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The Impact of Short Term Missions and Study Abroad on the Academic Engagement of College Students

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THE IMPACT OF SHORT TERM MISSIONS AND STUDY ABROAD ON
THE ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Jeffrey J. Wallace

May 2014

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

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entitled

The Impact of Short Term Missions and Study Abroad
on the Academic Engagement of College Students

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
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Abstract

Understanding the connection between a students' short term missions (STM) and study abroad (SA) experience to his or her academic engagement proves necessary for higher education professionals desiring to enhance the benefits of a co-curricular college education. As students return from various trips, their interaction with different cultures, exposure with diverse ideas, and involvement in service work create an opportunity for engagement with deeper life-long learning. Higher education professionals should capitalize on these positive learning outcomes and transfer them into the classroom, further impacting students' academic engagement. The present study researched key themes evidenced by student participation in STM and SA trips and the ways they impact students not only in their worldview and global mindedness but also in their ability to better engage academically. Participants in the research expressed a connection between their trip experiences and better academic engagement in and out of the classroom. Some of the key themes coming out of the research included a better knowing and understanding of the world around them and how it connects students to what they learn and study in the classroom. Participants also could better apply what they experienced directly to their own academics and vocational pursuits, often answering questions associated with the pursuit of their particular area of study. Effective communication and critical thinking in and out of the classroom also emerged as significant to their academic engagement. Participants expressed an increase in their ability to communicate with

faculty and fellow students what they learned from their experiences and an ability to better contribute to overall classroom discussion. These positive outcomes prove beneficial for both student affairs and academic affairs professionals alike who seek ways to enhance academic engagement through student participation in these trips.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“The prospect of going abroad can motivate a student and invigorate them in extraordinary ways” (Martinez, 2011, p. 25).

Short Term Missions and Study Abroad

Few would argue the positive impact short term missions (STM) and study abroad (SA) trips have on the lives of students in respect to their cross-cultural sensitivities, attitudes towards world events, and the globalization of any college campus (Rexeisen & Al-Khatib, 2009). Often, learning that takes place outside the classroom equips students with greater productivity and creative thinking processes deemed valuable to future employers or organizations (Martinez, 2011).

According to Sandell (2007), both scholars and professionals date the practice of study abroad back to around 500 B.C. Individuals seeking advanced education traveled to Athens, Greece, Alexandria, Rome, and East Persia. This trend of traveling to foreign lands continued throughout centuries and increases in participation even today. Over the last decade, participation in SA programs by U.S. students has more than doubled (Sandell, 2007).

Study abroad programs in the US grew from the concept of how students studying in another country could broaden their views and understanding of the local diversity of cultures, thus providing a better view of the diverse world around them (Breen, 2012). When students from U.S. institutions travel abroad, they represent American culture to

others whom they interact with, further modeling this educational experience (Breen, 2012). Most institutions of higher education offering a semester or even a year of studying abroad believe it proves invaluable in helping the student understand their role in the social, political, and economical landscape on a much more global scale (Jenkins & Skelly, 2004).

Available data from the Institute of International Education clearly indicates the number of students seeking SA experiences to further support and broaden their education is on the rise (Jones, 2010), and, overall, student participation in SA experiences has increased dramatically over the last decade (Serrano, Tragant, & Llanes, 2012). In turn, students hope these experiences will broaden their place in the world market and impress potential employers by demonstrating a self-initiative contributing to an overall better understanding of the world around them (Martinez, 2011).

Additional research also indicates positive outcomes for engagement regardless of the length of stay during the experience. While SA, especially in shorter-term programs, seems a “focused” type of educational experience, a strong service learning component produces positive outcomes in both SA and STM trips, regardless of duration (Sandell, 2007). The continuing trend of sending students to study abroad manifests in data from the Institute of International Education (2012) and the European Commission for Higher Education (2011). With the ever-changing world market and continual move towards globalization on an economic and political scale, U.S. institutions of higher education must committed increasingly to placing many more students and faculty into study abroad programs (Jenkins & Skelly, 2004). According to the 2001 Peterson’s Study Abroad Guide (Reed, 2001), U.S. and foreign universities offered over 2,900 semester

and year-long programs and over 2,500 short-term programs. This number does not include the hundreds of programs from various institutions offering short-term experiences in January and the summer months (Jenkins & Skelly, 2004).

Academic Engagement

How student participation in either STM or SA trips can connect to his or her overall academic engagement requires an awareness of the various and unique ways students engage with learning. One key component educators should note for effective practice in education is utilizing active learning techniques (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). These authors identified unique and challenging ways students learn beyond merely sitting in a classroom listening to lectures, turning in assignments, or answering questions. Chickering and Gamson (1987) emphasized the need for students to openly communicate experiences and what they learn through discussion and written assignments.

Some students excel in classroom seminar settings rich with theory. For others, hands-on experiences can contribute better to effective learning and engagement with subject matter. Working with student's unique style and talents can guide them effectively to new ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Students must be able to relate their own personal experiences to learning, making it an integral part of their identities (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). The abilities and unique ways in which students interact and engage with what they learn and how they relate those experiences to the world around them appear through the varied opportunities of STM or SA.

Student engagement seems a better predictor of personal development and life-long learning than that of merely classroom achievements alone (Carini, Kuh, & Klein,

2006). Student engagement and a deeper involvement with educationally productive activities while in college develop healthy habits in students, leading to life-long learning and personal development long after the college years (Carini et al., 2006). With effective student engagement directly impacting academic engagement, institutions more fully engage with students in a variety of activities and opportunities that better contribute to long-term outcomes beneficial to both students and faculty (Kuh, 2001).

Short-term missions and SA trips enable students to participate in a type of learning community unique to the trip itself. Teaching students through first-hand experiences proves highly beneficial in allowing them to apply what they learn in one course to other courses and related material (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Similar to outcomes and components of STM and SA team interactions and experiences, learning communities incorporate active and collaborative learning both in and out of the classroom and further compliment academic and various social activities (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

As more students pursue study abroad opportunities as a fundamental part of their higher education experience, there continues to exist a need for further inquiry into the ways STM or SA trips contribute to the academic engagement of students during their college experience. Short-term missions and SA trips, regardless of trip location or duration (Sandell, 2007), offer a diversity of experiences different from most traditional classroom learning outcomes. These first-hand experiences occurring outside the classroom can prove significant and impactful to how students relate to classmates, faculty, and classroom materials. So how do these experiences affect the student's

academic engagement in the classroom? The following question guided the current research.

Research Question

- How is a college student's ability to comprehend, analyze, and engage with their academics further impacted through the deep learning opportunities afforded by participation in a short term missions or study abroad experience?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

What Are Short Term Missions and Study Abroad?

Definition. One of the difficulties in evaluating program effectiveness of short term missions (STM) or study abroad (SA) experiences comes with the lack of common terminology used within the field of higher education referencing for these programs. “Education abroad professionals have had no agreed-upon set of definitions upon which to base their work” (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2011, p. i). The terms “short-term” and “study abroad” do not appear necessarily defined by any specific pre-determined duration of time or location of study. Understandably, differences exist that lead to some confusion in adopting a working definition. Different institutions organize and establish service learning educational components that meet their specific needs as an institution, and thus definitions, terms, and program names vary from institution to institution. For the purpose of the current research, the researcher defined STM and SA as programs with strong service learning components and trips designed around a duration of 4 weeks or fewer.

Duration. However, regardless of duration of stay, the literature seems to support that both short term and long term study abroad experiences do meet some of the basic goals and requirements of liberal arts institutions (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). Current research indicates possible positive outcomes regardless of duration of stay for

the experience, with “short term” defined as eight weeks or fewer (Kehl & Morris, 2005). While study abroad, especially in the shorter-term programs, remains considered a “focused” type of educational experience, the research indicates positive learning outcomes with both study abroad and mission trips with a service learning component present; regardless of the trip duration (Sandell, 2007). Any short-term study abroad experience mainly aims to create an “awareness of and enthusiasm for the international mission and a willingness to participate in international activities” (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002, p. 47).

A 2009 study reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* indicated short (duration) study abroad trips do have lasting and beneficial effects for students. The study indicated the duration of a trip in and of itself did not prove not significant to the overall positive experience potentially gained by the student in regards to lasting impacts and future engagement. The findings of the Study Abroad for Global Engagement project suggested even four weeks or fewer spent on a study abroad experiences would have the same beneficial impacts on engagement as those students experiencing several months to a year (Fischer, 2009). Another 2009 study at the University of Minnesota further supported the positive outcomes available in short-term study abroad opportunities, defined by durations of 4 weeks or fewer. Gerald W. Fry, professor of International-Development Education at the University of Minnesota, suggested a short-term program done correctly can have a significant impact on the individual (Fischer, 2009).

According to findings from the Institute of International Education (2013), student participation in SA programs has more than tripled over the last twenty years, with 58.1% of those students choosing a short term SA program duration of 8 weeks or

fewer. Short term programs have often been criticized by skeptics for operating more akin to cultural tourism than academic, global-mindedness experiences (Fischer, 2009). Advocates for such programs see short-term experiences as an opportunity for students to study abroad who otherwise would not have the financial means or ability to commit for the longer durations (Fischer, 2009). While faculty—typically those leading SA trips—widely agree these shorter length study abroad experiences can prove transformative, there remains a need for strong academic content (Fischer, 2009).

Service Learning Component

A service learning component during the college years can play a significant role in students' engagement with their academic pursuits and personal development. "Service learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). By utilizing this definition for service learning, the emphasis on *learning* and *engaging* in service activities encompasses the varying aspects of both SA and STM not defined by any specific length of time. Jacoby (1996) described service learning as "education that is grounded in experience as a basis for learning," intentional in its specific design to facilitate effective learning (p. 9). Jacoby further indicated service learning brings another level of learning to students' educational experience; it provides them with the opportunity to develop more fully the necessary skills and abilities to deal better with life after college. Some of the benefits Jacoby associated with service learning experiences include students who can interpret information more accurately, solve problems with a higher level of creativity, work well within a team structure, effectively communicate to

others, possess better decision making skills, and know how and when to negotiate and compromise.

These findings received additional evidence in a study from the late 1990's, conducted to measure the impact of community service participation on undergraduate college students' experience. The study showed that volunteer participation in service learning during their undergraduate experience does enhance the students' academic development, sense of civic responsibility, and life skills (Astin & Sax, 1998). As institutional policy makers seek to add or expand existing service learning programs to their curriculum, they must first address whether participation in one of these programs could affect the students' personal and educational development (Astin & Sax, 1998).

In *Service Learning in Today's Higher Education*, Jacoby (1996) stated different institutions have "distinctly different missions, traditions, and approaches regarding service and service learning" (p. 17). She indicated church-related colleges and universities established service learning in the institutions' spiritual mission (Jacoby, 1996). Research by Astin and Sax (1998) provided some of the strongest support for the possible positive educational outcomes due to participation in service learning programs. The study researched information gathered from pre-tests at the time freshman entered college, then again at a later date with follow-up tests after those same students participated in a service learning program. Students who participated in an area of service learning scored higher on all areas tested. The data suggested participation in service activities during students' undergraduate years positively impacts their ability to engage a sense of civic responsibility.

Students became more involved and more committed in their communities, with a stronger desire to serve others, promote racial understanding, volunteer their time, and work with nonprofit organizations (Astin & Sax, 1998). Even with the extra time students spent away from the classroom due to participation in service learning engagement, the study by Astin and Sax (1998) showed students actually spent more time concentrating on their own studies than students who did not participate in any type of service learning programs. The U.S. study abroad community acknowledged “students normally and naturally learn” together and gain valuable educational experiences through their participation, especially in other countries when students become immersed in the experience (Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012, p. 7). Service learning components contribute a value and level of commitment to the STM and SA experience, further adding to engagement in and out of the classroom and a better sense of community awareness and need for involvement (Astin & Sax, 1998).

Student Engagement

Successful student engagement on any college campus directly relates to the extent in which students interact with faculty and staff invested in their successes both in and out of the classroom (Kuh, 2006). Students involved with SA opportunities acquire global mindedness, increased self-confidence, and continued intellectual growth (Dwyer, 2004). Writing for the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Kuh addressed what to do to enhance overall student engagement and further increase a student’s success at college.

Kuh indicated every student should have the opportunity to participate in at least two impactful activities during their undergraduate program years, with SA being cited as

one area with high impact potential (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). College students in the United States returning from SA experiences have demonstrated increased self-awareness, maturation, sensitivity to their own independence and international affairs, and appreciation of different cultures (Dwyer, 2004). Also, while additional studies frequently point to the transformative nature of these trips for both participants and organizers, efforts for any type of systematic evaluation appears lacking (Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, & Adler, 2011).

For many years, higher education in the United States has relied on two measurable outcomes to evaluate student success by participation in SA or STM opportunities (Vande Berg et al., 2012). One evaluative measure looks at the increasing number of students' colleges and universities in the US annually send abroad. The more students engage in SA experiences while at the institution, the more they are likely to be seen as "succeeding" (Vande Berg et al., 2012). Secondly, higher education evaluates success by looking at students returning from various SA experiences who indicate the personally transformative power of their individual experience (Vande Berg et al., 2012).

Lasting education benefits appear as long term programmatically sought goals of any educational program. The desire for a program that impacts a student long after their years at college must result for any impact on local or global community. Expected outcomes for students participating in these experiences involve confidence, empathy, and maturity, awareness of surroundings, and an enhanced cultural sensitivity (Gray et al., 2002). Kehl and Morris (2005) referenced a study by Hadis (2005a), in which he utilized a series of retrospective questions of college alumni involved in STM or SA as undergraduates. In his study, the alumni reported returning from the experience and

becoming more engaged in reading and international affairs, increasing their second language fluency (as applicable), and generally feeling more comfortable with those from other cultures (Hadis, 2005b).

Opportunity exists for improving undergraduate education by providing students with unique and diverse ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Unique opportunities such as STM and SA trips allow students to experience active learning firsthand. Rather than sitting in a traditional classroom merely observing, students apply their real-life experiences to what they know and learn, enhancing their academic understanding and engagement (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

Students who experienced quality interactions with faculty, staff, and other personnel in and out of the classroom likely experienced academic success as measured by satisfactory GPA and individual persistence and more likely expressed an overall satisfaction with their academic experience (Amelink, 2005). Interactions students have out of the classroom positively shape their views of the campus environment, further influencing their educational aspirations in a positive and impactful way (Epps, 1975; Gurin, 1985; Hearn, 1987; Pascarella, 1985). Interaction with faculty inside and outside of class exposes students to ideas, values, and beliefs, further encouraging the learning process. Faculty members have the ability to build influential relationships with students on campus, leading to measurable gains in academic knowledge and skills (Pascarella & Terinzini, 1991). Additional literature has identified student-faculty contact both in and out of the classroom as the single most significant factor impacting student involvement and motivation (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Studies have further connected the

student-faculty relationship to enhancing students' overall learning, commitment, and ability to formulate a plan for their own future (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

Another study examined the relationships between student engagement in educational activity in and out of the classroom and student participation in community. The research indicated participation in a learning community significantly related to student engagement in a highly positive way (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011). These studies seemed to support the benefit of student engagement and participation in community based learning opportunities such as STM and SA trips, in which faculty and staff members typically lead and teach.

Academic Engagement, Service Learning, and Study Abroad

The theory of Student Involvement proposed by Astin (1999) identified student involvement as the “amount of physical and psychological energy the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518), further defined by both the *quality* and *quantity* of physical and psychological investment made by students in their overall college experience. This theory, unlike many other pedagogical theories, emphasized more the motivations and behavior of students engaged in their college experience rather than any subject matter and technique utilized by faculty and institution. The study also addressed the effectiveness an educational policy or practice has on the student only as much as the policy or practice actually increases a student's involvement.

Students who participate in international experiences such as SA programs experience personal growth and development in certain areas that can lead to further classroom engagement and academic successes (Kuh, 2006). Students benefit from impactful experiences when exposed to new ideas, values, and beliefs through

interactions with faculty and staff inside and outside of the classroom. This interaction leads to significant gains in students' personal development and level of learning, which further encourages their individual academic processes (Pascarella & Terinzini, 1991). Also, Astin and Sax (1998) observed greater gains in those with service learning experiences, than with those students in traditional classes alone. The ability of students to think, reflect, engage, and interact with others through these types of experiences can perhaps transfer to this same type of learning and engagement within the classrooms upon the students' return.

Additionally, there appears to exist a relationship between participation in community service experiences such as STM trips and SA opportunities and cognitive development. This relationship appears in more knowledge of subject matter, improved learning as reported by students, and increased understanding of varying world perspectives and general problem solving (Astin & Sax, 1998). These results can directly affect students' success in the classroom through a better sense of contributing to the learning atmosphere or having their own unique perspective added to discussion. Many faculty members indicated off-campus experiences have had a positive impact on their students, with those experiences contributing to the overall learning process of an individual (Martinez, 2011). This finding further validates the valuable learning that takes place *outside* the classroom but ultimately can directly affect learning that takes place *inside* the classroom as well.

The research of Martinez (2011) showed a connection between participation in service-engagement programs during the undergraduate years and students' ability to develop academically, better their personal life skill abilities, and increase their

understanding of their own civic responsibility. Sandell (2007) identified at least four areas impacted as a result of international educational experiences: professional role, incarnational perspectives, personal development, and intellectual development. Personal growth in these areas proves significant to higher education, particularly when looking at the relationship among STM and SA, service learning, and academic engagement. Higher education practitioners must acknowledge these areas to fully understand their impact on academic success both in and out of the classroom. Personal development of students impacts their decision making skills, confidence, and maturity (Sandell, 2007), which all lead to better engagement with classroom material and better understanding and assimilation of information.

A longitudinal study conducted at the Higher Education Research Institute in 2000, indicated student involvement in the area of service participation during the undergraduate college years demonstrated a significantly positive effect on all measured outcomes of the research: “. . . academic performance (GPA, writing skills, critical thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, interpersonal skills), choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college” (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000, p. ii).

This same study (Astin et al., 2000) further indicated a strong correlation between community service and service learning in two key outcome areas: college GPA and critical thinking ability. In these areas, the qualitative and quantitative analysis showed a correlation between GPA and community service (indirect) and service learning (direct). Similarly, an indirect correlation existed between critical thinking ability and community

service/service learning (Astin et al., 2000). These findings, in relation to those of Sandell (2007), Martinez (2011), Kehl and Morris (2005), and others, appeared to indicate a relationship between student involvement in meaningful shorter length/service learning engagement opportunities and academic success.

Current research has indicated positive outcomes gained from participation in various study abroad experiences. A significant impact from STM and SA experiences has emerged in the continued academic development of college students (Dwyer, 2004). In their 2004 research, Dwyer and Peters showed, when asked about personal growth related to their SA experience regardless of duration, 97% of students indicated studying abroad contributed to their maturity; 96% noticed an increased self-confidence; 89% stated it enabled them to tolerate ambiguity; and 95% indicated a lasting impact on their world view. Additionally, the study found a positive and sustainable impact from SA experiences with potential life-changing academic, intercultural, personal and social benefits.

Conclusion

The present research aimed to understand how STM and SA programs affect students' desire to engage in a deeper more meaningful way in the classroom and positively affect their academic success with subject material, professors, and their peers. The ability to directly relate overall experiences from participating in STM and SA opportunities to positive academic success for students following such an experience would prove beneficial to students, faculty, and the institution. The researcher desired to better understand ways in which STM and SA, regardless of duration, can facilitate academic engagement, student learning, and overall academic success.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Design

Following existing literature indicating positive outcomes for students engaging in study abroad experiences for durations of four weeks or less (Fischer, 2009; Gray et al., 2002; Kehl & Morris, 2005; Institute of International Education, 2013), the current study researched the impact short-term missions (STM) opportunities have on academic engagement.

The study utilized a phenomenological qualitative research methodology to study the effects of STM experiences on student academic engagement. The vast array of experiences and exposure to new ideas appears a common component of such programs. Studying the student experiences necessitates use of a methodology capable of looking at the participants as individuals, viewing their experiences each from their own unique perspectives. Phenomenological study looks at the totality of lived experiences of a single individual and provides a more precise meaning of the word *experience*, addressing the *essence* and *meaning* embedded deeper within the experience itself. The impact phenomenological design has had on educational research proves largely due to its descriptive nature and applicability to accessing the human experience (Giorgi, 1997).

According to Giorgi (1997), phenomenological qualitative methodology must progress through five basic steps:

Collection of verbal data, reading of the data, breaking of the data into some kind of parts, organization and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective, and synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community. (para. 25)

The researcher of the current study followed these five steps in order to measure the unique and individual “experience” of the participants in relation to the research question.

Participants

A random sample of eight students participated in this study. The researcher selected participants from among male and female students in the sophomore, junior, and senior classes. Participants attended a small, faith-based, liberal arts university in the Midwest with an approximate student population of 1,950. For participation in its STM program, this institution required regular class attendance prior to and after the trip.

The institution also required students to enroll in a class that met for a minimum of two hours a week for a preset number of weeks prior to the trip. The class functioned to better prepare students to the cultural, social, political, economic, and religious backgrounds and differences of the people and country to which they would travel. As a result of the class component, students received an institutionally required one-hour service learning credit. The researcher conducted interviews with students who participated in either a one-week university-sponsored spring break experience or a three-week term experience. The researcher did not seek semester-long SA program participants due to the longer duration of the trip.

Procedures

From the institutions' world outreach programming office, the researcher acquired an excel spreadsheet of 742 students who participated on either a one-week or three-week STM trip. Next, the researcher used *Random.org* to randomly selected participants from the list of 742 students, then emailed the selected students with a request for interview participation. The email invitation for research participation outlined the research study, participation requirements, and specifics of the interview process. The researcher then scheduled the first eight affirmative email replies for participation in the study.

The researcher conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews to connect students' own overall academic engagement to their short-term mission experience. The researcher designed and evaluated the interview questions (Appendix A) to identify how learning objectives, experiences, and interactions from the trip allow for better academic engagement for the students.

The researcher designed the questions to encourage students to think deeply about their STM experience and how particular events on the trip motivated them to a deeper connection with academics. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed for the interviewees to share answers unaffected by the opinions, perspectives, or past research findings by the researcher. This freedom allowed them to respond in their own words to best describe their individual experience (Creswell, 2009).

The researcher conducted interviews one-on-one with each student after conducting a pilot interview to ascertain the effectiveness and relativeness of the initial protocol questions. This pilot interview guided further changes or refinement of questions to better serve the researcher and the present study. The researcher took an audio-

recording of each interview and compiled data from both written interview notes and audio recordings; this compilation method allowed the author to review and analyze the responses better.

Data Analysis

The researcher had each interview transcribed before performing a preliminary exploratory analysis of the research findings to obtain a better overall sense and value of data obtained (Creswell, 2009). The researcher analyzed the data utilizing the five steps identified by Giorgi (1997) and separated into themes observing and notating any connection between the STM and SA experience and student academic engagement. The researcher reviewed and comparatively analyzed the interview questions in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the ways those unique experiences—the *essence* of the experience itself—affected students' overall academic engagement.

During the interview process, the researcher took every effort to ensure the anonymity of each student, editing any quotes utilized in the research findings in such a way as to protect the identities of all participants and maintain the confidentiality of the study. The researcher also kept all results from the interviews both in audio recording and note-taking form in a secure location not accessible to the general public. At the conclusion of the study and after anonymously and properly presenting all data in written and oral format, the researcher destroyed all original records of the interviews.

Benefits

Findings by Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) relating to short-term engagement indicated a higher level of intercultural development outcomes attainable by utilizing a quantitative approach. With the vast majority of available research focusing on global-

mindedness and cultural awareness, the present study aimed to gain valuable information regarding academic outcomes connected to student engagement in such experiences. The current research adds to the validity of shorter length programs for study abroad opportunities and allows for a wider range of student engagement and repeated possibilities throughout a student's college years

The present research shows a correlation between the experiences students have through various STM opportunities and their own academic success. Both academic affairs and student affairs higher education professionals have a desire to see students succeed in the classroom as well as have exposure to a broad range of life experiences. The current research can not only provide insight to the additional educational value of such trips but also further assist colleges and universities in establishing related programs benefiting both the academic and student life interests of the institution; at the same time, such programs offer the students a real-world, applicable connection between their college experience and the world around them.

Chapter 4

Results

Literature has supported a crossover of definition for STM and SA programs of fewer than four weeks with positive outcomes related to a student's academic engagement (Kehl & Morris, 2005; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). For the purpose of the present research, the study specifically focused on the impact of experiences and program outcomes associated with STM.

The following themes emerged from the eight participants, six females and two males, all of whom participated on a STM experience ranging from one to three weeks. The ratio of women to men in the participant pool directly resembled the gender ratio of those students participating in these experiences at the institution studied. By the time of the interviews, all eight participants had participated in more than one STM trip either prior to or while studying in college. For the purposes of the interview, four of the participants referenced their one-week experience, while four recalled their three-week experience. Two participants had participated in both a one-week and three-week STM trip while studying at the institution. Information pertaining to the present research directly related to their most recent experience. Some of the participants indicated involvement in a trip more academic in nature, and some indicated more of a service learning work-related study trip.

All participants acknowledged some level of impact on their academic engagement associated with their STM experience. This finding emerged in various responses, indicating a direct connection to thinking critically for reading requirements, writing assignments, or classroom engagement during lectures. Other less direct connections also related to areas of critical thinking in general and a further understanding of different cultures and relating to the world around them. Furthermore, all eight participants indicated a high level of spirituality and faith connectedness to their experience. Stephanie stated, “I got to see a glimpse of God...it was cool to see what He was doing there.” Erika expressed a similar connection to her faith: “It is a privilege to be able to pray however we want to and speak to the Holy God in whatever language we want to.” This finding came somewhat expectedly, given the evangelical affiliation of the institution studied. The current study highlights the main themes that emerged, as well as additional themes that, while not as particularly strong in response, further evidenced impactful outcomes directly related to the participants’ STM experiences.

Initial questions with participants focused on trip details: duration, location, team size, and purpose of trip. This initial questioning allowed participants to begin reflective thought on trips and experiences that may have taken place a few years prior to the study. These questions also served as an opportunity for participants and the researcher to become comfortable with the interview process and each other, creating space for further reflection and deeper levels of sharing on the significance of the experience. Additional follow up questions guiding the study developed as an organizational guide, beginning with more generalized “logistical” questions and progressing towards the more research specific questions of the study. During this initial interview phase, the researcher began

to identify strengths stemming from some of the participants' personal experiences prior to their STM experience impacting individual motivations and academic engagement.

The participants appeared highly motivated and success-driven regarding academic pursuits, goals, and personal success. Personal areas of their life prior to their time at college or any STM experiences also seemed significant to their overall personal success. As research questions became more specific to academic connections and possible engagement specifically due to the STM experience, specific themes emerged.

Research Questions

The following protocol questions specifically related to the impact the trip experiences had on the participants' academic components of their college experience:

- After returning to campus from the trip, what differences did you notice in your engagement with academics compared to your engagement before taking the trip? Interaction with Faculty? Classroom engagement/class discussion? Motivation for coursework/area of study?
- Was improvement in your academic success did you observe after returning from the trip? How are these improvements significant to you?

The following leading themes emerged from participant responses to these research questions and subsequent follow-up questions.

Impacts of Trip on Knowing and Understanding

Seven of the eight participants expressed a level of connection to their academics after the trip through deeper learning and understanding of the world around them. This learning has proven particularly significant and impactful for a continued way of knowing and understanding how firsthand experiences directly related to the uniqueness

of each trip. Students' exposure to various experiences ranged from teaching English in classrooms, to basic carpentry projects, to working in orphanages. Each of these uniquely diverse experiences brought a deeper level of knowing and a better sense of understanding themselves, allowing application of what they learned from the trip to the classroom. This outcome also provided them with a better understanding of how to interact with those around them and their role in the larger context of worldview. The impact of these experiences and realization of what inspired them allowed them to think about things from different perspectives. The ability to know and understand lived experiences from their own lives impacted them in sometimes subtle ways, even with how they looked at what they experienced in their own college academic work. Suzie, recalling a one-week STM trip to Russia in her freshman year, expressed,

I had a shift of then realizing just how much—what my classes now would be doing for me in the future. I think that experience and that realization of how much there is to know and just being immersed in the world of education . . . probably affected me the most as far as looking at my classes in a different way.

This sense of engaging with and deeply connecting experiences to academic engagement further emerged in the responses of Erika, who spent three weeks on a STM mission experience in Southeast Asia:

Specifically with academics, it encouraged me to approach my academics in a more holistic way rather than just being concerned with the results, getting a good grade, or doing well on a test. I think it allowed me to draw more connections between my classes. Even between my spiritual walk and academic walk. I feel like it became a lot more cohesive and coherent.

These examples demonstrated the ability of students to relate experiences from their trips to what they knew and understood in the classroom, further contributing to their positive educational perspective and overall academic engagement.

Application of Trip Experience to Academic Requirements and Pursuits

Six of the eight participants expressed an understanding of how their STM experience connected to what they studied or pursued in their career and vocation. For some participants, this connection came through specific assignments, projects, or writing assignments. Stephanie, who participated on a one-week trip to El Salvador during her sophomore year, identified a specific connection to her writing:

I think because of those trips I was passionate about that subject so I wanted to write this paper about it, rather than write it about something else...and I enjoyed doing the research and writing the paper because I had that experience and seeing it in action.

Other students like Samantha, a philosophy major who traveled on multiple trips during her college experience (most recently to the Czech Republic for a three-week STM), connected her experiences to required readings and more complete engagement with the material.

I feel like every trip has led me to the point of engagement in my academic career by completely just changing how I look at the world. Every trip I have taken has impacted how I read philosophy as I see it enacted on the world . . . how I look at things . . . how I read things . . . how I understand things . . . how I interpret lectures and my interest in what I am studying.

One of the participants, Suzie, mentioned how a specific experience from her trip affected her connection to learning in the classroom and further developed her vocational calling.

I'm currently working in the schools and so I've made connections there between what I experienced in the Philippines and what I am experiencing now. You get to know your students and try to figure out what is going on . . . what affects them and how you can best teach them and meet their needs academically and in other ways.

The ability to make connections between learning and practice proves essential to effective student engagement (Kuh, 2006). This skill allows for a life-long learning perspective beneficial to students long after they complete their college years.

Development of Skills for Effective Communication

Five of the eight participants indicated some level of communication skill development gained from personal experiences while on their STM trip. Participants expressed the finding as both verbal and written communication strengths and development and an overall greater self-awareness where students could effectively communicate their thoughts, beliefs, and ideas to others with an increased level of confidence. The component of effective communication emerged in the participants' interactions with others while on the trip, as well as with others on campus after returning. Some responses appeared more indirect about the ways in which they communicated better because of their experience, while others experienced a much stronger and significant connection to their own communication skills and shared very

specific examples. James, who traveled to Spain on a one-week spring break STM mission trip, stated,

You know, I spoke in chapel for – there is this spring break mission trip chapel – and people were surprised. There were two of us and people were surprised when I actually volunteered to be one of the two. Experiencing that, I was nervous but I got through it and really appreciating, that I was able to do that because of the trip.

Likewise, Michael, who traveled domestically for a one week STM experience, indicated a specific connection to building his communication skills as a direct result of the trip.

I think it [trip] made me just more socially competent obviously because you are talking to strangers all day. So I think it helped me engage more. It helped me articulate what I believed . . . developing opinions about things and discussing things.

Some of the participants commented on how the development of communication skills came from difficult circumstances upon returning to campus after the trip and trying to share their experience with others. They expressed a need to find words to share their stories with others in a way that accurately reflected their individual experience, as well as the need to seek out others with similar emotional connections with whom to share.

Erika commented on her experience after returning from her trip to Russia:

I think just emotionally you are completely drained . . . you are trying to take the lessons you learned and apply them in day to day actions and conversations and it is so hard . . . but thankfully, I feel like I had a good support system who I could kind of process those things with.

The five participants who indicated the ability to more effectively communicate as a result of their STM experience also indicated a similar perspective with the required pre-trip class in which interaction with other student team members positively impacted their ability to effectively communicate with others and think more critically before speaking.

Connections to Critical Thinking

Three of the eight participants specifically connected trip experiences to an ability to think more critically. While this theme did not prove significant in terms of frequency, it emerged significant in terms of the depth of feedback from participants. They engaged their academics with a more holistic approach beneficial to their educational experience. Erika discussed her time in Southeast Asia and her engagement in classroom discussion:

I think it allowed me to be more of a critical thinker about the topics that we were learning, rather than just absorbing them. I could listen and then kind of engage with that topic and apply it in a different way . . . I was able to interact with the course material in a way that applied to things more than just studying and getting a good grade on a test and forgetting the facts later on . . . Like I said, drawing more connections between my classes, the course material, and my spiritual walk.

Samantha, who had experienced a STM or SA trip four times during college, related an ability to take different lessons from multiple trip experiences and connect them to her academics and ability to deeply engage in and out of the classroom:

Each trip has had a different lesson, a different thing that I have brought back as well as being aware. I think that it is crucial to my college experience. It has been like utterly crucial. It has made me who I am as a person . . . each time has changed something in me.

The previous themes significantly impacted the participants' ability to further engage in the classroom and think more critically about their experiences. Other themes, while not occurring with the same frequency from all eight interviews, seemed just as significant to the individuals themselves.

Additional Themes

Throughout the interview process, additional themes emerged, although not specifically related to the research questions. Still, a common thread existed among some of the participants' responses with regard to how their STM experiences affected their engagement with some aspect of college life after returning to campus. For instance, motivation arose as an additional theme. Participants mentioned motivation as significantly impacting how they viewed the world. Suzie and other participants indicated a desire to have their "eyes opened" to what their futures held and expressing how the trips "add perspective and maturity to each student that cannot be gained elsewhere."

All eight participants expressed value in their required pre-trip class. The benefits ranged from providing an opportunity to further bond with team members and leaders to meeting the institutional requirement of a cross-cultural credit. The participant responses regarding the pre-trip class preparation did not necessarily indicate a direct connection to academic engagement and thus did not become a theme for this research; however, the finding did show a significant value to the overall experience for students, affording them time to learn about the culture and enhance team dynamics. Stephanie specifically identified the class as a way of investing in her personal interest in missions: "I'm really interested in missions . . . figure out how this trip that I'm going on is actually going to do any good rather than just a vacation or something." Individuals responsible for

establishing, organizing, and leading short-term mission or study abroad trips should strive to provide a strong service learning component as part of the experience. Pre-travel preparation in the form of structured class time facilitated by effective leaders greatly contributes to overall team building and cohesiveness before, during, and after the trip.

Participants also described life-long learning as another theme. Reflecting back, Bethany realized the significance of the experience and its continued impact even two years later:

I'm like . . . yeah I did learn that, or I have grown in these ways that I didn't even recognize. I think a lot of the time it's just—like I was growing up while in the Czech and a couple of months afterward—and now I'm done. But now I am like Wow! There is so much more—how long that trip impacts you that even right now I'm like realizing there's a lot that it impacts.

Every participant indicated a strong connection to God's presence in their personal lives. They desired to evidence that relationship on their trips as well as make similar connections to how they viewed the world, including their academic pursuits during their time at college. All participants directly correlated their personal faith to the mission component of their STM or SA experiences, regardless of trip duration, location, or service project goal of the team. This theme proved consistent given the evangelical faith-based foundation of the particular institution used for the study.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Researching the role varied life experiences play in the lives of college students provides a glimpse into the challenges many students face in understanding how the exclusivity of their own academic coursework relates to the bigger world around them. Such study also affords a view through the lens of personal growth, development, and maturity of the college student. For effective life-long learning, higher education practitioners must know how college students comprehend, analyze, and engage with their academics through other non-traditional classroom opportunities and experiential learning. Participation in a short term missions or study abroad experience serves as an opportunity for college students to relate their interactions with the world around them back to the classroom and their own ever-present academic challenges.

One of the major themes from this study emerged as a way of knowing and learning more about the world, which further impacts other areas of students' lives including academics. Participation on a STM trip experience afforded students interactions with other cultures and further developed deep relationships with their team as well as those individuals they worked with during the service learning component of the trip. Exposure to culture and the ability to develop new relationships informed the way students looked at the work around them and how they could further synthesize what they learned into the classroom. Knowing and understanding their own experience has

proven transformative, allowing for better and broader engagement with their academics (Vande Berg et al., 2012).

Another area significantly impacting students came in their ability to directly apply what they learned from their experience to academic requirements and individual pursuits. This finding manifested in students who indicated experiential impact on their own pursuit of calling and career as indicated through specific work-related aspects of their STM trip, like an education major teaching English. For others, the connection formed more with how they viewed their own passions and interests through the experience and how it directly related to their academics. For example, a philosophy major participant desired to approach reading assignments more deeply to better analyze and absorb the material.

Effective communication emerged as a reoccurring theme by participants who described this area as impacting their academics through the application of both written and verbal communication skills. Students indicated not only an increased level of ability to effectively communicate with others but also an increased desire to communicate in a more effective manner. Some of this impact manifested in the class and pre-trip preparation with team leaders. Additional impact appeared while on the trip through interactions with those from other cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographical differences. These challenging discussions and conversations allowed for heightened self-confidence and intellectual growth critical to classroom engagement and continued academic development (Dwyer, 2004).

Another theme of the current study emerged as the ability of students to think critically about the world around them, their own strengths and unique abilities, and their

academic engagement and successes. While the number of participant responses (three of the eight) remained less in terms of overall numbers compared to other identified themes, they nonetheless related to their academic engagement and achievement in such a direct way as deeming it significant to the study. As a direct result of their trip experience, students indicated a desire to “wrestle” with their thoughts about things and to critically think about learning specific topics rather than merely “absorbing them.”

The current research indicated connections to academic engagement through the varying student experiences of STM and SA trips. While some connections to academic engagement seemed stronger than others, all connected in some way to the components of student engagement by further impacting students positively as the out-of-class experiences connected to their educational aspirations (Amelink, 2005; Astin & Sax, 1998; Epps, 1975; Gurin, 1985; Hearn, 1987; Kuh, 2006).

The duration of participants’ trips ranged one to three weeks, and the results of the study found no significant differences in the value of student experiences or impact on engagement based on duration alone. With existing research indicating the possibility of positive outcomes for even short-term experiences (Kehl & Morris, 2005), this finding also proves largely dependent on strong service learning components embedded into the trip (Martinez, 2011). The current research found the service learning component had a similar effectiveness on the overall positive impact of student experiences and their level of overall academic engagement. Participants indicated positive outcomes from experiences acquired while at work sites ranging from teaching in foreign classrooms to farming agricultural fields. These experiences allowed students to interact with others from varying cultures as well as fellow team members, further influencing them to think

about and reflect upon their own involvement and civic responsibility, life skills, and academic development (Astin & Sax, 1998).

The Student Involvement defined by Astin (1999) emphasized the quality and quantity of the physical and psychological investment made by the student as contributive to their academic experience. Participants regularly referenced both the amount of time devoted to preparing for the trip as well as the depth and richness of the experience itself as significant to their academic engagement and overall college experience. By exposing students to new ideas and different worldviews, STM trips afford students the opportunity to engage with different cultures they likely would not experience through traditional classroom experiences alone. As the current study indicated, these diverse and unique first-hand experiences affect students in ways that, in turn, impact their depth of academic engagement and personal pursuits.

Implications for Practice

Based on the current researchers study, all participants indicated at least some level of impact on their academic engagement as a direct result of their STM experience. In reviewing top themes developed from participant responses, clear evidence appears for the benefit of such trips.

Participants expressed a connection to their academics through better knowing and understanding the world around them, likely not possible within the walls of a traditional classroom. While there much discussion remains within higher education regarding the effectiveness of such trips outside of full semester-long experiences, literature indicates similarly significant value in STM and SA experiences regardless of duration, given the correct service learning components and the presence of proper

preparation (Kehl & Morris, 2005; Sandell, 2007). All eight participants' trips had specific service learning components as part of the overall experience regardless of whether the trips lasted one week or three weeks.

With 75% of the participants expressing a direct connection from trip experiences to individual studies, career, and vocational pursuits, practitioners should continue to implement programs and curriculum allowing expanded access for students who desire to participate in such trips. As institutions seek ways of increasing student engagement and effective pedagogical opportunities, efforts should address more out-of-class learning possibilities for students and faculty alike. Curriculum with specific academic components allows students to apply firsthand experiences to academic interests and make informed decisions about future career and calling opportunities.

Many factors contribute to the overall positive experiences of STM trips. Location, duration, class preparation, team leadership, and the specific type of service experience component all add to the level of engagement a student experiences upon return (Astin & Sax, 1998; Jacoby, 1996; Martinez, 2011). Such findings certainly reflect the current study. Participant responses indicated the trips afforded them the ability to view the world around them in a different way, allowing for critical thinking, a larger world perspective, and a desire to succeed for the betterment of society (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Students feel more prepared and willing to share their thoughts and experiences in the classrooms, residence halls, and sidewalks of campus in a clear, articulate manner critical to student engagement (Kuh, 2006).

Practitioners should consider differentiating between STM trips in which pre-travel class preparation, culturally relative assignments, and team building content play a

significant role. The key becomes organizing trips in such a way as to avoid the category typically criticized by skeptics who see STM and SA as merely cultural tourism rather than academic, globally-minded experiences (Fischer, 2009).

The current study indicated class requirement, pre-trip planning, and team preparation contribute to the overall engagement students have with not only the experience but also with their regular campus activities upon return. This finding has additional support from Kuh (2006), who indicated successful student engagement directly relates to the interaction students have with faculty (leaders) in and out of the classroom. Practitioners should look for opportunities for involvement and engagement with students through STM and SA trips. Amelink (2005) suggested students exposed to quality interactions with faculty, staff, and other personnel in and out of the classroom experience greater academic success and overall higher academic satisfaction. This result certainly becomes the case when faculty and staff from the institution serve as team leaders, participating in trip experiences and team dynamics alongside students.

Implications for Future Research

A study specific to trips organized with strong service learning components versus those with very little or no service learning component would prove beneficial to understanding better ways of developing learning outcomes and impacting students to further engagement on campus. Experiential learning in which students interact with real-world human and community needs can promote effective student learning (Jacoby, 1996). This learning would provide for STM experiences that, according to Jacoby (1996), further ground the service experience as an overall basis for learning.

Participants in the current study attended a faith-based liberal arts institution. Student experiences, even while connected to academic engagement, still largely appeared influenced by spirituality and evangelical Christian perspectives. Future research would benefit from a sample population at a secular institution. Results from participants of non-faith-based institutions would provide another lens through which to view program effectiveness for impacting academic engagement. Similarly, research at a larger institution likely would provide additional information regarding STM trips' impact on student engagement. The student population involved in the present study numbered fewer than 2,000 students. The total number of students in conjunction with the institutional evangelical emphasis and faith-based liberal arts curriculum affects the cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity from which to choose research participants. Future studies should research STM and SA trips without a faith-based connection.

Research on the effects of STM on academic engagement should include an examination of outcomes from varying types of trips. Participants in the current study participated in service learning based trips and specific field of study trips more academic in nature. While both trip types prove significant to academic engagement, valuable information could arise for institutions programming future trips. Better understanding how preparation and trip-specific curriculum can impact academic trips differently from those trips more service-oriented in nature can ultimately further the overall positive experience for students, faculty (team leaders), and the institution as a whole.

Future research also should examine the benefits of pre-trip class preparation and use of trip-specific curriculum. With all participants of the present study indicating the impact of the required class prior to the experience, higher education professionals can

evaluate new and existing STM experiences for continued effectiveness. Information from additional research could provide valuable insight for developing and implementing curriculum designed to enhance the overall trip experience, build on desired learning outcomes, and impact student engagement upon returning to campus.

Limitations

Regardless of the thematic connection to academic engagement by some participants' responses, readers must note and understand certain limitations of the present research. First, six of the eight students interviewed were female. Given the overwhelming female to male participation rate for STM trips at the institution studied, and even with the completely randomized selection process for participant interviews, the researcher anticipated that more females than males would participate.

The second limitation of the study came in the sample size. Restricting the study to eight participants limited the variety of responses from the many STM opportunities available at the institution. Additional participants from varying trips could have drawn upon vastly different experiences for the study. Additionally, because the study specifically looked at the impact of STM experiences with durations of four weeks or fewer, students who participated in study abroad for semester, summer, or year-long durations did not participate.

Third, students attending this particular liberal arts institution ascribe to a particular faith-based orientation that encourages and reinforces certain lifestyles, personal beliefs, and religious acknowledgments in the classroom as well as various cross-campus programming. Lastly, due to the aforementioned religious affiliation, the institution designed most of the short-term missions and study abroad trips as mission

based with a strong faith component. Whether service-project oriented or relationally concentrated, the trips directly and purposefully tie the students experience to the institutional mission statement.

Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between student experiences gained by participating on STM trips and their academic engagement in the classroom, focusing specifically on the impact from trips of four weeks or fewer. The unique experiences students gain on these trips have equally unique and significant impacts on students' academic pursuits and engagement in the classroom. As a result of participation on a STM trip, students expressed deeper levels of knowing and understanding the world around them as relating to their academics. They directly applied trip experiences to the classroom and their individual academic pursuits. They could communicate their thoughts, beliefs, and ideas more effectively to others with increased confidence. They could think critically about their interactions with others and their responsibility as global citizens.

The impact of student experiences can occur in different ways and to varying degrees from one individual to another. Students who positively engage with others regardless of religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds, or geographical borders offer lasting contributions to the betterment of society. The value of lectures, assignments, tests, and classroom interactions to the academic engagement of students remains obvious. The value of life-long learning and skills developed from participation in STM experiences proves equally critical to an overall positive college experience and the continued pursuit of student academic engagement.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

- Tell me about your trip?
 - a. Where and when did you go? What was the duration of the trip?
 - b. What was it like and what was your overall experience?
- Talk about the class preparation required for participation on the trip?
 - a. What was the purpose of the class?
 - b. How well did it prepare you for the trip?
- Talk about significant or impactful experiences from the trip?
- After returning to campus from the trip, what differences did you notice in your engagement with academics compared to your engagement before taking the trip?
 - a. Interaction with faculty?
 - b. Classroom engagement/class discussion?
 - c. Motivation for coursework?
- What improvements in your academic success did you observe after returning from the trip?
 - a. How and in what ways are these improvements significant to you?
 - b. Why do you think they impacted your engagement?

