

Taylor University

## Pillars at Taylor University

---

Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE)  
Theses

Graduate Theses

---

5-2022

### Understanding Integration Post-Study Abroad: A Case Study of a Semester in France

Emma Hagan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---



UNDERSTANDING INTEGRATION POST-STUDY ABROAD:  
A CASE STUDY OF A SEMESTER IN FRANCE

---

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

Emma Hagan

May 2022

© Emma Hagan 2022

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

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

---

MASTER'S THESIS

---

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Emma Hagan

entitled

Understanding Integration Post-Study Abroad:  
A Case Study of a Semester in France

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

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2022

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kelly Yordy, Ph.D.                      Date  
Thesis Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Skip Trudeau, Ed.D.                      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Scott Gaier, Ph.D.                      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Skip Trudeau, Ed.D.                      Date  
Director, M.A. in Higher Education and Student Development

## Abstract

Ever-increasing in prevalence and popularity, spending a semester abroad during college presents students with a rich opportunity to learn about themselves and the world in a new way. No matter the program, practices, or rhythms built into a semester abroad, students return home to a period of reentry. This stage of study abroad gives participants a chance to continue learning from their time away as they take their experiences home. Because of the impactful nature of study abroad, integration is a vital process in which students make sense of their experiences. During integration, students continue learning as they remember what they saw abroad and sift it into how they experience life back home.

This research, a phenomenological case study, focused on a particular group of students and explored their experience with integration post-study abroad. In researching their transition home, implementation of learning, reflection on time abroad, and changes in perspective and relationships, the study resulted in a few key findings that help to clarify the college student experience with integration. In the time following their semester abroad, students reported experiencing a personal impact with both inward and outward focuses. In addition, students shared about the importance of personal connections in their experience of integration. Along with changes to how students experienced social interactions, it was personal connections that deeply enhanced integration for the participants of this study.

Due to the nature of the case study methodology, connections formed between the study's findings and programmatic elements from a semester in France lead to a more holistic understanding of how college students experience integration. Further, this greater understanding can help clarify the potential needs and gaps that education abroad professionals may hope to fill as they attempt to support students with integration during reentry.

## Acknowledgements

To my family, endless thanks for listening to my verbal processing and being the foundation I needed to persevere through my graduate studies. To Mom specifically, thank you for being my lifelong role model. Growing up on stories from your own graduate studies impacted me more than I thought possible. Knowing you went before me sustained me on my best and worst days alike.

To Cohort XIV, I will forever be thankful for your support and care. Obviously, I was going to research study abroad, but your willingness to sit with me as I unraveled a topic that could not hold a single ounce more of meaning exemplified what it means to collaborate in community. Thank you.

To my supervisor, Dr. Kelly Yordy, thank you for being my cheerleader, sounding board, faithful editor, and guide through this daunting but rewarding process. I could not have asked for a better supervisor.

To my students and Honors team, both past and present, your dedication to my work expressed in long phone calls, conversations at the office, or requests for regular updates sustained my efforts. I truly could not have done it without people like you in my corner.

To my participants, thank you for allowing me into your study abroad experience and for teaching me about how you experience integration post-study abroad. May you lean into the lessons you learned in France and continue to share them with each other.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	v
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	2
Reentry .....	3
Integration.....	4
Reentry and Integration.....	5
Purpose of the Study .....	5
Conclusion.....	6
Chapter 2 Literature Review .....	7
Practices for Impact: What Makes a Good Program .....	8
Reentry .....	11
Integration.....	14
Reentry Programs: Where Reentry and Integration Connect.....	16
Conclusion.....	19
Chapter 3 Methodology .....	20
Research Design .....	20
Context .....	22
Participants .....	23
Procedures .....	23



Data Analysis.....	24
Chapter 4 Results.....	25
Personal Impact: Inward Focus .....	26
Personal Impact: Outward Focus.....	27
Personal Connections .....	30
Conclusion.....	35
Chapter 5 Discussion .....	36
Methodology and Themes .....	36
Integration as Deeply Personal .....	37
Integration Enhanced by Relationships.....	37
Links to Programmatic Elements.....	39
Impact of Programmatic Elements.....	40
Filling in the Gaps.....	41
Implications for Practice .....	41
Implications for Future Research.....	43
Limitations.....	44
Conclusion.....	45
References.....	47
Appendix A: Interview Protocol .....	51
Appendix B: Informed Consent .....	52

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The airplane wheels make contact with the runway—on American soil. A semester of memories flood the brain, bringing with it relief to finally be home. Buried beneath anticipation to experience the familiarity of home again, thoughts and reflections on time spent abroad lie dormant, waiting to sprout. The next few critical months have the potential to ignite rich development and learning in the study abroad student. Having stepped into another world that boasts a new language, lifestyle, and perspective, study abroad students return home with a wealth of exposure to cultural diversity. The inevitable return home often drops students into a home environment that has remained largely unchanged. However, because study abroad students return home with a treasure chest full of experience and learning, integrating new perspectives into a previously held normalcy creates an opening for deep developmental impacts.

Imagine a student leaves his home country and college campus to spend four months in France. His particular semester abroad challenges him with the rigorous academics of his engineering studies. In addition, his study abroad program encourages and requires cultural immersion in the form of an academic course with French students, community involvement, site visits, and reflection assignments. Like all other students in his program, he completes his semester abroad and returns home at the end of the fall semester just in time for the holidays. Shortly after his return, a new semester on his home campus begins. After spending four months in France, this fresh study abroad

student must reacclimate to college life in the United States during a period of time called *reentry*.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Study abroad students tend to face a mix of emotions, challenges, and benefits during reentry (Kartoshkina, 2015). It is during the time following an experience abroad when students must integrate what they learned abroad with their lives back home. Historically, study abroad students have had trouble recognizing the need for integration after returning home (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012; Young, 2014). Often, students who go abroad come home only to view their time away as an isolated experience (Carpenter et al., 2019). The challenge of reentry and integration lies in knowing what students experience during this time and how institutions might best help them grow through the process.

Unless students receive an explicit message demonstrating the importance of integrating their experience abroad back into their life at home, many of them will miss the rich development made possible through post-study abroad integration. The process of integration is challenging and varied (Gray & Savicki, 2015; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Universities commonly miss the mark in post-study abroad support (Ballo et al., 2019; Brubaker, 2017). Integration during post-study abroad reentry presents some of the more difficult challenges of the entire study abroad experience. The problem partially lies in the form of unfamiliarity with the experience of students as they traverse reentry and integration (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012).

Because efforts to support students during integration have been found to significantly and positively impact students' overall study abroad experience (Arouca,

2013; Carpenter et al., 2019), correcting the lack of integration becomes a central concern. As colleges and universities strive to provide productive and constructive student development efforts, understanding the student experience with integration will inform and guide support structures. Translating student development efforts to study abroad programs will in turn continue to fulfill university missions that aim to provide students with rich development and personal growth.

### **Reentry**

Reentry always accompanies study abroad. The nature of leaving cannot escape the reality of coming back. When applied to study abroad, this concept is known as reverse culture shock, or reentry. This period of time following study abroad tends to carry a reputation of emotional challenge, loneliness, isolation, and a disconnection from and skepticism toward home culture (Gaw, 2000; Gray & Savicki, 2015; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Similarly, students also tend to experience a sense of relief in returning home. Reencountering the comforts of home often comes as a welcomed change to the cultural differences of living abroad (Kartoshkina, 2015). Taking this variety of experiences together, students must readapt to life back home as they juggle lessons learnt abroad; they must integrate new ideas, perspectives, and experiences into old ones (Gray & Savicki, 2015).

No matter the type or length of study abroad, reentry will always be a part of the experience; return accompanies departure. Even for students who walk through reentry seemingly without struggle, the act of leaving one place to return to another forces the human body to adjust to myriad factors—some as basic as climate, time, landscape, culture, or language spoken. It is important to understand everything reentry entails

because it leads to a more effective, beneficial, and helpful disposition from which student development personnel and study abroad professionals can aid students. Having a clear understanding of the student experience in reentry allows the time following an experience abroad to result in deeper personal development and learning.

### **Integration**

Because study abroad provides students a wealth of observations, new experiences, and changes in perspective, integrating lessons from abroad is vital to students' learning. As students settle into life back home during reentry, their intercultural learning is enhanced by the integration of experiences abroad with experiences from normal life at home. Taking new understandings of the world and applying them to previously held beliefs and perceptions is central to the concept of integration (Marx & Moss, 2015). Due to cultural and experiential impacts, students must incorporate their experience abroad into a larger framework from which they can make sense and meaning of their time abroad (Barber, 2012). Barber (2012) describes this integration of learning as a "complex, iterative phenomenon" (p. 592) when compared to the simple transfer of knowledge from one context to another.

This mixing and synthesizing of lived experiences with the life at home to which students return includes efforts like reflecting, interacting with others, and expressing thoughts and perceptions that grew from spending time abroad. Unless a student deliberately enters into integration efforts, they may not realize the full benefits of spending time abroad (Young, 2014). For many, studying abroad is a privilege and an honor. This opportunity requires careful stewardship from students as it presents an opportunity for growth (Young, 2014). Preparing to go abroad and engaging in the

culture while in-country are extremely worthwhile. However, integration post-study abroad opens the door for students to foster an attitude of continued learning (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012; Carpenter et al., 2019; Sobkowiak, 2019). In integration, students put to good use what they learned instead of locking the lessons in a box that remains in their mental storage indefinitely (Gray & Savicki, 2015).

### **Reentry and Integration**

Integration occurs during reentry. When students begin the process of reentry, they have the chance to integrate what they learned, observed, and experienced abroad into what they already knew and are currently experiencing at home. These two constructs should be researched together because they go hand in hand. An understanding of how students experience integration during reentry helps to frame and give context to the support students require to successfully return from study abroad. The intersection between reentry and integration is further explored in the literature review of this study. In order to fill the gap that exists in understanding the effects of in-country study abroad practices on student integration during reentry, this study examined the participants of a specific study abroad program in a city in northwestern France. Because each student's experience with integration during reentry is different, this study contributed to how education abroad professionals understand student needs in terms of integration post-study abroad.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand how college students experience integration post-study abroad. Having a clear sense of the struggles, questions, and learning students experience helps colleges and universities to more effectively

support study abroad students. This exploration then leads to more effective post-study abroad integration programming. While the goal should not necessarily be to lighten the burden felt by students during reentry, institutions would do well to intentionally come alongside students as they wade through reentry and integration.

### **Conclusion**

Study abroad provides students with a unique and rich opportunity to learn about the world, others, and themselves. Regardless of how much learning occurs during a semester abroad through practices like cultural immersion and interaction with locals, students have the potential to experience even more growth post-study abroad.

Integration during reentry is the perfect time to reflect on the international experience as a whole. During this time, students engage with lessons from both their home and host culture, comparing and contrasting differences and similarities. This process is difficult and often lost amidst the transition from life abroad to life at home. Integration is vitally important and adds exponentially to the learning, growth, and development students can find during post-study abroad reentry. In order to know how to best assist students during this time of integration, one must understand the student's experience. This study seeks to answer this question and to provide a foundation upon which institutions can build a support structure for integration. Thus, the following research question will guide this study: How do college students experience integration post-study abroad?

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Among the many activities offered to students during college, study abroad presents an opportunity to transform perceptions of self and the world. Adapting to new cultures, lifestyles, and values deepens students' views of others and gives them a chance to experience themselves through a different lens (Haines, 2013; Kartoshkina, 2015; Young et al., 2015). By removing students from their own college campus comfort zone and inserting them into a foreign system with differing elements, study abroad programs create enough of a disturbance to awaken previously unreached thoughts and perceptions of nearly everything (Engle & Engle, 1999; Haines, 2013).

While students have the chance to encounter immense learning and stretching during their time abroad, the richest time for transformational learning occurs when students return home (Gray & Savicki, 2015). The process of leaving comfortable surroundings, acclimating to a foreign culture, and finally returning home has both broadening and individuating effects on students (Haines, 2013). What generally follows is a significant impact on students in several areas: academics, intercultural development, career path, and personal development (Dwyer, 2004). Spending time abroad automatically sets students up for a rich cultural exchange and deep learning. While in many cases traveling to a foreign environment is reason enough to expect such transformation, there are several elements that tend to strengthen study abroad programs and increase the chances of deep impact.



Operating from a foundational understanding of impactful practices sets the stage for supporting students as they experience integration. This chapter discusses best practices in study abroad programming and potential impacts on various elements of students' lives. Next, an overview of reentry and integration aids in understanding the student's experience post-study abroad. Finally, this foundational comprehension of study abroad programs, reentry, and integration gives way to understanding how students experience continued learning and integration post-study abroad.

### **Practices for Impact: What Makes a Good Program**

Strategically planning and implementing activities and experiences into a study abroad program leads to increased student learning. Substantiating knowledge gained abroad with practice that aims to collaborate with surrounding culture provides students with needed structure and integration of learning (Pagano & Roselle, 2009). Avoiding isolation in learning abroad by interacting with the host culture is important and must be an intentional effort during program planning (Bain & Yaklin, 2019; Chwialkowska, 2020; Pagano & Roselle, 2009). As educators structure their learning programs, they provide critical spaces in which students can integrate their learning while interacting with others through social identity differences (Perez & Barber, 2018).

### ***Engaging Culture Abroad***

There are several ways to engage the culture, including but not limited to field trips and community engagement. When structuring study abroad programs, it is important to implement experiences and lessons that engage students and challenge them to dive into the culture. Field trips and community engagement both represent methods that have found success in past study abroad programs in giving students a rich, impactful

experience (Bain & Yaklin, 2019; Engle & Engle, 1999). As students participate in these programmatic elements, they connect their learning to context. This connection “provides a structured, meaningful, and useful way to learn and engage more holistically” (Carpenter et al., 2019, p. 99).

Engaging the community is at its best when students have regular interactions with community natives or organizations. Further, allowing students to contribute to the organization themselves helps them to develop their own skills (Carpenter et al., 2019). In order to tap into the full impact that community engagement offers, study abroad educators need to implement practices such as framing, preparation, and reflection. Walking with students both before and after their experience abroad and in the community sets them up to deepen and grow their learning over time (Carpenter et al., 2019).

### ***Program Classifications and Elements***

In a comprehensive examination of the different types of study abroad programs in existence at the time, Engle and Engle (2003) offer seven defining components: “length of student sojourn, entry target-language competence, language used in course work, context of academic work, types of student housing, provisions for guided/structural interaction and experiential learning, and guided reflection on cultural experience” (p. 8). All of these elements play a role in creating an impactful study abroad program (Mohajeri Norris & Dwyer, 2005). Engle and Engle (2003) use the defining components to describe different types of study abroad programs ranging from a study trip that lasts a few weeks to a full, year-long immersion program.

The present study researched students who participated in a semester study abroad program in a city in northwestern France. The study abroad program was carefully created and operated by a small, private, liberal arts institution in the northeastern United States. When compared to Engle and Engle's (2003) program definitions, the study abroad program boasted several unique components, all of which contributed in different ways to the student experience. For example, the France program provided group housing set in a residential French neighborhood, used English as the primary language of instruction, and required little to no French language competence at the beginning of the program. The program required students to take a French language and culture class during the first half of the semester in France. Engle and Engle (2003) generally indicate that these practices might not provide as much challenge and depth as other practices such as living with a host family while abroad. Nevertheless, these programmatic elements played an important role in the program overall and supported the higher impact practices.

The program's high-impact practices included provisions for experiential learning and guided reflection on experience abroad. Several times during the semester, the students were required to participate in field trips, weekend trips to various regions in France, museum visits, and site visits that directly related to academic course work. Further, the students attended an in-person class at a local French university once per week. In this class, the American students learned alongside their French peers, engaged in conversation, and completed group projects. The group housing accommodations provided the students with a chance to experience life in France like a local. Surrounded by a plethora of French neighbors—many of whom visited the group housing for weekly

dinners—the students had the chance to engage in life abroad in a unique way. Lastly, the program directors required, encouraged, and guided both group and individual reflection. These program elements created space for high impact, challenge, and cultural depth.

While higher impact practices do not necessarily promise a more impactful study abroad program, Engle and Engle's (2003) program definitions, explanations, and categorizations can help to clarify best practices for study abroad and program planning. Overall, Engle and Engle's (2003) program classification communicates the importance of providing students with beneficial and challenging practices during study abroad that set the stage for greater impact. The more students can experience rich cultural immersion, the more they will be able to view study abroad as an all-encompassing experience that intertwines program elements with the impact of cultural exploration (Engle & Engle, 2003).

Understanding the specific components of the France program helped to frame results of the research. Coupling a description of the program with definitions and expectations of reentry and integration guided analysis and interpretation of the results. No study abroad program is perfect for every student, and integration after an overseas experience remains challenging (Pagano & Roselle, 2009; Young, 2014). However, studying how students experience integration during reentry combined with a complete understanding of their semester abroad revealed a more complete picture as to what students needed both while abroad and when transitioning back home.

## **Reentry**

Upon returning home from study abroad, students enter into a time of reentry. Just as students generally enter a time of preparation to go abroad or pre-departure, followed

by spending time in-country, students who study abroad must also necessarily walk through reentry. Each student's experience in reentry is different; students may experience both positive and negative elements, all at varying levels and for different reasons (Kartoshkina, 2015; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Positive elements include once again enjoying the conveniences and comforts of home. Negative elements include loneliness, anxiety, isolation, and difficulty in relationships, to name a few (Brubaker, 2017; Gaw, 2000; Kartoshkina, 2015). Because study abroad takes students outside their home culture, each student is confronted with forces that require them to answer questions about themselves and others (Engle & Engle, 1999). Due to human variability and differences in understanding and perception, no two students' experiences in reentry will be the same.

### ***Holistic Impacts of Study Abroad: Identity and Perspective***

Because of the holistic nature of study abroad, students tend to experience adjustment in various areas including identity, communication with people back home, and perception of surroundings (Gaw, 2000; Gray & Savicki, 2015; Kartoshkina, 2015; Martin, 1986; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). When students leave their home culture to be immersed in a foreign culture, they are often forced to question cultural elements that could lead to skepticism about their home culture. In a study on issues presented in reentry, researchers found more skepticism toward native culture in students who studied abroad than those who did not go abroad (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Students who come home with a sense of skepticism often experience the spillover of these thoughts in their relationships and communication with others.

Connecting this skepticism to how students interact with others upon returning home, students may experience apprehension in sharing feelings and thoughts. Fearful that their perspective shift will be seen as weakness or a lack of appreciation for home culture, study abroad students may feel more comfortable talking about the differences in the host culture as opposed to difference in their home culture (Young, 2014). Extending this idea of foreign study and its effect on relationships at home, students also experience internal changes when it comes to maintaining relationships.

### ***Holistic Impacts of Study Abroad: Relationships***

While communication can become more complex after study abroad, students must also wrestle with internal changes in how they view the world (Martin, 1986). Experiencing a new culture is often accompanied by a personal reset. This reset often means that students find difficulty in combining their experience abroad with their experience back home (Carpenter et al., 2019). When students leave home to live in a foreign environment, the eventual return to their home culture has the potential to be loaded with new ideas and perspectives. While students may have adapted to the changes already, the new ideas remain completely foreign to the people they left behind at home. Although these international and foreign ideas may no longer be foreign to the students themselves, the ideas nevertheless remain foreign to everyone back home.

As a result of this dissonance, students can find themselves feeling out of sync once they are confronted with the indifference they find back home (Carpenter et al., 2019). Following this realization of indifference, students are likely to settle on viewing their time abroad as a wonderful and glorious part of their lives. Too often, this is where students stay in their journey through study abroad; they remain in a state of wonder,

viewing study abroad as a cool experience that lasted for a few months, but has no impact on the future (Carpenter et al., 2019). Amidst all the difficulty students face in reentry, they also have an opportunity to engage in discomfort and change and learn from it. Reflecting the wide-stretching nature of study abroad, a holistic approach to reentry processes is needed in order to help students make sense of the full range of the experience—both abroad and at home (Gray & Savicki, 2015). This approach is known as integration.

### **Integration**

Returning home from study abroad can bring on a mix of emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Students in the reentry phase of study abroad must navigate how to apply what they learned abroad to their lives back home. In discussing their research on reentry post-study abroad, Marx and Moss (2015) write that after students return to the campus life they left behind, “students need to continue to hear echoes of their overseas experiences as they integrate their intercultural learning into new understandings regarding culture and cultural difference in their domestic cultural context” (p. 46). Having stepped outside normalcy and the comforts of home, students who study abroad must reconcile their foreign experiences with what they knew to be true before they left home. Reentering into their home atmosphere, students need to integrate what they saw abroad with what they see now that they are home. This process of integration can be difficult and requires critical thinking.

### ***Achieving Integration***

To begin integration during reentry, students need to critically think about their experiences and observations from time spent abroad. Noticing the nuance in behavior,

perception, values, and decisions is a vital first step in negotiating reentry and integrating experience from abroad (Arouca, 2013). Optimizing the impact of study abroad requires self-awareness; students must become aware of internal differences and changes perceived in the environment. Once aware of both obvious and subtle differences, students may take this information and apply it to their lives after returning home (Arouca, 2013). Certainly, skills and knowledge will be applicable to life back home. However, the core of integration consists of deep perceptions and thought processes (Arouca, 2013). As students consider the nuance of cultural differences, they may hope to fully sift their experience abroad with their previously held identity.

Proposing a method in which students can apply what they learned abroad to their lives back home, Barber (2012) posits that a holistic integration of learning is needed. More than just transferring learning, skills, and knowledge, integration of learning is a complex process. Barber's study on integration of learning found that this process requires students to connect, apply, and synthesize their learning. While some students fall into this rhythm naturally, Barber suggests that educators might foster a culture of integration with specific actions. Discussing, actively bridging contexts, promoting perspective taking, and reflecting can help students to achieve integration of learning.

As students wrestle with their experience abroad and how it plays into their lives once they return home, students need to reconcile their learning abroad with a framework for how exactly it will fit into life during and after reentry. Making meaning from time spent abroad and knowledge gained promotes integration (Barber, 2012). Reentry difficulties often lead students to view time abroad as a dream—an island of an experience that only exists in their memories (Carpenter et al., 2019). However, taking



this distinct time in students' lives and meshing it with a broader sense of identity achieves this idea of integration. Instead of viewing time away as a compartmentalized segment of time during college, students have a chance to incorporate it with their ongoing lives (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012).

### ***Educators' Contribution to Integration***

Integrating experience abroad with life back home is notoriously difficult. Even more difficult to navigate is the contribution of educators in guiding students through reentry and integration (Gray & Savicki, 2015; Pagano & Roselle, 2009; Young, 2014). Nevertheless, students need support as they wade through the barrage of cultural learning and changing perceptions of self (Savicki, 2012). As students deal with the anxiety, loneliness, and isolation that is often present during reentry, having the support of international higher education professionals could greatly benefit students in integrating their learning from abroad. Developing tools for the journey such as flexibility, creativity, and acculturation strategies have the potential to greatly impact students as they walk through reentry and integration (Savicki, 2012). Reentry programs present a viable method in equipping students to process their experience abroad.

### **Reentry Programs: Where Reentry and Integration Connect**

Having explored the possibilities of how students might experience reentry and the importance of integration post-study abroad, the vital importance of reentry programs becomes evident. Many study abroad programs focus on pre-departure meetings, orientation, and other forms of preparation to study abroad. While these components are also an important part of going abroad, many overseas programs do not include support during reentry (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012). As a result, students are left to navigate

reentry and integration, likely alone. Sometimes stemming from complete unawareness that reflection is needed, students often do not know that there is more to be gained from study abroad than some fun memories and souvenirs (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012). Thus, the need for reentry support arises (Szkudlarek, 2009).

Integrating experience abroad into a student's life can seem an abstract process. Due to the differences in how individuals view the world, no single method exists for how to best reflect on time overseas. This nuance makes the task of integration during reentry challenging as there is no clear consensus on how reflection might apply to education (Pagano & Roselle, 2009). However, wading through the challenges of integration becomes worthwhile once students and professionals alike recognize that the flow of experience from abroad feeding back into life at home sets the stage for long-term impact (Carpenter et al., 2019).

### ***Importance of Integration During Reentry***

Initially, some may assume that culture shock upon arriving at a study abroad destination would prove more difficult than the reverse culture shock that many students experience when returning home. However, the majority of professionals in international higher education hold that reverse culture shock tends to bring more challenges for students walking this road (Young, 2014). While many students receive preparation to travel and live abroad, few receive the same support when preparing to return home. Further, the challenges of reentry are even more deep-seated and are a result of more than just a lack of programmed support.

Arriving to a foreign country immerses students into a first layer of learning and cultural adaptation. Returning home adds a second layer of learning and cultural

adaptation. Thus, students are faced with a plethora of experience to sort through and apply to their lives. As previously established, reentry and integration can be difficult. However, this time should also be viewed with hopefulness; it is a positive challenge (Young, 2014). More than a reaction to the loss of a life abroad, reentry provides a chance for deep, rich learning through integration (Gray & Savicki, 2015).

### ***Helpful Practices for Reentry and Integration***

Amidst the diversity found in how students will perceive and integrate their time abroad, a few practices are generally helpful in giving students a solid starting point. Receiving support from faculty or administrators in reflecting, debriefing key learning moments, and developing an awareness for the rewiring that has occurred in their brains helps students to synthesize their thoughts (Perez & Barber, 2018; Young, 2014). As professionals attempt to intervene in students' intercultural learning, they can support students in evaluation on time abroad (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012; Sobkowiak, 2019). Analyzing a study abroad program in France, researchers posited that the "real agenda is helping students to link their individual cultural discovery both backward, into the fund of a personal past and its cultural conditioning, and forward, into a new, internationalizing self" (Engle & Engle, 1999, p. 47).

Providing a space and time dedicated to guiding students through identity negotiation post-study abroad is crucial to realizing the full impact of an overseas experience and its holistic nature. There is a wide range of possibilities when it comes to reentry programs, such as workshops, mentorship, reflection, activities, and learning to communicate experiences (Brubaker, 2017; Kartoshkina, 2015; Sobkowiak, 2019; Young, 2014). Exchanging information and hearing from others about how they attempt

to understand their study abroad experience can be helpful in attempting to make sense of one's own time abroad. Surrounding oneself with others who have gone abroad and who can relate through similar experiences results in validation; this sense of validation supports the idea of integration as students start to see the importance and value in incorporating lessons from abroad into life back home (Arouca, 2013). Reentry workshops can also help students to be more observant and critical as they begin to view their time abroad as a real, tangible part of life that has a place in the larger picture of a student's identity (Arouca, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

Study abroad is a highly impactful experience available to many college students. Gaining a new perspective on the world, one's home, and oneself is priceless and can change a student's life for the better. This rich experience requires hard work, though. As students enter back into their comfort zone and normal life once their time abroad comes to a close, they must consider what they learned while abroad. Reentry comes with both positives and negatives and opens the door for integration. Through critical thinking, reflection, professional support, and additional tools, students may hope to take lessons from abroad and combine them with life back home. Understanding how students who spent a semester in France experience integration during reentry will paint a clearer picture of what students need during this process of integration.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

In order to understand how college students experience integration post-study abroad, a highly exploratory methodology was needed. By studying the phenomenon of how students experience integration, education abroad professionals can take discoveries from the study and apply them to the creation or modification of reentry best practices. Understanding students' experience during reentry will help guide support for achieving successful integration. This chapter provides an overview of the present study's research methodology, participants, and benefits.

#### **Research Design**

Literature on study abroad programs, reentry, and integration is prevalent. The increasing popularity of study abroad has resulted in countless studies and publications on the student experience and resultant learning. However, integration post-study abroad remains notoriously difficult (Pagano & Roselle, 2009). Each student experiences integration during reentry differently. Thus, a deeper, explorative understanding of how students experience integration post-study abroad is needed. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology allowed for a firm understanding of student needs during integration. From these needs, education abroad professionals can build support structures that directly target specific points of learning during reentry.

### *Phenomenology*

No two students experience integration post-study abroad in the exact same way. Each student brings different perspectives, experiences, interests, strengths, and weaknesses with them into reentry. However, because students share the general experience of leaving home to study abroad followed by an inevitable return, employing a phenomenological research method helped the researcher to understand the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013). Distilling the potentially vast array of experiences into a narrower understanding led to a deeper view of the nature of integration post-study abroad.

### *Case Study*

In hopes of learning more about how students experience integration post-study abroad, a case study methodology was also utilized. Case studies are highly exploratory as they aim to provide an understanding of an isolated group (Creswell, 2013). In this method, an investigator explores “a real-life, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). Focusing this research study on a specific group of students who participated in the same study abroad program provided a thick, rich description of the experience (Creswell, 2013). Isolating participants from a single study abroad program allowed the researcher to better understand how students experience integration post-study abroad. Imbedding a case study lens in the methodology allowed the researcher to account for program specifics in the research. For example, the program in question required heavy cultural immersion from the students.

The researcher attempted to make sense of the students' experience with integration in light of program elements.

### **Context**

This study examined the group of students who participated in a study abroad program through a small, private, liberal arts institution in the northeast United States. The study abroad program was located in a city in northwest France and was managed by two program directors employed by the home institution. The program participants consisted of engineering students in their third year of study at the institution. The semester-long program started in late August and extended through mid-December.

In order to enrich the experience, the France program included elements like regular involvement in the local community, weekly meals with French university peers, and frequent meals and interactions with French neighbors. In addition, the program maintained a partnership with a local university. This partnership allowed the American students to join French peers in attending an academic course at the university. Together, the French and American students completed group projects, went on field trips and site visits around the city, and attended social gatherings.

The American students were required to serve on small teams comprised of other students in the program to accomplish tasks like cleaning the group lodging facilities, preparing meals for the whole group, and grocery shopping. Academic courses in engineering were video streamed from the home campus in the United States a few days per week. The students had the opportunity to continue interacting with students and faculty at home via video conferencing and phone calls.

The students were required to participate in several field trips within France for the program as well as coordinate personal trips during semester breaks. Many of the students chose to travel outside France and often did so with other members of the group. Lastly, students took a required French language and culture course, taught by one of the program directors. In the course, students learned basic conversational French, practiced with native speakers, and reflected on cultural learning while still in France.

### **Participants**

The participants of this research study all successfully completed a semester abroad in France during Fall 2019. Their home institution required students to apply and interview before being accepted into the program in France. All participants studied Mechanical Engineering at the home institution and continued taking engineering courses while in France during the fall semester of their junior year. The study was composed of eight males and one female. At the time of data collection, all participants had graduated from the home institution. Interviews took place within 6 months of graduation.

### **Procedures**

In order to collect the desired data, the researcher invited all participants of the study abroad program to an individual interview. The participants were asked semi-structured questions about their experience post-study abroad (see Appendix A). Unlikely that the students would be familiar with the term “integration” in this context, the researcher simply posed various questions about transitioning home, implementation of learning, reflection on time abroad, and changes in perspective and in relationships. These questions were purposed in understanding how the students experienced integration post-study abroad. The researcher worked with each participant to set up a



virtual interview after they had given informed consent to participate. (See Appendix B for a copy of the Informed Consent release form.) The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and themed. Coding and theming followed the phenomenological case methodology. Finally, the researcher reported the findings and answered the research question: How do college students experience integration post-study abroad?

### **Data Analysis**

Once data were collected, the researcher personally transcribed the participants' responses. This practice allowed the researcher to become more familiar with the data and to better understand the entirety of the data. Next, the researcher sifted through all of the data and looked for codes. From the codes, the researcher derived themes. These codes and themes elicited a sense for the participants' explanations of how they experienced integration post-study abroad.

In order to validate the findings, the researcher followed a common interview protocol for all participants that included asking semi-structured interview questions. The questions were piloted on students with similar study abroad experiences. This practice ensured that the researcher did not unnecessarily influence the content of the participants' responses (Creswell, 2013).

## Chapter 4

### Results

The time a student spends in reentry after returning home from study abroad provides a rich opportunity to integrate learning from overseas into previously held knowledge and perceptions. Much research has been conducted to indicate what students may experience during reentry and what is needed for integration. The purpose of this study was to explore how college students experience integration post-study abroad so that education abroad professionals may better understand the needs of and opportunities for students as they integrate their learning from abroad. A phenomenological case study methodology was used to interview nine participants; the researcher coded and themed the interviews and from them drew the essence of the college student experience with integration post-study abroad. This chapter focuses on themes found in the data as well as examples that support and clarify the meaning behind each theme and subtheme. The use of pseudonyms and neutral pronouns in the study's results and discussion protects the identity of the only female participant.

From the nine interviews conducted for this study, three main themes were drawn from the data, one of which includes two subthemes:

- 1) *Personal Impact—Inward Focus*
- 2) *Personal Impact—Outward Focus*
- 3) *Personal Connections*
  - a. *Meaning-Making*

b. *Social Interactions*

**Personal Impact: Inward Focus**

This theme describes the internally rooted effect of study abroad on participants. Included in this self-venue of personal impact are growth, interests, convictions, and changes in behavior. Essentially, data within this theme indicate that personal impact created during or by study abroad is internally rooted. For example, all participants reported some type of change in interests or convictions. One noted,

I think I had a very content mindset with being in the States and just, you know, living here but I think that I would value traveling a little bit more. I definitely value just spending time with friends a lot. And realizing that school, or work, or things like that, they're very important but they definitely don't mean the most, by any means.

In this response, Taylor indicates an inward-focused impact in that spending time in France led to a noticeable mindset shift.

Further, four out of nine participants indicated a change in behavior after their return home from France. Stemming from experiences in France, participants who described changes in behavior demonstrate an internal shift that manifests in a new or different behavior. This change in behavior indicates the integration and internalization of lessons from time spent abroad. The magnitude of this response received from four of nine participants expresses an important component of integration. Henry described a change in behavior by stating:

I sort of have this idea of like, you know, um, like, in France they don't work as hard in some ways, but, but kind of recognizing, instead it was like, in France,

they have a healthier work-life balance, and definitely trying, I definitely try to emulate that more, um, after coming back.

In mentioning this effort to change behavior upon returning from the study abroad experience, Henry indicated a personal impact that stemmed from integrating learning from abroad with life back home.

### **Personal Impact: Outward Focus**

Similar to the previous theme, this theme describes the impact many participants felt in terms of external expressions. Participants mentioned shifts in perspective, a greater understanding and appreciation for the world, shifts in attitude toward others, and noticing and understanding cultural differences. Indications of these various impacts have a connection to internal thought processes and learning, but ultimately deal with external constituents. Ranging from close family to the local community to the global population, participants indicated a personal impact that concerned others near and far.

Five out of nine participants indicated that study abroad played a role in shifting their perspective:

I really do enjoy meeting people and getting to know them but I think that it, I guess like, my perspective on it and even just like how I go about doing it probably changed a little bit from being in France, um, but it definitely changed for the better.

By expressing this shift in perspective, Taylor demonstrated how such a change could be externally focused as it concerns other people.

Additionally, seven out of nine participants expressed an externally focused personal impact in the form of a shift in attitude toward others. While speaking about

experiences shared with native French students, Julian commented on their increased sense of connection with French peers:

I noticed that, like, even though they grew up in France, it's like I don't know, when we met with the college students they like invited us over for dinner, um, they were still college students, they talked about the same stuff we talked about at home, and you know it's a bit different obviously because they live in a different place but it's also like they joke around the same way we do...so it's like, very similar, in a lot of ways that I didn't think we were. We're just more interconnected than what we think we are.

In describing this shift in perspective toward others, Julian exhibited an outward-focused personal impact.

Further, seven out of nine participants described a greater understanding and appreciation for the world and different ways of life. Alex described this concept when speaking about how experiencing the French culture taught them about their own culture back home:

Even something as simple as what it means to have to take public transit everywhere you go cause people don't have cars, uh. I don't think about that kind of thing because when I want to go somewhere here I get in my car, I drive there, and I park and then I'm there. And something as simple as transportation over there is a little bit different because not everyone has cars, so I think it's the little things like that that make you, I don't even know if appreciate is the right word, uh, that make you see how other places are different. And it's the big things, too.

It's the different language, the different food, the different ways people think about interacting with each other.

Alex clearly exemplified a greater understanding and appreciation for cultural differences by describing the ways in which they learned about their own culture when compared to the French culture.

Building off of this mention of language, three out of nine participants mentioned that they have continued to study and learn the French language since coming home. This act is completely voluntary as students were no longer required to practice French once their semester in France ended. Because learning French was no longer required, the magnitude of this response received from three out of nine participants warrants a mention within this theme. Taylor commented on this continued language learning:

I think being over there definitely showed me like how awesome it would be to go and to talk to people in the language that they know and that they're comfortable with and not be the other way where someone's always speaking English, when that's their second language. So language is one thing for sure that I don't think I ever would have cared as much about learning if I had not studied abroad.

This lasting motivation to learn French indicates an appreciation for cultural differences. By spending time in France, Taylor experienced an increase in understanding of the world that led to a deeper sense of care for others and cultural differences.

Finally, seven out of nine participants indicated that their return home resulted in noticing and understanding cultural differences. Alex expressed this outward-focused person impact describing specific differences they noticed between the American and French cultures:

One thing I guess I would say is that no one culture does everything exactly right, and that there are pros and cons to the ways people think and no, no one country has got it all figured out, I don't think. We do really well and we are successful financially in America and I think that leads to frivolity and materialism more so than in other places where they don't have the ability to have all these things.

Just as many participants described both inward- and outward-focused personal impacts, many participants also spoke to the importance of connections with others in the months following their study abroad experience.

### **Personal Connections**

This theme describes how participants experienced integration in relation to others. Moving beyond personal impact that affects either participants' self-view or external elements, this theme transcends the basics of perception, behavior, interests, and understanding. Personal connections emerged as a main way in which participants make sense of their study abroad experience. While previous themes touch on participants' community, this theme goes further to describe how participants experience integration in light of others. The two subthemes for this theme include meaning-making and social interactions.

### ***Meaning-Making***

Perhaps the most striking subtheme that emerged from the data indicates that much of participants' continued learning occurred because of the presence of other people. In many cases, these people were either peers who participated in the same study abroad program or people the students met and built relationships with while in France.

Jaime described this subtheme by explaining the effect of relationships on continued learning:

I would say just being intentional about the friendships I made with people, whether it be people from the group that I had my study abroad experience with or um from the people I met in France or other countries, um, I think that helps me stay in touch with the culture and what's going on in France and those kinds of things.

Jaime's sentiments were mirrored by seven out of nine participants.

Further, this subtheme emerged as participants indicated that reminiscing about their time in France was enhanced by those with whom they shared the experience abroad. Strong relationships built abroad tended to lead to strong relationships back home. From these bonds came the benefits of remembering time spent abroad and continuing to learn from the semester in France. When talking about the transition home post-study abroad, Jaime shared about strong personal connections formed while in France:

Um I would say transitioning back to the U.S. is definitely more helpful to have just people that went on the same trip with me, same study abroad group to talk about especially since my experience was so unique with it being an all engineering program and we were all from the same school, um, similar graduation years, so I think that was definitely helpful, especially if you missed something or you'd be looking for a certain type of soda in the grocery store and it's not there and you're like "oh wait that's right they don't have that here," um I think it's just helpful to have people to talk with about that kind of stuff.



Jaime clearly demonstrates the power of American peers to help students continue making meaning from experience abroad after returning home. Seven out of nine participants reported similar experiences with reminiscing post-study abroad. The next subtheme explains how participants experienced integration post-study abroad in terms of social interactions.

### ***Social Interactions***

Data indicating the importance of personal connections branched further into a second external focus for the majority of participants. Eight out of nine participants reported greater ability to communicate with others. When asked how study abroad made it easier or harder to connect with, relate to, and communicate with others, participants indicated that, on the whole, it only became easier to communicate with others. These developed communication skills are described by Julian:

[Studying abroad] forces you to develop your communication skills which was super valuable, I believe. One thing that I take from the trip is like, man I really had to, like, communicate in a different way. Because sometimes you don't know what you're talking about or they don't know how you're, like I don't know if you have an expression they've never heard before you have to explain it and you have to explain your reasoning behind it, so it's just a different way of communicating.

Additionally, Cameron shared specifically about how the challenging interactions faced while in France resulted in developed social and communication skills after returning home:

Um, I definitely feel more comfortable in difficult or awkward situations now, um, cause I was put into a lot of difficult and awkward situations while I was over there. Um, just having to go through the, the language hoops to do something as simple as ordering a sandwich at a restaurant. It's really, uh, I think pushed me to be more comfortable in those situations, um, I'd still say I'm not quite as eloquent as I might like to be sometimes, um, but I at least am less anxious and stressed when I get placed in those situations and I know how to handle it better.

Both Julian and Cameron exemplified an increase in communication skills due to experiences while abroad.

Additionally, seven out of nine students described the impact of the personal connections theme in stating that study abroad made it easier to relate to other people. When asked about how study abroad affected how one relates to others, Taylor described an increase in attentiveness to others:

I think being attentive to how other people are feeling at work and school, that's one thing. Um, again like I said it goes back to that like connection that people kind of have, or at least like the interpersonal skills, the things that are like, like soft skills, I guess people would consider them for sure, um, we spent a lot of time with that over there.

In speaking to the impact of personal connections, Taylor describes how their ability to relate to people increased as a result of programmatic elements built into their semester in France.

Finally, six out of nine participants reported having to navigate personal connections when it came to sharing about their experience. Some participants indicated

that they share about their experience abroad, some share only when asked, and others indicated that they must gauge when sharing about the experience is desired by others in social settings. Jaime spoke of a tension between wanting to share about the experience and having to discern when to share saying, “it’s something I’m always excited to share but also something you share in moderation just because, um, people don’t always understand it.” Demonstrating a different aspect of navigating personal connections and talking about experience abroad, Chris connected reminiscing with peers to how they navigate sharing about the semester abroad:

I’m a pretty private person so I generally sort of keep internal thoughts to myself, um but I mean with closer friends I think, yeah there are times where I’ll probably sort of mention you know either something reminds me of France or we just talk about France with closer friends.

These two participants expressed different aspects of navigating personal connections when sharing about time spent in France.

On the whole, participants did not express direct difficulty in articulating their experience with others upon returning home. However, one participant did express a level of complexity in sharing about their study abroad experience. Julian described these thoughts by saying:

It’s hard to describe your feeling of this world that’s interconnected and you just kind of experience that for yourself, you really can’t describe it.... I mean you can kind of explain to somebody but they’ve got to go, they’ve got to see it, they’ve got to do it themselves.

While Julian's sentiments were not explicitly matched in responses from other participants, the magnitude of the expression warrants a mention in this subtheme.

### **Conclusion**

As seen in the data, participants reported a significant amount of personal impact as a result of studying abroad and, consequently, coming home at the end of the semester. Taking the themes together, the essence of the data shows that integration post-study abroad was experienced on a personal level. Stemming from internal processing of the time spent abroad, participants discussed changed views and behavior. Further, participants also discussed outward impacts such as changes in communication with others.

Ultimately, this personal impact then spilled over into an experience of integration that was heavily tied to the presence and influence of other people. Whether it be peers from the program in France, people encountered in community while abroad, or friends and family participants had at home, the fruitfulness of study abroad was experienced with others. Practices such as reminiscing, sharing about observations from abroad, and communicating the meaning of the semester all indicate the important role other people played in students' experience with integration. Discussing these findings in relation to program elements of the semester abroad will help to further clarify how college students experience integration post-study abroad.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

As discussed in the literature review, the return home from study abroad provides an invaluable opportunity for students to experience rich learning (Gray & Savicki, 2015). Transitioning back to life at home helps students to test what they observed, experienced, and lived while away from their native culture. When students notice and respond to differences they sense between life abroad and life at home, they can experience transformational learning. It is the mixing and synthesizing of different ways of life that provides students with a framework for thinking critically about identity, culture, communication, and perceptions of the world, others, and themselves (Haines, 2013; Kartoshkina, 2015; Young et al., 2015).

The following pages discuss this study's findings and how they add to one's understanding of how college students experience integration post-study abroad. Connecting the findings to programmatic elements of a semester in France clarifies and indicates impactful practices of the study abroad program. Further, connecting the themes and subthemes to previous research and the understanding of reentry and integration presented in the literature review deepens the understanding of what benefits students during the time following their experience abroad.

### **Methodology and Themes**

This study followed a phenomenological case study methodology. The case in question was a semester in northwestern France during which 13 students took classes,

experienced the local culture, and built relationships with both American peers and locals. After interviewing nine out of 13 participants of this program in France, it is clear that this group of students experienced transformational learning in a few ways. Personal impact with both inward and outward focuses as well as the impact of personal connections all explain an aspect of integration. When connected to programmatic elements from the semester abroad, the essence of the student experience emerges and adds to the understanding of how college students experience integration post-study abroad. This framework enhances how education abroad professionals think about and support their students who return from an experience abroad.

### **Integration as Deeply Personal**

The themes that emerged from the data describe integration as a deeply personal experience. Participants described coming away from the experience with a personal impact that boasts both inward roots and outward expressions. While the word “integration” was not used during interviews for the study, the participants nevertheless articulated signs of integration in how they described their life post-study abroad. Leaving home, living abroad for a semester, and returning home caused students to notice and respond to the experience as a whole. Participants reported changed values, interests, and behavior; they demonstrated deep personal change based on their experience and learning from abroad. These personal changes, in the end, describe integration on a very personal level that is both inward- and outward-focused.

### **Integration Enhanced by Relationships**

The essence of the students’ experience with integration post-study abroad indicates that other people play a large role in continued learning from study abroad.

Leaving the experience of a semester abroad naturally means leaving the physical place and its direct influences. For the participants of this study, leaving France meant discontinuing routines established specifically for their time abroad. Coming home meant that they could no longer meet in person with native French students or meet with neighbors for dinner. The return home even meant that some roommate relationships came to an end as new roommate pairings were made upon returning to the home campus.

With so many discontinuations of life abroad, maintaining minor practices from life abroad aids students' continual learning. The majority of participants cited personal connections as integral to their experience post-study abroad. For most participants, then, it was these personal connections that stood the test of time and distance and contributed to how students continued to hear echoes from their time abroad (Marx & Moss, 2015). In order to avoid compartmentalizing an experience abroad to which students never return and forgo their chance to glean further learning, having a type of accountability and living reminder of life abroad can promote continued learning (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012). Because participants so heavily noted the impact of personal connections and relationships in their experience post-study abroad, it is quite clear that these personal connections are central to how college students experience integration.

The findings from this study build upon existing knowledge about how students experience integration post-study abroad. After returning home from a semester abroad, students often experience adjustments when it comes to communicating with others, identity, and perception of surroundings (Gaw, 2000; Gray & Savicki, 2015; Kartoshkina, 2015; Martin, 1986; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). The participants of this study

demonstrated changes in behavior, perception, values, and interests, all of which indicate integration of learning (Arouca, 2013). Further, integration requires students to draw meaning from an experience abroad and apply it to their lives (Barber, 2012). The way the participants of this study expressed their process of meaning-making revolved heavily around other people.

The theme of personal connections is an aspect of study abroad that does not often receive attention. Whereas most studies look at how study abroad affects students' relationships that had been established before going abroad, the results of this study highlight a different type of relationship—the relationships built while abroad. Understanding this finding in light of programmatic elements from the semester in France helps to clarify how students experienced integration post-study abroad in relation to other people.

### **Links to Programmatic Elements**

Linking the benefits of personal connection in integration to specific program elements from the semester abroad helps to pinpoint and clarify important study abroad practices. In addition to citing relationships formed with American students, some participants also mentioned relationships built with French locals or other international students. Because of the program's emphasis on community engagement, participants of the program were forced out of their American cohort and into different contexts. Whether it was dinner at a restaurant, a community event, ice skating with French neighbors, or playing sports with local university students, the American students had rich and plentiful opportunities to interact with the culture and its key players.



Amidst all their interaction with locals during time spent in France, the students almost always shared these experiences with fellow Americans. Taken together, interactions with both locals and American peers crafted a rich experience in which students noticed, dealt with, and debriefed cultural difference. Especially after coming home, the students had people who understood the experience and with whom they could reminisce and discuss their shared experiences. Integration is enhanced by personal connections that allow students who study abroad to be reminded of their experience abroad and to translate those lessons back to life at home through community built while abroad.

### **Impact of Programmatic Elements**

The literature review discussed programmatic elements of a semester abroad and their potential impact on students. Group housing is not generally viewed as an impactful practice (Engle & Engle, 2003). However, this study's findings show that group housing in a French neighborhood did provide an important learning environment for the students that in turn created a rich opportunity for integration post-study abroad. By providing students with the chance to grow in relationship with one another while also experiencing and engaging local culture together, this program in France created a strong foundation for integration post-study abroad. This framework was then enhanced by high-impact programmatic elements like field trips, community engagement, and extra traveling around France and the surrounding countries (Bain & Yaklin, 2019; Engle & Engle, 1999).

Practices generally viewed as high-impact include opportunities for experiential learning, guided reflection, and site visits (Engle & Engle, 2003). Each of these practices

showed up in the data and were the driving forces behind two themes in particular— inward- and outward-focused personal impact. The findings of this study also support the assumption that regular interaction with locals and contributions to organizations are high-impact practices (Carpenter et al., 2019). The theme of personal connections shows that participants of this study experienced integration in relation to others. Much of these personal connections were with American peers, but there was no shortage of mentions about relationships formed with locals in France. Overall, the practices and elements built into the semester in France proved to contribute to the integration experienced by participants of this study.

### **Filling in the Gaps**

By studying how college students experienced integration after spending a semester in France, this study contributes a unique understanding of integration to the field. The program itself boasted several impactful practices. However, once the semester ended, so did the programs meant to help students continue learning. The students who participated in this program returned to their home campus and had to navigate integration on their own. This situation created a fresh opportunity to look at the college student experience with integration; the students acted as a blank slate example of the effects of a high-impact semester abroad without reentry support. Thus, the results of this research study contribute in a meaningful way to one's understanding of how college students experience integration post-study abroad.

### **Implications for Practice**

Given the results of the study, a few implications for practice emerge from the findings. As previously stated, many participants experienced both an inward- and

outward-focused personal impact. When asked if they have continued to reflect on their experience abroad, the majority of participants responded with a simple “no,” “not really,” or “only when reminiscing.” While the results of the study do indicate that most students experience integration in terms of changed behavior, interests, and perceptions, an important question remains: How much more effectively would students integrate their time abroad if they reflected on the experience? Thus, an implication for practice indicates that guided reflection post-study abroad could enhance the student experience abroad as reflection was not a natural tendency for many of the participants in this study.

Another implication for practice touches on the importance of interacting with the local community during time spent abroad. Whether it be a three-week trip abroad, a summer, a semester, or a year, an international experience can only be enhanced by direct interaction with the local culture. Learning about practices, language spoken, and people of a specific location is great preparation and certainly contributes to learning, but immersion into the culture strongly promotes integration post-study abroad. This conclusion is supported by the study’s findings on personal connections: The majority of participants noted the strong influence of personal connections to others after returning home. Thus, interacting first-hand with local cultural while abroad provides vital opportunities for learning and integration once back home.

Finally, an implication on reentry support can be drawn from this study. Participants highlighted a few impactful practices from their experience abroad that contributed greatly to how they experience integration. These practices included regular interaction with locals, the group housing context, and relationships built while abroad. Each study abroad program is different and will contribute in various ways to reentry

post-study abroad. Thus, education abroad professionals should consider the impactful practices that may enhance their students' reentry and integration processes. Intentionally considering programmatic elements and their contribution to integration and continued learning will lead to effective reentry support programs.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Stemming from this study are a few implications for future research. The scope of integration post-study abroad is wide, encompassing many components of life. When the participants of this study returned home, they entered into a few weeks of winter break. Following this time at home, the students all returned to their home campus to resume college life as they knew and understood it before living in France. While some students did explicitly mention life on campus as opposed to life at home, the number remained small. The few students who did mention life back at college post-study abroad indicated some challenges that emerged due to their choice to disconnect for a semester and go abroad. Future research should study this specific transition between time spent at home and time spent back on campus after completing a semester abroad. Exploring this facet of the students experience with integration could help clarify the learning that does or does not take place.

Further, like the present study, a future phenomenological case study might choose to collect data through focus groups instead of individual interviews. Because the essence of the data so clearly describes the importance of personal connections, future research might capitalize on this finding by researching the participants of similar study abroad programs together. In cases where programs abroad are run consistently each year, future research studies might include several cohorts of students to measure the

long-term impact of practices found to enhance integration post-study abroad. A longitudinal study could help to identify similarities and differences in how college students experience integration. These implications for future research further the ideas presented in this study and would contribute to the field's understanding of how college students experience integration post-study abroad.

### **Limitations**

There were a few limitations to this study that must be considered. First, the COVID-19 pandemic sent participants of this study home at the midpoint their first semester back on campus post-study abroad. While students spent two months back on their home campus and returned to in-person classes the following semester, they nevertheless missed the on-campus experience for a couple of months. More than just time missed on campus, the pandemic affected daily practices that were once a part of normal life at college; many students were likely to have experienced a different type of college than they did pre-pandemic. While COVID-19 was only mentioned a few times during interviews for this study, it warrants a mention as the effects of the pandemic were far-reaching and disruptive.

A second limitation to this study is that data were collected through digital interviews as opposed to in-person interviews; interviewing best practices call for interviewer and interviewee to meet in person. Digital interviewing is a limitation because the method leaves room for misinterpretation of body language or facial expressions that might help the researcher understand the meaning of participants' responses.

Third, attention must be called to researcher bias. Having experienced the challenges of integration very personally after her own study abroad experience, the researcher remains very intrigued by reentry and integration post-study abroad. In addition to personal exploration of the process, the researcher has a thick background in conversing with others about education abroad, its impact, and the nature of reentry programs. It is important to note this bias as the researcher was knowledgeable about the topic prior to conducting the study.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to explore how college students experience integration post-study abroad. Spending a semester away from home provides students with a rich opportunity for growth, development, and learning. When considering the potential impact of study abroad on a student's identity, perception, values, behavior, and view of others, the need to understand how students navigate these impacts emerges. A challenging process that takes place during students' transition home, integration requires synthesis and internalization of lessons from overseas.

The findings of this study describe how college students experience integration. Participant responses exemplified depth of impact post-study abroad and indicated that integration is highly personal and unique. Despite participants' individual and varied stories, they were linked by commonalities. Thus, the essence of the study emerged. First, data showed that participants indeed experienced personal impact that was both inward- and outward-focused. This personal impact indicated integration of learning as students made sense of their experience abroad upon returning home to the life they left behind for four months. Whether it be a shift in behavior, interests, perspective, or understanding,

participants of this study used personal impacts to describe how they experienced integration post-study abroad.

Integration was further explained in terms of personal connections established while abroad. Despite the discontinuation of life in France, participants expressed ways in which they continued to learn from and stay connected to their semester abroad. From locals in France to American peers, participants discussed the importance of reminiscing and continuing to share experiences with the people who were a part of their life abroad.

Programmatic elements of the semester in France account for prominent contributions to these personal connections initially established in France. First, the group housing setting provided participants with a space in which to build relationships that continued once the semester abroad ended. These sustained relationships contributed greatly to how students experienced and moved closer to integration after returning home. Second, cultural immersion and community engagement also significantly added to how students experienced integration. Through relationships built with others in France, participants of this study were able to remain connected to their experience abroad and to continue integrating important lessons.

Overall, this study explored and added to the understanding of how college students experience integration post-study abroad. By identifying key components of a program in France and drawing connections to how students experience integration, this study illuminated practices that enhance continued learning after spending a semester abroad. Further, this study provided a deeper understanding of what helps students to work toward integration post-study abroad instead of leaving lessons from overseas locked away in mental storage indefinitely.

## References

- Arouca, R. A. (2013). A qualitative study of returning study abroad students: The critical role of reentry support programs. *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 33. <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/33>
- Bain, S. F., & Yaklin, L. E. (2019). Study abroad: Striving for transformative impact. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 36.
- Ballo, A., Mathies, C., & Weimer, L. (2019). Applying student development theories: Enhancing international student academic success and integration. *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*, 11. 18–24.
- Barber, J. P. (2012). Integration of learning: A grounded theory analysis of college students' learning. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(3), 590–617. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831212437854>
- Bathurst, L. & La Brack, B. (2012). Shifting the locus of intercultural learning: Intervening prior to and after study experiences abroad. In M. Vande Berg, R. M. Paige, & K. H. Lou (Eds.), *Student learning abroad: What our students are learning, what they're not, and what we can do about it*. (pp. 261–283). Stylus Publishing.
- Brubaker, C. (2017). Re-thinking re-entry: New approaches to supporting students after study abroad. *Teaching German*, 50(2), 109–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tger.12036>



- Carpenter, S. D., Kaufman, H., & Torp, M. (2019). *Integrating worlds: How off-campus study can transform undergraduate education*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Chwialkowska, A. (2020). Maximizing cross-cultural learning from exchange study abroad programs: Transformative learning theory. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 24(5), 535–554.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315320906163>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among the five approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). SAGE Publications Inc. (3)
- Dwyer, M. M. (2004). More is better: The impact of study abroad program duration. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10(1), 151–164.  
<https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v10i1.139>
- Engle, J., & Engle, L. (1999). Program intervention in the process of cultural integration: The example of French practicum. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 5(2), 39–59.
- Engle, L., & Engle, J. (2003). Study abroad levels: Toward a classification of program types. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 9(1), 1–20.  
<https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v9i1.113>
- Gaw, K. F. (2000). Reverse culture shock in students returning from overseas. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 24(1), 83–104.
- Gray, K. M., & Savicki, V. (2015). Study abroad reentry: Behavior, affect, and cultural distance. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 26(1), 264–278.

- Haines, D. (2013). More Aware of Everything. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 17*(1), 19–38.
- Kartoshkina, Y. (2015). Bitter-sweet reentry after studying abroad. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 44*, 35–45.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2014.11.001>
- Martin, J. N. (1986). Patterns of communication in three types of reentry relationships: An exploratory study. *Western Journal of Speech Communication, 50*(2), 183–199.
- Marx, H. E. & Moss, D. M., (2015). Coming home: Continuing intercultural learning during the re-entry semester following a study abroad experience. *Journal of International Social Studies, 5*(2), 38–53.
- Mohajeri Norris, E., & Dwyer, M. M. (2005). Testing assumptions: The impact of two study abroad program models. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 11*(1), 121–142. <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v11i1.154>
- Pagano, M., & Roselle, L. (2009). Beyond reflection through an academic lens: Refraction and international experiential education. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 13*(18), 217–229.
- Perez, R. J., & Barber, J. P. (2018). Intersecting outcomes: Promoting intercultural effectiveness and integration of learning for college students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 11*(4), 418–435. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000067>
- Savicki, V. (2012). The psychology of student learning abroad. In M. Vande Berg, R. M. Paige, & K. H. Lou (Eds.), *Student learning abroad: What our students are*

*learning, what they're not, and what we can do about it.* (pp. 215–238). Stylus Publishing.

- Sobkowiak, P. (2019). The impact of studying abroad on students' intercultural competence: An interview study. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 9(4), 681–710. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2019.9.4.6>
- Szkudlarek, B. (2009). Reentry—A review of the literature. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.06.006>
- Wielkiewicz, R. M., & Turkowski, L. W. (2010). Reentry issues upon returning from study abroad programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(6), 649–664. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2010.0015>
- Young, G. E. (2014). Reentry: Supporting students in the final stage of study abroad: *New Directions for Student Services*, 146, 59–67. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20091>
- Young, J. T., Natrajan-Tyagi, R., & Platt, J. J. (2015). Identity in flux: Negotiating identity while studying abroad. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 38(2), 175–188.

## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### Tier 1:

1. What does your study abroad experience mean to you?
2. Tell me about your transition back to life in the States after coming home from France.
3. Did you notice any differences in your behavior, perception, values, or decisions after you came home? If yes, explain.
4. How did seeing and learning about different parts of the world affect how you see and think about the world once back home, if at all?
5. What did studying abroad in France and then coming back home teach you about yourself and your culture, if anything?
6. How do you feel your life is different (or the same) because you studied abroad?
7. What helped you continue learning from your study abroad experience, if anything?

#### Tier 2:

1. You were asked to do some reflection while you were in France. Have you continued to reflect on and learn from your experience abroad since coming home?
2. How has studying abroad made it easier or harder to connect with, relate to, or communicate with others?
3. Is your experience abroad something you feel you regularly share with others or something you keep to yourself?

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent**

#### **College Student Experience Post-Study Abroad**

You are invited to participate in a research study concerning your experience post study-abroad. You were selected as a possible subject because you participated and completed a semester abroad in Fall 2019. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you many have before agreeing to be in the study. The study is being conducted by Emma Hagan, a student in Taylor University's Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development program.

#### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to understand the college student experience post-study abroad, specifically the experience with reentry, integration, and transition out of study abroad.

#### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of 8-12 subjects who will be participating in this research. If you agree to participate you will be asked to conduct an individual interview with the primary researcher.

#### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

1. Agree to participate in an individual interview via Zoom lasting approximately 30-60 minutes.
2. Agree to have your responses recorded during the interview.
3. Agree to be quoted and/or have your experience referenced in the results of the researcher's study under a pseudonym.
4. This study will take place during late summer 2021, but your participation will simply consist of your individual interview.

#### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

There is minimal risk involved with taking part in this study. While participating in this study, there is the risk of discomfort or an emotional response associated with recalling one's past experiences while either abroad or shortly after returning home from studying abroad. For this reason, participants may choose to not answer any interview question.

#### **BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

The full benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect are unknown, however it is reasonable to expect that reflecting on one's experience post-study abroad may have

positive effects on the participant's view of time spent abroad and subsequent experiences.

This research may also benefit university professionals, such as student development faculty and staff, to create post-study abroad programming that better meets the unique needs of study abroad students.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential, however we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence and a pseudonym will be used in reports in which the study may be published. Transcripts and recordings of your virtual interview will be stored in a password-protected computer. Audio recordings of interviews will only be made accessible to the researcher and they will not be used for any other purpose or for any other person. Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the primary researcher and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, Dr. Kelly Yordy, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

#### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher or faculty advisor:

##### **Researcher:**

Emma Hagan  
[emma\\_hagan@taylor.edu](mailto:emma_hagan@taylor.edu)

##### **Faculty Advisor:**

Dr. Kelly Yordy  
[klyordy@taylor.edu](mailto:klyordy@taylor.edu)

Inquiries regarding the nature of the research, your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject can be directed to Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu).

#### VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University.

**SUBJECT'S CONSENT**

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study. *A copy of this consent form can be made available to you if you would like one for your records.*

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

