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**To All the Nations of the World: A Postcolonial Analysis of Protestant Christian-oriented Study Abroad Programs**

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**Abstract**

*This study uses a basic qualitative design to explore faith-integrated study abroad programming at Protestant Christian-affiliated institutions in the United States, with a particular focus on comparing programs in Majority and Minority worlds. Guided by postcolonial theory, and informed by critical lenses of globalization, we analyze curricular content found on the webpages of four US higher education institutions. Study abroad trips are compared across four vectors: how Protestant Christianity is integrated into the programs; how programs are described; the activities undertaken; and the images used to promote them. Results reveal stark and pervasive differences in how programs are depicted, depending on their location in the Majority or Minority world, that reinforce negative stereotypes and colonial/imperial narratives regarding the Majority world, contrasted with the Minority world. These results have important implications for both individuals who work directly with study abroad and to leaders more generally at Protestant-affiliated institutions.*

**Keywords:** international education, postcolonial theory, proselytization, religion, study abroad

## Introduction

The Institute of International Education (IIE)’s annual Open Doors report serves as a reminder each year that U.S. students who participate in study abroad are racially/ethnically homogenous compared to the general U.S. postsecondary student population. For example, in 2017-18, 70% of study abroad participants were white compared to 56% of total enrollments at U.S. institutions (IIE, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Study abroad professionals and researchers consistently propose diversification of destination choices (that is, the expansion of programs to locations outside of Europe) as one solution to this problem of unequal participation (e.g., Esmieu et al., 2016; McClure et al., 2010; Whatley, 2017). This logic suggests that if students are presented with a more diverse array of location options for international learning, then a more diverse student population will participate.

In actuality, no evidence suggests that such programs contribute to racial/ethnic diversification in study abroad. Instead, calls for diversification in destination choices ignore the potential for negative consequences that these new,

‘diverse’ programs hold for both host communities and student learning experiences. That is, these programs have the potential to impact host communities negatively and to reinforce students’ preconceived notions about ‘non-traditional’ study abroad locations, all while not achieving their purported goals (Ficarra, 2017). As an example of the former, well-intentioned service-learning implemented in host communities may have unintended consequences that disrupt traditional approaches to health or childcare that have worked for centuries. The fact that service-learning opportunities are provided through study abroad programs in some parts of the world and not others may send the wrong message about the kinds of support and resources needed in certain communities. Indeed, postcolonial critiques of internationalization activities at US institutions highlight ongoing colonial domination at the hands of imperial and neoliberal ideologies (Mok, 2007; Tikly, 2004; Rizvi, 2007; Stein, 2021b; Stein, 2022). These challenges may be particularly evident in faith-integrated study abroad programs at religious higher education institutions in the United States, given the colonial legacy of western Christianity (Jules et al., 2021; Majeke, 1952). For much of colonial history, education and religion have been inseparable in that Christian missionaries selected the content, curriculum, and language of instruction at educational institutions, decisions that were made based on a “divine mission of salvation” regarding non-Christian societies in various parts of the world (Jules et al., 2021, p. 44). Thus, colonial underpinnings that remain present at faith-based U.S. institutions of higher education, particularly those that speak to the institution’s relationship with the world at large, whether explicit or implicit, may lead to aspects of faith-integrated study abroad programs at these institutions that negatively impact both host communities and student learning.

For the purposes of this study, the term study abroad refers to outbound education abroad programs completed for academic credit from a higher education institution. Notably, this definition does not include programs branded as noncurricular “mission trips.” Using data derived from study abroad program webpages, this study applies a basic qualitative design to explore faith-integrated study abroad programming at Protestant Christian-affiliated institutions in the United States. Its purpose is to understand how these programs are portrayed differently according to destination location and, through these portrayals, programs’ potential for adverse impacts on both local communities and student learning. This work is particularly important considering recent research findings suggesting that Protestant Christian-affiliated institutions in the United States report higher study abroad participation rates compared to Catholic and non-religiously affiliated institutions (Whatley & Stich, 2021). Our findings have important implications for future critical research that examines U.S. study abroad programming and for practitioners who design and implement study abroad curriculum.

International education data indicate a preponderance of study abroad programs in European locations (IIE, 2019) and prior research has demonstrated a tendency toward representation that promotes a binary presentation of European and non-European cultures (Ficarra, 2017). In this study, we find a similar binary representation among the study abroad programs featured in our research. While recognizing that a binary representation of the world of any type is problematic, as it inherently glosses over important cultural differences among diverse communities and experiences that exist throughout the world (Bhabha, 2012), we maintain a binary representation here because it reflects our data. However, we adopt terms referring to Majority and Minority worlds (Alam, 2008) rather than European and non-European locations or other terminological options because we find that these terms more accurately reflect the patterns we observed in our data. The Majority world refers to areas of the world that are home to much of the world’s population, that historically have been subject to colonization, and that are often economically poorer compared to the Minority world. The Minority world, in contrast, is home to a minority of the world’s population numerically, often represents colonizers rather than the colonized, and tends to include areas that are more economically prosperous (George Mwangi, 2017).

While the Minority world certainly includes many countries in Europe along with the United States, it also includes countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Similarly, while the Majority world includes mostly non-European locations, it can also include European countries such as Romania. Other terminological options, such as Global North/Global South or European/non-European also don’t pattern as well with our findings than does Majority/Minority. A term like ‘European’ would apply equally to Spain and Romania, even though these two locations exhibited very different patterns in our data, with Romania patterning more similarly to locations outside Europe. Couched within the more nuanced concepts of Majority and Minority Worlds, this study extends comparisons among locations within a subset of study abroad programs: those that have explicit Protestant Christian faith integration. Specifically, we address the following research questions:

1. How is faith integrated into study abroad programming at Protestant Christian-affiliated institutions in the U.S.?
2. How do study abroad websites describe these faith-integrated study abroad programs?
3. According to website content, what activities are undertaken on faith-integrated study abroad programs at these institutions?
4. How are images used to portray faith-integrated study abroad programs?

Our first research question aimed to establish how faith was integrated into study abroad programming at Protestant Christian-affiliated institutions. As detailed below, the institutions included in this study represent a range of Protestant denominational affiliations and theological traditions—from liberal to conservative. However, each of the institutions included have made clear and explicit choices to forefront their religious affiliation: in their overall mission; their study abroad offerings; and throughout their curriculum. Most private colleges and universities in the United States have or had a religious affiliation (Benne, 2001), but in our initial search for institutions to include in this study, the phenomenon of faith-integrated study abroad appeared most apparent at those that retain that affiliation and that have a strong religiously focused institutional identity. Without a clear understanding of how faith manifested in programs at Protestant Christian-affiliated institutions, it was more difficult to explore destination-specific differences, the focus of our other research questions. These questions address specific aspects of how Minority and Majority destinations are depicted in faith-based study abroad program materials, namely program descriptions, activities, and the images used to promote these programs.

## Literature Review

### U.S. Study Abroad Programming

In general, academic literature focusing on education abroad takes a positive perspective of this educational activity and focuses attention on areas such as ways to increase study abroad participation (e.g., Netz et al., 2020) or improve education abroad programming (e.g., Davis & Knight, 2021). While education abroad can certainly be a positive experience for many students, this literature ignores potential negative aspects of education abroad programming. Although the body of literature that critically examines U.S. education abroad programming is small, this work provides important context for our study. In a significant contribution to this line of inquiry, Zemach-Bersin (2009) cites problematic rhetoric with which institutions promote study abroad programs, shaping students’ perceptions of study abroad even before they begin international experiences. Findings in this study suggest that students’ pre-departure attitudes are overwhelmingly in accordance with a commercial narrative of study abroad. This narrative portrays study abroad as providing students with a needed break away from campus, a break to which they are entitled. This narrative also promotes study abroad as existing primarily for students’ own personal advancement, a trait that Zemach-Bersin attributes to a “reckless employment of global citizenship rhetoric” (p. 315) on the part of institutions in study abroad promotional materials. Ficarra (2017) presents a similar finding regarding institutional study abroad webpage content.

Additional work in this line of inquiry has focused on how study abroad destinations are portrayed in institution-produced materials. For example, Caton and Santos (2009) explored photographs and images used in promotional materials of one especially popular education abroad program provider. The authors found that these images tend to portray non-western people and cultures as backwards and primitive. These images also depict non-westerners as reliant on western study abroad participants to experience modern advancement, perhaps most notably in technology (e.g., digital photography). Such portrayals are, of course, problematic, and present prospective study abroad participants with notions about non-western people and cultures that are inaccurate. Ficarra (2017) examined study abroad portfolios of three institutions of higher education providing insight into the content or function of study abroad programs by geographic area. The scholar found that service-learning programs are heavily concentrated in Africa and Latin America - an overwhelming 80% of study abroad programs in Africa were classified as *service learning* in this study; sending a message to students that people in these regions need their help. In contrast, other regions of the world are dominated by programs in business (Asia and the Middle East) and internship opportunities (Asia and the Pacific). Study abroad programs in Europe, the region with the most programs, are the most varied in terms of content and function. However, Ficarra (2017) found that service-learning programs are almost non-existent in Europe.

Like Caton and Santos (2009) and Ficarra (2017), the current study examines materials that institutions produce to promote and share information about study abroad programming. In this study, we consider an additional nuance in study abroad program design namely an explicit integration of Protestant Christian faith.

### International Missions

In addition to utilizing postcolonial works in theorizing about faith-integrated study abroad, we were also in conversation with literature on the colonial legacy of Christian missionary activity, given the faith-focus of our research questions. While the particulars are certainly complex, Christian missionary activity and religious conversion were “both vital and a consistent element in the colonial encounter,” first for European powers, and later for the United States (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1986, p. 2). Missionary activity is often the focus of critical inquiry because of its importance in establishing and shaping postcolonial normativity through social institutions. Examples have been noted regarding education (Mackenzie, 1993), family life and rites of passage (Sagner, 2001), and health care (Rubinstein & Lane, 1990), among others. The legacy of Christian missionaries is varied. In the best cases, missionaries were educators, humanitarians, philanthropists, and even anticolonial activists (Porter, 1997), whose presence was nonetheless “concomitant with the imposition of foreign rule” (Mackenzie, 1993, p. 45). In other cases, missionaries have been seen as cultural conquistadores (Majeke, 1952). Missionaries are ascribed this role for their efforts on two fronts. First, for “the subtle colonization […] of indigenous modes of perception and practice” that “laid the ground for its integration into the industrial capitalist world” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1986, p. 2); and second, for having played a critical role in supplying theological and moral justifications for colonial domination, capitalist exploitation, and cultural erasure (Maldonado-Torres, 2014; Said, 1993). Contemporarily, the constructions of non-Western countries in a Christian missionary discourse perpetuate a deficit narrative and a supremacist imperative (Conroy-Krutz, 2015).

Since the 1980s, the word ‘mission’ in the Protestant Christian context has also been used to refer to short-term mission trips (STMs). Designed by STM agencies or churches themselves, these international trips include service, evangelism, or other faith-oriented activity and last anywhere from one week to several months (Howell & Dorr, 2007). Nearly 1.5 million people, largely high school and university students, participate in STMs each year (Nagel, 2021), while only about 350,000 participate in for-credit, university study abroad programs (IIE, 2019). STMs, consequently, constitute a significant portion of the outbound international exchange industry.

Nagel (2021) explains that STMs rely on the same liberal-cosmopolitan language used by secular global education programs to emphasize intercultural immersion and transformative experiences. While they sometimes mirror traditional mission objectives to ‘save’ non-believers and instill Christian values, contemporary STMs are more likely to emphasize leaving one’s ‘comfort zone,’ self-transformation, leadership, relationship-building between participants, and faith-development (Nagel, 2021; Freidus & Caro, 2018; Howell & Dorr, 2007). While STMs often revolve around service learning, these projects fail to enact effective change; instead, service is posed as an opportunity for participants to ‘grow in faith’ (Nagel, 2021). Additionally, STM discourse emphasizes an encounter with not only foreign environments, but more specifically, sites highlighting global poverty. Therefore, STMs actively extend Protestant missionary legacy of colonial exploitation by intentionally using Majority world contexts for Minority-world participant gain. STMs constitute a new form of social institution for maintaining Minority-world supremacy through Christian, colonial normativity. Thus, contemporary Protestant Christian faith-integrated study abroad resides at the intersection of faith-centered outbound programming and international education.

While this study does not consider STMs a form of study abroad, it is quite evident from the presentation of these programs to potential participants that contemporary Protestant Christian faith-integrated study abroad has the potential to operate as an extension of the centuries-old global evangelistic project of western Christianity. Many of the faith-integrated study abroad trips explored in the current study share the goals of broader mission work and STMs, partner with longstanding resident missionaries, or explicitly contextualize themselves within evangelistic traditions. These trips are only a small part of contemporary missionary efforts for U.S. Protestant Christians but represent the intersection of international missionary activity with formal international higher education practices. It is useful then to locate these trips within a broader historical and cultural context of international missionary and STM activity. Protestant-Christian affiliated colleges and universities, which extend their religious mission into study abroad, have been understudied as part of the postcolonial discourse, a lacuna that this study addresses.

## Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, this study draws from recent work that takes a critical look at the rationales, functions, and curriculum of international education. Stein (2021a) defines this line of inquiry as “an area of study that problematizes the overwhelmingly positive and depoliticized approaches to international higher education” (p. 1). That is, while international education is often depicted as inherently good, it has great potential for negative consequences, especially for individuals and communities located outside the Minority world (Buckner & Stein, 2020). In recent work, Stein (2021b) argues that higher education institutions in general operate within an “organizing imagery” that perpetuates “implicit horizons of justice, hope, futurity, and change” (p. 388). Like Stein, we challenge these stated rationales for higher education and instead highlight a specific instance of colonial violence that demonstrates how “higher education is both rooted in and contributes to the reproduction of a fundamentally harmful and unsustainable system” (p. 388). Notably, the particular instance of colonial violence explored in this study, the design and implementation of Protestant Christian-focused study abroad programs in the Majority world, harms not only local populations, who are subjected to epistemic and spiritual erasure, but also the primarily Minority-world students who participate.

The critiques of international education that Stein and colleagues leverage draw substantially from postcolonial theory, which highlights implications of past and current western expansion, especially through neoliberal policies and practices. Crossley and Tikly (2004) acknowledge the colonial structures that many existing education systems impose, highlighting that such systems continue to suffer from “hegemony of western forms of knowledge/power and of the spread of western, and particularly North American, consumer culture” (pp. 149-150). Although neoliberal economic practices may be the most obvious way in which higher education institutions perpetuate colonial systems from the Minority world, “the effects of modern colonialism [are] also not confined to the mere economy, but spill over to all the aspects of colonial life, including culture, language, religion, caste, gender, and education, etc.” (Jules et al., 2021). As Anuar et al. (2021) indicate, a postcolonial approach identifies both a “continuous exercise of decoupling from the experience of colonialism over time” while simultaneously recognizing that “globalization has ushered in more subtle forms of colonialism” (p. 109). The study abroad programs represented in our research are decoupled from traditional notions of colonialism in that they do not explicitly seek domination over the areas of the world where they operate. At the same time, our results suggest that these programs represent a more subtle approach to the perpetuation of colonial power dynamics and resulting violence.

Evidence of Majority world colonial practices may be especially prominent in study abroad, given its elitist and exclusionary history (Hoffa, 2007). Prior work highlights neoliberal elements in study abroad marketing (e.g., Zemach-Bersin, 2009) and messages communicated through these materials to students about the world beyond U.S. borders (e.g., Ficarra, 2017). Caton and Santos (2009) show how study abroad promotional materials produce a binary representation of program destinations, wherein western locations are described as modern and advanced while non-western locations are portrayed as traditional, backwards, and exotic.

Religion is an especially prominent way that (post)colonial knowledge and power structures perpetuate (Jules et al., 2021). As Elbourne (2003) summarizes: “The missionary movement was an early exemplar of a transnational global movement, while the intellectual claims of missionaries to universality paralleled the modernist claims of a globalizing colonialism.” (p. 436). For this reason, our study focuses especially on study abroad programs at Protestant Christian-affiliated U.S. higher education institutions and, within this category, programs that have explicit faith integration. Our choice to focus on faith-integrated study abroad trips, many of which are advertised as international missions, draws from Roberts’ (2012) observation that “Christian missions have often combined with and contributed to European colonization” (p. 273). This study expands on scholarship documenting the impact of colonial expansion through western religious and educational institutions and explores how a faith-centered focus might influence the already problematic representations of some study abroad host countries.

## Methodology

We used a basic qualitative research design to understand the phenomena of faith-integrated study abroad programs, using Qualitative Content Analysis for data analysis. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note the strength of qualitative design in studies that are centered on process, meaning, and understanding. Though representing four institutions, the data we incorporate were selectively drawn to meet specific criteria (described below), thus falling short of the ‘bounded system’ that is present in case studies (Simons, 2009). Instead, this study uses basic qualitative design to explore a strictly defined but non-exhaustive set of data at each institution to focus on the *how* in this theory-guided exploration of phenomena (Yin, 2017). This study aims to understand how the portrayal of faith-integrated study abroad host countries has the potential to adversely impact both host communities and the learning outcomes of participating students. Basic qualitative research design helps to understand and interpret these representations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Data

Our data consist of study abroad program curricula in the form of webpage content from four Protestant Christian-affiliated institutions of higher education—depicted pseudonymously as Communion University, Worship University, Mission College, and Friendship University. We selected these institutions in part because of the explicit mention of Protestant Christianity and a global vision in their institutional mission statements (see examples from these statements in Table 1). Our conceptual framework—and previous literature utilizing similar frameworks—helped us bound both the institutions and the data selected, as detailed below. Following the theory, we focused on elements like institutional mission and faith integration to contextualize programs, and types of activities and depictions of host countries in the program materials as a site of colonial discourse. As a precursor to an in-depth analysis, we reviewed the study abroad offerings of over 100 Christian-affiliated institutions. The final sample aimed to maximize variation among cases, including institutions representing a variety of sizes, U.S. locations, and, importantly, Christian orientations. Also, several of the trips presented by these institutions are offered through broader Christian institutional consortia, extending the transferability of conclusions from this study. For those familiar with Christian-affiliated higher education in the U.S., there is a notable omission here of catholic institutions. That is not because Catholic institutions do not offer study abroad—many are prolific in their offerings—however, our survey of programs broadly revealed that the nature of faith-integration in the study abroad at Catholic institutions was distinct. No single Catholic institution offered the same range of possible faith-integrated trips or positioned the faith-integration of study abroad so explicitly in their public-facing materials. Table 1 provides general information about the characteristics of the institutions included in our sample, including religious affiliation, size, and U.S. geographic region.

**Table 1**

*Example Quotes Connecting International Education to Religious Mission and Sample Characteristics*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Example** | **Affiliation** | **Size** | **Location** |
| Communion U. | | | |
| The mission statement states that “each of our faculty and staff are devoted to discipleship in classrooms and residence halls, on the turf, and around the world”, calling on university students, faculty, and staff to be both “world-engaging” and “Christ-centered” defined this further by saying that “Our Christian faith should permeate all learning – leading to a consistent life of worship, servant leadership, stewardship, and world outreach.” | Methodist Episcopal at founding, currently described as nondenominational evangelical Christian | Less than 2,500 | Rural-Midwest |
| Friendship U. | | | |
| On numerous webpages, Friendship U. touted their status as “national leader in study abroad,” along with the claim that more than half of undergraduate students “participate in an international experience.” More broadly, Friendship identified local and global engagement as the fourth component of its mission and went on to claim that “since its founding, [Friendship] has encouraged its students to seek ways to make their faith relevant in the world.” | Quaker affiliation at founding, currently described as Christ-centered | Less than 3,000 | Suburban-West Coast |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mission College | | | |
| In their mission statement, Mission College “strives to graduate men and women distinguished by intellectual maturity and Christian character committed to lives of service and prepared for leadership worldwide.” Elsewhere, text on the webpage stresses “Christian faith frames all aspects of the experience […] We want students to think deeply and holistically about how their faith informs their influence in society.” | Baptist affiliation at founding, currently described as broadly evangelical | Less than 2,000 | Urban-New England |
| Worship U. | | | |
| Worship U.’s institutional mission stated that “Integral to its commitment to God and to the church is Worship’s commitment to society. Whereas that society in the mid 1800s was limited to [Southwest state], today [Worship’s] sphere of influence is indeed the world.” Moreover, “[Worship U.] strives to develop responsible citizens, educated leaders, dedicated scholars and skilled professionals who are sensitive to the needs of a pluralistic society. To those ends, Worship provides expanded opportunities for civic education and for church and community service at home and abroad.” | Formerly affiliated with Southern Baptist Convention | Greater than 10,000 | Urban-Southeast |

*Note.* All quotes in this table were taken directly from institutions’ mission statements on their webpages, current as of the 2019-20 academic year.

For each institution, we focused our analysis on webpage content relating to study abroad programs with an explicit faith-integration in their descriptions (all webpages corresponded to the 2019-20 academic year, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020). These faith-integrated study abroad programs included clear and explicit religious content and/or a proselytizing or service focus. In most cases, the faith-integration was described in detail on the program’s webpage and was a key or defining programmatic feature (see Table 2). In all cases, programs were *study abroad* programs, meaning that students earned academic credit through participation.

### Analysis

Our analysis consisted of a two-stage review of webpage content. The first stage involved the identification of institutions to construct our sample, wherein we reviewed webpages from many religion-affiliated institutions. This review informed the grounded framework for types of faith-integration represented in Table 2 and established a baseline for our sample selection. In the second stage, we conducted a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) of the faith-integrated study abroad program webpages belonging to the four institutions we selected, following Schreier (2012). We used an iterative open-coding approach, beginning with a code list informed by postcolonial theoretical constructs, our research questions, and the first phase review. We then added codes that arose during the coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). QCA was particularly helpful in pinpointing the most relevant data among long and detailed study abroad pages. We first collaborated to segment and prioritize webpage content and code each segment according to our research questions (Mayring, 2000). That is, each segment was assigned a broad code corresponding to the study abroad program’s location (Majority or Minority world) and the type of content it contained (image, program description, or activity). Next, within each of these broader codes, we coded each segment’s specific content inductively. For example, an image may have received a code such as ‘landscape’ while an activity may have been coded as ‘museum visit.’ We first worked independently to code the content of two institutions’ webpages each, then, to ensure inter-rater reliability, we came back together to cross-check code assignments and identify emerging themes. We then each revisited our respective webpages to apply the revised common coding scheme and to collapse existing codes into larger categories (Schreier, 2012).

### Positionality

This study’s first author researches the intersection of Christianity and higher education curriculum, primarily in the United States. While the first author has not participated in study abroad, he did participate in extracurricular faith-integrated international travel as an undergraduate through Christian campus ministry (Jamaica, Israel, and Bulgaria). Regarding personal religious identity, he was raised as a Fundamentalist Protestant Christian and currently identifies with the affirming/reconciling wing of the Methodist tradition. The second author of this study specializes in research on international education, especially study abroad, and as a student participated in study abroad programs in both Minority world (France and Spain) and Majority world (Morocco) locations. However, she did not attend a religiously focused institution as an undergraduate, and as a consequence, none of these programs had a specific religious focus like the programs depicted in this study. Regarding religion, she grew up in a Catholic household, but no longer practices a specific religion. The third author researches non-dominant pedagogical approaches to undergraduate study abroad and draws on her own study abroad experiences in Italy, Greece, Turkey, New Zealand, China, and Japan (none of which involved faith-integration). While she identifies as a religious ‘None,’ she earned her BA in Religious Studies from a Quaker-affiliated college and a Master of Theological Studies from an ecumenical divinity school.

## Results

### Faith Integration

Our first research question focused on how faith was integrated into study abroad programs at Protestant Christian-affiliated institutions. Our results pointed to four broad categories of faith integration: Christian-informed/shaped environment; Evangelism/proselytization; Faith-motivated service; and Personal spiritual development for study abroad participants. Table 2 provides examples of webpage content that speak to each of these four categories.

**Table 2**

*Faith-Integration Categories with Example Quotes and by Location*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Faith-integration Category** | **Example Quotes** | **Minority World** | **Majority World** |
| Christian-informed/shaped environment abroad | “Students are encouraged to *engage with local churches and fellowships to experience diverse expressions of Christianity* and consider God’s work in the broader world. Students return from this trip with deeper insights and understanding of their own faith, calling, and communities” (Communion U.).  “Hosted at Tokyo Christian University is a one-semester program, offered in the fall semester, that gives students the opportunity to study in Japan *at a Christian University”* (Friendship U.). | 28 | 27 |
| Evangelism/Proselytization | “International and local projects are designed so you can *use your gifts and talents to share your faith*. During these trips, you can share your faith through business development, children’s ministry, construction work, teaching English, family ministry and *evangelism*” (Communion U.).  “Through *ministry on the streets* and educational programs at a community center, WMF strives for a transformed society in which the poor are *redeemed* and empowered” (Friendship U.). | 7 | 10 |
| Faith-motivated service | “Students are also encouraged to take part in a *work-based professional internship or a community and volunteer service learning practicum*. A wide range of opportunities are available with educational charities, youth agencies, and faith-based organizations” (Worship U.). | 5 | 48 |

**Table 2 (continued)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | “The beauty of studying abroad in Chile, coupled with the opportunities to serve together with local believers, makes this a great place to live your mission” (Friendship U.). |  |  |
| Personal spiritual development for participants | “The program *fosters Christian spiritual formation* alongside academic courses and cross-cultural experience and seeks to provide a context for mutual transformation” (Friendship U.).  “The […] Irish Studies Programme creates an *opportunity for students to deepen their cultural and spiritual awareness* by experiencing the history and culture of Ireland” (Mission College). | 10 | 11 |

This first category, Christian-informed/shaped environment, involved the integration of U.S. students into a faith community in the abroad environment, often a local church or other faith-focused institution in the host community. This integration was often described as providing students with a perspective of Christianity as a global phenomenon (see the first example of this category in Table 2). The second category, evangelism/proselytization, positioned students as bringing their faith to the host community, often construing host communities as in need of redemption or saving (see the second example of this category of faith integration in Table 2). Faith-motivated service, the third category, also positioned students as making positive contributions to the host community. In this case, emphasis was less on the spirituality of individuals belonging to the host community and more on the spirituality of students themselves. That is, students’ own Christian faith was positioned as the motivating force behind providing a particular service to the host community. For example, in the first example of this category in Table 2, students are invited to take part in “a wide range of opportunities are available with educational charities, youth agencies, and faith-based organizations.” Finally, the fourth category, personal and spiritual development for participants, again focused attention on students themselves, highlighting how the study abroad environment could shape their spiritual growth as Christians. Examples of this category can be found in the bottom row of Table 2.

These four categories of faith integration were distributed differently among Minority and Majority world destinations (see Table 2). Specifically, both evangelism and faith-motivated service were mentioned more frequently for Majority world destinations compared to Minority world destinations. The other two faith integration categories, Christian-informed/shaped environment, and students’ personal spiritual development were roughly equally represented in both location groups.

### Program Description

General descriptions of study abroad programs in Majority and Minority world destinations differed greatly (RQ2), particularly with respect to two categories: descriptions of the courses offered and the descriptors used for host institutions and countries.

The top panel of Table 3 summarizes code frequencies for the kinds of courses that students could take in Majority and Minority world destinations. As this table suggests, Minority world programs offered a great variety of courses, exhibiting no clear pattern in what courses students could take abroad. These courses ranged in topics, covering the intersection of Christian faith and the environment and politics, as well as global missions. In contrast, course offerings in Majority world locations most often related to local religious beliefs, global missions, or some type of service (e.g., health, social work, peace studies, etc.). Indeed, topics such as health studies and social work were largely absent from course offerings in Minority world destinations.

The bottom panel of Table 3 summarizes code frequencies for general descriptors used to characterize programs in Majority and Minority world locations. Minority world host institutions were more likely to be described in terms of *academic prestige*. Additionally, descriptions of programs in these countries were overwhelmingly more likely to highlight the host country’s culture. Table 3 provides some typical examples of these descriptions. For example, the study abroad webpage for Friendship University described a program location in Italy (a Minority world destination) as follows: “You can’t take two steps in Rome without running into a historical statue, building, ruin, or landmark creating a unique environment for studying topics related to Christian life and history.” In contrast, study abroad programs in Majority world locations were discussed in terms of *quality control, safety,* and *stability.* The quote from Mission College provided in Table 3 is an example of this kind of description. Here, in describing Rwanda, the webpage states “Because it [Rwanda] is a poor country but one of the safest and most stable parts of the African continent, it represents an attractive place to test development impact.” Majority world countries were also nine times more likely to be described as poor, developing, belonging to the third-world, or having poverty.

**Table 3**

*Study Abroad Program Description Codes by Location and Examples*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Minority World** | | **Majority World** | |
| Code | N | Code | N |
| **Course Offerings** | | | |
| Bible credit | 1 | "Religion" | 11 |
| Environmental Stewardship | 2 |  |  |
| Global Missions | 7 | Global Missions | 8 |
| Leadership Skills | 3 | God and Nature | 1 |
| Other Topics w/ Christian Focus | 8 | Health Studies | 1 |
| Peace Studies | 5 | Peace Studies | 2 |
| Religion and Politics | 3 | Ministry | 3 |
| Religious doctrine | 2 | Social Work | 3 |
| Science and Faith | 1 |  |  |
| Theology | 6 |  |  |
| **General Descriptors** | | | |
| Academic Rigor/Prestige | 5 | Academic Rigor/Prestige | 1 |
| Quality control of program | 2 | Quality Control of Program | 3 |
|  |  | Safe/Stable | 2 |
| Conflict | 2 | Conflict | 6 |
| Culture | 25 | Culture | 20 |
|  |  | Develop Empathy and Social Sensitivity | 3 |
| Diversity in host country | 1 | Diversity in host country | 12 |
|  |  | Explore NGO Careers | 4 |
| Full-Immersion | 6 | Full-immersion | 9 |
| Poor/Developing/Poverty | 1 | Poor/Developing/Poverty | 9 |
|  |  | Strategic Importance | 1 |
| Transportation | 4 | Transportation | 3 |
| **Examples** | | | |
| “Our hope is that through this experience, you will be able to connect your talents to new ways to serve those in need around you! And all while you are exploring a place rich with history and beautiful sites – you will not want to miss this opportunity!” (Worship U.) | | “The [program] is offered […] for those desiring to serve in developing third-world countries. Students live and learn in a simulated third-world village. Emphasis is on technical skill learning in agriculture (animals and horticulture), appropriate technology, cross-cultural communication and community development, nutrition and food preparation, and primary health care. Students receive three hours of credit for this program, which takes place at the [program] Institute in Lake Wales, Florida.” (Communion U.) | |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| “You can’t take two steps in Rome without running into a historical statue, building, ruin, or landmark creating a unique environment for studying topics related to Christian life and history. Whether you are interested in art, architecture, theatre, or meeting new people, Rome is a great city to live your mission, to learn about your faith and grow as you serve a community.” (Friendship U.) | “Rwanda represents an ideal location for development experts to engage. Because it is a poor country, but one of the safest and most stable parts of the African continent, it represents an attractive place to test development impact. The last two decades have shown remarkable progress in Rwanda, and many of the most promising efforts are already being replicated in other developing countries. There is perhaps no more accessible and hopeful location to study the effects of a variety of development initiatives all in one place.” (Mission College) |

### Program Activities

Regarding program activities (RQ3), our results indicated a wider variety of activities offered in Majority world compared to Minority world locations. Table 4 illustrates the numerical counts of selected codes and provides some examples of trip activities from our data set. Clear and pervasive differences emerged between the activities included in trips based on their location. While tourism was common in both categories, as shown in Table 4, it was more common among Minority world destinations. Frequently, activities in Majority world locations had a relationship to service. In fact, there were three times as many mentions of general service for Majority world study abroad programs. Beyond that, among Minority world programs the only mention of specific service was with respect to refugees from the Majority world. Among Majority world programs, the service opportunities were numerous and included involvement in health care, community development/outreach, teaching/tutoring, and working with children. In contrast, many activities in Minority world countries related to tourism and local travel. For example, a Mission University trip to Europe—excerpted in Table 4—emphasized opportunities for weekend travel, while a Communion University trip to Uganda (a Majority world country) described work to address “major issues like illiteracy, hunger, malnutrition, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, child mortality, and injustice in a local Ugandan community.”

Religious activities, devotional and evangelistic, were both more common in Majority world locations. While some Minority world trip activities included references to *diverse Christianity* and *local churches*, Majority world trips were more likely to reference *local missionaries.* Evangelism activities were limited on Minority world trips and included in only a very few. By contrast, Majority world trips offered a wide variety of evangelism activities—as seen in Table 4—and were common across these trips. The only more common activity in Majority world destinations were related to service. In Minority world countries, more common activities were related to travel and tourism; however, at the programs included in this study, there were no activities relating to working with children. This latter finding contrasts with findings for the Majority world, where working with children was referenced more than any other single activity. The examples cited in Table 4 notably refer to child mortality (Uganda: Communion U.) and underserved children (Japan: Worship U.).

**Table4**

*Study Abroad Program Activities Codes by Location and Examples*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Minority World** | | **Majority World** | |
| Code | N | Code | N |
| **Activities** | | | |
| With Host Country Faculty/Mentors | 3 | Blessing Others | 11 |
| Addressing Others’ Spiritual/Physical Needs | 1 | Business Consulting |  |
| Changing A Nation | 1 | Changing A Nation | 8 |
| Post-Program Travel | 6 | Church Attendance | 1 |
| Educational Travel | 13 | Educational Travel | 1 |

**Table4 (continued)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | End Poverty | 2 |
| Engagement With A Diverse Christianity | 5 | Environmental Stewardship | 3 |
| General Service | 4 | General Service | 3 |
|  |  | Health-Related |  |
| Open To Adult Learners | 1 | Students Providing Medical Care |  |
| Moral Apathy | 1 | Hunger/Malnutrition | 8 |
|  |  | Illiteracy | 1 |
|  |  | Injustice | 1 |
|  |  | Local Churches | 5 |
| Engagement With Local Churches | 2 | Medical Assistance | 12 |
|  |  | Mock Third-World Village In Florida | 1 |
|  |  | Technical Skills | 1 |
|  |  | Orphanage | 7 |
|  |  | Prison | 1 |
|  |  | Professional Development For Local Students | 3 |
| Service-Focused Training | 5 | Service Learning | 6 |
| Sharing Faith | 1 | Sharing/Strengthening Faith | 6 |
|  |  | Social Work | 1 |
| Singing | 2 | Spiritual Development Of Others | 7 |
|  |  | Spiritual Development Of Self | 7 |
|  |  | Sports | 7 |
|  |  | Studying/Learning | 6 |
|  |  | Teaching/Tutoring | 10 |
| Tourism | 18 | Tourism | 13 |
|  |  | Working With Animals | 1 |
| Unemployment | 1 | Working With Children | 20 |
|  |  | Discipline And Encourage Children | 1 |
|  |  | Working With Low SES Populations | 8 |
|  |  | Working With Missionaries | 2 |
|  |  | Working With Needy Students | 2 |
| Working With Refugees | 1 | Working With Refugees | 3 |
| **Examples** | | | |
| “The program offers a variety of opportunities for travel including trips to Auckland, New Zealand (the country’s capital), the Catlins (Cathedral lakes and wildlife observing), the North Otago Region and Lake Tekapo.” (Friendship U.) | | “Community Development: The Uganda team will be strategically addressing major issues, like illiteracy, hunger, malnutrition, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, child mortality, and injustice in a local Ugandan community.” (Communion U.) | |
| “Over the semester, students visit four countries in four months: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Russia. This means unique destinations with opportunities for learning more deeply firsthand. With everything [Mission College] teaches about being travel savvy, students will be able to travel around Europe independently on the weekends.” (Mission College) | | “What will we be doing?: We will be volunteering along side [sic] Japanese College [sic] students to provide meals to underserved children and youth, and help develop English skills!” (Worship U.) | |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
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| **Activities** | | | |
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| Changing A Nation | 1 | Changing A Nation | 8 |
| Post-Program Travel | 6 | Church Attendance | 1 |
| Educational Travel | 13 | Educational Travel | 1 |
|  |  | End Poverty | 2 |
| Engagement With A Diverse Christianity | 5 | Environmental Stewardship | 3 |
| General Service | 4 | General Service | 3 |
|  |  | Health-Related |  |
| Open To Adult Learners | 1 | Students Providing Medical Care |  |
| Moral Apathy | 1 | Hunger/Malnutrition | 8 |
|  |  | Illiteracy | 1 |
|  |  | Injustice | 1 |
|  |  | Local Churches | 5 |
| Engagement With Local Churches | 2 | Medical Assistance | 12 |
|  |  | Mock Third-World Village In Florida | 1 |
|  |  | Technical Skills | 1 |
|  |  | Orphanage | 7 |
|  |  | Prison | 1 |
|  |  | Professional Development For Local Students | 3 |
| Service-Focused Training | 5 | Service Learning | 6 |
| Sharing Faith | 1 | Sharing/Strengthening Faith | 6 |
|  |  | Social Work | 1 |
| Singing | 2 | Spiritual Development Of Others | 7 |
|  |  | Spiritual Development Of Self | 7 |
|  |  | Sports | 7 |
|  |  | Studying/Learning | 6 |
|  |  | Teaching/Tutoring | 10 |
| Tourism | 18 | Tourism | 13 |
|  |  | Working With Animals | 1 |
| Unemployment | 1 | Working With Children | 20 |
|  |  | Discipline And Encourage Children | 1 |
|  |  | Working With Low SES Populations | 8 |
|  |  | Working With Missionaries | 2 |
|  |  | Working With Needy Students | 2 |
| Working With Refugees | 1 | Working With Refugees | 3 |
| **Examples** | | | |
| “The program offers a variety of opportunities for travel including trips to Auckland, New Zealand (the country’s capital), the Catlins (Cathedral lakes and wildlife observing), the North Otago Region and Lake Tekapo.” (Friendship U.) | | “Community Development: The Uganda team will be strategically addressing major issues, like illiteracy, hunger, malnutrition, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, child mortality, and injustice in a local Ugandan community.” (Communion U.) | |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| “Over the semester, students visit four countries in four months: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Russia. This means unique destinations with opportunities for learning more deeply firsthand. With everything [Mission College] teaches about being travel savvy, students will be able to travel around Europe independently on the weekends.” (Mission College) | “What will we be doing?: We will be volunteering along side [sic] Japanese College [sic] students to provide meals to underserved children and youth, and help develop English skills!” (Worship U.) |

### Program Images

Finally, our analysis revealed systematic differences in the images that were used to promote study abroad programming in the two location categories (RQ4). The codes presented in Table 5 and example images presented in Table 6 demonstrate these differences. In Majority world countries, U.S. students frequently appeared in photos, engaging in recognizable service activities relating to medical or teaching contexts. Like the patterns discussed relative to activities, photos of local children were also prominent. The first two images in Table 6 are representative of the many examples of depicting white students with and among children of color. In contrast, photos on webpages corresponding to Minority world destinations consisted primarily of city- or landscapes. Landscape images were common overall, but much more common in Minority world locations. When landscape images appeared on Majority world trip pages, they often focused on natural features or wildlife. The example in Table 6 from Friendship University demonstrates this common pattern. While maps appeared on trips from both groups, they were much more common in Majority world locations. Although an exploration into why these differences were observed between Majority and Minority world locations is beyond the scope of this study, we posit that this observation potentially suggests that students interested in study abroad need help in knowing where some of these locations are. Images including students themselves were much more common on Majority world trip pages. Common examples featured students participating in recognizable trip activities with citizens of host countries.

**Table 5**

*Study Abroad Images Codes and Number of Times Represented by Location*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Minority World** | | **Majority World** | |
| Church/Cathedral | 9 | Animals | 4 |
|  |  | Classroom | 11 |
|  |  | Community Service | 4 |
| Landscape or Cityscape | 34 | Landscape or Cityscape | 20 |
|  |  | Local Adult | 5 |
|  |  | Local Children | 29 |
| Map | 3 | Map | 24 |
|  |  | Medical | 13 |
|  |  | Sports | 1 |
| Students | 17 | Students | 48 |

**Table 6**

*Selected Image Examples*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Destination** | **Example** | **Institution** |
| Majority world | A group of people that are standing in the grass  Description automatically generated | Friendship U. |
|  | A group of people sitting at a beach  Description automatically generated | Worship U. |
| Minority world | A picture containing sky, outdoor, building, water  Description automatically generated | Friendship U. |
|  | A picture containing outdoor, mountain, sky, person  Description automatically generated | Communion U. |

## Discussion

This study draws attention to an understudied phenomenon in international higher education: faith-integrated study abroad. It highlights actions at a certain subset of religiously focused institutions that have the potential to be incredibly harmful, especially to host communities, but also to student learning outcomes. Our findings reveal clear differences in how Protestant Christian-integrated study abroad program webpages portray Majority and Minority world host countries and communities. These patterns across locations, like those seen in study abroad literature more broadly (e.g., Ficarra, 2017) reinforce negative stereotypes and colonial/imperial narratives, thus potentially harming the learning that institutions intend for students to experience through these programs. While Minority world locations were depicted as prestigious sites for cultural and spiritual development, webpage material repeatedly characterized Majority world destinations as morally, spiritually, and intellectually deficient and in need of help. The religious component of these study abroad programs adds several additional layers of complication to the postcolonial tendencies already observed in many non-religious study abroad programs (Caton & Santos, 2009; Ficarra, 2017; Zemach-Bersin, 2009). In addition to this pervasive deficit framing of Majority world host countries, the webpages also often fail to acknowledge the presence of local Christians, and if they mention local non-Christians, it is often in the context of proselytization. In the aggregate, these web page descriptions present Majority world countries as un-Christian or lacking an existing Christian community or tradition. Put differently, students are often charged with bringing religion to these communities, which are depicted on study abroad webpages as not having any religious tradition of their own. Beyond being factually inaccurate, such presentations are both offensive to and dismissive towards the diverse Christian faith practices that exist around the world that are not presently dependent on U.S. missionary support (Conroy-Krutz, 2015) and hostile towards the adherents of other religions, no religion, or indigenous worldviews.

Another potential implication of the ‘augmented postcolonialism’ present in these faith-integrated study abroad programs is that they expand existing missionary networks, broadening the reach of culturally imperializing religious practices (Said, 1993). Indeed, many faith-integrated study abroad programs explicitly reference the idea of cultural impact in their descriptions, with references to ‘change a nation’ (Uganda: Worship U.), ‘transformation’ (Thailand: Friendship U.), and ‘development’ (Rwanda: Mission College) of Majority world hosts. While service efforts can be admirable in and of themselves, such consistent patterns in depictions of host countries represent symbolic and discursive violence. These patterns suggest a real potential for a negative impact of these programs on host communities. When local partners are pervasively portrayed as inferior, it seems unlikely that they are made equal partners in the work of building and maintaining study abroad programming, or that their concerns or needs are being prioritized in these arrangements. At the same time, these depictions are providing students with, at best, an inaccurate depiction of what these communities are like, thus detrimentally impacting student learning outcomes and leaving the potential for life-long misconceptions of the Majority world. These framings perpetuate colonial perceptions before students even depart on their international experiences. One of the more shocking examples we uncovered in our analysis was the billing of a mission-focused trip to a mock third-world village in Florida as study abroad, where actors portray host citizens so that students can practice ‘cross-cultural interactions’ for the purpose of religious proselytization. Our work underscores the urgent need for continued dialogue between critical international education researchers, advocates, and practitioners on how best to responsibly design, advertise, and administer study abroad programming, including faith-integrated programs. Our findings serve as a call to action to reimagine religious-focused study abroad programs in a more morally responsible way.

## Implications and Conclusion

Our study has clear implications for practice, which apply both to individuals that work directly with study abroad programs and to leaders more generally at Protestant-affiliated institutions. Individuals involved in faith-integrated study abroad programs must address the colonial history of Christianity and acknowledge the differential impact that faith-integrated international activity may have on host countries depending on their geographic location. Students must be engaged in conversations about the legacy of the colonial and postcolonial encounter and be exposed especially to local stories and perspectives about this past. In particular, the tendency to omit established Christian communities and practices in Majority world destinations must be addressed. Even if significant sectarian differences exist between local traditions and the affiliation of the U.S. institution, such intra-Christian encounters are important to students’ understandings of their place within a global religious movement—one which contains its own traditions to refute western-centrism. While we would also like to see these same frameworks extended to other religions and the non-religious, greater literacy within the Christian tradition seems both more feasible and more in alignment with these institutions’ stated missions. Moreover, students must be given the tools and opportunities to critically reflect on their own role in perpetuating colonial legacies – whether through their perspectives as individuals belonging to a particular faith tradition or specifically as study abroad students participating in a Protestant Christian faith-integrated program. While religious outreach is an imperative in certain religious traditions, such outreach may be best left as a separate activity from credit-bearing study abroad. If such activities are merged, individuals who design these programs must be aware of their potential to inadvertently perpetuate colonial legacies through epistemic and discursive violence in certain host communities, particularly those in Majority world destinations.

Beyond individual program design, it is the responsibility of institutional leaders to consider how their program descriptions and offerings, in the aggregate, can affect both students and citizens of study abroad host countries. At each of the institutions in our sample, and across the United States, colleges and universities have taken up international goals and missions. The leaders of these efforts at Protestant Christian-affiliated institutions should continue to reflect carefully on how their religious mission is shaping their international footprint and impact. The findings of this study indicate that, in some individual cases and in the aggregate, faith-integrated study abroad trips often present international partner countries and communities as morally and intellectually deficient. These perceptions are likely to make a lasting impression on students and shape how they and the broader institution interact across international borders.

**Limitations**

This study is not without its limitations. First, this study is limited to transferable findings among Protestant-Christian affiliated institutions with a strong focus on integrating their religious identities into their curriculum. These findings do not extend to Christian affiliated institutions Robert Benne (2001) referred to as “accidentally pluralistic,” those for whom their affiliations are mostly historical or are subsumed under broader research or educational goals (p. 56). Nor—as discussed above—are these findings transferable to Catholic institutions or those affiliated with other minority Christian denominations or non-Christian religiously affiliated institutions. All those sectors are ripe for future research. A second limitation of this study is that we analyzed webpage content rather than directly observing study abroad participation experiences or conducting interviews with members of the local communities where these programs take place. For this reason, this study speaks more to how institutions present their study abroad programs rather than to what happens on these programs. Future research is needed to reach a better understanding of the congruency – or lack thereof – between what institutions say they do on their webpages and what happens on these programs. A final limitation of this study is that while we would like to speak to the program outcomes of Christian-integrated study abroad programs for students (e.g., Do students return from study abroad with a particular – perhaps erroneous–- perspective of their host community?) and for host communities (e.g., How does the predominance of service-oriented faith-based study abroad programs in Majority world locations impact local communities?), we are only able to extrapolate the impacts. Future work could further demonstrate the impacts of these differences through more empirical research.

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