

# Growth and Meaning through Study Abroad: Assessing Student Transformation with Mixed Methods

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## Abstract

*International experiences are touted as a life-changing experience that can enhance cultural and global competencies in college students. However, results are mixed, based on outcomes assessed and methods used. This study sought to examine students' international learning experiences by looking at sense of purpose, meaning in life, intercultural and social attitudes, expectations, and outcomes. A total 123 students completed self-report measures and an open-ended questionnaire before and after studying abroad. Quantitative analysis of data indicated a decrease in search for meaning, but no other significant changes. Qualitative data suggested an increase in personal growth and uncertainty about how to interpret the international experience. Findings indicate a gap between quantitative and qualitative assessment, suggesting that open-ended questions give students a better chance to reflect on their personal experiences. More research is needed in order to investigate meaning and growth through study abroad.*

*Keywords:* international education, meaning, student growth, mixed methods

Traveling, living, working, and studying in a foreign country has, for centuries, been reported as deeply meaningful, offering opportunities for creativity, cognitive flexibility, and powerful revelations. The net effect of such travel experiences is frequently referred to as life changing (Dwyer & Peters, 2004), indicating a transformative experience. Given the personal and interpersonal benefits, colleges and universities are increasingly recommending study abroad as key to student development. The new experiences, challenges, and perspectives gained by students is considered essential for student success in a global, multicultural environment (Gill, 2007).

It is commonly assumed that cross-cultural experiences afforded via study abroad will increase positive intercultural attitudes, such as sensitivity, openness, and cultural competence (defined as awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to function effectively in diverse cultural contexts, e.g. American Psychological Association, 2002). Numerous studies have explored the benefits of study abroad participation, which may include increased international understanding, interest in international affairs, cultural sensitivity, language gains, and personal growth (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990; McCabe, 1994; Dolby, 2004; Hadis, 2005; Kitsantas, 2004). Overall, there is an escalating recognition of the importance of international education in an increasingly global society (Tabi & Mukherjee, 2003), and with that, a growing number of students who study abroad each year. Indeed, according to the latest data of the Institute for International Education, the number of students studying abroad for academic credit is constantly increasing (IIE, 2017). With more students venturing out and being encouraged to do so, there is an increased interest in assessing the outcomes of international experiences.

## **A New Global Ethos through Transformative Learning**

Students often describe their study abroad experience as life-changing, deeply meaningful, and a time of tremendous personal growth and development (Gill, 2007). Personal growth is often characterized by the development of a *new global ethos*, which includes self-confidence, new ways of coping, a more independent and courageous lifestyle, as well as new civic attitudes, a commitment to make a positive difference in the world, and finding purpose in life (Carlson, et al., 1990; Rahikainen & Hakkarainen, 2013). The outcomes and processes inherent in the study abroad experience can be accounted for using Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory (TLT; Mezirow, 1991).

According to Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), new learning experiences will lead to perspective transformation, i.e. a change in the way learners interpret and reinterpret their experience to make meaning and learn from it. Mezirow (1991) proposed that individuals go through phases of transformative learning, which are initiated by a disorienting dilemma and are followed by self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, and exploration of new ways of action and roles. Ultimately, transformative learning should result in successfully integrating the new information, beliefs, and perspective into one's life and world perspective. The main goal of transformative learning is for an individual to create a more valid, meaningful perspective to guide future actions (Kiely, 2004). Lange (2004) suggested that the disorienting dilemmas proposed by Mezirow could be considered as "pedagogical entry points" (p. 183), which will lead students to engagement and assessment of the situation and may result in transformative learning. Research suggests that changes in attitudes and beliefs are often outcomes of the study abroad experience (Gill, 2007); therefore, going abroad appears to provide students with the 'entry point' needed to transform their perspective. For example, in a study by Trilokekar and Kukar (2011), participants reported encountering several disorienting experiences during their study abroad experience (e.g. racial dynamics, risk taking behavior), which the authors described as a crucial first step for transforming perspective. However, some of their participants struggled with relating these experiences in ways that would lead to perspective transformation and meaning making, which Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) attributed to individual differences between students.

Limitation in methodology and difficulties operationalizing the study abroad experience have led to scarce exploration of growth and meaning resulting from studying abroad (Durrant & Durious, 2007). Meaningful living is theorized to be connected to well-being, personal growth, and psychological strength (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Kenyon, 2000). Thus far, meaning and personal growth have been expressed and investigated as an important component of studying abroad in qualitative descriptions (Rahikainen et al., 2013; Mapp, et al., 2007), but have not been widely explored using standard psychometric measures, such as the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006). Importantly, there are an array of factors related to study abroad experiences that stand to influence processes and outcomes.

### **Factors Influencing International Study Experiences**

According to Engle and Engle (2003; 2004) the following seven variables distinguish study abroad programs: length of student sojourn, language competence upon entry, language used in course work, context of academic work, types of student housing, provisions for guided/ structured cultural interaction and experiential learning, and guided reflection on cultural experience. All variables need to be taken into consideration in order to maximize outcomes. Further, program components (e.g. length of stay, student housing) are considered the most important predictor for the use of a second language (Dewey et al. 2014). Findings from Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige (2009) suggest that students who lived with other students from their home country or with students from their host country showed significant gains in intercultural learning, which were not found in students who lived with international students or host families. According to Berg et al. (2009), staying with a host family does not necessarily lead to oral and intercultural proficiency, but students who take advantage of the potential in a host family environment make significantly more progress in their language and intercultural skills compared to students who do not take advantage of it. Further, findings from Berg et al. (2009) suggested that the presence or absence

of a cultural mentor who meets frequently with the students is an important component to improve students' learning during study abroad experiences.

Today, the majority of students in U.S. colleges tend to participate in short-term study abroad experiences during the summer term, such as faculty-led programs, field schools, and focused areas of study within certain cultures and regions (Perry, Stoner, & Tarrant, 2012). With the rise of popularity of short-term study abroad programs, it is important to explore if shorter stays have the same positive effects on students' perspectives and skills as long-term study abroad programs. Research shows that short-term study abroad programs have an influence on students' cross-cultural awareness and competence (e.g. Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Nyaupane, Teye, & Paris, 2008; Van't Klooster, Van Wijk, Go, & Van Rekom, 2008), personal development and growth (Harrison, 2006; Mapp, et al., 2007), as well as functional knowledge and learning (Berg et al., 2009). Mapp, et al., (2007) found that students who participate in a short-term study abroad experience tend to show an increased interest in a longer study abroad experience (e.g. mid-length and full-term). Overall, results suggest that similar to long-term stays, short-term study abroad programs are educational, foster personal growth, and can be considered a promising alternative to a long-term stay (Chieffo et al., 2004; Mapp, et al., 2007).

### **Measuring the Outcomes of Studying Abroad**

While the benefits of studying abroad are increasingly stressed in academia and students often describe their experience as life changing and deeply meaningful (Clark, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillan, 2009), getting a handle on the actual 'outcomes' is not so straightforward. Given the complex processes involved in such transformative learning, measuring processes and outcomes can be a messy. From a practical perspective, rich retrospective accounts and simple post surveys are typical methods, because pre-test data is often not available, sample sizes are too small, and appropriate control groups are difficult to obtain (Hadis, 2005; Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006). Random assignment and other types of programmatic control are limited.

Further, quantitative and qualitative investigations of the outcomes of study abroad often differ in the variables that they assess. Quantitative research often relies on scales and indices that measure cultural competence, world-mindedness, adjustment, political attitudes or personality (Poole & Davis, 2006). On the other hand, qualitative research assessing the outcomes of study abroad programs often consists of reflection papers and open-ended questions in order to capture students' subjective understanding and interpretation of their experience (e.g., Schwarz et al., 1999; Healy, Asamoah, & Hokenstad, 2003). For example, Caldwell and Purtzer (2015) conducted a qualitative descriptive study to investigate long-term learning outcomes in nursing students that participated in a short-term study abroad. Participants were given a set of open-ended questions one or more years after their return from studying abroad. Students were asked to describe their study abroad experience and to elaborate on the personal and professional impact it had on them. Authors used a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the data, which offered a close interpretation of the data and allowed for subtle distinctions among responses. Results suggested long-term learning effects as evidenced by four learning themes that were found (Embracing Others, Gaining Cultural Competencies, Experiencing Ethnocentric Shift, and Negotiating Ethical Dilemmas). In order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits of studying abroad, researchers may choose mixed methods. Some studies that included both, quantitative and qualitative data, suggest that qualitative assessment data can show benefits higher than those measured with quantitative assessment. For example, Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) conducted a study in which she used quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the link between students' development of intercultural sensitivity. Results showed that qualitative data revealed higher levels of intercultural sensitivity than quantitative data. Mapp, McFarland, and Newell (2007) tried to look at students' change through a short-term, two-week study abroad trip to Ireland by using both, quantitative and qualitative assessment. For the quantitative assessment, they chose the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) in order to measure personal development and growth through studying abroad. For the qualitative assessment, each student in this study completed a reflection paper after their return. The quantitative data did not reveal significant changes, however, the qualitative data suggested a change in attitudes regarding global understanding and

cross-cultural knowledge. Including both quantitative and qualitative assessment helps to ensure objective assessment without losing the rich, subjective meaning of the study abroad experience students report and its influence on their personal development and growth (Poole et al., 2006).

### **Current Study**

The current study aimed to explore students' transformational learning and development of a new global ethos as defined by sense of meaning, purpose in life, and social and civic attitudes. Several different indicators of intercultural ethical reasoning and interpersonal growth were examined including social justice attitudes, political awareness, diversity attitudes, cultural empathy, and intercultural communication apprehension. Measures to investigate personal growth of students, including meaning and purpose in life, were included in the study. Further, an open-ended, qualitative question was included and results were compared with the obtained quantitative data. Finally, program factors, such as length of stay, language fluency, and living arrangements as they relate to changes in civic, social, and personal attitude development over time were examined.

### **Hypotheses**

Taken together, the study focused on three research questions. The first one addressed findings already present in the literature (Carlson et al., 1990; Gill, 2007; and Hadis, 2005); namely, the transformative benefits of study abroad participation. It was hypothesized that students would report increased purpose and meaning in life and show a change in social and civic attitudes toward their community after studying abroad. We expected students to report expectations for change before the excursion and then to report an array of growth experiences upon return. The second research question addressed the impact of educational program factors (such as length of stay, language fluency, and living arrangements abroad) in desired outcomes. It was hypothesized that, as suggested by Chieffo et al., (2004) and Mapp, et al., (2007), program factors would be correlated to participants' social and civic attitudes. Lastly, the third research question aimed to compare and contrast obtained results from quantitative to qualitative data. It was hypothesized that both sets of data would provide a complementary understandings of the study abroad experience that allowed for both objective data and subjective, self-perceptions of change (Poole et al., 2006).

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 123 college-aged students (83% Caucasian) who completed a survey prior to and after a study abroad trip. Of the 123 participants, 88 were majors in International Studies predominantly traveling to countries in Europe, Asia, and South America. The remaining 35 students were students in a variety of academic disciplines participating in short-term study, such as environmental psychology in Tanzania or business-focused studies with international colleagues in China. Approximately 84% of the total sample was enrolled in a study abroad program for less than six months. The rest of the participants (roughly 14%) were enrolled for six months to a year. Two percent of the sample did not indicate length of stay. Regarding living arrangements, the largest percentage of students lived with a host family (39%). The remaining percentages were fairly divided evenly among various living arrangements (e.g. apartments, dorms, roommate of a different culture). The majority of participants reported being semi- or highly fluent in the language of their host culture (approximately 57%). Many participants had previous experience traveling abroad. Approximately 55% had spent 0-3 months abroad, 15% were abroad for 3-6 months, 2% were abroad for 6 months to 1 year, and 15% had been abroad for more than 1 year. Thirteen percent of participants did not have prior study abroad experience.

## Measures

A total of four measures were chosen to evaluate several aspects of the study abroad experience, including civic and political attitudes, apprehension towards intercultural communication, and meaning in life.

**The Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ; Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002).** Four subscales from the CASQ were used: Political Awareness (perceived awareness of current events/political issues, higher scores indicate more awareness), Diversity Attitudes (interest in relating to others culturally different than oneself, higher scores suggest higher interest), Social Justice Attitudes (attitudes about poverty/social problems, higher scores indicate recognition of need for system-level changes), and Civic Action (intent to become involved in community service, higher scores indicate more involvement). Sample items from each of these scales include “I am knowledgeable of the issues facing the world” (Political Awareness), “I enjoy meeting people who come from backgrounds very different from my own” (Diversity Attitudes), “People are poor because they choose to be poor” (Social Justice Attitudes), and “I plan to become involved in my community” (Civic Action). Internal consistency (Cronbach’s coefficient alpha) of the CASQ was determined across two large samples, and values ranged from .69 to .88. The Political Awareness subscale consists of 6 items (sample 1  $\alpha = .80$ ; sample 2  $\alpha = .79$ ), the Diversity Attitudes subscale consists of 5 items (sample 1  $\alpha = .70$ ; sample 2,  $\alpha = .71$ ), the Social Justice Attitudes subscale consists of 8 items (sample 1  $\alpha = .70$ ; sample 2  $\alpha = .69$ ), and the Civic Action subscale consists of 8 items (sample 1  $\alpha = .86$ ; sample 2  $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997).** The PRICA is a measure of real/anticipated interaction with people of different cultural groups, higher scores indicating higher levels of communication apprehension. This measure consists of 14 items, with a reported internal consistency reliability coefficient alpha of .941 (Neuliep et al., 1997). Sample items include “I dislike interacting with people from different cultures”, or “I am afraid to speak up in a conversation with a person from a different culture.”

**Purpose in Life-Short Form and Meaning in Life Questionnaire.** Two measures were chosen to evaluate sense of meaning and purpose in life because of the purported relationship to study abroad experiences: the Purpose in Life test- Short Form (PIL-SF; Schulenberg, Schnetzer, & Buchanan, 2010; measure of meaning in life, with higher scores indicating higher presence of meaning), and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ, Steger et al., 2006; presence and search for meaning, higher scores indicating higher perception of life meaning and high strive for finding meaning, respectively). Schulenberg et al. (2010) reported an internal consistency reliability coefficient alpha of .86 for the four items of the PIL-SF. The MLQ consists of two scales (Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning) with five items each. Sample items from the Presence of Meaning scale include “I understand my life’s meaning” or “My life has a clear sense of purpose”, and sample items from the Search for Meaning include “I am always looking to find my life’s purpose”. Internal consistencies for both scales are reported to often exceed .80.

**Open-ended question.** An open-ended question was included in the pre-departure and re-entry set of questionnaires to capture the students’ experiences beyond what quantitative measures could potentially capture. Pre-departure, students were asked the following question: “What are your expectations for how you might change during this experience?” After return from study abroad, students were asked a similar question: “How do you feel your trip has changed you? Explain.”

## Procedure

Participants were recruited from a mid-size University in the Southern U.S. through which they participated in a variety of study abroad programs. Programs included short-term focused immersions, a traveling program with international colleagues, and more typically, summer, semester, and year-long programs. Participants had to complete a pre-departure and/or re-entry workshop related to their study abroad trip during which they were asked to participate in the present study. In the beginning of each workshop (pre-departure vs. re-entry), participants were presented with a consent form, which included information about the study, institutional review board approval, and the voluntary nature of the participation in this study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to completing the survey packet.

## Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS), Volume 22, was used for statistical data analyses. Analyses began with calculating descriptive statistics for the measures including means and standard deviations. Dependent samples t-test were used to investigate differences between pre and post study abroad reports. Correlations and linear regressions were calculated to investigate the relationship between program features and outcome measures. Given the variety of programs from which participants were recruited, sample sizes per analysis vary depending on the measures that each group completed.

The open-ended question was analyzed by an extensive coding procedure that involved two independent raters. Initially, a review of the literature was conducted to recognize the different categorical systems used by previous studies that were found to be both informative towards the research question and comprehensive towards capturing the participants' experiences while studying abroad. Eleven categories were formulated based on the recommendations of Carlson, et al. (1990), a study by Rahikainen et al. (2013), and the characteristics of the data (i.e. creating a category for those who did not have any expectations or were unsure about their answers to the questions). The categories were 1) Language abilities (improvement of foreign language skills), 2) Gaining a new perspective on home country (United States), 3) Gaining an increased understanding of the host culture, 4) Gaining new perspectives on the world as a whole, 5) Developing an interest in international affairs and politics, 6) Personal growth (defined as gaining new perspectives on life, broadening their world-view, becoming more appreciative of life, increasing their self-efficacy, becoming more independent, and engaging in a process of self-discovery), 7) Academic and Career goals (including gathering information to further inform their thesis or help them discern their academic major), 8) Creating new friendships, 9) Traveling and exploring the host country, 10) Having no expectations, and 11) Being unsure or not providing an answer.

Two independent raters were provided with separate copies of the database for open-ended answers and with the list of the 11 categories. They were asked to approach the data using a top-down strategy where they would place each item under its corresponding category. Upon completion, researchers gathered to discuss the items that had been codified under different categories by at least one rater. These items were then categorized through discussion and mutual agreement between the researchers. In addition, inter-rater reliability was assessed for each category using Cohen's kappa.

## Results

### Descriptive Analysis

Means and standard deviations were calculated for each measure pre and post study abroad total score (see Table 1). For the four subscales of the Civic Action and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ: Political Awareness, Diversity Attitudes, Social Justice Attitudes, and Civic Action) an average of the mean for each scale was calculated.

**Table 1** *Measure Means and Standard Deviations Pre and Post Study Abroad*

Measure	<i>N</i>	Pre-Study Abroad			Post Study Abroad	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
CASQ Political Awareness	119	3.66	.62		3.57	.71

**Table 1** Measure Means and Standard Deviations Pre and Post Study Abroad Continued

		Pre-Study Abroad		Post Study Abroad	
CASQ Diversity Attitudes	119	4.17	.59	4.15	.57
CASQ Social Justice Attitudes	117	3.91	.63	3.94	.63
CASQ Civic Action	91	4.06	.63	4.06	.72
PRICA Total	119	27.20	9.31	27.83	9.53
MLQ Search for Meaning*	114	26.16	6.64	24.84	6.80
MLQ Presence of Meaning	97	27.19	4.37	27.70	4.58
PIL-SF Total	86	22.47	2.58	22.24	3.00

*Note.* Due to missing data from either prior or post studying abroad,  $N < 123$  for the quantitative data.

\*statistically significant difference between pre and post score ( $p < .05$ )

According to the results of the descriptive analysis, pre and post study abroad, students tend to score highest on the Diversity Attitudes scales of the CASQ, followed by the Civic Attitudes, the Social Justice Attitudes, and last the Political Awareness scale. The CASQ was designed to be sensitive to change over time as a result of service-learning experiences. Scores for these students are, overall, in line with norms among college students in the U.S. when given prior to a service learning experience (range from 3.58 to 4.3.) There was no difference in pre-departure and post scores on the CASQ for any scales measured.

On the measure of intercultural communication apprehension (PRICA), means suggest no obvious difference between the pre and post scores. A PRICA score under 31 indicates a low level of intercultural communication apprehension (CA), thus the participants show relatively low levels of apprehension overall, which may have contributed to the lack of change.

On measures of meaning and purpose (MLQ and PIL-SF), scores pre-departure appear similar to scores post study abroad, except for the MLQ Search of Meaning scale. Here, scores indicate a decline in search for meaning in life after returning from studying abroad.

### Quantitative Analysis

Statistical tests on the dependent samples revealed no statistically significant difference between pre and post study abroad scores on the four scales of the Civic Action and Skills Questionnaire. Means and standard deviations for the paired differences are as follows: Diversity Attitudes  $M = .02$  ( $SD = .65$ ); Social Justice Attitudes  $M = -.03$  ( $SD = .33$ ); Political Awareness  $M = .09$  ( $SD = .70$ ); and Civic Action  $M = .001$  ( $SD = .66$ ).

Similarly, no statistically significant changes in intercultural communication apprehension (PRICA) from pre to post-test were found, yet these scores are reflective of low apprehension at both pre and post-test. Means and standard deviations for the paired differences are as follows:  $M = -.63$  ( $SD = 11.08$ ).

For the MLQ, a statistically significant difference was found between the pre-departure and post scores on the Search for Meaning scale ( $M = 1.32$  ( $SD = 6.06$ );  $t = 2.32$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Descriptive analysis showed that students' scores post study abroad were lower than pre-departure. No statistically significant

difference between pre and post scores was found for the Presence of Meaning scale of the MLQ ( $M = -.52$ ;  $SD = 4.34$ ). No significant difference was found for pre and post scores on the Purpose in Life – Short Form measure ( $M = .22$ ,  $SD = 2.42$ ).

**Relationship Between Prosocial Attitudes and Meaning in Life.** Correlations among prosocial attitudes and meaning in life on both pre and post surveys suggest an interesting relationship as a function of the study abroad experience. Specifically, intercultural communication apprehension is negatively correlated with Purpose in Life pre and post travel (pre:  $r = -.207$ ,  $p < .05$ ; post:  $r = -.499$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Further, intercultural communication apprehension is negatively correlated with Presence of Meaning post travel, but not pre-departure ( $r = -.282$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Purpose in life is significantly correlated with Political Awareness and Civic Action prior to study abroad ( $r = .214$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r = .209$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and significantly correlated with all four scales of the CASQ (Political Awareness, Diversity Attitudes, Social Justice Attitudes, and Civic Action) post study abroad ( $r = .388$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = .416$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = .470$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = .324$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Also, Search for Meaning is positively correlated with Political Awareness, Diversity Attitudes, Social Justice Attitudes, and Civic Action post, but not prior to study abroad ( $r = .221$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r = .213$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r = .296$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = .395$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, after study abroad, Presence of Meaning is significantly correlated with Political Awareness, Diversity Attitudes, and Civic Action, but not with Social Justice Attitudes ( $r = .204$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r = .236$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r = .288$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These results suggest that after studying abroad more meaning and purpose in life relates to less intercultural communication apprehension, and more political awareness, civic action, and prosocial and diversity attitudes.

**Relationship Between Program and Personal Features and Outcome.** Pearson correlations were used to explore the relationship between variables such as length of stay, language fluency pre-departure, prior length of time abroad, living arrangements, and post study abroad scores on prosocial attitudes (CASQ, PRICA), and meaning and purpose in life measures (MLQ, PIL-SF). Language fluency pre-departure is negatively correlated with post travel scores on the PRICA ( $r = -.263$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Length of stay is negatively correlated with post scores on the MLQ Presence of Meaning scale and the Purpose in Life questionnaire ( $r = -.220$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r = -.215$ ,  $p = .05$ ). No significant correlations for living arrangements and prior length of stay with post travel scores on the different measures were found.

Linear regressions were calculated for each of the measures to further examine the relationship between personal and program features and post travel scores. Only language fluency pre-departure and length of stay were used in the regression analyses, because they were the only variables that showed significant correlations (see above). For post travel scores on the PRICA, the regression model was significant ( $F = 5.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with length of stay serving as significant predictor. The regression model accounted for 5.6% of the variance ( $R^2 = .056$ ). Further, the regression model for the post scores on the Purpose in Life questionnaire was also significant ( $F = 4.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and accounted for 5.5% of the variance ( $R^2 = .055$ ). Again, length of stay served as significant predictor. The regression model for the CASQ scale Diversity Attitudes was also significant ( $F = 4.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with length of stay again serving as a significant predictor. The model accounted for 4.5% of variance ( $R^2 = .045$ ). The regression model for the CASQ scale Social Justice Attitudes was significant ( $F = 8.77$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with both variables, length of stay and language fluency, being a significant predictor for post travel scores. The model accounted for 16.6% of variance ( $R^2 = .166$ ).

### Qualitative Data Analysis

For the 11 categories drawn from the open-ended question, interrater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa. Kappa values ranged from extremely strong to weak, although the majority reflected a moderate level of agreement between raters. In most occasions, weak level of agreements proportionally related to the number of items in each category. In other words, kappa values in small categories (with less than 10 items) were more severely affected by one or two interrater disagreements than those in larger categories (with more than 60 items). Kappa values for the 11 categories were as following: Language skills ( $\alpha = .95$ ), New perspective on home country ( $\alpha = .62$ ), New understanding on host country ( $\alpha = .67$ ), New perspective of the world ( $\alpha = .53$ ), Interest in international affairs ( $\alpha = .49$ ), Personal growth ( $\alpha = .86$ ), academic/career goals ( $\alpha = .46$ ), New friendships ( $\alpha = .92$ ), Traveling/exploring host country ( $\alpha = .73$ ), No expectations ( $\alpha = .93$ ), and Unsure/no answer ( $\alpha = 1.00$ ).

**Table 2** *Categories with Percentages of Endorsement on the Group Level*

Categories	Pre-Study Abroad	Post Study Abroad
	% (256)**	% (180)**
Personal Growth*	28.13	42.55
New understanding of host culture	19.92	12.77
Language Skills	17.19	6.92
New perspectives of the world	7.42	3.72
No expectations	5.08	1.60
Traveling/ Exploring host country*	4.30	5.32
New friendships*	3.91	4.26
Academic/ Career goals	3.91	2.66
Unsure/ No answer*	3.52	12.23
New perspectives on home country*	3.13	6.38
Interest in international affairs	3.13	1.06

\*Percentage of answers in these categories went up post study abroad

\*\*Refers to the number of responses given by the 123 participants

Descriptive analyses of qualitative data indicated a slight shift in expectations and goals of participants before and after their study abroad trip (see Table 2). In the pre-departure packet, participants indicated being highly interested in becoming more fluent in the language of their host country (“more proficient in my foreign language skills”, “more willing to speak a foreign language”), learning from the host culture through their immersive experience (“hopefully I will improve my understanding of Chinese culture”, “learn more about the Spanish culture”), and overall personal growth in terms of independence (“Being a more independent person”, “hope to learn more about myself”). Upon re-entry, participants indicated some changes with regard to their perspectives on their host country (“more aware of foreign culture”, “I have a greater cultural understanding of people from South America”), an increase in being unsure of what their experience meant for them (e.g. did not answer the question), and a great increase in personal growth in terms of increased self-efficacy, broadening their world view, and being more appreciative of their lives (“Made me much more patient, yet adventurous”, “I am more confident/flexible”, “I am more open minded”).

Due to these findings, a supplemental analysis was run in order to further investigate the changes in responses on the open-ended question from pre to post studying abroad. A McNemar test for paired nominal data was run for each category to compare student’s responses pre to post studying abroad on an individual level. Significant changes were found for the following variables: Language ( $p < .001$ ), No Expectations ( $p < .05$ ), and New Understanding of Host Culture ( $p < .001$ ). Results suggest that after returning home from their international experience, students report less language gains and understanding

of the host culture than they expected to have prior to their trip. On the other hand, fewer students reported no change compared to responses of 'no expected change' prior to going abroad.

**Table 3** *Categories with Sample Quotes*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Quotes pre-departure</b>	<b>Quotes post return</b>
<b>Language Skills</b>	"I want to become more fluent in the language";	"I feel like my language acquisition has improved";
<b>New perspective on home country</b>	"I also want to be more appreciative of my home county..."	"Notice the negative nature of people in the U.S."
<b>New understanding on host country</b>	"To better understand a foreign culture";	"It helped me become more accepting of other cultures"
<b>New perspectives of the world</b>	"I think I will gain a broader perspective of the world"	"It has made me look at the world in a different way"
<b>Interest in international affairs</b>	"Better understanding of economy"	"...more familiar with issues regarding reconciliation in South Africa..."
<b>Personal growth</b>	"Being a more independent person"	"I am more confident and self-reliant"
<b>Academic/career goals</b>	"I also plan to do thesis research while in Germany"	"I learned more about what kind of work I want to do."
<b>New friendships</b>	"I expect to develop a more diverse group of friends"	"I have made new friends"
<b>Traveling/exploring host country</b>	"Travel in Europe"	"I am much more comfortable with traveling"
<b>No expectations</b>	"I have no expectations for this trip"	"No"
<b>Unsure/ no answer</b>	"I am unsure"	N/A

### **Discussion**

This study was conducted to explore the transformative effects of study abroad experiences on students using mixed methods. It aimed to assess student growth and transformation by assessing changes in personal, social, and civic attitudes as well as meaning and purpose in life through a set of quantitative measures. We also aimed to illuminate student perspectives on self-growth and change by including an analysis of their open-ended response about expected and actual changes (outcomes) of study abroad.

The results on quantitative measures revealed no statistically significant differences between pre-departure and post study abroad experiences on most measures, including the four scales of the Civic Action and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ) and the intercultural communication apprehension questionnaire (PRICA). On measures of meaning and purpose, quantitative findings were limited, too. No significant change in scores were found on the Purpose in Life questionnaire (PIL-SF) and the Presence of Meaning scale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). However, a decrease in the Search for Meaning was detected on the MLQ. This finding suggests that students do not strive for meaning as much as they did prior to their study abroad experience. A possible explanation for this could be that students have recently come from a period that might be considered a 'search' of sorts. That is, they have just been out in the world experiencing and seeing new things, on a search for new scenery, experiences, skills, relationships, and other discoveries. Using Mezirow's TLT framework (1991), these students' recent study abroad experience might have served as a disorienting dilemma followed by self-examination, critical assessment, exploration for options etc. Since presence of meaning did not increase, it is likely that these students still need time to consolidate their experiences and have not yet completed their transformative learning process.

Analysis of the relationships between prosocial attitudes and meaning in life suggests an interesting relationship as a function of the study abroad experience. Results suggest that after returning from studying abroad, more meaning and purpose in life is connected with less intercultural communication apprehension. Students who are less afraid and aversive towards interacting with members of different cultures appear to experience more purpose in life. Further, students with higher scores on measures of political awareness, diversity and social attitudes, and civic action after studying abroad, report more purpose in life and search for meaning. Similar results were found for political awareness, diversity attitudes, civic action and presence of meaning.

Further, results suggest that language fluency pre-departure and length of stay play an important role in the study abroad experience. The role of other variables examined was not affirmed (e.g. prior length of time abroad, living arrangements).

While many expectations for gains during study abroad expect a linear trend, with an overall increase in positive outcomes from pre to post study abroad, there is reason to speculate that benefits may be variable, fluctuating in a temporal pattern along with cultural adjustment and re-entry processes, which may include multiple disorienting experiences that include both positively and negatively valenced thoughts and emotions. For some students, re-entry is perceived as a shock (reverse culture shock), and they experience a decline in psychological well-being after returning home. It might take one to two months before their psychological well-being returns to pre-departure baseline again, especially for students who adapted well to their host country (Bikos and Dykhous, 2015). As such, the transformative learning and outcomes of study abroad likely entail multiple disorienting events, adjustments and consolidations. Consideration of students' psychological and cultural adjustment states is important in assessing outcomes. For example, student 're-entry' after study abroad is viewed as a "W" shape graph, indicative of changing and unstable mood and adjustment (the re-entry worm; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) wherein students' psychological and internal experiences can be understood as a series of fluctuating high and low points which vary based on individual adjustment patterns and contextual factors. Measuring outcomes of one phase of transformation may be pre-mature or ill-advised when the students are in the midst of a second period of adjustment. Scores on post-study measures could vary as a function of time, type of adjustment required, and other personal or contextual factors related to re-entry. Critical reflection, consolidation, and transformation resulting from the initial study abroad experience may take time and be inseparable from the secondary experience of re-entry (which can be as equally transformative). The story of how life changing the experience really was, may not be fully written. In the present study, students completed post study abroad packets at the first if the semester after returning home, capturing a range of time points in their re-entry process. In general, conducting research with study abroad participants can be a messy process. Data collection is often slow and attrition maybe be high in longitudinal designs. This speaks to the practical nature of the retrospective approaches so commonly used.

Compared to the findings of the quantitative assessment, the open-ended question in this study tended to report gains not reflected in the psychometric measures (e.g., “It has transformed my entire life.”). Overall, students reported gains across a number of different domains when openly asked about the effects of their experience. Further, analyses of qualitative data indicated a slight shift on the group level in expectations and goals of participants before and after their study abroad experience. Prior to their trip, students reported being highly interested in becoming more fluent in the language of their host country, learning from and about the host culture through their immersive experience, and overall personal growth in terms of independence. After return, there was an increase in the number of students that did not supply an answer, which could potentially be a result of not knowing what their experience meant for them. In this case, this would add support to the notion that personal development outcomes may be unclear, slow, multifaceted, and/or transient. Further, reports about personal growth, in terms of increased self-efficacy, broadening their world view, and being more appreciative of life, doubled after return. On the individual level, this increase in answers related to personal growth did not reach statistical significance. However, statistical analyses on the individual level showed that students’ reports of language gains and knowledge about the host culture decreased significantly after return. Oddly, this may be an actual reflection of their learning (e.g., I now realize how little I knew before about the language or host culture.) Compared to answers of no expected change prior studying abroad, fewer students reported that they did not change at all through their international experience.

### **Implications**

Findings of the present study indicate a gap between presumed transformative outcomes and their measurement among students returning from study abroad. Moreover, quantitative and qualitative assessments showed different pictures, which is similar to that found by other researchers (e.g. Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Mapp, et al., 2007). In this study, the open-ended question appeared to give students a better chance to reflect on their experiences and express personal changes. This is consistent with Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory (1991), which emphasizes that individuals differ in the way they learn and interpret their experiences. It is important to provide students with adequate ways and opportunities to interpret and make meaning from their international experience (Perry et al, 2012). For most participants in this study, an open-ended question that required them to pause and reflect upon their time abroad seemed to be an appropriate way to encourage meaning making. However, after return from studying abroad, there was also an increase in participants who appeared to struggle with providing an answer to how their study abroad experience had impacted their lives. It is possible, that they needed more support, or a different medium (e.g. photography, focus groups) in order to adequately benefit from their learning experience. This is consistent with Kortegast and Boisfontaine (2015), who pointed out that studying abroad does not automatically result in expected learning and gaining new skills. More specifically, it is important to understand how students create meaning from their international experience in order to assist them in reaching desired learning outcomes. Kortegast et al. (2015) provide recommendations and guidelines for how to help reach these outcomes: 1) provide students with re-entry workshops to share and reflect on their experience, 2) ask students to complete reflective papers and presentations to articulate what they learned, 3) provide information to students’ families in order to facilitate communication, and 4) use photography as a medium to highlight the most important parts of their international experience.

Further, current findings from quantitative data suggest that students experienced more personal growth than other areas, such as improved language abilities. These findings could be helpful when preparing students for their international experiences. More specifically, when planning and designing pre-departure workshops, educators should find a way to help students form realistic expectations that will ideally lead to less disappointment and a better use of their time and resources abroad.

### **Limitations**

Given the diversity of the population of interest and the small number of students who studied abroad, the selected sample was too limited to allow for randomization or the creation of a control group. The quasi-experimental design of the study has limitations regarding the self-selection bias of the sample

(with the majority of the participants being international study majors). In addition, the pre-designed time regulations of study abroad programs nullified the possibility of administering post measures at equal intervals for all participants. In other words, the variability between the programs and within the students of each program (i.e. length of stay, time of departures and arrivals, overlap at different points in the academic year) created obstacles to equalize the administration of the post measures. The same challenges prevented researchers from including follow-up measures to assess if more post changes occurred over time.

It is also important to note that the study's external reliability is limited by the homogenous nature of the sample obtained from a university in the southern United States. Their specific demographic characteristics (predominantly Caucasian, 18-24 years old college-students) limit generalization to other study abroad students. Lastly, the self-report nature of the measures placed the results at risk to reflect the participants' social desirability and other biases that may not accurately reflect their experiences while studying abroad. On the other hand, self-report measures did contain reversed items to discourage social desirability and particular response sets.

### **Future Directions**

Despite these findings and numerous studies that have explored the benefits of study abroad participation in the past (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990; McCabe, 1994; Dolby, 2004; Hadis, 2005; Kitsantas, 2004), the number of college students studying abroad each year is still miniscule. Even with the reported increase, during the academic year of 2015/16, less than 2% of students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States participated in a study abroad program (Institute for International Education, 2017). For the majority of undergraduate students in the United States, a study abroad experience is still not part of the regular curriculum. Often these experiences are restricted to the wealthy students and those with high grade point averages. Lack of flexibility in regular college schedules, extra time needed for study abroad, and costs keep many students grounded. Some may be afraid to venture out of their comfort zone. Others have never considered the idea since the opportunity may not be known or offered. More research is needed in order to determine and investigate reasons and barriers, and possible ways to better incorporate study abroad type experiences into the regular curriculum. Further, future research with mixed methods is needed to better capture how, when and in what way outcomes of study abroad manifest themselves. Future directions should also be focused on obtaining measures that better capture the study abroad experience using quantitative measures at many different points in time.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

Overall, findings from the current study supported the notion that studying abroad is a valuable and meaningful experience for college students. Qualitative reports indicated change and there was a significant reduction in search for meaning. Although lacking in other quantitative outcomes, results do provide some support for a shift in perspectives and beliefs as postulated by Mezirow's Theory of Transformational Learning (1991). Students initially believed that their study abroad experience would lead to language gains and cultural knowledge. However, upon return students reported more personal changes instead (e.g. self-confidence), indicating personal growth and transformed perspectives.

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