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Listening to the Voices of Students Who Studied Abroad: Students and Their Agency to Maximize Their Abroad Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This article learns from student voices about how their education abroad experiences were shaped by their agency. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with 22 U.S. community college and university students and with U.S. faculty and U.K. senior staff who worked at a Study Abroad Center in London. The study focuses on what the students said were the impact they had from studying abroad, what they said about institutional support that they needed prior to studying abroad, and what they said about their changing sense of being while studying abroad. Counter-barrier construct and agency theories were used to ground the findings. The findings showed that these students used their agency to influence their decisions to study abroad, to find the strength to transcend weak institutional support services, and to recognize their own personal, social, and critical skills development as a result of studying abroad.

Keywords: academic advising, counter-barrier construct, influencers, student agency, study abroad

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of studying abroad are varied and, along with an in-person international experience, have the potential to allow students to capture self-awareness, learn new academic subject material, acquire problem-solving skills, and build intention for social action and civic engagement. The sense of belonging that arises during the study abroad experiences positively engages students beyond their campus experiences (Raby & Rhodes, 2018). The long-term effects of participating in education abroad include stronger college persistence and graduation rates (Raby et al., 2014). On a personal level, students report changes in their worldview, experiencing personal growth (Petzoid & Peter, 2015) and moving from a monocultural to a multicultural lens (Nguyen et al., 2018).

Student agency refers to the level of autonomy that students have which facilitate intentional, purposeful, and meaningful choices that enhance overall learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). This includes the information and experiences they already have and the learning choices that they make when navigating what and how they learn. There are many different and highly contested interpretations of how agency effects choice and learning that are often divided along barrier and anti-barrier theoretical constructs. Some academics interpret student agency as limited and possessed mostly by those who have social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Other academics see agency as being multidimensional, with the potential for all students, even nontraditional students, as possessing voice and power (Yosso, 2005).

To support discussions on equity and inclusion in study abroad, it is important to unpack why students choose to study abroad, what their experiences are while preparing to study abroad, and what learning experiences, while abroad, reinforce critical reflection. The purpose of this article is to examine how two cohorts of U.S. students, who studied abroad in different times, but in the same location, had their student identity shaped by both their agency and their experiences abroad. Three research questions informed our research:

1. What do students say about their intent to study abroad?
2. What do students say about their institutional support needs prior to studying abroad?
3. What do students say about their changing sense of being while studying abroad?

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

Two theoretical constructs help to ground this study to help explain why some students more readily study abroad than others. The barrier/counter-barrier construct is used to understand student choice. The barrier construct views barriers in a deficit framework that is grounded in racism and more readily applied to students who are labeled as minoritized, first-generation, low-income, or students of color (Raby & Rhodes, 2018; Whatley & Raby, 2020). For study abroad, identified barriers explain why students chose not to study abroad and include family resistance, fear to travel, inability to take time off of work or

wfamily, lack of knowledge to successfully navigate institutional bureaucracies, and personal deficits in social capital (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012). The counter-barrier construct shows that the current generation of nontraditional students are not constrained by identified barriers (Wick et al., 2019) because they use a range of social and cultural capitals to participate in college activities (Robertson, 2019).

The second theoretical construct uses student agency theories to show how student identity is shaped by their agency, and how agency helps students to build meaning from learning experiences. At the heart of student agency theory is the idea that students are not simply consumers, but also have the capability to invest in their own human capital (Sen, 2006). Students use their grit and achievement orientation goals to obtain and use new knowledges (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020). Agency becomes something that is intentional, malleable, and learnable (OECD, 2020) that supports study abroad by building personal identity (Zamani-Gallaher et al., 2016), using existing social and cultural capital to access information (Willis, 2016), enhancing sense of empowerment (Johnson, 2018), and acknowledging influencers that provide students with tools to be active agents shaping their own learning (Nasir & Hand, 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Three themes illustrate how student agency supports students who study abroad.

Influencers That Impact the Choice to Study Abroad

Key influencers help students make study abroad choices. For example, Whatley (2019) found that the community college, as an institution, is a space where underrepresented students are more able to participate in intercultural experiences, including study abroad. Influencers are a primary reason why students choose to study abroad even if it means leaving their jobs, their families, and their home obligations (Raby & Rhodes, 2018).

Timing

Barrier research suggests that the potential of extra time to degree completion resulting from studying abroad negatively impacts students' choice to study abroad (McClure et al., 2010). Timing is a critical issue, but it is rarely related to graduation. For nontraditional students, timing involves the best time to study abroad. Free time varies between students and the long-term planners find it easier to accommodate study abroad. Unlike barrier research that links working students to unavailable free time, nontraditional students do have free time to study abroad, in part because they are less constrained by prescriptive curricular tracks than full-time, nonworking students (McKee, 2019). A constrictive academic program (that barrier research says limits choices) may create opportunities to use free time in summer or in between academic programs for studying abroad (Amani & Kim, 2019). Students find the time to accommodate study abroad into their lives, even if it means leaving spouses, children, and jobs (Hamir & Gozik, 2018).

Interest

Many different factors influence students' interest to study abroad. Intrinsically, opportunity and desire to travel are primary reasons why students have interest in education abroad (Harrell et al., 2017). Students equate studying abroad to an experience of a lifetime (Whatley & Raby, 2020). Extrinsically, students choose to study abroad in order to earn academic credits for a class and/or graduation or to enhance their job opportunities (Harrell et al., 2017).

Family, Friends, and Popular Culture Connections

Support comes from a combination of various influencers. Among the strongest influencers are family members, many who themselves had studied abroad, peers (Kasravi, 2018), and being a role model for siblings or children (Gipson et al., 2018).

Cohort Connections

Group affinity is an important influencer for choosing to study on a faculty-led program. Students know the cohort format as one that intensifies engagement and one that provides a safe place to learn because everyone starts with a similar level of knowledge (Willis, 2016). Cohorts also are a place where peers can encourage one other to study abroad and because students know each provides a familiarity that leads to comfort, and safety (Brenner, 2016).

Faculty Connections

Faculty are key influencers who, through their personal connections with students, build trust and support (Gillespie, 2019). Faculty also help students to navigate institutional bureaucracy necessary for study abroad participation and are key in program marketing and outreach (Petzoid & Peter, 2015).

Institutional Connections

Literature confirms that institutional support is a key influencer for students to choosing to study abroad. Positive institutional practices promote diversity and inclusion (Hamir & Gozik, 2018) and ethical practices (Hartman et al., 2020). Positive support for study abroad staff (Robertson, 2019) provides positive learning experiences. The primary extrinsic factors that limit student choice continue to be the availability of programs (Raby & Rhodes, 2018) and inadequate counseling (Kasravi, 2018).

Personal Growth

Studying abroad results in personal growth linked to student agency. Students can reexamine their viewpoints and may develop a global perspective, which can result in "internal redirection, resulting in a deepening sense of one's identity and

self-awareness” (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014, p. 78). As a result, some students become more independent (Harrell et al., 2017), gain a sense of self (Willis, 2016), enhance their cross-cultural knowledge and intercultural competencies (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015) and engage in activities that deepen their soft skills (Geibel, 2018). In the process, some students gain a high level of self-efficacy as a result of intercultural adjustment (Nguyen et al., 2018) and gain a sense of empowerment (Johnson, 2018).

Three benefits of studying abroad are highlighted in this article. First is intercultural learning in which there is “the acquisition of generalizable (transferrable) intercultural competence” (Bennett, 2012, p. 91). The second is personal growth (Chwialkowska, 2020) that includes creating a sense of belonging (Wick et al., 2019) and using agency to build personal identity (Zamani-Gallaher et al., 2016). The final is growth that emerges from uncovering hegemonic assumptions related to power and inequity that forces the student to reinterpret what they thought was the norm (Hartman et al., 2020, p. 76).

Critical Learning Objectives

Critical learning objectives focus on whether students are actually learning prescribed objectives (Vande Berg et al., 2012). Examples include whether actual exposure abroad creates substantive changes in students’ sense of being (Asada, 2019), in empowering their ability to live in the moment (Johnson, 2018), and in recognizing their privilege while visiting another country (Stein et al., 2016). In the end, there is no guarantee that the student learning will result in positive change.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative design to provide an in-depth look (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) at student agency among students who studied abroad. The study examines two student cohorts, each of which studied in the same location, but in different years. Interviews and focus groups were used to get rich data that focused on student narratives about their study abroad experience (Yin, 2014). Two theoretical lenses informed our research design. We analyzed the data through the counter-barrier construct and agency theories to see how the students created choices and, in turn, how those choices helped to shape their learning. We also used sensemaking to see how identity and environment informed students with how they made sense of their experiences (Yin, 2014). Finally, we used a critical discourse analysis to pay attention to how students used language to define and explain their experiences.

Instrument Design

Interviews and focus groups were conducted with two groups of students, two faculty, and on-site senior staff who participated in a summer study abroad program at a provider Study Abroad Center in London, United Kingdom. All

participants signed study consent and human subjects/ethical approval forms. Sessions were audio-taped and transcribed for coding and analysis.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person or via Skype and averaged 45–90 min. Holstein and Gubrium (2012) suggest that what matters in a narrative is the subjective meanings and the positionality attached to the narrative. In this way, the interviews had authenticity as participants were able to tell their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The open-ended questions asked for anecdotal information about their own experiences in terms of (a) intent to study abroad, (b) influencers, (c) agency related to learned experiences, and (d) critical learning objectives. Students were interviewed prior to studying abroad and then participated in a focus group while studying abroad.

Five focus groups were held at the Study Abroad Center to allow students and staff to explain the multiple and complex meanings of social reality created through their “opinions, attitudes, beliefs, values, discourses, and understandings of things” (Yin, 2014, p. 81). Sessions lasted about 60 min., were recorded and transcribed. Directed questions were designed to encourage all participants to collectively contribute ideas to a discussion theme focusing on their experience in terms of: (1) academic and financial stressors, (2) social connectedness and support, (3) needs met or unmet, and (4) critical learning objective changes that they experienced.

Sample

We used purposive sampling (Miles et al., 2014) to identify two study abroad programs at the Study Abroad Center. The leading faculty and Center staff choose the student participants.

Five students in the first group participated in two different California community college faculty-led study abroad programs in 2015. Seventeen students in the second group participated in a direct enrollment program in 2018. Two community college faculty and two Center staff also participated. We choose to include two different groups from two different time periods because we wanted to see if student agency was time-specific or generalized.

Data Analysis

The interviews and focus groups were analyzed using narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) to capture the stories that the students, faculty, and staff had about the study abroad experience. Coding was both deductive and inductive with codes derived directly from the participant’s words to add rich meaning from their own perspectives (Saldaña, 2015). Data from interviews were combined with the focus groups to enhance data richness (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008) and to build triangulation. A three-stage process coded and identified themes (Miles et al., 2014). First, deductive and inductive data analysis identified emerging codes in the transcripts. Second, codes were clustered into categories based on research questions (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Third, main themes were identified using parallel coding classifications in which the larger codes included (a) pre-study

abroad choices, (b) how students found out about study abroad, (c) influencers, (d) expectations met, (e) worldviews changed and contrasting values, and (f) what students learned from their experience about themselves.

Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

Qualitative research rigor was embedded in all methodological choices. Credibility was achieved by use of the respondent's own words, consistency in coding, and details of data collection and analysis. Transferability was achieved by two student samples who shared similar experiences. Dependability was achieved by a specific data collection procedure, and constant checking for accuracy (Yin, 2014). Conformability was achieved through triangulation between findings from the interviews and focus groups and thick descriptions. Finally, we addressed researcher bias with full disclosure of our prior history with the field of study abroad for the past 30 years which gives us unique insight that intersected with our data collection and analysis.

Limitations

There are four limitations. First, students were identified by faculty and Center staff and did not represent all students at their home institutions nor those who studied at the Center. Second, data were collected in different time periods. Third, details on institutional type and demographics that could add to a discussion on agency were not collected. Fourth, our own biases of those who conduct research extended to the questions we asked, the theories we used, and the analysis we conducted.

FINDINGS

The data help to answer the three research questions. (1) What do students say about their intent to study abroad? (2) What do students say about their institutional support needs prior to studying abroad? (3) What do students say about their changing sense of being while studying abroad. To maintain confidentiality, students who studied abroad in 2015 are identified as Sa, those who studied abroad in 2018 as Sb, and F is used for faculty or staff.

Intent to Study Abroad

The two groups of students provided insights into how they made their decision to study abroad.

Choice by Design

Many students in both groups had a clear sense of purpose when making their choice to study abroad. Many talked about how higher education itself can help them to achieve their future goals. Higher education was a gateway to advance

knowledge: “I view education as much more than just something that prepares me for my job. I want to be educated ... where you develop your mind and your abilities in the world” (Sa-4). Another student said choice was influenced by how to gain a future career: “I think that’s kind of why I want to be a teacher so I can make learning, I mean, it’s like a cross between wanting to be a teacher and wanting to change the way teaching works especially in America” (Sa-2). Some students shared that their choice to study abroad was to “experience the world beyond my small hometown” (Sb-17), to “gain credits for my major” (Sb-11), and to navigate nontraditional environments:

One of my goals is to climb Everest without oxygen ... it just got me into like thinking of what I can do for the world and what I can do for someone else instead of in a corporation what, how much money I can make or this and that, I just want to be able to put myself out there instead of just having a normal nine-to-five job and just having, to me, a monotonous life. (Sa-5)

Accidental Choice With Influence from Faculty

Students’ choice to study abroad was often accidentally inspired by a faculty member. One student shared that a former professor suggested the program which was “all I needed to know” (Sa-1). Another student chose to study abroad as a result of a chance interaction with a faculty:

I think the deadline was about March 3, and then someone came in two weeks before that and talked about it and my professor, she was like, oh, you know, ... this isn’t gonna be one of those things that you’re gonna be like I wish I didn’t go do that, you’re never gonna think that about this. (Sa-3)

Accidental Choice With Influence from Timing

Another accidental influencer was timing (Amani & Kim, 2019). Students shared that the “right timing” mostly occurred when the student realized that they had free time prior to the next stage of their higher education. One student noted:

I had learned like a couple months before I wasn’t gonna be able to be admitted in the Fall, and then it clicked I was, wait!, I can, I have this time, I have this extra time, I’m gonna do it. And that’s when I decided. (Sa-1)

Another student linked free time during a gap semester as the “right” time:

Nursing programs don’t accept your applications until all your sciences are completed. So, then I found out oh I’m gonna have a gap semester in the Fall and I didn’t really put that together until ... really close to the deadline last semester. I was like, you know what, I have this gap semester, I’ll be able to make back the money ... and it’s a summer

session, so it's only three units, so I applied for that, I literally applied on the last day, the deadline when we could apply. (Sa-5)

Finally, one student shared how unexpected free time allowed introspection of future choices and that "I needed to be open to new experiences, especially when I realized that I had the time to study abroad" (Sb-19).

Introspection About Finances

Students were more concerned about debt from higher education and if the cost is worth the investment more than their concern about the cost of studying abroad itself. None linked studying abroad to contributing to that debt. One student shared:

I think there's a big awareness in young people that does tend to paralyze us, facing what am I gonna do for a living and how am I gonna pay for my education. And I believe those are going hand-in-hand these days and can cause despair that comes with how is this all gonna work. (Sb-10)

Many students talked about how managing their finances helped them to figure out how to afford to study abroad:

People think oh study abroad, you know, it costs so much money. I'm already struggling as it is and for me, I asked Frank [advisor] the same thing. I was like financially what are my options, you know, 'cos I am a student, I work a lot of part-time jobs so that I can go to school and, you know, it is hard to get an extra eighteen hundred dollars. (Sa-1)

Finally, students and faculty had stereotypes about who can afford to study abroad. One faculty reflected that "Those who have money, have an easier time to study abroad because they can pay without going into student debt" (F2). A student shared a similar concern:

There were a couple of us who looked like we had to provide our own funds. The people who didn't have to do that looked like they had sponsorship from their parents especially. I would guess they were better-to-do or of a different socio-economic class than we were, where we had to provide our own funds. I know at least one student tried to do fund-raising and I'm not sure how successful that was but they were able to go on the trip anyway. (Sa3)

Institutional Support Needs Prior to Studying Abroad

Students shared what they thought would have helped their predeparture experiences.

Institution-Based Services

Students linked a lack of institutional coordination and communication between on-campus services as a primary barrier to prepare to study abroad. One student noted the poor communication between the financial aid and the study abroad offices:

think actually the biggest problem was that none of my offices on campus really interrelated that well so my study abroad office and my financial aid office had a big problem communicating with each other. So, I kept running back and forth because I wasn't sure what forms I needed, what information I needed, what form of money I needed, if I needed to do a money order or if I did cash. (Sb-22)

Another student identified a lack of institutional communication as leading to difficulties:

I had to get like six or seven signatures and then it was like a huge list, I had to go to the heads of every single department for the courses I wanted to get transferred and then I had to go to my advisor and then I also had to go to my Dean and then I had to go to this like certain location to get it stamped but when I went to that location they'd lost the papers so I had to do the whole process all over again. But other than that, you know, it was about a two to three-week process. (Sb-14)

Finally, another student shared how effective communication between departments can streamline the process:

Mine was pretty simple. I went to my study abroad advisor, chose a program with the advisor's guidance, and then filled out like one form for my courses, gave it to my advisor, who then signed it. I had to e-mail my Honors Director because one of the classes I'm taking here is supposed to be like Honors level but that was just like a few e-mails but it was like really simple, it was one form, like five minutes filling out. (Sb-16)

Lack of Support From Advisors

Lack of advisor support and misinformation left some students feeling alone in the application process. One student noted that "I felt like I was doing everything by myself" (Sb-12). Another shared that the advisor gave incorrect information and that it "took so many weeks to re-do everything and get it correct" (Sa-7). Another student linked the lack of information as intensifying anxiety that the student was having about studying abroad:

For me and a lot of people this is their first time abroad ... they're nervous about their anxiety abroad and if people are more aware of the resources, like for mental health ... or maybe like a crash course on

passport, customs and like a simplified version of that so people don't as like nervous to like go abroad and flustered. (Sb-18)

Students also reflected that advisors should have counseled students about details on the educational experience, especially the rigor of the class. One student noted that the missed information prevented getting departmental approval:

To get course approval, they were asking me what I was gonna be doing in the class and I was like, I don't know ... and they said we're not gonna approve this if this is just kind of a blow-off course and you're just gonna be hanging out in a class for an hour a day. But it was like my class actually was a lot of work. If I had known that before it would've been easier to get it approved. (Sb-21)

Faculty and Advisor Stereotypes About Students

A lack of support from faculty and advisors is often grounded in barriers that imply that some students cannot, or even should not, study abroad. Many of the faculty and staff comments in this study confirmed that they viewed certain students as lacking cultural and social capital needed for success. One staff member stated:

They're (the students) are incredibly overwhelmed kids ... the group of students that we're working with doesn't really come from a background that understands education, that really values education. (F-4)

Another simply diminished student knowledge and interest in study abroad, "I think a lot of people aren't even aware about it (Study Abroad) and the people that are on campus don't think it's possible" (F-2). Finally, another shared a strategy into which kind of students would be targeted for studying abroad:

I think the [institution] too often operates on kind of a nuts and bolts philosophy and anything that is considered to be not nuts and bolts is dispensable. So we're gonna get either the kids who can really afford to pay and it's not really a problem for them or we're gonna get the kids who pretty much most of their cost of school is being covered by their financial aid from the government and they will struggle, both financially and academically. (F1)

Student Changing Sense of Being While Studying Abroad

Students shared their sensemaking about how they used their agency to make decisions to enhance their study abroad experience.

Learning to Learn About My Own Strengths

Students reflected on how unexpected challenges had a hidden benefit that forced self-introspection and learning. Several students shared that what they

anticipated their needs would be, in the end, did not turn out to be the problem that they expected.

I think for me the biggest thing that I've learned is I'm a lot more capable than I thought I was. Starting out, about a week before I had a lot of anxiety to a point of it was kind of like why am I doing this, why am I going for six weeks to another country, I don't know anyone, and everybody kind of was like you're insane, why are you not going with anyone, why are you going alone. But, I went and I found new strengths that I did not know were there. (Sb-13)

Another student shared that through studying abroad, they learned that they were capability of doing things independently:

I think for me the biggest thing that I've learned is I'm a lot more capable than I thought I was. For the first week, I had a lot of anxiety ... and as I spent more time here and I've made friends like lifelong friends for sure, and excelled in class and just have seen places that I never thought that I would see or even get there by myself, I went to Budapest by myself which blows my mind now, how I did that, but I've just realized that I'm a lot more capable of doing things ... I've just learned that I can do basically whatever I want to do. (Sb9)

Learning to Recognize Joy in Self-Changes

Many students found enjoyment in how they changed during the study abroad program. One student shared that "I did not even realize that everything from accents to other languages was going to be novel to me and that I would enjoy it so much" (Sa-8). Another student shared that out of frustration came a realization that strength comes from within:

that week, when school was done, when I was out of classes, I didn't have to worry about test homework I was like oh my God I'm going to leave the country for the first time and I'm doing it by myself, like I'd be on a plane by myself for the first time and it was gonna be a 9 plus hour flight and, I'd consider myself independent but never that independent, I'd never done anything like that before. So definitely as time led up to the trip I was understanding the reality of the situation a lot more than I did when initially making the decision and I didn't want to hesitate or be scared or change my mind at all but it was definitely like okay this is really happening, I mean you're really gonna do it and maybe it will change your life. And then, all of a sudden it just happened. (S-14)

Finally, another student shares that in learning through difficulties, they learned that independence came from within.

I think being away from home was just generally really difficult, especially the time difference. I couldn't talk to my mom or my friends when I wanted to ... I don't know, wake up really early and I was willing

to stay up late but like randomly during the day I couldn't call them because they were asleep, so that was really hard and something I had to get used to. And it forced me to kind of take care of myself, I guess, not have to depend on other people to comfort me, which was nice. That was a good thing to kinda learn. (Sa6)

Learning to Identify Sociocultural Changes

Students acknowledged that they experienced sociocultural changes while abroad. One student shared that the changes were ones that they could not identify, but just new something was happening to them:

It felt very surreal, ... it wasn't that it was entirely like magical and anything it was just I knew that I had just traveled across the world and then that here I was standing somewhere that wasn't entirely different from where I was standing about 15 hours ago, but I knew it was different and I knew it was nowhere near my home and I think that was the biggest change that I had ever experienced and it was like blew my mind. (Sa8)

Another student shared that even the mundane abroad was different from what they had experienced in their home city:

I'm from a really small town so like coming here and like having everyone's different views of the world in like especially politics and society in general, it really opened it up to me 'cos before like my hometown is very like, everyone has the same beliefs so like being surrounded by people who are like strong women has showed me that like there are people out there like that and they're not all from like small Kansas. (Sb18)

Several students noted changes in a sense of self in terms of how they viewed the world and themselves:

I think being away from something also has given me a renewed view and clarity about who I am. When I go back to the familiar, I will see that while I may be doing the same things, I will be doing them with a new purpose, with a new sense of just how I am able to do now do those things. (Sb10)

Another student noted hope in the changes that they experienced: "I say just like it's this small thing it was a huge thing but to understand how that kind of experience can really influence the way that I see my future is huge for me and it makes me want to go out and to do more" (Sa2). Another student share joy in being more capable of doing things on their own than the student had realized:

I think for me the biggest thing that I've learned is I'm a lot more capable than I thought I was. Starting out, about a week before I had a lot of anxiety to a point of it was kind of like why am I doing this, why am I going for six weeks to another country, I don't know anyone, and

everybody kind of was like you're insane, why are you not going with anyone, why are you going alone. And as I spent more time here and I've made friends like lifelong friends for sure, and excelled in class and just have seen places that I never thought that I would see or even get there by myself, I went to Budapest by myself which blows my mind now, how I did that, but I've just realized that I'm a lot more capable of doing things, I'm not that, I come from a town of 4,000 people so it's like, yeah, I'm your typical small-town country girl and so this just, yeah, I've just learned that I can do basically whatever I want to do. (Sb20)

Finally, another student shared that while studying abroad they developed a critical sense of global citizenship "that brought into perspective how different my life was in the United States were as compared to living within a global context, and that politics, I think, it's a lot, it's a lot easier for people to talk politics here than it is back home. Back home if you talk about politics you get attacked like automatically" (Sa7).

DISCUSSION

The study showed how students used their sensemaking to reflect on how they used their student agency prior to and during study abroad to make sense of their experiences. The comparison of the two unrelated groups of students in different years showed a consistency in experiences and actions. It is important that many of these narratives were similar across institutional types, community colleges, and universities, across time, 2015 and 2018, and across the variety of students that participated.

The barrier/counter-barrier theoretical constructs are useful in answering RQ 1. The barrier construct was mostly utilized by the faculty and staff in their perceptions about perceived limitations of the students. These limitations were linked to student characteristics that the faculty and staff thought set them apart from traditional students. While never mentioning race or social class, the implications are clear when one faculty mentioned that the students "don't come from a background that understand education, that really values education" (F-4). In answering RQ 1 and RQ 2, student narratives showed a counter-barrier context in which they did not acknowledge traditional barriers and instead they demonstrated their use of social/cultural capitals to overcome institutional barriers that complicated their enrollment in a study abroad program. A noted difference in the student cohorts was that those who studied abroad in 2018 were from universities and encountered inconsistent institutional services, even at highly resources universities. The students from 2015 did not mention weak institutional services most likely due to the prescriptive programming at the community college. Both student groups noted how they used their agency to take advantage of accidental opportunities such as free time (Amani & Kim, 2019) and counsel of faculty (Kinzie et al., 2017). Finally, all students knew what they wanted from higher education and purposefully enroll in education abroad to achieve their goals.

Student agency theories show a connection between student agency and a sense of identity that helps to answer RQ 3. All students showed that they understood some of the profound changes that they were experiencing and shared how they used their grit to obtain and use new knowledges (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020), used critical reflection to define deeper changes in their personal identity (Asada, 2019), and used student agency (Zamani-Gallaher et al., 2016) to navigate the world around them. Both groups of students realized that because of their study abroad experience, their worldview changed (Harrell et al., 2017), their sense of cultural intelligence expanded (Nguyen et al., 2018), their sense of self was renewed (Johnson, 2018), and their independence grew (Thomas, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study explored students who studied abroad in two different time periods and despite the different years used their agency in similar ways to influence their decisions to study abroad and to navigate their abroad experience. All students had a sense of purpose of what they want to do within their life and saw higher education and study abroad as an enabler. Most were influenced by similar forces and used their agency to make the choice to study abroad. They used agency to find the strength to transcend weak institutional support services, to take advantage of opportunities that were unexpectedly presented to them, to recognize their personal, social, and critical skills development, and to maximize their overall learning experiences. Finally, both groups of students shared concrete examples of their sensemaking of noted changes in their independence, in their attitude toward others, and in a new worldview. Most importantly, all of the students showed that they used their social and cultural capitals to get things done and that although they may have faced barriers, those were not the most important part of their study abroad story.

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