employees who have international experience and can leverage their skills to navigate the global marketplace. Once an employee starts with a specific employer, they can receive training on intercultural communication skills, problem-solving, and so on. There are investments of time and financial resources to develop these internally. If an
employee enters a company with higher global competencies, the company can use those resources for other purposes.

**Historical perspective**

The history of students gaining international experience through study abroad can be divided into two time periods, before 1965 and 1965 to the present. This is evident from the books written by William Hoffa in 2007 and 2010 detailing and summarizing the history of the field. The idea of study abroad has been present in the United States since the late 1800s (Hoffa, 2007). During this time, a few U.S. colleges and universities had scholarships and programs to promote study abroad to its students. However, as can be imagined, it was not a widely accepted form of education. Even with little support on the national level, in the 1920s, earning credit abroad toward home school degree credits developed. At this time, study abroad programs could be categorized into three trends: (1) junior year abroad, (2) faculty-led, and (3) summer study (Hoffa, 2007). Also, during 1920–1930, there was a push for the internationalization of degree studies in the United States; this was influenced by the presence of foreign students at U.S. universities, which had been steadily increasing (Hoffa, 2007).

In 1919, the Institute of International Education (IIE) was founded in response to the need for an entity to mediate between government policies and university programming (Celebrating a Century, 2019). In 1949, IIE began collecting data on study abroad students with their initiative “Education for One World” (1949–1953) and then with “Open Doors” (1954–present), which was more inclusive of the demographic info on study abroad students (Annual Reports, 2019).

From 1940 to 1950, federal bills and subsidies were created to promote and fund study abroad. For example, the Fulbright and exchange programs were developed by the U.S.
Department of State due to its interest in spreading the American way (Hoffa, 2007). This led to the development of the U.S. Information and Education Exchange Act of 1948 (Smith–Mundt Act, 2013) and later the International Education Act of 1966 (2012). All of these helped to connect universities to government funding and private foundations, increasing financial resources for study abroad opportunities.

In 1948, the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA) was developed as a board of trained professional campus advisers to guide students through the study abroad process (The History of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, n.d.). This board continues today as a leader within the field. As the field has developed, it has been influenced by events in the United States and around the world. This is especially true for World Wars I and II, which replaced study abroad with more volunteer and humanitarian work associated with wars, such as volunteer ambulance groups, the Red Cross, and so on. More recent events such as the Cold War, economic recessions, and September 11th had an impact on where, how, and why students chose to study abroad. For example, the Cold War limited the opportunities for U.S. students within the Soviet Union, while September 11th greatly decreased students’ desire to study abroad, particularly in the Middle East (Hoffa, 2010). Some of these trends can still be seen today, as there are low numbers of students who choose to study in Russia, other former countries of the Soviet Union, and the Middle East (Open Doors, 2018).

Since 1965, study abroad has been steadily increasing as a part of students’ undergraduate studies. The following trends within study abroad data (collected through Open Doors from 1965 to 2005) have become apparent, continuing into the present:

i. Diversifying the curriculums into science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); liberal arts; and so on (Hoffa, 2010), with not only a focus on the language but also the ability to align programs more closely with the academic needs of different majors. This includes
curriculum integration with STEM majors and a push towards critical languages such as Arabic, Russian, Mandarin, and so on.

ii. Diversifying the student populations that study abroad (Hoffa, 2010). The majority of the students participating in study abroad programs are White (Open Doors, 2018). Currently, the majority of students are White females, whereas during the mid-1960s to 1970 they were mostly White males, which followed the trend of college enrollments during that time (Hoffa, 2010). Ethnic minorities such as Black, Hispanic, and Native American students have always participated in low numbers; however, their participation is steadily increasing (Open Doors, 2018).

iii. Diversifying locations where students study (Hoffa, 2010); in particular, away from Western Europe, which is where 55% of students study, and towards more nontraditional locations such as Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (Open Doors, 2018).

iv. A focus on the quality and accessibility of the study abroad program by creating successful study abroad programs combining cultural, academic, economic, and political themes (Hoffa, 2010). Experiential learning guided programs that are affordable and economically available can broaden the demographics of the students who study abroad.

v. A drive towards professionalization within the field of international education by creating offices within universities to promote and guide students through their experiences (Hoffa, 2010). Building more professional networks such as NAFSA and the Forum on Education Abroad will provide best practices in the field. Within these networks, there has also been a recent focus on the quality and impact of study abroad programs, including the employability of students.
Problem Statement

There are two general issues that relate directly to this research study, as well as the broader field of international education. First, within the international education profession, assumptions are used to promote study abroad to prospective students. These include the assumption that a study abroad student will make more money, find a better job quickly, and be overall more employable upon graduating and entering the workforce. However, there is very little widespread research within the United States to support these claims.

What broad research there is comes from study abroad providers who have a financial stake in study abroad, such as the Institute for International Education of Students (IES Abroad) 50-year Alumni Survey, completed in 2002. This survey was the largest quantitative study focused on all aspects of study abroad and its impacts on the participants. There was a small section dedicated to career impacts (Sharp, 2018). IES Abroad used the data from this survey to continue research in the area of the career impacts of study abroad; the most recent research was conducted in 2008 (Sharp, 2018).

There are studies being conducted at U.S. universities; however, most are very small or not focused on the employability of the students. An example would be the study conducted by Tracy Williams in 2005 at Texas Christian University. Williams (2005) compared the intercultural communication skills between study abroad and non-study abroad students. Similarly, a study conducted by Lisa Brooks and Linda Simpson in 2014 incorporated a larger number of universities but focused only on students who were in the family and consumer science (FCS) majors. Moreover, Brooks and Simpson focused on the overall impact of a student’s employability. As will be discussed further, within the United States, there are no large studies that have researched employability or even several smaller studies using similar students that
could support each other. To have a broader view of the employability of study abroad students, we need to look at the research that is being produced in Europe.

Second, when returning from a study abroad experience, it is common for a student to say, “It was awesome,” when asked about it. They often lack the ability to expand on their experience further and a good understanding of how the experience impacted both their personal and professional lives. With reflection, students begin to understand how they have been impacted; however, this can take significant time (Akella, 2010). To assist students through this process, it is important that study abroad professionals have a clear understanding of the skills that students gain during their experience. With this understanding, they will be able to prepare students before they go abroad to be mindful of their experiences and the skills used to navigate them. Once returning, the professionals can work with the students through reflection and guide them to use those skills to impact their future in their selected professions.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for both personal and professional reasons. I was a study abroad student and have seen firsthand the impacts that such experiences can have. During my entire undergraduate career, I had the opportunity to study abroad on three separate occasions. My first experience was a two-week, Spanish language, intensive faculty-led program. After that two-week program, a new passion was awakened in me. Within a year I returned abroad for a full semester of Spanish language immersion with the goal of completing a Spanish major. I returned from that experience a new person; however, it was not until years later that I realized how much of an impact that experience had on me. A few years later, when I was pursuing my secondary education degree, I jumped at the chance to go abroad one more time, this time as a student-teacher. Working abroad was completely different than my previous two experiences, and it once
again affirmed for me that if it was possible, I wanted to work in a role that helped students have the same experience that I did. However, at that time, I did not know if that was possible. My study abroad experiences made me realize that I had a dream of being a faculty leader taking undergraduate students abroad, but I was not sure if that type of position existed. I felt like I was aspiring to be something that was a figment of my imagination.

Once I started working in higher education, I found out that there were offices dedicated to international education. From that point on, I began to plan out how I could reach my dream and be a part of this office. I started my career at Penn State University in 2011 with the College of Engineering, working on the recruitment and retention of students. It was here that I began to develop a relationship with faculty members who take students abroad as part of their course work.

Since 2017, I have been working in the field of international education, and it has helped me to understand trends and needs within it. This understanding was expanded in 2019; as part of my course work in workforce education and development, I traveled to South Africa with a group of engineering students. Throughout my experience, one issue that has been clear to me is the value of a study abroad experience for a student’s career. Faculty and practitioners work hard to give students impactful experiences abroad, and we know that when they are carried out effectively, they can have an impact on students in many ways, both personally and professionally. But are these impacts as great as we think? This study on the employability of study abroad students focuses on the professional impacts of study abroad.

Throughout my academic studies in workforce education and development, it has become clear that my passion for study abroad can be linked directly to the broader field; more specifically, this study works to connect students’ undergraduate experiences in study abroad to their ability to successfully join the workforce. According to Gray and Herr (1998) in *Workforce Education: The Basics*, there are two missions of workforce education and development, both of
which can be met through the process of gaining global skills through international experiences. The first mission, to promote career opportunities to individuals (Gray & Herr, 1998), is fulfilled as graduating students with global skills enter the workforce. By previously gaining these skills, they have a distinct labor market advantage over other individuals who are competing for the same positions (Gray & Herr, 1998). Their experiences abroad increase the employment opportunities that become available. As a result, they learn to think globally, gain competencies to interact with other cultures successfully, and gather experience to thrive in unknown environments. According to Martin et al. (2015), there is evidence that the competency of open-mindedness leads to deep learning and critical thinking. As critical thinking skills increase, so does an individual’s ability to solve problems, create inferences, and make decisions. Further, these competencies contribute to the individual’s ability to operate successfully within a global marketplace. The individual(s) becomes a member of the “world-class” workforce. Thus, accounting for the second goal of workforce education: to prepare the nation’s workforce, specifically to prepare a “world-class” workforce. (Gray & Herr, 1998).

Global skills are not restricted to any particular industry or job title. For example, a student majoring in engineering may feel that they will not need global skills gained through study abroad. Due to the technical nature of the field, they do not understand what an effect it can have for them as they enter their career, and no matter their role within an engineering company, these skills will be an asset. For example, they may become employed at a small branch of a global engineering company located in the rural eastern United States, and this company could have its main corporate headquarters in a Central European country. The higher administration individuals would frequently travel to and communicate with each of the locations. During these interactions, they would be dealing with cultural and language barriers. At the same time, the machinists, engineers, assemblymen and technical service personnel could be traveling to and communicating with the other location as well as a variety of customers located all over
the world. Even though these individuals are at very separate levels within the company, they are traveling and communicating on a global scale.

At the conclusion of my research, it is my hope to continue my work within the field of international education, helping students to realize the impact that these experiences can have on their futures, while also working with my colleagues to continually grow and strengthen the programs offered within higher education. I hope to continue my research throughout the broader international education community, through both domestic and international partnerships.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore undergraduate student study abroad experiences, to identify how they are directly linked to employability skills, and moreover, to investigate whether the skills gained led to an increase in students’ employability. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do the students perceive their employability has been affected by their study abroad experience?
2. What employability skills did the students gain as a result of study abroad?
3. How does the study abroad experience give students an application of Kolb’s experiential learning theory?

Limitations

The data collection method for this study was qualitative in nature, with interviews being the main source of data. As a result, the data collected were specific to the groups of students interviewed. Selection bias could be present since the students who volunteered to participate in
the study were those who had positive experiences abroad. Those who had negative experience were not accurately represented with in the study. Additionally, as a result of the qualitative nature of the study, the data was not generalized to the whole field; however, it was used to support what previous studies have found, adding to the overall base of knowledge.

A majority of the studies used as support for this research study were based in Europe. This is due to differences in the availability of large data sets and the cultural importance placed on study abroad between Europe and the United States. The data available through studies conducted in the United States is produced by large study abroad providers such as IES Abroad or independent university studies. By contrast, in Europe, there are large data sets based around the Erasmus Programme.

I selected the topic and focus of this study as a result of my past experiences and passion for international education. The factors that make me so interested in the topic also lead to bias on the topic. In order to control this bias, two panels of experts reviewed the interview questions and process before the study was conducted. One panel consisted of individuals who had expert knowledge of qualitative data collection; the second panel consisted of individuals within the international education field at Penn State University. Both panels served to analyze the proposed interview process for contact and base validity.

**Assumptions**

As mentioned, I see my bias and past experiences as a limitation of the study. These also led to assumptions on my part as the researcher. My first assumption focused on the impact of the experience on the students, and the second focused on how the participants shared what they had learned. Due to my past experiences and current work, I assumed that students were impacted in a
positive way during their study abroad experiences. I also assumed that students made significant gains in the area of skills that led to an increase in employability.

During the research, participants were asked to recall events that occurred during their past study abroad experience. Responses to these inquiries were anticipated to be general in nature, and participants were expected to need prompting to dive deeper into their experiences. Depending on the amount of time that had passed since the experiences, the participants may have had difficulty recalling important information. However, it was the assumption that the most impactful experiences, either positive or negative, would be easily recalled by the participants, having had the most influence on their paths after study abroad.

Theoretical Framework

The global skills of employees in the workforce directly affect the workforce education and development that are provided. Globalization is the main theoretical foundation and driver for workforce education and development as it relates to the importance of international experiences prior to entering the workforce. In “The Emergence of ‘Workforce Development’: Definition, Conceptual Boundaries and Implications,” Jacobs and Hawley (2009) described the historical and current drivers for workforce education as globalization, technology, the new economy, political changes, and demographic shifts. Globalization has led to a flow of information and commerce between nations, creating a global marketplace. This issue revealed that an increase in workforce development is needed (Jacobs & Hawley, 2009).

According to The World Is Flat by Thomas Friedman (2007), we are currently in Globalization 3.0. Globalization 3.0 is best described as the world shrinking from its small state, achieved during Globalization 2.0 (1800–2000), to a tiny and flat state (Friedman, 2007). In this new tiny and flat state, individuals have the power to collaborate and compete with each other on
a global scale. To reach a successful level globally will take specific global skills that should be
developed early and strengthened over time.

The skills gained through study abroad will allow those entering the workforce to change
as the global market changes. Globalization increases the need for those global skills; individuals
entering the workforce after obtaining such skills will directly affect the workforce performance
and development needs of their employer. Globalization is a perpetual cycle, increasing
communication across countries and cultures, shrinking the world, and growing the global
marketplace (Friedman, 2007). As we progress through Globalization 3.0, these trends will
continue to expand, thus increasing the need for individuals who can successfully navigate global
businesses (Friedman, 2007). For students, having global skills prior to becoming employed with
a company would create less of a learning curve and require less training at the employer’s
expense.

Due to globalization, the skills needed can be more impactful when specifically
developed through study abroad programs based on experiential learning theory (ELT). ELT was
developed by David Kolb in 1984; it is grounded in the humanistic concept that humans have a
natural ability to learn and make learning a lifelong process. Even though the theory is based on
the concepts of learning in general, there is an emphasis on experience and reflection (Akella,
2010).

Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as a “holistic integrative perspective on
learning that combines experience, cognition, and behavior.” He also states that learning is “a
continuous process grounded in experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 27). Through this process,
knowledge is formed as new information and experiences are combined. Kolb’s model
emphasizes turning experiences into learning (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985). A key step within
the model is a reflection on experiences. Without this reflection, students lack deeper thought
about their experience and are in danger of continually making the same mistakes. Reflection
enables the student to make sense of a situation; comprehending, understanding, and answering questions and making necessary personal and social connections lead to increased knowledge and overall learning effectiveness (Wilson & Lee, 1989).

Kolb’s ELT is made up of four stages of learning: concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE). The learning cycle can be entered at any point, but the stages are followed in sequence. Learners usually go through the cycle several times during their individual learning cycles (Akella, 2010). Kolb (1984) conceptualizes the learning process as a spiral of action and research consisting of four major moments: plan, act, observe and reflect (Akella, 2010). The cycle of this model can be seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory Model*
Brief descriptions of each of these stages are as follows (adapted from Akella, 2010):

1. Concrete experience (CE): provides the basis for the learning process. Students learn lessons throughout the experience by exercising adaptability and open-mindedness. This allows them to find creative solutions.

2. Reflective observation (RO): students learn from their experiences. They observe, reflect, and examine their experience from many perspectives.

3. Abstract conceptualization (AC): students use logic and ideas rather than feelings to understand the experiences and problems they face.

4. Active experimentation (AE): student test theories developed during AC, develop predictions about their experiences, and then act on those predictions.

Quality study abroad programs are designed and based on Kolb’s ELT. They not only provide students with learning opportunities through their experiences abroad but also guide students through reflection so that they fully understand and can articulate what they have learned. At the conclusion of these experiences, students will have gained valuable global skills needed within this globalized world. They will have the ability to effectively communicate and implement these skills easily as they enter the workforce.
Definition of Terms

*Direct enrollment*: Students will directly enroll in a foreign university. The process is often facilitated by a program provider or office at the foreign university.

*Employability*: The ability of an individual to gain and keep gainful employment.

*Embedded programs*: A majority of the course work and class meetings are conducted at the home institution. A small portion of the course, often over fall or spring break, is conducted at an international location. The international part of the course builds on the lessons previously discussed.

*Exchange programs*: A specialized agreement is drawn between a foreign institution and a U.S. institution. This agreement details the exchange of students on a semester-long basis. The balance of students must be kept through the duration of the agreement. For example, two students from the U.S. institution go abroad during the fall semester, then two students from the foreign institution come to the United States for the spring.

*Faculty-led programs*: A faculty leader takes a group of students abroad for a specific course. All of the course work is conducted while abroad. The faculty leader is in charge of securing all logistical and academic aspects of the program.

*Nontraditional locations*: These locations have a smaller number of U.S. students studying abroad when compared to other locations. They are identified as Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.

*Program provider*: A nonprofit organization that facilitates the study abroad program in partnership with a U.S. institution. These are often based in the United States; however, there are many in Europe as well.

*Traditional locations*: The locations in which a majority of U.S. students study abroad. These include Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.
Chapter Summary

This chapter has served as an introduction to the research study focusing on the employability of study abroad students. A brief history of study abroad in the United States has been provided, while also detailing the significance of the study, limitations, and assumptions on behalf of myself as the researcher. These are based on my personal and professional experiences as a study abroad student and adviser. At the conclusion of this chapter, a theoretical framework was provided based on globalization and ELT. In the next chapter, a literature review will focus on research studies conducted both in the United States and Europe.
Chapter 2

Review of Related Literature

Introduction

Study abroad experiences are becoming an increasingly important aspect of a student’s undergraduate career. Once achieved, these experiences will allow students to gain skills that allow them to be global citizens in an ever-shrinking world (Friedman, 2007).

Currently, less than 2% of the national student population has studied abroad on either a short-term (less than a semester) or long-term (semester or longer) experience while at a university in the United States. (Picard, Bernardino, & Ehigiator, 2018). The locations of these study abroad programs vary greatly and generally can be divided into traditional or nontraditional. The categorization of locations into traditional or nontraditional is most commonly based on the number of U.S. students who study there. Using this method, traditional locations are identified as Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. By contrast, nontraditional locations are those in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East (Wells, 2006).

No matter the length or the location of a study abroad experience, students return from them saying, “It has changed my life.” The research on this phenomenon is extensive; since 1920–1930, researchers have tried to understand why students have such a powerful response to their experiences and what aspects of students change as a result (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2009). This body of research, which is widely dispersed, is detailed in two separate publications by the Forum on Education Abroad. Within these publications, discussed in Chapter 1, the research on study abroad is organized by decade and common topic (Mukherjee, 2012).
One common topic that does arise is based on the soft skills that students gain through study abroad. These studies have found a number of common skills that are increased as a result of a study abroad experience. These are most commonly categorized as follows: (a) foreign language skills, (b) understanding and tolerance of other cultures, (c) ability to adapt to changing situations, and (d) overall communication and interpersonal skills (Crossman & Clarke 2009; Di Pietro, 2014; Di Pietro, 2015; Jones, 2016; Kostelijk & Regouin, 2016; Williams, 2005).

Many researchers have supported the development of these skills during study abroad; however, as the number of students participating in study abroad increased rapidly in the early 2000s, practitioners and administrators began to wonder if study abroad had the intended influence on students. Were the learning outcomes and objectives being attained? Were those skills that students developed benefiting them as they finished their academic careers and looked to join the workforce?

This literature review seeks to gather and organize studies that detail how those soft skills from study abroad are transferred into the workforce. It also examines whether employability has increased for those students who participated in a study abroad experience during their undergraduate academic careers.

The organization of this chapter is as follows: First, the introduction has served to give a short historical perspective and baseline knowledge on study abroad. Second, the Methodology section will describe how the research process was conducted and provide its results. Third, the Literature Review section will be an in-depth view of the articles found during the research process. These articles will be organized by a common topic and compared. Fourth, the results will be further discussed, conclusions will be drawn, and implications for future research will be presented.
Methodology

The initial search for studies related to study abroad and employability occurred in February 2018. Using Google Scholar, the terms “study abroad” and “employability” were searched. This first search yielded 6,120 results. These results were sorted by relevance; the first 60 article titles were skimmed and set aside for further review as needed. Further, searching was conducted using the advanced search function of Google Scholar. “Study abroad and employability” was entered into the “exact phrase” field in the advanced search. This yielded 11 results; all of the abstracts were scanned for relevance.

The Penn State University Libraries online search engine was also used. Initially, a search was conducted with the terms “study abroad” and “employability.” The search was selected to only include peer-reviewed publications and yielded 460 results, sorted by relevance. The titles of the first 30 articles were scanned and set aside for further review as needed. To narrow the search of these articles, the advanced search function was used. Within the fields of the advanced search, the terms “study abroad” and “employability” were used, searching only peer-reviewed publications. This search yielded 11 results. The abstracts of all 11 articles were scanned for relevance.

The articles that were selected for further review were skimmed and divided into folders labeled “yes,” “maybe,” and “no,” depending on their relevance to the literature review. The articles within the “yes” category met the criteria of being specific about the employability of students who studied abroad during their undergraduate academic careers. The references of these articles were also reviewed to find articles that may have been missed during the online searches. During the review of articles in the “yes” category, it became evident that within Europe the term “student mobility” is used rather than “study abroad.” Therefore, the advanced searches within Google Scholar and the Penn State University Libraries were repeated, using the term “student mobility” instead.
mobility.” These searches yielded 136 and 10 results, respectively. The titles of these articles were then scanned for relevance, reviewed later, and added to the categories previously listed. After all of the searches and review of articles were concluded, 20 articles were found to be relevant for review in regard to the employability of study abroad students. Within the next section, these articles will be described and categorized thematically.

In January 2020, the searches described were repeated for two separate reasons. First was to ensure that no new publications were available on the topics previously searched and analyzed. The second was to reevaluate the appropriateness of the literature reviewed; no changes to the literature included were needed.

**Literature Review**

Current research has served to link the skills gained from study abroad to the employability of the students who participated in these programs. For the purposes of this literature review, the term “study abroad” refers to any time that a student spent on an undergraduate academic or internship program outside of their country of citizenship. The base of knowledge on the employability of students as it relates to skills gained during study abroad is fairly new and still developing. Much of the research is based outside of the United States and is not specific to one type or location of the study abroad program. Therefore, this review will use the same broad and all-encompassing terms to reflect the terminology used in the current literature.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2017), the number of students enrolled in tertiary education (i.e., postsecondary education) outside of their country of citizenship more than quadrupled between 1975 and 2015, from 0.8 million to 4.6 million. The largest increase was seen between 2000 and 2015 when the numbers
doubled from 2.0 million to 4.6 million (OECD, 2017). Governmental incentives and policy changes have had a direct influence on this growth. In the United States, the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program claimed to have 1 million Americans participating in a study abroad program by 2017 (Brooks et al., 2012). Similarly, in Europe, the Erasmus Programme, funded by the European Commission, had over three million students participating in study abroad programs from its inception in 1987 until 2012–2013 (Brandenburg et al., 2016).

In the examination of the literature on study abroad and the employability of students, the following categories were identified: (a) skill development and employability; (b) student motivations; (c) effects on employability, both positive and negative; and (d) view of employers. The literature relevant to each category is described in the following sections.

**Skill Development and Employability**

When discussing employability skills, it is important to think of them both in a domestic and a global context. Globalization has required those entering the workforce to be able to function on a global scale. Often, to encourage students to go on a study abroad experience, it is not uncommon for advisers, practitioners, and study abroad alumni to tell these prospective students that studying abroad will increase their chances of getting a job within the global market. Often it is advertised as a way to “set yourself apart” or “move your resume to the top of the pile.” This communicates to students that by studying abroad, they will build a set of skills that will make them more employable. Yorke (2008) defined employable skills as a “set of achievements, skills, understanding and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” (as cited in Jones, 2016). These
skills can further be identified as transferable or soft skills such as intercultural communication, self-awareness, and flexibility (Jones, 2016).

Jones (2016) offered a broad description of what employability skills are, whereas Eaton and Kleshinski (2014), Kostelijk and Regouin (2016), and Williams (2005) examined how certain populations of students grow in certain skills during a study abroad experience. These studies are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Studies on Employability Skills Developed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Country or Region of Study</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eaton and Kleshinski (2014)</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Important competencies include the ability to operate globally, intercultural understanding, fluency in a foreign language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones (2016)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Transferable or soft skills are key to increasing employability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kostelijk and Regouin (2016)</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Study abroad influences significant growth in the personal lives of students, moderate professional growth and English proficiency. No influence on multicultural personality was evident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams (2005)</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Study abroad students have a larger growth in intercultural communication. They also start at a higher level than students who do not study abroad.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eaton and Kleshinski (2014) conducted an overall study on the top 50 undergraduate business programs in the United States. From this study, they identified the top three competencies that led to employability for business students. These skills included the ability to operate globally, intercultural understanding, and fluency in a foreign language (Eaton & Kleshinski, 2014). Even though Eaton and Kleshinski (2014) were specifically studying U.S.
students, their findings could be applied throughout the world. For example, they found that the ability to speak a foreign language increased the employability of business students. For a U.S. student, a foreign language would be Spanish, German, or Chinese. But for a student in Europe, the foreign language could be English. In their research, Kostelijk and Regouin (2016) focused on the English fluency and other soft skill areas of Dutch students who studied abroad and those who did not during the spring 2007 semester.

Their qualitative study evaluated the following soft skill areas: (a) English language proficiency; (b) personal growth; (c) professional growth; and (d) development of multicultural personality. Overall, it was found that students who participated in a study abroad program had significant growth within their personal lives, whereas there was only a moderate change in the categories of professional growth and English language proficiency. The development of multicultural personality was not affected by the study abroad experience.

Whereas the study conducted by Kostelijk and Regouin (2016) focused on Dutch students, Williams (2005) specifically focused on the intercultural communication and global competence of U.S. students who studied at Texas Christian University. By using the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory and the Global Competency and Intercultural Sensitivity Index, Williams (2005) was able to compare the growth of study abroad students to those who stayed on the home campus. Through this analysis, William (2005) identified that students who study abroad not only have a larger growth in intercultural communication skills but also start at a higher level of intercultural communication than those who do not study abroad.

**Student Motivations**

Kostelijk and Regouin (2016) not only examined the outcomes of intercultural communication, as previously described, but they also studied the motivation of students when
they are choosing to go abroad. A pretest survey was distributed to 714 study abroad students prior to leaving on their experience. They found that 84.7% were motivated to go abroad for personal growth, whereas 62.8% were motivated by professional growth. Once students returned from their study abroad experiences, they received a post-test survey, which asked how their professional and personal growth was affected. Of these students, 56.3% felt that the study abroad experience prepared them for their professional careers. In addition, 79.6% of students who did an internship abroad felt that it affected their professional careers. This compared to 81.8% of students who had a domestic internship. On a personal level, 84% of students who went abroad or who stayed on the home campus felt that they grew their personal networks.

Even though the findings of Kostelijk and Regouin (2016) were based solely on the responses of Dutch students, they were similar to those of Di Pietro (2014). Through literature from studies around the world, Di Pietro (2014, p. 1) found that oftentimes students go abroad “not because they want to gain competence in academic and professional domains but because they are looking for adventure and excitement.” He also highlighted the fact that students who choose to study abroad in the first place may have higher or different skill levels than those who do not, especially as it relates to intercultural skills (Di Pietro, 2014). This description is highly anecdotal but is similar to the findings of Williams (2005).

A comparison of the results can be drawn between those studies conducted in Europe. Whereas some, like Kostelijk and Regouin (2016), focused on specific populations, Di Pietro (2014) and Nilsson and Ripmeester (2016) examined broader populations. Nilsson and Ripmeester (2016) encompassed the entire region with their sample, consisting of 164,000 current students who were studying abroad around the world, as well as 2,366 prospective study abroad students (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). For 69% of the prospective study abroad students, improving their career prospects was the main reason for participating (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). Current study abroad students from the study rated employability as the top factor leading
to their satisfaction with the study abroad program. They rated these factors on the value of importance; historically, employability ranked number 1 consistently from 2010 until 2014 (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016).

From these studies focused on student motivations and employability, which are summarized in Table 2, it can be seen that commonly students selected to go abroad for personal reasons. There is a smaller population that does it for professional growth. The difference could be aligned with cultural differences between the populations, but it is most likely a result of the personality and characteristics of the individual student. However, no matter the motivation for going on the study abroad, students experienced professional growth.

Table 2

Studies on Student Motivations for Going Abroad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Country or Region of Study</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro (2014)</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Students choose to go abroad for personal reasons, looking for adventure and excitement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kostelijk and Regouin (2016)</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>84.7% of students were motivated by personal growth, 64.8% by professional growth. 56.3% felt they had grown professionally after the experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nilsson and Ripmeester (2016)</td>
<td>Europe and global</td>
<td>69% went abroad to improve their career prospects. Employability ranked no. 1 for motivation from 2010 to 2014.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effects on Employability

Even though there has been research to establish both the skills gained by students on study abroad and their motivations for doing so, the gap between those skills, motivations, and
employability needs to be bridged. Much of the research on the employability of study abroad students was based out of Europe. This is due to the Erasmus Programme, which allowed for large amounts of data from 1987 to 2013. Studies from the United States and other regions of the world tended to be smaller scale and more qualitative in nature. To further organize the studies on the effects of study abroad on employability, the studies have been separated by positive and negative subcategories.

**Positive Effects**

To be considered to have a positive effect on a study abroad student’s employability, a characteristic or factor must have made a positive impact on the student’s job prospects. Throughout the studies examined, this positive impact manifested itself in a variety of ways. Brandenburg et al. (2016), Di Pietro (2014), Di Pietro (2015), Lianos et al. (2004), and Rodrigues (2013) all measured the earning potential and employment rates of study abroad students as compared to non-study abroad students. Their studies focused on different countries and populations of students throughout Europe.

Both Brandenburg et al. (2016) and Rodrigues (2016) conducted data analysis across Europe. Di Pietro had two separate studies, one in 2014 on the students in the Erasmus Programme and the second, in 2015, on a large population of Italian students. Due to the size and length of the Erasmus Programme, all of these studies were conducted on very large populations of students. In contrast to these large studies, Lianos et al. (2004) focused on a comparatively smaller population, around 800 students in Greece.

Brandenburg et al. (2016) summarized the findings of the Erasmus Impact Study, which gathered data on students in 34 different countries. The three main points from the study, which
focused on career development of students, were as follows: (a) study abroad students were 50% less likely to be unemployed in the longer term; (b) 10 years after graduation, study abroad students were more likely to hold managerial positions; and (c) they were more inclined to take a job abroad (Brandenburg et al., 2016).

Similarly, Di Pietro (2014) used data from the Erasmus Programme to form conclusions about the employability of study abroad students. Of the surveyed students, 87% stated that they felt the experience helped them have a more successful interview, whereas 54% said it helped them secure their first job (Di Pietro, 2014). There was a small sample of U.S. college students represented in the study; their study abroad experience helped them become fluent in a second language, which helped them earn 2%–3% more than those who did not know a second language (Di Pietro, 2014). In a study of 16 European countries, Rodrigues (2013) found that study abroad students earned 3%–5% more in general, no matter their fluency in a second language. The percentage increased the longer a student was abroad; for example, students who spent three months to one year abroad earned on average 5% more than non-study abroad students (Rodrigues, 2013).

The same author, Di Pietro, conducted an in-depth quantitative study specifically on the Italian students in the Erasmus Programme. For this population of students, it was found that 10 years after graduation, the employment probability increased by 22.9% for those students who studied abroad (Di Pietro, 2015). The positive effects of study abroad on the employability rate were also seen by Lianos et al. (2004). They found that 86% of study abroad students in Italy had employment within the first year of graduating (Lianos et al., 2004).

The positive effects of study abroad on employability expanded past the rate described and the higher earning potential. Additional positive effects, which oftentimes are more vague, were found by Brooks and Simpson (2014), Crossman and Clarke (2009), Farrugia and Sanger
(2017), Norris and Gillespie (2009), Orahood et al. (2004), Petzold (2017), and Wiers-Jenssen (2008). Similar to the previous studies discussed, these also occur in a variety of different regions.

Both Norris and Gillespie (2009) and Farrugia and Sanger (2017) conducted larger-scale studies on study abroad students in the United States. Norris and Gillespie (2009) used data from a 50-year alumni survey administrated through IES Abroad, a nonprofit organization that coordinates study abroad programs for U.S. students (Study Abroad with IES Abroad, 2018). The survey was distributed to 14,800 study abroad alumni with IES Abroad between 1950 and 1999, with a response rate of 25% (Norris & Gillespie, 2009). Of the respondents, 77% stated that the study abroad experience allowed them to acquire skills that made a significant impact on their career (Norris & Gillespie, 2009).

The number of responses, 4,500, for the study conducted by Farrugia and Sanger (2017), was similar to that of Norris and Gillespie (2009). Farrugia and Sanger (2017) used data gathered through the IIE Generation Study Abroad initiative. Seventy-eight percent of respondents in this survey had talked about their study abroad experience in a job interview, whereas 50% felt that their experience led to a job offer (Farrugia & Sanger 2017).

Smaller-scale studies were conducted on specific fields or regions by Brooks and Simpson (2014), Crossman and Clarke (2009), Orahood, et al. (2004), Petzold (2017), and Wiers-Jenssen (2008). The studies conducted by Brooks and Simpson (2014) and Orahood et al. (2004) were based in the United States. Brooks and Simpson (2014) conducted a small-scale study on FCS majors at midwestern universities. The study abroad experience of the FCS majors was directly linked to a positive impact on the student’s personal and professional growth (Brooks & Simpson 2014). By using the skills gained during that experience, the respondents felt it made a significant impact on their ability to gain employment (Brooks & Simpson, 2014).

Orahood et al. (2004) also conducted a study in the Midwest region of the United States, specifically focused on business students at Indiana University. There were 198 responses to a
survey that was distributed to all junior and senior business majors at the university (Orahood et al., 2004). Of that number, 83 or 42% of them had studied abroad (Orahood et al., 2004). Ninety-six percent of those students responded that the study abroad experience had an impact on their career path; some (30%) had received job offers prior to their date of graduation (Orahood et al., 2004).

When comparing studies conducted around the world, it is not uncommon to compare the United States to other first-world countries with English as the primary language. In fact, in terms of study abroad and employability, a study conducted by Crossman and Clarke (2009) in Australia is frequently cited on similar topics in the United States. Crossman and Clarke (2009) conducted stakeholder research at one Australian university that included students, academics, and employers. This provided a strong connection between those who are affected by a study abroad experience. Through their qualitative interviews, Crossman and Clarke (2009) were able to draw the conclusion that all three stakeholder groups saw the connection between a study abroad experience and the development of key skills within the students. Employers felt strongly that students with a study abroad experience were “ahead of the pack” when it came to interpersonal skills (Crossman & Clarke, 2009).

Whereas other studies like Brooks and Simpson (2014), Crossman and Clarke (2009), and Orahood et al. (2004) studied specific populations of students in the United States and Australia, in the European region two studies, Petzold (2017) and Wiers-Jenssen (2008), focused on similar, yet more specific topics. Wiers-Jenssen (2008) conducted a study with Norwegian students with some small comparisons to Erasmus students. They not only looked at the fact that study abroad students had higher employment rates but examined where those positions were held. It was found that students who study abroad were more likely to work abroad or to have more frequent international work assignments, no matter the field of study (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008).
Petzold (2017) conducted a very unique study that was unlike any other that had been examined. To track the effect of study abroad on a student’s employment prospects, they created a variety of resumes to submit to job postings. The resumes were strategically designed to either include or not include a study abroad experience. If included, the experience was described in the cover letter and detailed in the resume (Petzold, 2017). The resumes were submitted to 231 job postings; the length of time until a reply was received and the type of reply was tracked (Petzold, 2017). It was found that a study abroad experience significantly decreased the length of response from those employers with a foreign branch; it also increased the likelihood of an invitation for an interview (Petzold, 2017). However, for employers with no foreign branch, the study abroad did not make a significant difference (Petzold, 2017). Even though this study was unique in its design, it offered great insight into the effects of study abroad experience on the job application process.

All of the studies examined are summarized in Table 3. From this summary, it can be seen that study abroad has a significant positive effect on a student’s employability. These positive effects included the following: (a) decreasing the time of response to a job application and increasing the likelihood of an invitation to interview, (b) increasing the chances of a successful job interview, (c) increasing the employment rate from one to 10 years after graduation, and (d) increasing the earning potential by 3%–5%.

Table 3

Summary of the Positive Effects of Study Abroad on Employability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Country or Region of Study</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brandenburg, Taboadela, and Vancea (2016)</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>10 years after graduation, study abroad students are more likely to hold management positions and earn higher wages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Country or Region of Study</td>
<td>Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooks and Simpson (2014)</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Study abroad had a statistically significant impact on the participants’ professional growth and the ability to gain employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossman and Clarke (2009)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Students who study abroad are more employable, according to potential employers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro (2014)</td>
<td>Italy and Europe</td>
<td>Students felt it was a positive addition to their resume. Employers felt it made a job interview more successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro (2015)</td>
<td>Italy and Europe</td>
<td>Study abroad students are 22.9% more likely to be employed three years after graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farrugia and Sanger (2017)</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>78% of study abroad students discussed their experience in a job interview. Those more advanced in their careers felt it had led to a promotion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lianos, Asteriou, and</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>87% of study abroad students gain employment within 12 months of graduation. Study abroad students consistently earn higher wages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agiomirgianakis (2004)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norris and Gillespie (2009)</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>77% of participants felt that the study abroad experience had a significant impact on their career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orahood, Kruze, and Pearson (2004)</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>96% of study abroad students felt the experience had a significant impact on their career path. 33% of study abroad students had a job offer prior to graduation, compared to 25% of non-study abroad students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petzold (2017)</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Applications with a study abroad experience received a quicker response than those without it. It also increased the chances of a job interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodrigues (2013)</td>
<td>Western and Eastern European countries</td>
<td>Having a study abroad experience increases the chances of having an international career. Students who study abroad from 3 to 12 months earn 5% more per hour compared to non-study abroad students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Country or Region of Study</td>
<td>Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiers-Jenssen (2008)</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Study abroad students are more likely to have international careers than non-study abroad students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Negative Effects**

The positive effects of study abroad on employability were previously described. These effects were significant; however, there have been a few negative effects that need to be examined. Some of the studies that described these negative effects are the same studies that were discussed as finding positive effects, specifically, Di Pietro (2014), Rodrigues (2013), and Wiers-Jenssen (2008). Brooks, Waters, and Pimlott-Wilson (2012) authored the only study that found negative effects and no positive effects. All of the studies were conducted in Europe (Eastern and Western).

Brooks et al. (2012) conducted a small, qualitative study with 85 students who had studied abroad during their undergraduate career. To gather data, in-depth individual interviews were done with each of the students. The results showed that student motivations were for personal growth, which aligned with what was found previously by Kosteljik and Regouin (2016), Di Pietro (2014), and Nilsson and Ripmeester (2016). They then drew the conclusion that these motivations provided no advantage to students when it came to gaining employment (Brooks et al., 2012).

Both Di Pietro (2014) and Wiers-Jenssen (2008) found overall that students who studied abroad took longer to find a job. Specifically, Wiers-Jenssen (2008), whose study was conducted in Norway, found that the longer students studied abroad, the longer it took them to find a job. These results were supported by Rodrigues (2013), who found that study abroad students took an
average of 0.4 months to find a job. When trying to find a job, they also used more job searching strategies and applied for more jobs than those who did not study abroad (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008).

The studies with findings on the negative effects of study abroad on employability are summarized in Table 4. Overall, even though negative effects were found, it is unclear whether they outweigh the positive effects of study abroad.

Table 4

Summary of the Negative Effects of Study Abroad on Employability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Country or Region of Study</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro (2014)</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Not all study abroad students are able to communicate their experience into something an employer would value. Study abroad students have difficulty developing an employment network. It takes them longer to find a job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodrigues (2013)</td>
<td>Western and Eastern European countries</td>
<td>On average, study abroad students took 0.4 months longer to find a job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiers-Jenssen (2008)</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Study abroad students have higher unemployment rates 3–5 years after graduation. They spend a longer time on their job search.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

View of Employers

A majority of the studies on the employability of study abroad students depended on student impressions to collect data and form conclusions. A few of the studies previously discussed collected information from both the students and their potential employers. Di Pietro (2014) and Crossman and Clarke (2009) authored two such studies. Both gave the employer’s
view on a job candidate who had studied abroad. Overall, Crossman and Clarke (2009) found that study abroad students were more employable and more attractive to potential employers. Their experience abroad “stands out to employers” on their resumes and tells the employers that the candidate has been “exposed to global thinking” (Crossman & Clarke, 2009).

Similarly, Di Pietro (2014) stated that the experience was a positive addition to a resume and often led to a more successful job interview. However, the success of an interview could be determined by how the students discussed their past study abroad experience and related it back to the job position (Di Pietro, 2014; Ripmeester, 2016). Oftentimes when asked about a study abroad experience in a job interview, students used the term “fun” or “nice” with no ability to discuss it more deeply (Ripmeester, 2016). They have no training on how to reflect and articulate their experience so that it leads to an increased chance of getting a job offer (Harder et al., 2015).

One other factor that may impact the employability of study abroad students is how those in charge of hiring new employees view that experience. According to Trooboff and Berg (2008), human resources or hiring managers valued a study abroad experience more than senior management. The value of a study abroad experience seemed to increase the longer it lasted (Trooboff & Berg, 2008). Additionally, if the person who conducted the job search or interview had studied abroad in their academic career, a higher value was placed on that experience when evaluating potential employees (Trooboff & Berg, 2008).

Information from these studies is summarized in Table 5. From them, it can be concluded that overall, employers valued a study abroad experience. However, how much they valued it depended on two factors: first, on the student’s ability to discuss the experience in a meaningful way and second, on the position and past experience of the employers.
Table 5

Employer’s View on the Value of Study Abroad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Country or Region of Study</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crossman and Clarke (2009)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Students who study abroad are more employable, according to potential employers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro (2014)</td>
<td>Italy and Europe</td>
<td>Students felt that study abroad was a positive addition to their resume. Employers felt it made a job interview more successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harder et al. (2015)</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>The value of the study abroad program is based on students’ ability to express themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ripmeester (2016)</td>
<td>United Kingdom and Erasmus</td>
<td>Study abroad students are highly attractive to employers. However, students need to be educated on how to talk about their experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trooboff and Berg (2008)</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>All employers valued a study abroad experience in employees; however, to what degree depended on their position and previous study abroad experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

It is apparent from the research described in this literature review that students who go abroad do gain employability skills. However, to what extent is still being developed. The literature in this area is still relatively new but growing due to the need to justify the outcomes of study abroad experiences. Because this body of literature is so new to the field, when examining it, it seemed slightly disorganized and contradictory. A majority of the studies came from Europe, with a limited number from the United States and almost none from other parts of the world.

Even though there is seemingly slight disorganization in the findings of the studies available and the lack of literature from a large section of the world, a majority of the literature
supports the theory that study abroad leads to higher employability of students. It is widely accepted that students gain intercultural communication skills, problem-solving skills, and global awareness through study abroad. These skills are valued by employers in many fields, as long as students can apply the skills gained to their work environment. Once study abroad students gain employment, they earn 3%–5% more than students who did not study abroad; they are also more inclined to gain managerial positions later in their careers (Brandenburg et al., 2016).

Between the positive and negative impacts found regarding the employability of study abroad students, there were some contradicting findings. For example, Di Pietro (2015) stated that study abroad students have higher employability rates three years after graduation than non-study abroad students. This is in contrast to Brooks et al. (2012), who stated that they actually have lower employability rates. Additionally, Lianos et al. (2004) stated that 87% of study abroad students gained employment within a year of graduation. By contrast, Wiers-Jennsen (2008) stated that study abroad students take longer to gain employment than non-study abroad students.

It is believed that the confusion and contrasts between studies can be attributed to the large variety of populations that are being studied around the world. Study abroad as a field is global in context; therefore, different cultures value study abroad differently. As the body of literature grows on the subject of the employability of study abroad students, themes and commonalities will become more apparent.

**Conclusion and Implications**

As a result of globalization, the need for individuals in the workplace who have the skills to be successful on a global scale continues to grow. Developing such skills before entering the workforce increases the likelihood that an individual will do so easily and quickly become successful. Employers have a need for employees who can navigate the global marketplace; they
invest great financial resources into developing those employees internally. If an employee enters a company with higher global skills, the company can use those resources for other purposes.

During postsecondary education is the ideal time to take advantage of the opportunities that are available at educational institutions that help build these skills. In an ideal situation, all students attending postsecondary institutions will have the opportunity to be culturally immersed through a study abroad program. Through this experience, they gain skills that will provide them with advantages as they enter the workforce.

To be competitive on a global scale, it is imperative that a higher number of individuals in the United States have more international experiences. According to some viewpoints, the United States may be lacking in this area due to its size and economic stability. The earlier individuals have an international experience and gain valuable skills, the more of an expert they can become. As they enter the workforce, this will provide individuals with distinct advantages within the global marketplace while providing cost savings to their employer.

Skills gained through study abroad can lead to an overall increase in productivity at every level in all industries. This result directly affects the training that is provided by workforce education professionals. These individuals have a responsibility to provide global skills guidance and training to all employees within a company. Employees with less development international experience must begin training by becoming more self-aware and may have difficulty moving past this level. By entering the workforce with more in-depth experiences and previously developed skills, training can extend into higher-level practical applications. As a result, the company as a whole will have higher productivity and be more competitive in the global marketplace.
Limitations and Direction for Future Research

This literature review only examined research on study abroad as it relates to the employability skills gained by students. The research on the overall impact of study abroad is extensive and has many different applications. However, it is limited when focused on the topic of employability. It could be possible to form different conclusions if the review contained articles on the broad impacts and skills gained by study abroad. With that said, due to the global context of study abroad, the research comes from many different countries with cultural differences. These differences add to the complexity of analyzing the research because different cultures value different things. For future research, studies should focus on the value of employability skills across different cultures, linking these to the study abroad experiences of students. This research can be focused on the potential employers of study abroad students because they are the ones who drive the value of the skills gained from the experiences.
Chapter 3

Method

Purpose of the Study

According to Creswell (2013), the theory of qualitative research is based on an inductive process of building from data to broad themes, then to a generalized model or theory. This process begins by gathering detailed information from participants and then organizing the data into categories or themes (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative approach, specifically phenomenology, was chosen for this study because it allowed for the personal stories of the participants to be told and understood. This study focused specifically on a time in the participants’ lives when they had the opportunity to live and study in another country.

This study took the experiences of the participants and explored the idea that students who study abroad gain skills that lead to an increase in their employability as they enter the workforce. This was accomplished through interviews conducted with past study abroad participants who started their job within three months of graduating with an undergraduate degree from Penn State University. This chapter includes the following sections describing the methods used in this study: (a) Restatement of Research Questions, (b) Design of the Study, (c) Population and Sampling, (d) Instrumentation, (e) Data Collection, and (f) Data Analysis.

Restatement of Research Questions

In an effort to investigate the students’ study abroad experiences and their employability, the following research questions guided the study:
1. How do the students perceive their employability has been affected by their study abroad experience?
2. What employability skills did the students gain as a result of study abroad?
3. How does the study abroad experience give students an application of Kolb’s experiential learning theory?

**Design of the Study**

Creswell (2013) identified five theories of qualitative research; for this study, the theory of phenomenology was the most applicable. This research strategy is based on the work of philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and is defined as “an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience in a particular group” (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology aims to gather a deeper understating of the meaning of everyday experiences asking, “what is the experience like?” (van Manen, 2003). It is not for developing a theory or generalizing to a larger field, but used to describe and discover a shared experience.

More specifically, descriptive or hermeneutical phenomenology refers to the study of personal experiences which requires a description of a phenomenon experienced by participants in a study (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Hermeneutical phenomenology also includes reflective actions revealing the true meaning of the experiences (Van der Zalm and Bergum, 2000) which aligned with the research question based on Kolb’s ELT.

Within this study hermeneutical phenomenology was the basis for the design. This was applicable since it allowed for the interpretation of phenomena of the participants to be used as an understanding of the overall human experience and reflection on behalf of the participants. The lived experiences shared by all of the participants were living and studying in a foreign country during their undergraduate academic career. Even though all experiences and individuals were
unique, it was assumed that there were commonalities among them. These commonalities encouraged the development of skills that may have led to an increase in the employability of the participants.

To gather rich, detailed information from the participants as is necessary in a phenomenological study, participants were interviewed in a semi-structured manner to learn about the situations and experiences they had while studying abroad. During the interviews, the participants were also guided to reflect on how their experiences led them to their current job in their field of choice. Discussion followed, not only about the skills they believed they gained but also about the direct effect they had on their employability. Once the interviews concluded, skills were identified that participants used to navigate their day-to-day lives in a new culture, as well as what kind of effect they had on the participants’ entrance into the workforce. All of the data collected was self-reported by the participants. They reported how they specifically felt their study abroad experiences led to their current job or standing in the workforce.

For the purpose of data analysis and interpretation, the independent variables were identified as the experiences or situations of the participants during their time as a study abroad student. The dependent variables were the skills used and developed as a result of these experiences.

**Population and Sampling**

**Population**

Phenomenology is used to describe the experiences of a small number of individuals, therefore, the target population for this study was 10 interviews. This fell within the range of 2–
25 participants, which according to Creswell (2013) is the ideal number to identify themes when using a study based in phenomenology.

The population of participants consisted of Penn State undergraduate students who had studied abroad for a semester or more during their time at the university. This specific group of students was within a semester of graduating or had graduated within the last academic year. It was important that these students have had a job offer prior to graduation or have a job within their field of choice where they had been working since graduation. More details on the ideal participant demographics can be found in Table 6.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideal Participant Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduation year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of study abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of study abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The population was not limited by major or field within the workforce. It was also not limited by the location or length of the study abroad experience of the participants. It was the goal of the research study to gather information broadly and not focus on a specific group of individuals. However, due to trends within the international education field, it was expected that a
majority of the participants would be domestic, white, traditional-aged college females within the liberal arts majors.

**Sampling**

Purposeful sampling techniques were used to recruit participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is a method where data collection resources, such as people, are purposefully selected for their insight, background, knowledge or experience on a specific topic (Creswell, 2017). With the target population as a goal, the purposeful recruitment of participants occurred by gathering as many potential participants as possible.

Once approval to conduct the research was given through the University Institutional Research Board (IRB) and a pilot study concluded, recruitment efforts occurred through email campaigns (Appendix A). A total number of 1,871 emails were sent to those students who had participated in a Penn State-approved long-term study abroad program within the last two academic years. Using individuals from the last two academic years increased the likelihood of finding participants because a majority of students study abroad during their junior year. The email addresses of the individuals were purposively drawn from the Education Abroad Office database stored on the Terra Dotta software.

In addition, email campaigns containing information regarding the research study were sent to the Office of Global Programs liaisons within the academic colleges on the University Park campus. It was not possible to estimate the number of students whom these liaisons contacted about the study. Their help in promoting the study increased the number of potential participants who completed the qualification survey (Appendix B).

Within these emails, brief details regarding the goal and purpose of the study were described; additionally, a link to a qualification survey was included. Potential participants were
directed to complete the qualification survey. The survey and its results were facilitated and stored on the Penn State Qualtrics software, which was password protected and stored on a secure server on the University Park campus. The results of the qualification survey were analyzed as they were completed. A total of 112 survey completions were recorded, with 45 of the individuals meeting the target population. Sixty-seven participants who completed the qualification survey did not meet the target population criteria. These individuals were emailed and thanked for their willingness to complete the survey, stating that they were not chosen to continue with the study.

Once they were identified, all qualified participants were emailed as a follow-up to their survey (Appendix C). The email invited them to schedule an interview to further discuss their study abroad experience and its impact on their entrance into the workforce. The interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participant via a private Doodle Poll. Nineteen of the qualified participants chose to schedule their interview time. Once the time was confirmed for the interview, participants were provided with a Zoom link, an informed consent document, and a list of prescripted interview questions.

Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

Instrumentation

To develop instrumentation for this study, a list of potential interview questions was developed by using a basis in phenomenology, research questions and goals of the study as guidance. This list of questions was then distributed to a panel of content experts within the field of international education and research methods for analysis. The international education panel consisted of Brian Brubaker and Dr. Kristi Wormhoudt, respectively the director and associate director of the Education Abroad Office at Penn State, as well as Chelsea Keen, a career adviser
within the College of Liberal Arts on the University Park campus. This panel reviewed each of
the questions, providing feedback and edits as needed based on the goals of the study and on the
Standards of Good Practice as published by the Forum on Education Abroad. Edits were also
suggested by the panel of experts on research methods, which consisted of members of the
dissertation committee.

Once the interview questions were finalized, a pilot study was conducted on two
graduating seniors who had participated in a study abroad program during their time at Penn
State. For the pilot study, these participants were chosen from the peer advisors within the
Education Abroad Office, College of Engineering, and Smeal College of Business at the
University Park campus. These participants completed the qualification survey as well as the
interview process. Edits were made to the qualification survey, communications between the
researcher and participants, interview process, and questions as a result of this pilot study.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview, an appropriate data collection method in phenomenology,
(Appendix D) was conducted with each of the participants who met the criteria of the target
population. At the beginning of the interviews, the purpose of the study was discussed as well as
the informed consent information, which was also provided prior to the scheduling of the
interview. Following this informational part of the interview, the questions that were developed
previously were asked. The questions asked were directly aligned with the research questions of
the study as seen in Table 7.
Table 7

*Interview and Research Question Alignment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: How do the students perceive their employability has been affected by their study abroad experience?</td>
<td>3a, 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Coding for skills and themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2: What employability skills did the students gain as a result of study abroad?</td>
<td>3j, 3k, 3o, 3p, 3q, 3r</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Coding for skills and themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3: How does the study abroad experience give students an application of Kolb’s experiential learning theory?</td>
<td>3f, 3g, 3h, 3i, 3l, 3m, 3n</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Coding for skills and themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* RQ, research question.

The recorded interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour and focused on the individuals descriptions of their study abroad experience. Each experience and individual was unique; therefore, a scripted set of questions was used. However, depending on the experience, unscripted follow-up questions were asked to prompt the participant to expand on what they were describing. Once they described their experiences, participants were asked to provide details on the hiring process for their positions. Once the questions were completed, participants were given the opportunity to share anything that was not previously discussed. Before the interview concluded information was provided regarding the interview transcription and analysis process, anonymity of the participants and a member checking timeline.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded using this software. The audio files from each of the interviews were saved and submitted to Rev.com for transcription in
batches of four to five. Once the transcription files were received, all identifiable information from the interviewees was removed, and they were randomly assigned a participant number. From that point forward, they were referred to as Participant 1, Participant 2, and so on.

**Data Analysis**

Within phenomenology, the data analysis focuses on the interactions between the individuals and the surrounding context (van Manen, 2003). According to van Manen (2003), to effectively complete a data analysis process, a qualitative researcher must become immersed in their data looking for consistent messages that align with current research and the questions that guide the study. These messages (i.e. words, sentences, paragraphs) were then organized into themes and categories throughout the analysis process. This was done through extensive reading and rereading of the interview transcripts. Categories and themes became apparent during this time with all instances being considered fully. To identify these categories and themes the interviews were transcribed and analyzed in batches of four to five, allowing for continual analysis of data while other interviews were being conducted. Once transcriptions were received, each interview was then printed and coded manually using open coding.

A running list of themes and categories was kept during this process. Interviews were continually conducted until data saturation was reached. Data saturation was reached at interview number 15, however another round of 4 interviews was conducted to confirm this saturation point. Data saturation is an integral piece of qualitative research, allowing for continual data collection until no further data is needed as indicated by data repetition (Bowen, 2008). Once saturation was reached, no new themes or categories were identified, data collection stopped (Kvale, 1996).
With all interviews concluded, their transcripts printed and analyzed for preliminary data, transcripts were then uploaded into the computer software, NVivo 10, for further analysis. Using the preliminary list of themes and categories, codes were created in NVivo 10 and the interviews were coded further. At this point in the analysis process, coding all interviews at one time allowed for overall comparison and identification of additional themes. Once all codes and themes were identified, the interviews were analyzed an additional two times to code all remaining vignettes and references. The final content analysis consisted of a word search within NVivo 10 to ensure that all instances of the themes and codes were included.

Within the qualitative research process, data validity and quality are key. Creswell and Creswell (2017) identified eight strategies to increase the validity of the data. These strategies are triangulation, member checking, use of rich and thick descriptions, clarifying bias, presenting negative or discrepant information, spending prolonged time in the field, using peer debriefing, and using an external auditor. For this study, four specific strategies were used: member checking, external editor, clarifying bias, and spending prolonged time in the field. Member checking was conducted once the data analysis process had concluded. The participants were presented with the major findings and were asked for their feedback. Transcript data was edited based on that feedback.

Possible biases were clarified and addressed in Chapter 1. To address and plan for these bias reactions, journaling, and member checking were two tools used to increase the validity of the data collected. These biased reactions come as a result of the prolonged time within the field, both as a student, professional, and researcher. Information from this study was also discussed and presented to other international education professionals as a form of peer debriefing and result validation. Once the study was completed and all analysis was written, the draft was submitted to an external editor, who read the document in its entirety, editing and providing feedback as needed.
Chapter Summary

This chapter has served to detail the reasoning behind the method chosen and the method used to carry out the research. Steps taken in the study process are detailed in Table 8.

Table 8

Detailed Study Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Study Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 2019</td>
<td>Applied for IRB approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>Conducted pilot study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2019</td>
<td>Final edits made to the process in alignment with results of the pilot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2019</td>
<td>Recruitment of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2019</td>
<td>Survey closed; results analyzed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2019</td>
<td>Selection of participants from survey data; interviews scheduled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2019</td>
<td>Interviews conducted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November and December 2019</td>
<td>Interviews transcribed and data analysis conducted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2019</td>
<td>Member checking of data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2020</td>
<td>Result validation with external editor and professionals in the field</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To carry out these steps, a phenomenological approach was chosen so that the shared experiences of study abroad participants could be expanded upon through their own personal stories. From these stories, themes were identified based on the skills that the participants developed as a result of their situations. In the next chapter, the results of the data collection and analysis process will be described.
Chapter 4

Results

This chapter contains the results of the phenomenological-based qualitative research study conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the students perceive their employability has been affected by their study abroad experience?
2. What employability skills did the students gain as a result of study abroad?
3. How does the study abroad experience give students an application of Kolb’s experiential learning theory?

This chapter also includes demographic information for the participants and the detailed data analysis processes used to determine the results. Open coding was used to analyze the 19 interview transcripts collected. During the data collection process, constant data analysis was used to determine emergent themes and the data saturation point. Included in the chapter are tables that present detailed code and theme data, as well as vignettes from the individual interviews to emphasize key themes.

Sample

Nineteen participants were interviewed for this study. The demographic information of these participants can be seen in Table 9.
Table 9
Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Middle East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Health and Human Development</td>
<td>Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Agricultural Science</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Health and Human Development</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the time of the interviews, all participants had secured a position within their dedicated field, which was a key eligibility requirement to participate in the study. Of the 19 participants, three were males, whereas 16 were female. All participants were White with the exception of one who identified as multiracial. The colleges of the students while at Penn State represented eight of the 13 on the University Park campus. Liberal Arts was the most represented college with six participants; the Smeal College of Business and Bellisario College of Communications both had three participants; the Colleges of Engineering and Health and Human Development had two participants each; and finally, the Colleges of Education, Agricultural Sciences, and Information Science and Technology had one participant each.
The programs of the participants in this study were located in six different regions of the world, with one participant studying abroad in more than one region. Fourteen of the participants studied in Europe, two studied in Africa, one participant studied in Asia, and another in the Middle East.

**Data Collection**

The 19 research interviews were conducted with current or recently graduated students who studied abroad while at Penn State and served as the primary source of research data. Within the interviews, the information gathered included the demographics, study abroad experiences, and hiring processes for current jobs. The interview questions can be referenced in Appendix D. The interviews took place over a two-week period in November 2019; once four to five interviews had been concluded, they were sent for transcription in a batch through Rev.com. The transcriptions were then coded manually and reviewed for emerging themes. Following this method, the researcher was able to track the preliminary findings of the study and the point of saturation.

**Data and Analysis**

Once the data was collected and to begin the data analysis process, the transcriptions were printed, with all personal identifying information removed. These were read and coded in a preliminary fashion. During this coding process, keywords or situations were identified, which led to the identification of a specific skill that was developed. These skills were coded as “communication,” “problem-solving,” “flexibility,” and so on. As new themes or skills were identified, they were entered into a coding dictionary. Once the preliminary analysis was
concluded, the NVivo 10 software was used to facilitate further coding by storing the codes, allowing text searches and links between the codes. The specific themes and codes that emerged as a result of the interviews are detailed in the following paragraphs. The open coding results included 29 codes, as shown in Appendix E. Table 10 serves as a summary of the information for each of the participants. More details, descriptions, and results will be discussed further in the chapter.

Table 10

Summary of Study Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>Program Structure</th>
<th>Internship/ Volunteer</th>
<th>Structure Reflections</th>
<th>Career Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Homestay</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Faculty-led</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Homestay</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Dorm</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Dorm</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Homestay</td>
<td>Provider</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Homestay</td>
<td>Provider</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Dorm</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Homestay</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Faculty-led</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Homestay</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Housing

Each of the programs attended by the participants offered a variety of housing options. As evident in Table 11, the participants in the study took advantage of all of these.

Table 11

Summary of Housing Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apartment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homestay</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorm</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most popular option for this study was an apartment. Eight participants lived in an apartment with other U.S. or international students, depending on the program structure. Provider programs were more likely to have apartments with only U.S. students, whereas university programs would house international students together, no matter their country of origin.

One participant had a number of roommates from around the world while studying in Ireland.

So I lived in apartment-style housing. I had my own bedroom and bathroom, and then I shared a kitchen and living space with five other people. There was a girl from Ireland, two kids from China, a boy from Germany, and then one other girl from the States, which was really cool. (Participant 7)

Another participant who was with a program provider had housing arranged for them with other students on the same program, all of whom were Americans.

Since I went through IES, they set up all of our housing for us and they owned apartments in different areas. So I lived in an apartment complex called Chapter, and that’s where they housed all of us. I had a roommate; I was living with the same students
that were in my program. So we lived together, we cooked together, we hung out together, we went out of town together. We did a lot of stuff together. (Participant 11)

The second most popular option for participants was a homestay; six students chose this option. With this type of housing, a student lives with a local family for the duration of their study abroad experience. Program providers arrange the homestay option for students, with strong support for both the families and the students. Often, the families who welcome students into their homes have been doing so for many years and are well-established partners with the program provider.

One participant lived with a host mom and daughters while studying in Spain. They had a great experience with the mom’s unique career.

She was a single mom, but she was divorced. She had two grown children. The younger daughter lived with us. They had a dog. The host, her name’s Delia, she was an artist, so she did freelance work. But she was also working on a lot of work for exhibits while we were over there. So one of the cool things was she was in an exhibit for the International Day of the Woman, and she took me as her plus one for opening night. (Participant 5)

A dorm room was a housing option that was less popular with participants and with study abroad in general. For this study, three participants lived in dorms during their time abroad. These dorm rooms ranged in size and configuration.

In terms of dorm living, I lived by myself. It was a single unit, so I had a single bed, a desk, a toilet, shower, and sink, all in this little pod. So I was kind of isolated, but I kind of prefer it that way. (Participant 8)

Similar to Participant 8, Participant 14 also lived in a dorm, but not alone: “I did have roommates who were international, but the girl in my room also attended Penn State.”

The final housing option for the participants of the study was categorized as “other” and was particularly applicable for the two participants on faculty-led programs. Both programs
involved a significant amount of travel, so there was no consistent type of housing available to the students. At times it would be camping; other times, they would live on a college campus or in a guest house. Participant 16 described their experience as follows: “We traveled a lot, so we camped most of the time. It was tough. It was different every time.” Their roommates changed at times as well. For this reason, it was best to categorize this option as “other.”

Program Structure and Resources

The programs that the participants took part in not only varied by the type of housing offered but also in structure, resources, and reflection opportunities available. Each of these categories was coded separately, and they are detailed in the paragraphs below.

Program Type

The participants’ program types could be separated into three categories. These categories included the following: (a) program provider, (b) university, and (c) faculty-led. A program managed by a provider is a U.S.-based nonprofit that is located in major cities around the world. They create study abroad programs specifically for U.S. students, providing academics, student support services, and cultural activities. The largest program providers that partner with Penn State are IES, the Council on International Educational Exchange, and Arcadia.

To participate in a university program, students enroll in an international university directly. They are considered an international student while studying on this type of program, taking classes with the local students and being totally integrated within the culture of the university. Often the university partners with a program provider like those listed above to
manage the application and student services portion of the experience. If a program provider is linked with the university, it is considered a hybrid program.

The final program structure that was included in this study is faculty-led. With this type of program, a small group of Penn State students travel with a Penn State faculty member, who provides most, if not all, of the academic instruction and support. These are rare for a full-semester program; they are more popular in the summer, with shorter-length programs.

A summary of the participants and their program structures is detailed in Table 12.

Table 12

Summary of Program Structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Structure</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty-led</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information provided about the structure of the program helps the researcher better understand the type of experience the student had. This often leads to insight into other aspects of the experience, such as the types of skills needed to navigate each structure and the resources available, and provides a holistic view of the student. When discussing the structure of their program, students often expanded on their living arrangements, academics, and interactions with local students.

For example, students who participated in a university program had more interactions with local students, both academically and socially. One participant was dually enrolled in a provider and university.

So part of the program was through IES, where I had some classes, but then I also enrolled in a Dutch university, which is what I wanted. I wanted sort of a home base with
some Americans, but then I also wanted to be put in a classroom with different people who weren’t like me, weren’t from the U.S. (Participant 17)

Students on provider programs took classes with all U.S. students; however, the programs worked hard to provide opportunities for students to interact with local students, including organizing language conversation groups. A participant studying in Italy took advantage of these activities with local ROTC students.

I think all of the Italian classes were required or recommended to go to these socials with, they were kind of ROTC students, but in Italy. They ranged from our age to a little younger, and we got to converse with them. (Participant 18)

Another participant studying in a different Italian city had a local student living in the same apartment, providing friendship and more in-depth cultural immersion.

We had an ISC, which is an Italian student companion. And that was the best thing I ever could’ve done that made my experience a million times better. He just knew so much about the city and was the nicest ever. I mean we went to his house for a weekend, and we went to his village. We slept over, and he showed us around; we got to meet his friends. We went to his farm. His parents came to our apartment a lot, and they were really nice. We just got to meet a lot of Italian people with his connections. (Participant 2)

**Internships/Volunteer Experiences**

Internship and volunteer opportunities are often resources available through program providers and hybrids. With that said, even if the opportunities are available, not every student takes advantage of them. Table 13 shows the number of students who participated in these opportunities while on their study abroad program.
Table 13

Summary of Internship Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internship/Volunteer</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The experiences that the students had were vast and diverse in nature. Those who participated often described these experiences when discussing different aspects of their study abroad program. These were times when it was clear that they had gained many skills during their internship or volunteer opportunities. One internship opportunity provided to a participant studying in Israel offered more than they had originally anticipated.

It was cool to work with all different types of people on a project that I was really passionate about. We ended up winning the machine learning award. So we got supported by a company in Israel who wanted to continue our work. And then we actually joined the incubator for six months; it was a start-up incubator, which was, you know, a program that had actually led to start-ups. So that was something I continued during my studies, you know, going to six-hour workshops every two weeks to learn about how to build a start-up, how to finance it, how to market it, how do you know, legality, all that stuff. So, you know, it was a really interesting experience. I did not expect to be involved in that while I was abroad. (Participant 1)

It was obvious from the participant’s description that this was a great internship opportunity with a start-up, which helped the participant work with different people, building teamwork but then also managing a lot of demands on their time once the project was sponsored by a bigger company.

Another participant had a different type of experience teaching English as a second language, which was a common internship opportunity that the participants had.
I volunteer ESL taught for one of my classes, I got to go to the middle school and the high school, to teach ESL there, which was a lot of fun. That definitely was my favorite part. Oh, I also taught for a government program. I taught a class of refugees and an ESL class in hospitality. That was, that was the best thing that came out of the study abroad. They were from Syria, Venezuela, Cameroon, and Ukraine. (Participant 15)

**Structured Reflections**

During the interviews, participants were asked if structured reflections were a part of their study abroad program. A majority (13) of the participants stated that there was no reflection built into their programs, whereas the other six had fully structured reflections or partial reflections within their program. Of the three students who had structured reflections, two of them were the faculty-led program participants. For example, Participant 16 traveled with a faculty member throughout South Africa. On this program, they came together every evening to journal and discuss their reflections on the activities of the day. They described this experience as follows: “It was so intimate when we had to journal. So we had to meet up every night and talk about our journals, and we had to hand our journals in.” Another participant (Participant 3), whose program involved structured reflections, was in a remote area of Ghana, and the program worked hard to help the students process and reflect on their experiences.

It was every week we had a day where they would kind of go over different topics if there was anything that was bothering each other, or things that they weren’t getting used to. So it was kind of always an open discussion. And then sometimes I would just happen in the office, cause a lot of us would hang out there. So it was a lot of stuff like that. There were definitely always reflections happening out loud all the time. (Participant 3)
Three students identified that their program had some structured reflections built-in, but they were not a focus throughout the semester. Most had informal check-ins throughout the semester with a final discussion at the end to provide an opportunity to reflect and discuss the overall experience.

Table 14 offers a summary of the structured reflection information provided by the study participants.

**Table 14**

*Summary of Structured Reflection Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structured Reflections</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Skills Gained

This section of the chapter will discuss each of the skills identified through the interviews and details of the study abroad experiences provided by the participants. Overall, 16 skills were used as codes for the interviews. These skills are listed in Table 15, along with the number of participants who identified them and the count of vignettes. The skills were listed and described in order of most common to least.

**Table 15**

*Summary of Skills Gained*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Vignettes</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural understanding</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural communication</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Vignettes</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign language ability</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of comfort zone</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-mindedness</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public speaking ability</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maturity</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cultural Understanding**

Cultural understanding was one of the most discussed skills within the interviews. When analyzing the data, this skill was coded when a participant detailed experiences in which they built cultural understanding, not only of their host country but also of other countries that they visited during their time abroad. There were a total of 213 cultural understanding vignettes discussed by all 19 study participants.

A majority of the vignettes within cultural understanding occurred when the students were discussing a positive experience that they had had while abroad. In particular, one participant studying in Spain was initially shocked by the clothing differences.

I definitely found myself wanting to buy all new clothes to fit in, because everyone there was so well dressed, and I just felt I like stuck out like a sore thumb as an American. And I didn’t like when I’d go into a store and they would immediately speak English at me. So I liked it by the end I’d be wearing Spanish clothes, and people would come up to me for directions asking in Spanish. I was like, I’m blending in. I think that was a pretty big
cultural thing. And also just cause they always are very well dressed. They don’t wear leggings. (Participant 12)

By contrast, another participant had an overall epiphany about the type of world they were a part of and beginning to understand.

I would just say there were moments where you look around to everyone that you’re sitting with and be like, you’re from Finland, you’re from Australia, you are from Canada. I’m from the U.S.; you know, we all are just here together. So little moments that where you can look around and wonder, how do we get all these people into one place? (Participant 17)

While studying in the nontraditional location of Ghana, a participant had a number of different moments in which they improved their cultural understanding. Two moments, in particular, were most impactful. The first was during an internship experience and involved the overall understanding of the education system in place.

So they sent me to a little school in a lower-income area, and they were like, well, you’re going to teach. And my inclination was, yeah, okay, I’ll help teach at a school. It was not, not like that at all. It kind of was, but it was just completely different from where I was living, you know; it was really in what you would imagine a slum to be. So I went, and it was just riddled with garbage, you know. I remember the stop I had to get off at was called “Gutter,” and I just thought that it was, that was just the name. But no, it was literally in a gutter. So it was just, I had to take this long pathway, and with the sides were just filled with garbage, and it smelled horrible. And, you know, the school was just a little small; I wouldn’t even consider it a building, but it was a little dwelling. And I was there twice a week at five o’clock in the morning helping to teach. I had to leave at four in the morning cause I had to catch a little, they’re called trotros. It was a little van of sorts that could take you all the way. And I lived 20 minutes from there, and the traffic
was just crazy. So yeah, that sucked. But I did it, and I learned so much. I think I learned more about people doing that. (Participant 3)

The second impactful moment was when the participant had to hand-wash clothes in the front yard, like the locals:

My host parents were like, we want you to have this experience. So I was always hand-washing; it took forever, I hated it. It was the worst thing, but I mean there were worse. But I was out there with a bar of soap just scrubbing my clothes. Then they were never clean. It was just the worst thing. In the beginning, I think, I was just taking everything as it comes. I was, yeah, I don’t mind washing my clothes, but eventually, by the third month, I was, I hate washing my clothes. (Participant 3)

Studying in the nontraditional location of Korea, another participant described a situation where the culture almost literally smacked them in the face and their struggle to accept these differences:

Here is something so small: here, we open the door for each other. But over there, everyone just kind of, such a fast-paced society that they just kind of do everything for themselves. They open the door for themselves. So sometimes I’d be walking out, and I’d be walking behind someone, and they’d completely just not open the door. And I’d be like, what the heck? And it just smacks you because they let go of it. Your first reaction would be to say something: oh wow, they’re really rude, they didn’t open the door for me or something. But it’s just a completely different culture and everything, and it’s just, I don’t know. (Participant 10)

These are just a few examples of how the participants had to view the culture of their host country and understand how to navigate it successfully. Being able to see it and analyze the differences between oneself and the surrounding culture is a skill that these participants strengthened during their time abroad.
Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication was the second most discussed skill gained by the participants. As with cultural understanding, it was experienced by all 19 participants. However, the number of vignettes was significantly lower, at 52. The coding of intercultural communication occurred during many different times within the interviews. These could include times of communication with professors, local students, or even host families. One participant had experiences living and trying to communicate with a host mother, who was not only of a different culture but also significantly older:

I had a host mom who was around 70 and didn’t speak any English. A lot of the host moms were all older women that kind of lived alone and liked having kids around, which is sweet. So, I was surprised cause she spoke no English, so it was a different experience, and I had one other roommate. So the two of us would kind of have to help each other out if we were missing something from her, but it was good. We would have dinner every night with her. She’d cook for us; they eat dinner so late there. So she’d cook for us at 9:00 PM every night. (Participant 12)

In the academic setting, participants gained communication skills while working with a professor or local student. While trying to finalize their schedule and navigating a new education system at an Irish university, one participant found challenges.

So we had to go around and make sure that all the classes worked for us, and figuring out how to sub other ones in if we couldn’t get into one or something. And the other tricky part of that process was, as you were trying to get into our class because those students there take all the same classes, they’re automatically enrolled in their classes every semester, based on the major that they’re in. Where we kind of had to figure out a way to reach out to the professor and say, hey, can you add me to your course online, and using
the online system that they used? And can you add me to the mailing list? And so there would a few different factors where I just felt pretty disorganized, and I didn’t have it all together the first week. (Participant 6)

The participants also had many opportunities to experience intercultural communication in their everyday lives living in a new city. For example, one participant found themselves changing their ways of communicating depending on the type of local interaction they had. They noticed that they were being more aggressive than usual because that was the only way they could get their point across:

   And so I became a little bit more aggressive when I was there. I think you have to be very just blunt about your intentions, what you want and what you don’t want, you know, because you can’t be saying, “oh no,” you have to say, “no, stop!” (Participant 3)

At times this seemed overwhelming, even though participants felt it was something they could handle.

   So I’m from New York; you see beggars all the time. But when you’re in an area like that, it just doesn’t compare. Kids would just hang off of you, you know; people would judge you all the time. So, eventually, later on, what was really stressful, it was I would just get more aggressive because I was just yelling, “stop touching me and just go away.” (Participant 3)

While traveling in Tanzania, another participant had the unique experience of needing to communicate interculturally using a translator, not sharing a common language with the locals. The participant found other ways to connect with individuals in conversation. This type of experience was particularly impactful and meaningful for the participant.

   Sitting down with a 12-year-old who was born and raised in Tanzania. She didn’t know much about America. I didn’t know much about Tanzania, but what can we find in common, and how can we relate, and kind of, you know, be friends or build a
relationship. Sometimes, you know, even when you don’t speak the language and you have to use a translator to build a relationship or just those things like building relationships with people. Sometimes it’s hard to because you’re so different, you know; a lot of people like to jump onto similarities or things they have in common, but how can you learn from people and their different experiences and make a connection with someone you might not otherwise. (Participant 4)

Adaptability

Adaptability was a skill that could be identified when a student was adjusting to their new life in a culture that was very unlike what they were used to. Overall, 18 participants discussed adapting to new cultures in 88 vignettes. They had to adapt to new academic settings, languages, people, and overall ways of life. In some instances, adaptation came easy to the students, such as with one participant in the Netherlands:

I think honestly I was surprised at how easy the transition there was, really. We really just fell into step, and it was so easy. There were really no hiccups. I think it was harder to come back than it was to go there. (Participant 17)

Similar to this, another participant found it was easy to adapt and enter into their normal routines:

So it wasn’t a crazy transition. I just think, just doing the normal things like going to class, trying to interact with the other students. It’s just like coming to college your freshman year. That’s sort of what I equated [it] to in my mind, where I just tried to keep it as normal as possible and just be myself, and things always tended to work out.

(Participant 8)
By contrast, in other situations, adapting was more challenging. However, the students still improved their adaptability as they pushed through these times. This was especially true for a participant who was close to coming home at the beginning of the program:

I would definitely say my first week to two weeks there was really, really hard. I told my mom, later on, I didn’t want to worry her then, but I told her after that if someone had offered me a plane ticket home those first two weeks, I would’ve taken it, no question. Just cause I was in a new place. I didn’t expect there to be much of a cultural adjustment because it’s a very Western country, and there’s no language barrier. Things like when I got there, my room was kind of cold, and I could not figure out for the life of me how to turn on my heater, and I had been awake for 24 hours at that point, and I was just a mess. So the adjustment period and just finding friends, too. It was hard to find friends. But once I found friends and started to settle in, I got over that, and I’d definitely say it made me more adaptable. (Participant 7)

Problem-Solving

Unforeseen problems are certainly a factor in everyday life. This factor is increased when studying abroad, encountering so many new and unknown situations. These situations do not necessarily need to be in a negative context; however, some are. When asked to describe difficult or stressful situations while abroad, 17 study participants described situations in 61 vignettes in which they engaged in many forms of problem-solving. One participant described how they navigated the city without relying on cell phone service because it was nonexistent for the first weeks.

I think, well, in the first week, nobody had cell phone reception, so everywhere we went had to be by memory. So we’d be like, okay, we took a left at that, and to the right here.
We had no map of where we were. So, we had to learn about the city very quickly. Making sure somewhere I’ve got myself, and I get myself back. When you’re biking around using the Metro and you’re looking at directions all the time, you really get an understanding of the city, and it’s really well mapped. So I think within the first week, I could get anywhere without an issue. (Participant 17)

One participant, in particular, had a number of situations that required quick thinking and problem-solving skills. The first instance occurred when traveling on a free weekend to Germany. We bought a plane ticket to Frankfurt cause it was really cheap. But then we didn’t realize that Berlin is far from Frankfurt. So she bought, I bought the plane [ticket], and then my friend was going to buy the train ticket from Frankfurt to Berlin. And so we get on the train and we’re like, wait, is this our train? And we weren’t sure what was happening. But the train just starts going and then the lady’s coming around and scanning our tickets, and she didn’t speak English; she just was yelling at us in German, very angrily. And we were like, what are you talking about? And she’s like, this is not a train ticket. And we’re like, that’s all we got. And so it turns out my friend actually bought bus tickets to Berlin, but she thought it was a train ticket. It was super stressful because we didn’t have time to get off cause we were only there for a weekend. So we didn’t know what to do. So we’d have to kind of get up on the train and say, hello, does anyone speak English and German? That can help us translate, cause we don’t know, what is this lady saying? And this woman translated for us, and we just had to buy a ticket for the train to be able to stay on the train, which was very expensive. (Participant 19)

This same participant had to use some key navigation and problem-solving skills to navigate public transportation in Hungary:

When traveling with my friends, I love just looking at the map and figuring out where I’m going or taking public transportation. Cause you know, I was in Budapest figuring
out the subways, and there are no English signs. We just kind of had to look at random words, and, that kind of looks like what we’re looking for. (Participant 19)

Another participant had a particularly stressful situation with their bank account while they were abroad, which required them to work through problems differently than if they were in the United States.

While I was over there, someone actually got into my bank account. So it was really difficult to kind of go about fixing that. My phone plan was weird because I couldn’t do international calling on my Korean cell phone number. And then, I tried to put my regular SIM card back in, but since it was a U.S. one, I couldn’t get any service, and I had to basically go through a bunch of stuff with my mom, and it took about a couple weeks cause they had to ship me a completely new credit card and everything, and then something with my PIN numbers, and it just took a couple of weeks, and it was just really hard to do abroad. I had no way to contact them. It had to be through my mom, who was here. But thankfully everything got solved, and I was able to, you know, be able to do things again. (Participant 10)

When asked to describe how they paid for items during this time period, they expanded on the story:

It was weird; the day before it happened, I had just taken out a little bit of money to kind of cover myself for a little bit because a lot of people over there use cash. So, I wanted to have cash on hand, and then I saw that the thing happened with my bank account, so I was really lucky in the sense that I had cash, but after the couple weeks or so that it took, I kind of ran out. So, my friends were nice enough to lend me the money until I was able to get my bank account ready again. (Participant 10)
Flexibility

The ability to be flexible in situations and accept a conclusion out of one’s control is a key skill when navigating the world. Sixteen participants in this study found that they were placed in situations that allowed them to build their flexibility skills. They described these situations and identified the skill in 42 vignettes throughout their interviews. Participant 16 described the need to be flexible with their living situations on a faculty-led program, because, “We moved week to week, so it was never like we were in one place for a very long time, like two weeks at most.”

Participant 18 also learned that they needed to be flexible within their living situation, as well. They were four roommates living in Italy, where the heating standards are different than in the United States. Participant 18 stated, “The heating is different. So inside, you always seem to feel cold. And the hot water, it was a little iffy at times.”

Besides living situations, the participants found that they needed to be flexible in both academic settings and while traveling. Many participants were experiencing a new academic structure and needed to learn to navigate it; one participant found that they needed to be flexible with a new grading and learning style:

So I didn’t always know how well I was doing, but I remember specifically talking about this with a friend, and later on in the program, things started to stress me out later than when I first got there, because I was just taking everything as it came. (Participant 3)

Over time, another participant was able to find amusement in some of the academic situations they experienced near the beginning of their program.

There was one day where none of us, none of the internationals were on the email list yet because we hadn’t had our first meeting of the class. We showed up to class at the time that it was, and it turns out the professor had sent out an email to everyone in the class. It said, hey, we are not going to be meeting this first week. And we were like 10 minutes
into class and I started looking around and I was like, these people all look like international students. I asked. And they’re like, yeah. And we realize that we were the only ones who didn’t know there wasn’t class. So that is funny, you know—frustrating. But you know, the first week, you’ve got to figure it out by the end. (Participant 6)

While traveling, it is always important to be prepared for the unexpected, although that does not make it easy to deal with when it happens. For a particular participant, there were no issues when leaving to go abroad, but trying to come home was a different story.

Getting back, they delayed my home flights. It got delayed by like a full day and a half. I was just straight up crying. I was just ready to go home. I missed my family. So I think the kind of like, you know, but that’s kind of out of your control. That of long march home was really, really difficult for me cause obviously, I was upset. I was leaving my friends, but I couldn’t get home soon enough that I just broke down at the airport. I was like, I need a minute, you know? I was stuck. I think I was stuck in Turkey or something. (Participant 9)

When asked to describe how they worked through this situation, the participant stated, “I just stayed in contact with my family and friends, you know, let them know that I was okay. I did a lot of bullet journaling, so that helped.”

One program required its participants to travel to another part of the world. It was during this travel that they had difficulties that they needed to work through.

My luggage was delayed so I didn’t have all of the stuff for a day or two from London to Jamaica. That’s the whole stressful part of the whole thing was just the traveling experience, which isn’t really a unique thing to being abroad. It’s just [that] travel is stressful. I got on the plane; my luggage was underneath the plane. That was where it was supposed to be. (Participant 11)
With this issue, the participant planned a bit ahead, just in case, and was able to work through it.

When we got there and they were like, oh, your luggage didn’t make it from Paris, so it’s going to be on the next flight tomorrow. And I was just kinda like, oh no. I didn’t have any time to process, and I just remember the only thing frustrating about it was that I didn’t have like a bathing suit, because we were going to the beach the next day, and I needed a bathing suit. But the friend that I had met was like, whatever you need, we’re similar body sizes. So she was like, you can take it. Anything you need, I can give you. I had my toothbrush and my toiletries and stuff from my carry on. (Participant 11)

Overall, the participants learned to find ways to work through the unexpected.

Specifically, Participant 5 learned to “relax a little bit more about things that are out of my control. You have to work with it and you can’t fight.” This is not always something that is easy to recognize or accomplish.

**Independence**

The skill of independence was described by 16 study participants in 32 vignettes. Within these, the participants of this study described their own feelings about their time abroad and self-growth. They were also asked to describe if they felt their experience was successful.

I think it was wholesome and I think, it was exactly what I thought it was going to give me. Cause in my application for studying abroad I was saying that if I can navigate and live in a foreign country and provide for myself, that’s kind of official adulthood. (Participant 18)

Another participant felt that they were thrown in and required to do it all by themselves, and they grew more independent as a result.
I was kind of thrown into this alone. You’re over there, you’re kind of just thrown into the dark, kind of; you have to do everything yourself and the whole new environment that you go through. And I think it kind of made me realize that I’m able to do it on my own, and I’m able to work through things by myself, and I don’t need to be as reliant on others. So I think it was really impactful in the sense that I was able to kind of see that side of myself that I had never seen before. (Participant 10)

Another participant was traveling alone for the first time.

Having to travel on my own in different countries where I didn’t speak the language was very interesting. I flew to Paris, actually; that was my first time leaving Spain while I was over there. I flew there, and my mom was there, so I met her there. (Participant 5)

Many study abroad participants describe their experiences as life-changing. They see this as a time of growth within themselves. This is evident from the stories that these participants shared.

**Confidence**

In conjunction with growth in independence, confidence as an individual was something that the participants often described together. Thirteen study participants described their growth in confidence through 46 vignettes. They described their overall experiences when asked what skills they felt they gained and discussed how it may have had an impact on their job search prospects. One participant felt that they overall grew in confidence through their experience:

I think just being, you know, in stressful situations where I had to adapt and I had to do it myself really just showed me that I could do that and I could get through it myself. And even if I had a tough week, it was okay, and I got through it, and it was fine. I’m just kind
Participant 18 felt that their confidence grew as they accomplished success: “The fact that I was able to get through it, navigate it, persevere through struggles. It’s a sense of accomplishment that you can’t really achieve through any other way.”

Another participant made a great analogy during the interview, comparing study abroad to the ability to swim as a form of survival, overcoming challenges and growing as a result.

Study abroad is a really good example of just being able to throw yourself out into the ocean and be like, I can swim, you know. Everything that you’ve built up to this point in time. Which I think is a really cool thing is being like, oh I can swim, I can do this. And then just having the confidence that if something else ever came up, that you can navigate that challenge or that new experience or whatever. Now I feel like I can pick up and move to any city in the world and be fine. (Participant 17)

For a participant who studied in Spain, a bit of reflection was important in the growth process and understating exactly how their confidence changed while studying abroad.

I guess looking back on the whole experience, definitely, I learned to be more independent and have more confidence in myself, you know, cause I didn’t have a roommate, and I had to travel to class every day by myself, and wherever I had to go, I went alone. I didn’t speak the language, so that made me get the courage and confidence to practice and talk to people, and so that was tough. But yeah, I think I definitely gained more confidence in myself. (Participant 19)
Self-Awareness

To be able to describe and recognize the growth that the participants had in many areas, they needed to first develop a sense of awareness, not only of themselves but of others. Within the study interviews, 13 participants described their growth in self-awareness through 38 vignettes.

Participant 13 not only became more aware of themselves as a person but also how their culture reflects onto others: “Well, I mean, I think it was really more in terms of identity, and you know, I come from a mixed background, and realizing just how my identity is perceived. Also just how people perceive Americans in general.”

A participant studying in Ireland became aware of how they reacted when adjusting to a new place and learned strategies to deal with it.

I became a lot better at knowing that I have to take the time to orient myself and pay attention to where I am. So that skill is still in progress, but it’s getting better. I realized that every time that I go to a new place, there will be, like, one day where I’m like, oh no, a little bit of a freak-out moment. (Participant 14)

Another participant not only became aware of themselves but also their place in the world, gaining an understanding of how their presence can make a difference wherever they are.

I just became way more aware of myself when I’m traveling and when I’m around people who are different from me. Trying to understand how I come off, and if I’m being exclusionary towards anyone, or if I’m like showing off some privilege of mine that I don’t mean to be showing off. Those are all things that I definitely try to consider now. It just made me realize that I am just one person of many different cultures in many different countries that exist out in the world and that whatever I’m doing in my day-to-day life in the grand scheme probably isn’t as important as I think it is. So, I can instead
focus on what I value and what I enjoy and what I can do to make a difference just in the community that I’m in. (Participant 6)

Foreign Language Ability

Not every student who studies abroad has the goal of building their foreign language skills; in fact, some go to locations that speak English to avoid any language barrier. However, 12 participants went abroad and built foreign language skills because they had a true interest in it, or they traveled to a country that did not speak English. They described their experiences in 52 vignettes.

One participant studied in Spain specifically to build up their Spanish language skills. They took advantage of many opportunities to be able to do this.

I just really studied abroad to practice my Spanish. I lived within a homestay, and it was basically kind of me teaching English to the daughters and speaking in Spanish with the mother. And I did some things around where I practiced my Spanish, and I had friends that communicated in Spanish. We had a relationship in Spanish because they were not American. So that helps, and just really trying to practice and be in a Spanish-speaking environment. (Participant 13)

For a participant who studied in Italy, however, it was not their main goal to increase their skills in Italian. However, they were surprised at how much they used it and enjoyed it.

I took Italian, which was really, really useful, because I could really say whatever I wanted to, to anyone. In the supermarket, it was definitely hard at first. And then once you wanted a challenge, you could start ordering in Italian and use a little more every day. Then the people there would be impressed, and it was fun. (Participant 2)
Another student who studied in Italy, but a much smaller town, had a background in the Italian language. They were also excited to see how they improved, becoming more aware of their own skills.

At Penn State when I had Italian homework, I’m was thinking, oh my God, this is going to be awful. But in Italy, we had homework, but it was more, I don’t know, it just felt comfortable. My teacher was a sweetheart. I had a conversation with her after class to kind of work on my Italian because I found I could generally speak good Italian, but hearing it is so hard for me, so I kind of asked her for extra help. (Participant 18)

This participant also got to experience using and growing their language skills while traveling.

I went to Lago di Garda, which is this huge lake in Northern Italy. I went alone to do some hiking pursuits, and I stayed in an Airbnb with this, like, Italian grandma who spoke no English, and we got along just fine. We were able to communicate. (Participant 18)

Participant 1 had an interesting experience. They studied in Israel for a semester; however, due to their religious background, they had a familiarity with Hebrew. Therefore, they were able to read the language but not speak it; so they had to adjust in a different way.

I had trouble adjusting and also just, you know, living in a country with a different language. It was a language that I was familiar with in a sense, just because I grew up reading it, but I did not know how to speak it at all. So having to, like, find my way into conversations to make, you know, my friends speak in English around me or try and learn from them. And it was, it was definitely hard at first to get into that environment. (Participant 1)
Out of Comfort Zone

Twelve study participants described their environments or feelings while abroad as being out of their comfort zone. Some of these were cultural in nature, whereas others were just overall feelings with what they experienced. They shared these feelings in 24 vignettes during the interview.

One participant who was studying in southern Spain was able to travel to Morocco as part of the program. It was here that they felt most out of their comfort zone, especially while visiting a hammam, or public bath.

I felt this tension between wanting to embrace the culture of the hammam but also being with other Americans. With this boundary there. But everyone did it. Everyone, you know, had the experience of having someone, kind of, scrub them down and then afterward just kind of continuing to wash you off. (Participant 13)

Participant 14 was experiencing a new culture for the first time, having never traveled outside of the United States prior to study abroad. They certainly described the experience as being out of their comfort zone: “I became acclimated to a new place where I didn’t know anyone, in a foreign country, which is something I had never done before.”

Another participant took advantage of the study abroad opportunity and really broke out of their comfort zone and expanded it.

I really capitalized on the fact that I was in a new environment for four months. I think it was because I was in a situation where I wasn’t really surrounded by the norm that I knew. I kind of broke outside the box in terms of the Penn State norm for going somewhere to study abroad. I didn’t go to an English-speaking country, and I didn’t go somewhere in a country that speaks another language where everyone goes. Because of
that, I had new experiences and made new friends and discovered new memories, and
learned a lot more about what is outside. (Participant 5)

Similarly, Participant 10 embraced the time of being out of the comfort zone: “I think I
pushed myself out of my comfort zone in a lot of different ways. That was kind of the best part of
it and to still keep in context, too, now. So I’m really thankful for that.”

**Time Management**

From their descriptions of their experiences, it seems that students who completed
activities outside of their academics were the ones who developed their time management skills
more than others. However, many students found it challenging to balance their academic and
social lives while abroad, experiencing different demands on their time than they were used to.
Ten participants described the act of balancing everything and the tools they used through 19
vignettes.

During a study abroad program in Ireland, one participant also volunteered in a local
adult learning center. While balancing this responsibility with those of class and social activities,
they developed a skill to help stay on track.

I was really able to set a schedule for myself and keep to it while I was there. So I guess
that was a pretty good thing. For me, it’s just trying to plan things out for my week and
figure out what I could do and when consistently. Cause then, if I was able to, like,
consistently do it, then I would look forward to it each week and know that I was, like, a
week closer to home or just a week further into my experience. (Participant 6).

One participant who studied in the Netherlands found they needed to balance academics
with the drive to experience as much of the city and Europe as possible.
Just trying to balance all the fun and the work. Balancing when’s the right time to travel, who you go with, where you go, for how long. What you can miss, and then just come to the balance between school and trying to experience the culture in the city, in different places in Europe. (Participant 17)

A participant studying in Israel did an internship that made large demands on their time; they found a great way to balance all of their responsibilities.

I’m big into using a calendar, like saying, these three hours are dedicated to schoolwork, these weekends are dedicated to traveling. Just making it clear to myself that I was breaking it up evenly and dividing it in a way that would give me enough time to really manage each individually. (Participant 1)

Another participant did not have an internship, but they did have an unbalanced class schedule and a large ambition to travel that required balancing.

So I had, like, six and a half hours of class on Monday. It was stressful. It was just that I didn’t have any time to get anything done on Mondays. Cause by the time I got home, it was 8:30, and I was exhausted. All I could do was eat dinner and just go to class. So it was more of trying to manage that time. But the counterbalance to that was that every Friday, we didn’t have class, so it was then, it was like a three-day weekend every weekend. (Participant 5)

Open-Mindedness

As some of the participants spent more time within a new culture, they began to realize how their world view was changing. They opened their minds to be more accepting of others, realizing that no matter how different we can be, we are also very similar. Ten participants described these experiences through 18 vignettes.
One participant did not realize how much of a personal impact study abroad would have on them. It seemed to awaken a passion that they did not previously have.

I had always wanted to study abroad, but I really thought that traveling would end there. Now, I just feel as though my horizons have been so expanded. I want to travel and bridge the gap between two communities; that needs to be a part of the rest of my career and in my life. (Participant 14)

Another participant had the opportunity to study abroad on more than one occasion. Each time, their minds opened more and more, having an appreciation for others and the need to connect with others who share a similar feeling.

You realize there are other things happening, with a different appreciation for other places. I found the people that I either admire the most or connect with the most are people who have traveled. The people I admire the most are the ones who have traveled the most and gotten the most out of it. (Participant 16)

A participant who studied in Italy began reflecting on how this growth in open-mindedness could benefit them and others within their careers.

I think [going] abroad just gives you perspective. I think that’s the biggest thing that you can apply in your life, just being a decent person who’s well-rounded and educated. In the workforce, just having an open mind and knowing that things are done differently in other places is great. (Participant 18)

Participant 4 also felt the overall experience of becoming accepted and open towards others: “I think one big thing is it made me alter how I think and be open to experiences. Open to different types of people, different types of cultures, and that willingness to always want to learn more.”
Empathy

One of the more impactful times during the interviews came when participants were describing experiences they had that made them more empathetic towards people. A common saying in the United States is, “You can’t judge someone until you’ve walked a mile in their shoes.” Nine participants described a time in which they felt this way in 18 vignettes. Some of these vignettes are general; however, others draw from specific examples and experiences had by the participants.

As previously mentioned, Participant 14 had never traveled abroad before their recent study abroad. This participant described their world before and after studying abroad: “My world was very small before this. It’s expanded so much, and I think it’s made me a much more understanding person, a lot more patient in some ways, as well.”

While studying abroad, one participant was an international student at an Irish university. They were able to take their experiences abroad and apply them to what they see with international students in the United States.

I can be more observational of my surroundings and understanding of [the] different ways that people live. I guess it’s also given me a little bit of perspective. I try to be more aware of international students at Penn State in our classes and just on campus. I know some people will be frustrated if there’s a big group of international students taking up one part of the gym or something. And I’m like, okay, well, if you think of it from my perspective while I was there, some of us did that as an international student. It was because we knew each other, and we knew that we had things in common and things that we wanted to do. So we just did the best to have a fun time with the situation. So I try to keep [that] in mind, and it’s not always the most welcoming [feeling] to be in a new country. (Participant 6)
Participant 9 felt an overall growth in understanding of how Americans are viewed around the world and connections between people: “It really, really opened my eyes to kind of how Americans interact with other people, how we are perceived, and just kind of the common threads that humans have in general.”

One participant had impactful experiences on two different continents that grew their empathy. This participant visited lower-class communities, causing them to understand their privilege as a female in the United States and appreciate what they may have previously taken for granted. The first experience occurred while studying in Peru.

I met little girls. I could speak a little Spanish, but not a lot; but I had a necklace on, and I know “necklace” in Spanish. One girl asked me what it was; she didn’t know, and she never had one. I asked her, oh, don’t you have necklaces? Do you know what I mean? The reason she doesn’t have a necklace is that her family is working in awful conditions. All their money goes to paying for her school. They don’t have money to pay for anything else. So that way, she can get an education. And this is a six-year-old little girl; that was so tough for me to comprehend. (Participant 4)

The second impactful experience occurred in Africa.

We went to the all-girls school in the orphanage, seeing these little girls who the only reason they’re getting an education is that somebody created this program for them. Otherwise, their families would be trying to marry them off. So, we had a class we attended with them. It was called life skills, and their class topic would be, what do you do if your parents try to marry you off? How do you handle that situation? How do you handle speaking to older men, and how do you respect them? But how do you still have a voice? And that was always so tough for me to see, as these girls fighting for their education and fighting for respect. (Participant 4)
Another participant who was studying in England had the opportunity to travel to Jamaica to compare the health systems in each country. While in Jamaica, they visited organizations that served individuals with fatal illnesses and mental impairments.

An organization that was called Missionaries of the Poor. It was a religious-based organization, where members of families who are turned away from one place because of their disability, or mental capability. It was basically a home for them. If they were fatally ill or sick, that was kind of like a shelter. And so it was run by some monks, some Catholic monks. There were also people who didn’t have a home that were homeless or just didn’t have the means to carry on living. They would come there. There was a lot of, I don’t know how to say this politically correct, but those who had some sort of mental retardation were there. Men who had AIDS could seek shelter there. So we got to tour. There were two types of those facilities, and there was one for children, which is terribly sad. Parents who had given up their children because of their disabilities were there. So we got to see the pediatric side, the adult side, and interact with the residents. And that was really powerful. (Participant 11).

Teamwork

We build teamwork skills through many different aspects of our lives. For these study abroad students, it was no different. Nine participants described in 22 vignettes how they built teamwork skills either through school-related or extracurricular activities.

While studying in South Africa, Participant 16 was able to work together not only with classmates but also with local rangers: “We had to work on a project together, and they were way more adapted to it cause they were actually park rangers. The South Africa experience was just very real.”
Another participant was able to work as part of a team in an internship as a member of a start-up company.

It was more like, hey, you know, you’re a part of this team now. You know, just kind of help out when we need it. I’d tell the supervisor what I wanted you to do. Let me know if you need anything else if you’re not enjoying what you’re doing. (Participant 1)

While working on a special project within the internship, Participant 1 was able to work with locals who were not initially part of the start-up. “I was working with Israelis who were married and you know, had kids. So it was really just cool to work with all different types of people on a project that I was really passionate about.”

The extracurricular activities that the participants took part in while abroad were mostly sports-related. One participant was able to join the local university climbing team, where they were the only international student.

I competed in the Irish national climbing competition with the team. I was the only international student that signed up to go on that trip, too. So I felt pretty cool that I was competing in this Irish competition. No one would know that I was an international student, because I was just on the Irish team. (Participant 6)

Similarly, another participant who studied in England joined the university soccer team. I was actually part of one of the soccer teams there, for the University of Westminster. So I was the only American; so I was really branching out, and it was with a bunch of local students. (Participant 8)

**Public Speaking Ability**

During the interviews, there were not many times that participants shared experiences where they could gain public speaking skills. Those who did share such experiences described
them as available during an internship or through a specific class, where they were mostly graded on presentations. Overall, six participants shared a time in which they used public-speaking skills in eight vignettes.

One participant gained significant public-speaking skills while working with adult learners as part of a volunteer opportunity.

I joined this class of adult learners from the area who all had some kind of, like, health advocacy role in their community. And so, being an international student and someone who was younger than them, it was an interesting dynamic too, kind of, have to be facilitating and leading their discussions. It was also interesting because so many of them had never been in formal education before that in that classroom setting. (Participant 6)

Participant 12 also spent time in front of a classroom, while teaching an English as a second language class to kids in the local community. This participant not only built valuable skills but also made a great connection with the students. “The teaching was really great. When I think about it, I remember the last day, all the little kids came up to me and all hugged me; it was really sweet. I really liked that aspect of it.”

Maturity

Growth in maturity was the least-discussed skill during the interviews. However, it could be inferred from growth in other areas, such as independence and confidence. Separate from these, six participants specifically mentioned maturity in seven vignettes.

Participant 16 expressed that they felt an overall growth in this area, being able to observe how studying abroad affected themselves as a whole. “You mature; I think you become more true to yourself. I think you become less selfish in a lot of ways, or self-centered.”
Participant 10 shared a similar outlook as to how they changed and matured as a result of their study abroad: “I think I kind of, I don’t know, I think I kind of just became a bigger person and kind of learned more about my own values as a person.”

Another participant expressed their growth in maturity in conjunction with the need to become more independent because their normal support system was further away.

You grew up a lot. Before I was only three and a half hours away from home, and not that I was super dependent. I think I’m a very independent person, but being in a completely different country on a different continent is like a whole new level of growing up in responsibility. (Participant 17)

Even though after discussing their experiences, it was clear that the participants had gained significant skills, they often admitted that they did not realize how much they had grown as a person. In fact, Participant 18 stated, “I guess I didn’t give myself enough credit,” after we discussed the skills they had gained. The participant was not able to acknowledge or identify the skills until they were clearly defined and described during the interview. Being able to understand personal growth through a study abroad experience is key to communicating these skills to employers.

**Career Impact**

Discussing the career impacts of study abroad with students was one of the main interests of this study. Having an understanding of how employers value the experiences of students and the skills they gain as a result can guide the field of international education to design programs aligned with the needs of students and employers. During the interviews, students were asked to discuss the overall hiring experience, including interview questions and the interest of recruiters in their study abroad, and summarize how they discussed their study abroad experience. They
were also asked to provide their own perspective on the impact that study abroad had had on their career goals and path. Table 16 shows whether the participants felt there had been direct, indirect, or no impact.

**Table 16**

*Career Impact Summary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Impact</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in the table, 16 participants felt that studying abroad had had an impact, either direct or indirect. This impact was categorized as direct or indirect based on the students’ perception that their career path would have been different if they hadn’t studied abroad. Often, it was difficult for the participants to realize the impact initially; however, the further they discussed it, the more they came to understand it. For those who categorized the impact as indirect, participants would describe how the skills they gained had helped them to navigate the interview and hiring process; however, they felt that they would still have their current position.

The three participants who felt that studying abroad had had no impact on their careers were in very unique situations, and they felt that even though they had gained skills, studying abroad had had no direct or indirect impact on how the hiring process moved forward or how they got their positions.

**Direct Impact**

It was evident when speaking with the participants that their study abroad experiences were successful and impactful. Moreover, eight participants felt that this impact carried into their careers. A participant who studied in Ireland found that the experience was easy to connect to
common interview questions; they even interviewed for an internship abroad, which they felt had a large impact on their full position with the same company.

Every interview that I’ve had since I went, they’ve asked me about it. Actually, I interviewed for jobs while I was over there, too, which people thought was very cool. So that’s how I got this internship. I interviewed via Skype, which I think, like, my manager last year said that she really loved it. I guess it showed that I had the dedication to look for jobs while I was over there. Also, with some of the common questions, like the name of the challenge and how you overcame it, [it] was just an easy answer for me anytime that question was asked. And actually, my boss in the spring is fully Irish. So she always liked to chat with me about that, too. That was just a little in with her, as well.

(Participant 7)

Participant 13 found it easy to discuss both of their study abroad opportunities in an interview for a career abroad with the Peace Corps. Without the previous experience abroad, they felt as if they would not have been applicable for the job. “They asked, how long have you lived or worked with someone from a different culture than myself. I drew from Tanzania, and I drew from Spain in the interview.”

Another participant changed their career path completely after returning from an experience abroad. They found a new passion for living and working abroad, which led them to apply for a Fulbright Fellowship.

Obviously, it narrowed down what I wanted to do with the rest of my life and with my career. I’m sure it really optimized my chances of getting a full grant because I was able to discuss my experiences in my personal statement. Studying abroad has led me here.

(Participant 14)
When asked to rate the impact on a scale of one to 10, Participant 14 stated, “I’d put it at a 10. I don’t even know if I would have known what to Fulbright was if it wasn’t for studying abroad.”

A participant with a career in public relations used their experiences when answering questions in the interview:

Even from getting the PR position perspective, I think I used a few of my experiences. I know this might be leading to your further question; I used them as some of my answers because a lot of the questions are like, how do you deal with situations where you’re outside of your comfort zone? How do you work with people in groups? How do you build relationships? And that’s what I was constantly doing when I was abroad, building new relationships, working outside my comfort zone, and different things like those.

From the perspective of, you know, I’m going to be thrown in in about three months into a completely new world. I’m moving to Chicago for my internship or [rather] for my full-time job. I’ve only ever been there twice. I don’t really know anyone there, but I’m going to have to figure out really quickly how to make it work. (Participant 14)

A participant who was majoring in supply chain management and had studied in multiple locations found it easy to connect their experiences and major to their future position.

I think in supply chain, especially with my major and not even with the company I’m working with, it’s a big topic of conversation in other interviews since supply chain is superglobal. You’re sourcing your products or your ingredients from different countries, or your manufacturing’s in another country, or you’re selling your products in another country. So if you’re able to have that global experience where you’ve been there, or you at least know how to approach a situation in another culture, a different market, and how you can be attractive to that market as a company, I think that has, like, a lot of leverage, especially in business and supply chain. (Participant 4)
One participant saw both the direct and indirect influences of study abroad on their career.

Definitely, definitely, both formally and informally. I have my abroad experience on my resume, just the fact that I’ve gone abroad. I have included the institution that I studied at and the service-learning internship. I include that as part of my experience, and everyone that I interviewed with asked about it. And I think to go on with what I said, about how just going abroad opens you up to new experiences and tolerances. I think that informally and personally kind of just made me feel a little bit more mature as an applicant and kind of like the mindset that I have a worldly view of everything. (Participant 11)

*Indirect Impact*

Whereas eight study participants found their experience had had a direct influence on their career path, another eight noted a more indirect influence. One participant specifically discussed the confidence they had gained and how it pushed them to find internships in different cities.

I would say more indirectly. So after studying abroad, I did an internship in Washington, DC, after my sophomore year, and then I did one last year in San Francisco. So I think it indirectly gave me the confidence to move somewhere else and try it out. I think the reason I was able to get my job was leveraging my previous experiences. I think for this specific job, I really had to push myself to go for it because it’s pretty out of my realm of confidence. Usually, it’s all business students going for it. So I had to go to all these networking events, and that definitely was not my comfort zone. I felt kind of like a fish out of water, and it was really stressful at first cause I was questioning, am I even qualified for this role? I was just happy to even get a first-round interview. So I think it
kind of worked; there were transferable skills there, where I was in a completely foreign experience for me. I had to just do my best. And I think it took that same kind of global competence to even go for the position. (Participant 12)

Similarly, two other participants felt that the confidence they gained while abroad helped them network more easily. The first participant linked it to their communication skills.

So I wouldn’t necessarily say that abroad helped me get the position, but I think it made me more confident. But I’d say in terms of jobs, I really get a lot of confidence from my past experience, because as long as you’re able to ask questions and communicate with people, if you’re not scared to communicate with people, you’re gonna thrive. (Participant 18)

The second participant linked their confidence to their ability to use their experiences abroad as a start-up for conversation points at difficult career fairs.

Having confidence when talking to recruiters because those career days can be scary, and there’s a long line, and you get there, and you have to make awkward conversation, and sometimes it just doesn’t flow. But when I have something up my sleeve to talk about, it’s easy. You know, everyone can be interested in an experience like that. Not everyone really cares about manufacturing, so that can be hit or miss. But when you talk about an experience in a start-up in Israel, automatically people are like, whoa, that’s really cool. How did you, you know, what did you go to? What was that like? It’s very easy and natural for me to talk about it. (Participant 1)

One participant felt that the skills gained while abroad may have helped them get an internship that led to a full-time job.

The fact that I was studying abroad was an indicator for them that I had all these characteristics. I learned independence, confidence, and all that kind of stuff. That was probably a sign to them that I was that type of person. I’m not sure if my study abroad
experience led them to offer me a full-time job after graduation. So it’s kind of hard to say, but initially, when I got the internship offer, I definitely think it could have helped. (Participant 19)

No Impact

Three study participants felt that their study abroad had no impact on their ability to get a job in their field. However, these participants were in more unique positions than the other 16 participants of the study. So it is understandable that they felt their experience had no specific impact. Participant 3 was already a member of the Marine Corps before they studied abroad. Once graduated from Penn State in May 2020, they will be commissioned as an officer, so even though they learned valuable skills from study abroad, it did not impact their entrance into the Marine Corps. When asked if anyone had discussed their experience with them, they mentioned, “Mostly the same kind of questions that everybody asks, which is what’s it like? I think that’s the broadest question. I’m like, what’s it like and what’d you do? and I typically always bring up the internship experience.”

Participant 6 will be entering into an engineering field, and during the hiring process, the recruiters did not pay much attention to the study abroad experience on their resume. I don’t think it was a major factor. I haven’t asked my recruiter if it was something, but it was something that got brought up in a few different situations. Engineering recruiters, I feel like, tend to focus more on other things that are on your resume. But they will be like, oh, you studied abroad. I would go, yeah, I did. It was really great. And then they’d be like, oh, that’s awesome that you did that. (Participant 6)

When asked if they thought that they would have gotten the job even without the experience, they mentioned, “Yeah, I think so. Again, I can’t say for sure, but I do think I would.”
Participant 9 was the most unique participant overall because they were an adult learner. Because of this, they were working in their chosen field before they studied abroad. “I’m a paralegal professional, and I have been one for about five years.” In fact, they did not discuss their study abroad experience during the hiring for their most recent position.

No, the hiring process was actually really interesting. I was in Georgia visiting my family, and so I actually did a Skype interview with them. But they actually hired somebody else. And then, so I was like, well dang. And then two weeks later, they called me, and they were like, are you still free? And [I was] like, yeah, why? And they’re like, this girl doesn’t know anything. Well, she did great on the interview, but she doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Can you come in, and just make sure that you know how to do the job? (Participant 9)

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter contained the results of the data analysis and connected the analysis back to the research questions of the study. Nineteen participants were interviewed for the phenomenological research study. The interview questions were structured to understand the study abroad experiences of the participants and the skills they had gained and to discuss any perceived career impacts. All participants were past study abroad students at Penn State University who recently graduated or will be graduating during the 2019–2020 academic year. To be eligible, the participants needed to have at least one job offer or a full-time job at the time of the interview.

The data analysis process for the study consisted of open coding content analysis. This process identified 29 codes that were based around the following: (a) program structure and resources, (b) skills gained, and (c) career impact. The participants were also asked to discuss the
structure of their study abroad programs, particularly in reference to the presence of structured reflections. Thirteen participants stated that there were no structured reflections within their programs, while six felt that there were only some or a significant amount. Of these six, three programs had reflections as a key part of the experience, whereas three other programs only had it as a minor part.

The participants of the study identified 16 skills that they had developed during their study abroad experiences. The skills identified by 75% of the participants or more included the following: (a) cultural understanding, (b) intercultural communication, (c) adaptability, (d) problem-solving, (e) flexibility, and (f) independence.

The career impacts perceived by the study participants were direct, indirect, and no impact. Eight participants identified their study abroad experience as having a direct impact on their job prospects and overall career path. Another eight participants felt the experience had an indirect impact, noting that the skills they gained had more of an impact than the experience itself. By contrast, three participants perceived that their study abroad experience had no effect on their jobs or career paths.
Chapter 5

Discussion, Implications and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the idea that students who study abroad gain skills that lead to an increase in their employability as they enter the workforce. This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings as related to the literature on skills gained as a result of study abroad, the effects of study abroad on a student as a whole, and its effects on the student’s ability to gain employment in their chosen field. Also included is a discussion on current theories, research, and practices within the field of international education. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, areas for future research, and a brief conclusion.

This chapter contains discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the following research questions:

1. How do the students perceive their employability has been affected by their study abroad experience?
2. What employability skills did the students gain as a result of study abroad?
3. How does the study abroad experience give students an application of Kolb’s experiential learning theory?

As a result of interviews with 19 study participants, 16 skills were identified as areas of growth and development while they were abroad. Six were specifically identified by 75% of the participants or more. Those skills were as follows: (a) cultural understanding, (b) intercultural communication, (c) adaptability, (d) problem-solving, (e) flexibility, and (f) independence. Additionally, when asked to describe the impact that their study abroad experience had on their
employability, eight participants identified their study abroad experience as having a direct impact on their job prospects and overall career path. Another eight participants felt that the experience had an indirect impact, identifying that the skills they gained had more of an impact than the experience itself. By contrast, three participants perceived that their study abroad experience had no effect on their jobs or career paths.

Due to the focus of this study, the participants were asked to describe the presence of structured reflection opportunities within their programs. Reflection is a key part of Kolb’s ELT. Thirteen participants stated that there were no opportunities available, whereas three felt that there were some, and finally, another three had ample opportunities for reflection during their programs.

**Interpretation of the Findings**

Whereas the programs and experiences of study abroad students are as individual as the students themselves, common themes can be seen across the broad spectrum of those available at Penn State. For the purposes of this study, semester-long programs were the focus so that the students could have a large amount of influence from the program, their host city, and country during their time abroad. As seen in Chapter 2, these influences and effects can be both negative and positive in nature. Even though the participants detailed some challenging aspects of the experiences, none of them felt that the programs had a negative effect on them personally or professionally. When asked, they all felt that their study abroad experience was an overall success.
Research Question 1

When linking the overall study abroad experience and the skills gained to their employability, the participants in this study identified that they felt that their experience and skills had a direct or indirect influence on their career. Those who identified a direct influence felt that their experience led to increased interest from their prospective employers, networking opportunities, or a change of direction within their previously intended careers. These results align with studies conducted by Brandenburg et al. (2016), Crossman and Clarke (2009), and Wiers-Jenssen (2008).

Studies conducted by Brandenburg et al. (2016) and Wiers-Jenssen (2008) both found that study abroad students are more likely to travel internationally for work or pursue an international position. For this research study, two participants (13 and 14) identified that their career pursuits changed completely as a result of their study abroad experience. In fact, their interviews for this study took place via Zoom while they were working abroad.

Two other study participants (10 and 16) expressed an interest in pursuing a future position abroad once they gained domestic experience. The remaining 15 participants all expressed that they would feel confident moving to other locations for their jobs or traveling internationally if needed. They were excited to have more opportunities to travel abroad for a variety of reasons.

A study conducted by Crossman and Clarke (2009) gathered data directly from the prospective employers of study abroad students. They found that employers felt that study abroad students were more employable and overall more attractive to employers due to their experiences and global skills gained. This direct influence on the employability of study abroad students, along with other examples in previously discussed studies, supports and aligns with the findings of this study.
In addition to the direct influence described by eight study participants, an additional eight participants focused on the indirect influences on their employability. These were often described by the participants as their ability to be confident during interviews, being willing to take more risks, and linking their study abroad to job-related skills. All of the participants who described the influence discussed their hiring processes and how they mentioned their study abroad experiences during their interviews. However, the interest of the employers varied depending on the field of the participant.

Indirect influences on employability were the focus of studies conducted by Brooks and Simpson (2014), Di Pietro (2014), Farrugia and Sanger (2017), Norris and Gillespie (2009), Orahood et al. (2004), and Trooboff and Berg (2008).

Farrugia and Sanger (2017) and Norris and Gillespie (2009) conducted large scale studies on study abroad students in the United States, both drawing from large data sets. Farrugia and Sanger (2017) gathered data from the IIE Generation Study Abroad initiative while Norris and Gillespie (2009) used data from a 50-year alumni survey administered through IES Abroad. While Farrugia and Sanger (2017) focused on the interview process for study abroad students, Norris and Gillespie (2009) looked at the overall impact of study abroad on a students’ career. Finding that 77% of students identified that study abroad allowed them to acquire skills made a significant impact on their career (Norris & Gillespie, 2009).

Similar to Farrugia and Sanger (2017), Di Pietro (2014) discussed the interview process for study abroad students. Specifically, Di Pietro (2014) found that these students felt that they had had a more successful interview than they would have if they had not gained confidence and other skills during study abroad. Farrugia and Sanger (2017) were able to identify that 78% of their study participants discussed their study abroad experience during interviews. For this study, only one participant (9) did not discuss their study abroad experience during the hiring process.
Brooks and Simpson (2014) and Orahood et al. (2004) measured the statistical impact that study abroad had on the careers of their participants. Both studies found that there was an overall statistical impact, making study abroad students more employable. Brooks and Simpson (2014) conducted their studies on students within family and consumer science majors, whereas Orahood et al. (2004) focused on business majors. These studies were qualitative in nature and support what was found in this qualitative study.

One indirect influence that some of the study participants mentioned was the ability to connect easily with others during the hiring process. This was especially true if the recruiter or hiring manager was a former study abroad student or from the host country of the participant. Trooboff and Berg (2008) identified that the impact of a study abroad experience is higher if a member of the hiring committee had also studied abroad, or if there is an easy cultural connection that could be made. Participants of this study found this ease of connection as a key skill in overall networking and confidence in the interview process.

It is evident from the data collected that a majority, 84.2%, of the participants felt that their study abroad experience had either a direct or indirect influence on their employability, with the participants split evenly between those two influences. These influences can be linked to the employability skills gained by students during their study abroad experiences.

**Research Question 2**

The skills gained during study abroad can be categorized as soft skills that can possibly have an effect on the employability of students, as was previously found by Crossman and Clarke (2009), Eaton and Kleshinski (2014), Jones (2016), and Williams (2005). Jones (2016) defined soft skills that increased the employability of students as intercultural communication, self-awareness, and flexibility. All three of these skills were identified as part of this research study,
with intercultural communication being identified by all 19 participants, self-awareness identified by 13, and flexibility identified by 16. Eaton and Kleshinski (2014) also identified foreign language development as a key skill in employability, which was one also identified by 12 study participants.

These skills may be developed by students who did not study abroad; however, Crossman and Clarke (2009) identified that study abroad students are ahead of the pack when developing these skills, specifically due to their global experience. When focusing on intercultural communication, Williams (2005) found that study abroad students developed these communication skills at a higher rate than those students who did not study abroad. In fact, they found that study abroad students start at a higher level of intercultural communication due to their increased interest in global topics (Williams 2005).

**Research Question 3**

While the first purpose of this study was focused on the employability of students, the second purpose was to analyze the structure of the programs attended by the participants in accordance with Kolb’s ELT. As a review, effective learning occurs when a one progresses through the four stages of Kolb’s ELT (a) concrete experience (feeling), (b) reflective observation (watching), (c) abstract conceptualization (thinking) and, (d) active experimentation (doing) (Kolb, 1984). According to Kolb (1984) each stage of the cycle is mutually supportive of the other and no one stage is effective on its own. Additionally, the cycle can be entered at any point and followed through its logical sequence (Kolb, 1984).

For the purposes of this study, the cycle was assumed to be entered at the concrete experience stage with structured reflections being used to guide students through the completion of the cycle. It is easy to define and identify a study abroad experience as a concrete experience
within Kolb’s ELT model. More specifically, an entire semester-long study abroad experience could be further divided into hundreds or thousands of concrete experiences. According to the model, following a concrete experience an individual needs reflection, conceptualization and experimentation to further analyze and grow. Study abroad is a key opportunity for individuals to grow in both personal and professional ways. In fact, many universities, providers, and faculty claim that their programs are experiential learning opportunities for their participants. This study used Kolb’s ELT model to focus on the Penn State-approved programs attended by the study participants.

During their interviews, study participants were asked to describe any reflection resources, group discussions, surveys, or interview opportunities that were provided to them while abroad. Of the participants, 31.5% stated that they had a few too many structured reflection opportunities that occurred while abroad, while the remaining 68.4% had no opportunities provided. With these statistics and the statements provided by the students, it can be interpreted that the programs did not provide an adequate application of Kolb’s ELT.

**Implications of the Study**

This research study was conducted to expand on the body of knowledge in the United States regarding the employability of study abroad students. As was described in Chapter 2, a majority of the large-scale quantitative studies on this subject originated in Europe as a result of the Erasmus Programme. In the United States, studies are more qualitative in nature and focused on specific populations of students. Very few involved students from a variety of majors; therefore, this qualitative study included students from all majors. It was also focused on students who were immediately entering the workforce so that they could speak in detail regarding their hiring process and the effects of study abroad on their employability.
In addition to the employability of students, this study also included aspects of Kolb’s ELT, analyzing the application of this theory within Penn State-approved study abroad programs. The quality of study abroad programs is often based on their ability to provide experiential learning opportunities to students. However, programs are rarely analyzed for their incorporation of reflection into the curriculum. Kolb’s ELT is a well-established theory that includes reflections and growth as the students experience situations abroad. The programs that apply Kolb’s ELT are thought to be more structured and include measurable growth for the students. Therefore, by using the results of this study, the programs represented in this study or those similar can be educated about the theory and understand how the programs can be improved, allowing for curriculum redesign and adjustment for better integration.

The study abroad reflection model shown in Figure 2 can be a guide as practitioners create programs and work with their students through the processes of study abroad. Similar to that of Kolb’s ELT, this model can be entered at any point of the cycle. It can also be easily applied to any moment of the process, including pre-departure, the study abroad experience and after returning.

Figure 2

Study Abroad Reflection Model
Note: Adapted from Gibbs Reflection Cycle (Gibbs, 2008).

Within each step of the model, questions can help guide the reflections of the students.

Table 17 provides an example of questions that can be asked by those professionals who are working with the students before, during and after they study abroad.

**Table 17**

*Guiding Questions for Reflection Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What happened?</td>
<td>Why did it happen?</td>
<td>How did it affect me?</td>
<td>What will I do the same or differently?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where did it happen?  
Who was involved?  
Was it positive or negative?

How was I involved?  
How could I change it?

What did I learn from it?  
How will I communicate it?

What can I do to use this experience?

The results of this study and the reflection model previously discussed can influence the day-to-day practices for international education professionals, such as those who work at universities and providers. This can affect direct discussions with students and programming aspects such as pre-departure and arrival orientations, as well as returnee programs. Predeparture and arrival orientations serve the purpose of preparing the students to leave the United States and live in a new country for a semester. With the proven knowledge that they increase the employability of students, career-focused topics can be incorporated into these sessions through open discussions or case studies, allowing for professional development and awareness to begin before the students start their study abroad.

Program providers can also provide programming during study abroad to guide the students through processes that will further benefit them. Tools such as focus groups, journaling prompts and cultural connections with locals could be easily incorporated into the already existing structure of the program. Once the students return, universities can conduct workshops on how to market study abroad workshops for the most effect, to increase students’ employability even more. Topics of these workshops could include resume formatting, international career opportunities, mock interviews, and other similar topics.

An additional implication is focused on the evaluation and improvement of programs. Frequently, programs undergo evaluations by providers, faculty members, and partners such as universities. If the program is claiming to provide experiential learning opportunities to its students, an assessment of the application of Kolb’s ELT should be included in the program.
evaluation, especially because this study found that 13 out of the 19 programs discussed did not provide any structured reflections for the participants. Reflections based on the study abroad reflection model would provide a starting point for those programs.

Once a program evaluation is completed, partners, faculty, and program providers can work together using that information to develop programs that are further aligned with Kolb’s ELT and the study abroad reflection model, increasing its quality and effect on the students. These programs could provide students with better opportunities to reflect and develop key soft skills to allow them to enter their careers at a higher level and possibly hasten their track towards leadership positions.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Qualitative research methods were used within this research study due to an interest in learning the stories of students through interviews. However, the data collected was subjective in nature and not applicable to a more general audience. Therefore, the quality and strength of this study could be increased if combined with quantitative research methods and statistical analysis. There are three future research studies that would build on the data collected from this study.

The first research study would combine qualitative data collected from students with quantitative data gathered from recruiters and hiring managers. These data would be used to identify the importance of global and leadership skills gained through study abroad or academics when speaking with potential employees. Recruiters and hiring managers would be asked to provide insight into their hiring practices, interview questions, and what attributes are important to their companies.

The second research study would expand on the data collected from this study, allowing for a more practical application of the information gathered from previous literature and research.
This would be used to develop a standardized instrument that could link the global skills gained by students to their employability. This instrument could be completed by students before their global experience and once again when they return. It would rate their employability on a scale in both instances, showing their growth in key areas. This would allow students to better identify and understand their areas of growth overall and the impact of the study abroad experience.

The third future research study would look at the long-term effects of global experiences and leadership skills on the careers of students. To accomplish this goal, cohorts of participants would be selected based on the number of years (e.g., 1, 5, 10, 15) they have been working in their field. These participants would have gained global and leadership skills through study abroad during their time at Penn State. The study could be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method, depending on the final design. No matter the design, the participants would be asked to identify what skills they had gained and in what ways and to provide details on their career path. They would then identify how they felt that those skills had impacted their career paths over time.

**Summary of Study**

Globalization is a driver for the need for globally competent individuals entering the workforce. Businesses are more international than they have been in the past, and the success of a company can be linked to its employees’ ability to navigate in a global market. Companies offer training for their employees to grow in areas of intercultural understanding, communication, time management, and other key global skills. However, it is more advantageous if employees enter the workforce with these skills previously developed. Studying abroad is a way for individuals to gain these skills; in fact, according to previous research, having these skills prior to entering the workforce could increase an individual’s employability.
The history of study abroad dates back to the 1800s, with governmental incentives and scholarships growing the field over the years. Since 2000, there has been a significant increase in the number of students studying abroad during their undergraduate academics. As the numbers have increased, so has the literature on the impact of study abroad; however, little of it focuses on the employability of participants. This study focused not only on the employability of students but also on the quality of the programs as an application of Kolb’s ELT.

Through 19 participant interviews, this study explored the employability impact of the overall program and the skills gained. Sixteen study participants identified either a direct or indirect impact on their employability. Eight expressed that their study abroad experiences influenced their ability to get a position in their chosen field or changed their career path. The other eight stated that the skills gained, such as intercultural communication, confidence, and flexibility, made their interviews more successful and helped them get their position.

When asked to describe the structure of their study abroad programs in reference to structured reflections, 13 participants stated that there were no structured reflections within their programs. By contrast, six felt that there were either some or a significant amount. Three programs had reflections as a key part of the experience, whereas three other programs only had them as a minor part.

The results of this study support the need for quality study abroad programs to provide students with opportunities to gain skills that will benefit them in the workforce. The global nature of the world’s businesses will change over time, shrinking as globalization continues to develop. Skills gained through study abroad will allow individuals to continually navigate this environment successfully. It is vital that international and workforce education professionals continue to research and understand the needs of the ever-changing workforce and the ways in which study abroad can meet them.
References


Study Abroad with IES Abroad. Retrieved March 09, 2018, from [https://www.iesabroad.org/](https://www.iesabroad.org/)


Appendix A

Recruitment of Participants

Email to Prospective Recruits

Hello, my name is Jamie Weaver and I am a Ph.D. candidate in Workforce Education and Development. For my research, I am exploring the idea that those who study abroad during the Penn State undergraduate career gain skills that can increase their employability in their chosen field. You are receiving this email because within the last academic year you studied abroad on a Penn State approved program and have graduated or will graduate soon.

To conduct my dissertation research, I would like to set up interviews with past study abroad participants to discuss in detail your experiences and how they led to a current job offer or position that you have. These interviews would last between 1 to 1.5 hours. If you are interested in speaking with me and sharing your experiences, please complete this [survey](#). Once you’ve completed the survey, I will receive your results and be in touch with further information.

Thank you so much for your help with my research, please let me know if you have any questions.
Email to College Representatives

Hello colleagues,

As some of you may know, my name is Jamie Weaver and I am a Ph.D. candidate in Workforce Education and Development. For my research, I am exploring the idea that those who study abroad during the Penn State undergraduate career gain skills that can increase their employability in their chosen field. You are receiving this email because I am hoping that you can distribute the information to your students who studied abroad for a semester or longer on a Penn State approved program and have graduated or will graduate soon.

To conduct my dissertation research, I would like to set up interviews with past study abroad participants to discuss in detail their experiences and how they led to a current job offer or position that they have. These interviews would last between 1 to 1.5 hours. If they are interested in speaking with me and sharing their experiences, they should complete this [survey]. Once they’ve completed the survey, I will receive their results and be in touch with further information about their interviews.

Thank you so much for your help with my research, please let me know if you have any questions.
Appendix B

Study Abroad Interview Qualification Survey

First Name

________________________________________

Last Name

________________________________________

What is the email address is best to contact you?

________________________________________

What best describes your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ Prefer not to say

○ Prefer to self describe _____________________________________________________
What is your age?

- Under 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24
- 25
- Over 26
- Rather not say
How would you best identify your ethnic background?

- Caucasian/White
- African American
- Indigenous or Aboriginal Person
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic
- Latino
- Multiracial
- Other ________________________________________________
- Rather not say

Did you attend Penn State for your undergraduate studies?

- Yes
- No
Which college did you study at Penn State?

- Agricultural Sciences
- Arts and Architecture
- Smeal College of Business
- Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications
- Earth and Mineral Sciences
- Education
- Engineering
- Health and Human Development
- Information Sciences and Technology
- The Liberal Arts
- College of Nursing
- Eberly College of Science
- Other ________________________________________________
What year did you or will you graduate from Penn State?

- 2018
- 2019
- 2020
- Other ________________________________________________

Did you have a job offer at the time of or within 3 months of graduation?

- Yes
- No

What field are you currently working in?

▼ Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting ... Other

Which of the following best describes your role in industry?

▼ Administrative Staff ... Other

Did you participate in a study abroad experience while at Penn State?

- Yes
- No
What type of study abroad program did you participate in?

- Academic Year
- Internship/Research
- Semester-long
- Summer - Short term (1 - 3 weeks)
- Summer - Long term (4+ weeks)

In what region of the world did you study abroad?

- Africa
- Asia
- Canada
- Central America
- Europe
- Mexico
- Oceania (Australia, New Zealand, etc.)
What was the name of your study abroad program?

________________________________________________________________

Describe one memorable moment from your study abroad experience.

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

Would you be willing to participate in a recorded 1 - 1.5-hour interview via video conference to discuss your study abroad experience?

○ Yes

○ No
Appendix C

Survey follow emails

Thank You Email, Accepting

Thank you so much for completing the pre-qualification survey for my research study focusing on the employability of study abroad students. After reading your survey answers I would like to set up a time to speak with you further. I am very excited to hear about the experiences you had while you were studying abroad. Our conversation would be in the form of an interview via Zoom, our conversation will be recorded for transcription and data analysis purposes. To help find a mutual time to speak I’ve created the following Doodle Poll. Please select one time that works best for your schedule, if you have difficulty with the times in the Poll, let me know and we can find one that works better for you.

Attached to this email you will find an informed consent form which will provide details about the purpose of this study and your rights as a participant. Please read this information, sign it and return it to me before our scheduled interview time.

Thank You Email, Not Accepting

Thank you so much for completing the pre-qualification survey for my research study focusing on the employability of study abroad students. After reading your survey answers, it seems that your experience does not fit well with the focus of the study. At this time, I will not need to schedule an interview time with you, however, if something changes, I will be in touch. Please let me know if you have any questions.
Confirmation Interview Time

This email is to confirm that we will be speaking on DATE, at TIME via Zoom. Please use the following Zoom link for our conversation. We will be speaking for about an hour to an hour and a half so please find a quiet place with limited interruptions. If you are unable to dedicate this time during our scheduled date, please let me know and we can find a more suitable time.

Attached you will find the Information Consent form for your reference again as well as the interview questions that we will be discussing. Please let me know if you need anything before now and our scheduled time to talk. I look forward to meeting you!

Final Thank You for Participating

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your studying abroad experience. I had a wonderful time during our conversation. I have a number of other interviews I am conducting. Once I have concluded with those and had a chance to transcribe your interview, I will be sending you a summary of my findings. You will have a chance to review them and make any changes you see are needed. Thanks again and I will be in touch soon!

Member Check Email

I hope everything is going well with you! I have concluded my interviews, transcription and initial analysis. Below are the results of our discussion and direct quotes that I plan to use in my dissertation. Please take a chance to read through it all and let me know if you see anything that is incorrect or should be changed. I would like to have these changes completed by Friday,
December 20. So please let me know your thoughts before I move into my final analysis phase. If I don’t hear from you soon, I will assume that everything has your acceptance. Please remember that I will be publishing my results, however, all participant information and identifying factors will be kept anonymous. Please let me know if you have further questions, thank you again for your participation.
Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

1. Demographic information:
   a. Name
   b. Major at Penn State
   c. When did you study abroad?
   d. When did you, or when will you be graduating from Penn State?

2. Professional work:
   a. What is your current job title and a brief description of your role and daily responsibilities?

3. Study Abroad Experience:
   a. What were your initial reasons for wanting to study abroad?
   b. Why did you choose the program and location you did?
   c. Describe study abroad experience, where, when, courses taken, housing, etc., other experiences (community engagements, internships, etc)
   d. Discuss one or two positive experience(s) while abroad.
   e. Discuss one or two challenging experience(s) while abroad.
   f. What types of things did you do throughout your time abroad to acclimate to a new culture?
   g. What were your most stressful times during your abroad experience?
   h. How did you work through these times?
   i. Do you feel you were successful or unsuccessful working through these? Why?
j. What skills did you feel helped you navigate these challenges?

k. Why do you believe your experiences were so impactful?

l. What would you change about your study abroad experience if you could?

m. What types of resources were available to you through your program?

n. Did your program have guided reflections, discussion groups, etc. through your program?

o. Do you feel that your study abroad experiences helped you obtain the position you currently have?

p. On a scale of 1-10, how much do you think that your study abroad experience – or the skills you gained during this experience – influenced your employer’s decision to hire you?

q. If you had not participated in this study abroad experience, do you think you would have been offered this position? Why or why not?

r. During the hiring process, did you discuss your study abroad experience?

   i. If so, how did you discuss your experiences or the skills you gained through your experiences?

   ii. Did the hiring manager ask you specifically about your experience? If so, what did they ask? How did you respond?
## Appendix E

### Open Coding Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employability</td>
<td>Direct impact</td>
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<td>Indirect impact</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Housing</td>
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<td>ELT</td>
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<tr>
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<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skill</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
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<td>Open-mindedness</td>
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<td>Out of comfort zone</td>
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<td>Problem-solving</td>
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<td>Time management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Faculty-led</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Provider
University
CURRICULUM VITAE

Jamie Weaver

EDUCATION
Penn State University, University Park, PA
Ph.D. in Workforce Education, 2020
Dissertation: “Individual perspectives on how employability can be influenced by study abroad experiences as an undergraduate student at The Pennsylvania State University”

Penn State University, University Park, PA
M.S. in Workforce Education, 2017

Lock Haven University, Lock Haven, PA
B.S. in Secondary Education—Science, 2006

Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, PA
B.A. in Biology, 2004
B.A. in Spanish, 2004

WORK EXPERIENCE
Penn State University, University Park, PA
Education Abroad Adviser, Global Programs, 2017–Present
Coordination of study abroad programs in multiple regions of the world.
Program Coordinator, Office of Engineering Outreach and Inclusion, 2011–2017
Coordination of recruitment and retention programming for underrepresented populations.

NHS Human Services, State College, PA
Therapeutic Support Staff, 2010–2011
One-on-one support of autistic and behaviorally challenged children/adolescents.

7th Grade Science Teacher, Spring Mills, PA
Planned and taught science lessons to the entire 7th-grade class.

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS
“Engaging Diverse Students in Co-Creation of Outreach Initiatives” Co-presenter at Diversity Abroad Conference, New Orleans, LA, 2020

“Employability of study abroad students, a literature review” Beyond: The ISI Florence & Umbra Institute Studies in International Education, 2, 94-114, 2019

“Connecting the Dots: How Does Study Abroad Impact Employability”
Co-presenter at IES Abroad Annual Conference, Chicago, IL, 2018

“Employability of Study Abroad Alumni, Career Readiness and Study Abroad”
Co-presenter at PACI Annual Conference, Cranberry Township, PA, 2018