

## WHAT ROLE DO PEERS PLAY IN A STUDY-ABROAD PROGRAM? THE IMPACT OF THE “SEMESTER AT SEA” PROGRAM.

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*As the world becomes more globally connected, study abroad programs have increased in relevance and have been found to have a positive impact on students' learning and development. Consequently, researchers have studied factors that influence study abroad outcomes, yet, there is limited data on how students' peers impact the study abroad experience. Using the responses of 80 undergraduate students, this qualitative study examined the role of peers during the "Semester at Sea" study abroad voyage. Four major themes emerged from the data suggesting students' peers influenced their experiences abroad in the following ways: 1.) Socio-emotional support; 2.) Personal growth and self-discovery; 3.) Safety and practical support; and 4.) Exposure to culture and diversity. These findings highlight the important role that peers play for students studying abroad, as well as how study abroad programs can be more effectively structured and delivered to enhance peer relationships.*

As the world becomes more interconnected and globalized, study abroad programs have received increased recognition in higher education. The Open Doors Report (2019), released annually by the *Institute of International Education*, indicated that the number of U.S. students engaging in global education experiences is increasing. In 2018-2019, 341,751 U.S. students studied abroad, representing an increase of 2.7% from the previous year (Open Doors Report, 2019). Researchers agree that study abroad programming has a number of positive implications for the learning and development of students who participate (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2016). These programs have been deemed to include a number of high impact practices that

promote students' personal and psychological development (Sanchez, 2012). More specifically, study-abroad programs can increase self-confidence, independence, global competency, open-mindedness, general knowledge scores, world views, cultural sensitivity, and global mindedness (Drexler & Campbell, 2011; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Medora et al., 2020; Stone & Petrick, 2013).

The scholarship has also demonstrated ways that study abroad programs are beneficial for students' future careers. For example, students who have studied abroad are often perceived as being more prepared to work efficiently within the global community and more likely to be familiar with issues related to cultural diversity and intercultural relationships (Harder et al., 2015). Scholars have also found that students who engage in study abroad programs are more likely to be offered higher salaries, and there is a greater possibility of attaining international employment (Kronholz & Osborn, 2016). Moreover, study abroad participants show significant gains in interpersonal skills (Bretag & van der Veen, 2017; Williams, 2005), which are required for all professions.

In an effort to develop impactful study abroad experiences, scholars have investigated the types of students who engage in study abroad programs (Green et al., 2015), how students effectively prepare for global education experiences (Medora et al., 2019), and best practices for faculty in developing and leading study abroad courses (Medora & Roy, 2017). Overall, the literature in this field has highlighted several factors (e.g. curriculum, program structure, length of trip, student characteristics) that can shape how students experience their time abroad. However, less attention has been given to the ways in which students' peers influence the study abroad experience (Jessup-Anger & Aragones, 2013). Considering the important role that peers can play in learning, especially as it relates to the exposure to diverse ways of seeing the world and processing novel experiences, the current study aims to expand this area of research by examining the specific ways that social networks and peer relationships contribute to global education experiences.

## **Relevant Literature**

### *Factors that Impact Study Abroad Experiences*

Previous researchers have published a robust body of literature

detailing the vast benefits of study abroad (e.g., Drexler & Campbell, 2011; Kronholz & Osborn, 2016). Yet, it is important to note that the positive outcomes highlighted in the scholarship are not an absolute consequence of participating in a study abroad program. There are a number of mediating factors that can determine how students experience study abroad programs and whether a study abroad program contributes to positive student outcomes. For example, the level and type of student preparation that occurs before the excursion is one factor that has been highlighted as influential on the study abroad experience (Goldoni, 2015; Medora & Roy, 2017). In addition, the curriculum design and structure of the study abroad program has been found to influence student outcomes while abroad. For example, scholars have noted that the integration of high impact practices (HIP) during study abroad positively influence student learning because HIP's encourage students to make connections between learning and real-life experiences, require more of a time investment from students and expect that students have meaningful interactions and communication with their peers (Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Kuh, 2008). Moreover, Cotten and Thompson (2017) found that the integration of HIPs during study abroad (e.g. engaging with people different than themselves, service learning projects, and applying information to real life contexts) resulted in positive implications for students' personal and academic development. Overall, though research has examined the mediating factors of student preparation and high impact curriculum design on the benefits of study abroad, the role of peers is an area that deserves more research attention. .

### *The Role of Peers in Learning and Development*

Research in higher education suggests that peers play an integral part in student engagement and can enhance learning (Lundberg, 2003). Data also suggests that having educationally related peer relationships can increase the investment that a student makes in their learning (Lundberg, 2003; Tinto, 1998). For example, Lundberg (2003) indicates that when peers complete coursework in groups (e.g. study groups, tutoring sessions), they spend more time on their work and have higher levels of learning compared to students who are not involved in such groups. Moreover, based on the strong contribution that peers make to college student learning, scholars

have argued for increased structuring of educational spaces around peer relationships (Lundberg, 2003; Tinto, 1998).

Furthermore, theories from cognitive science support the role that peers play in learning and development. Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective is one such theory that points to the importance of peer relationships in moving beyond one's current understanding of a phenomenon. Vygotsky (1978) argues that previous experiences and knowledge are critical when making sense of new situations or present experiences; therefore, peers provide an avenue for bringing diverse skills and new knowledge to situations for improved learning outcomes. This perspective also suggests that learning is an interdependent process that should encourage the discovery of new information through interactions within one's environment, which includes the teacher as well as other students. Vygotsky's (1978) work sees peer interactions as dynamic social connections that can transform the ways students think (Cole & Wertsch, 1996).

Developmental theories also emphasize the ways in which peer relationships can spur cognitive growth (Piaget, 1971; Ruble, 1994). For example, Piaget argues that equality in relationships (e.g. peer to peer) and different perspectives are critical for intellectual and moral development (Piaget, 1971). When students are asked to discuss and argue their perspectives with others on an equal basis, for example their peers, they are more likely to do the cognitive and emotional work that is required to understand how other people think and feel (Gurin et al., 2002). Whereas, in learning environments where students are not forced to confront the shortcomings of their point of view with other students, they are likely to conform to the perspectives defined by an authority figure (e.g. teacher). Therefore, peers can play an important role in learning and personal development especially as it relates to diversity, global mindedness, and democratic citizenship (Gurin et al., 2002).

Although Piaget did not speak specifically to the role of peers in global education experiences, his theoretical tenants of "discontinuity" and "discrepancy" make the case for the unique kinds of learning that could occur from study abroad, specifically those experiences that are steeped in building peer relationships with others from diverse backgrounds. More specifically, when

students encounter circumstances or individuals for which they have no current script, or when the current context challenges their past experiences, it produces the opportunity to think and behave in new ways (Gurin et al., 2002). Along these lines, we believe that peer relationships during study abroad can create this “disequilibrium” which can result in cognitive development and an appreciation for diverse ways of thinking.

Gurin et al.’s (2002) research with undergraduate students further confirms the importance of peers in learning about diversity. These scholars examined the implications of teaching diversity within the classroom setting, as well as within “informal” interactions among diverse peers on student academic (e.g. critical thinking, motivation, and engagement) and social development (e.g. perspective-taking, citizenship engagement, racial and cultural understanding). Their findings suggest that diversity should not only be integrated into course curriculum, but more efforts need to be focused on the types of experiences students have with peers from diverse backgrounds outside of the classroom as well. More specifically, Gurin et al. (2002) states

Genuine interaction goes far beyond mere contact and includes learning about difference in background, experience, and perspectives, as well as getting to know one another individually in an intimate enough way to discern common goals and personal qualities. In this kind of interaction— in and out of the classroom — diverse peers will learn from each other (p.336).

This corresponds with the work of social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954), who proposed meaningful interpersonal interaction as one of the most effective ways to address racial prejudice. Study abroad programs offer the kinds of formal and informal educational spaces for peers to learn with and from one another about diverse ways of living and diverse ways of thinking about the world. From a sociocultural lens, it is imperative to not only look at how faculty leaders impact learning but it is equally important to examine the role of peer relationships in the learning and development that occurs during the study abroad experience. Yet, when we look at the body of research on study abroad, there is a bias towards a top down approach to learning. In other words, studies focus more on how faculty leaders influence student outcomes rather than on

how peers contribute to student development and learning while abroad.

### *The Role of Peers in Study Abroad*

Though research on peers and study abroad is limited (Jessup-Anger & Aragonés, 2013), there are a few studies that have explored how peers influence students' decision to participate in study abroad. For example, according to Zhai and Scheer (2002), 33% of students reported that knowing someone who had previously studied abroad had a positive influence on their decision to do so. Likewise, Kasravi and Fry (2009) found that 61.3% of ethnic minority-students in their study reported that former students were influential in their decision to study abroad. Furthermore, Medora et al. (2019) surveyed how students prepared for the Semester at Sea study abroad voyage. A majority of the students indicated that they discussed preparation plans with peers who had prior study abroad experiences. In other research by Kitsantas (2004), "socializing" was among the three most common reasons influencing students' decisions to study abroad (Harrell et al., 2017).

Although limited, there are also a few studies that address peer relationships and study abroad. Research conducted by DeGraaf et al. (2013) found that the development of peer relationships during study abroad had immediate and long-term implications for their participants. More specifically, the respondents reported that they kept in touch with friends made during their study abroad trip for several years after returning. The participants also indicated that these continued relationships prolonged their intercultural interests and supported continued cross-cultural learning. Another study conducted by Jessup-Anger and Aragonés (2013) examined the role of peer relationships in a cohort of students participating in a short-term study abroad program. Data revealed that students spent a significant amount of time thinking about their peer relationships as well as their role in the cohort. These students reported acquiring knowledge by looking to their peers and observing others within the host country. Overall, these studies concluded that peer relationships during study abroad can have positive implications for students during and after the experience is over. In fact, students in Jessup-Anger and Aragonés's (2013)

study indicated that they learned more from their peers than they did from the host country.

However, contrary to research highlighting the positive impact of peers on study abroad experiences, there is research that suggests peer relationships can be correlated with risky behaviors as well, while abroad. For example, a study that investigated the relationship between drinking behaviors and cultural adjustment among a group of U.S. students studying abroad in Italy found that risky alcohol use was linked to social interactions with their peers (Mitchell et al., 2016). Similarly, Marcantonio et al., (2019) found that students in their short-term study abroad program were more likely to engage in risky alcohol use if their peers were drinking heavily. Mitchell et al. (2016) proposed that American students who have challenges adjusting to the host culture might be more likely to surround themselves with U.S. peers, which can reinforce risky behaviors.

Overall, research on the role of peers in study abroad can provide deeper insight into student learning outcomes as it relates to global learning experiences. Unlike in traditional classroom learning environments, students spend a significant amount of time living and learning together, all while exploring the novel environments of host countries together. Also, based on the available theoretical (Piaget, 1971; Vygotsky, 1979) and empirical data (DeGraff et al., 2013), peers have the power to shape the learning experiences of their classmates. Although studying abroad can be an exciting and positive experience, it can also be a stressful endeavor (Bierwiazzonek et al., 2017). Time away from home and exposure to new customs and cultural practices might result in challenges for some students. Consequently, social networks might play a key role in mitigating some of this unease, resulting in a more positive experience for students while abroad. Yet, some research shows that peers can increase students' risky behaviors while on study abroad programs (Marcantonio et al., 2019). Thus, we intend to further explore how peers influence students' study abroad experiences during the Semester at Sea (SAS) program.

The published research on SAS has mainly focused on how the program influences personal growth in participants (Caton & Santos, 2009). For example, there are some studies that have looked at student outcomes like global mindedness (Dukes, 2006; McCabe,

1994; Medora et al., 2020), while another study examined how students prepare for their SAS experience (Medora et al., 2019). Overall, the results of these studies highlight the beneficial implications of SAS, however, none of these studies have examined the role of peer relationships on study abroad experiences.

### *Objectives of the Study*

Existing research supports the role that peers play in a students' learning and development (e.g. Lundberg, 2003). However, the study abroad literature traditionally focuses on the ways that faculty sponsors promote the program, the curriculum development, and program structure influence students' experiences abroad, while the impact of peers on these learning experiences is given far less attention. Therefore, using qualitative data collected during a 2017 *Semester at Sea (SAS) Springvoyage*, the present study will explore the specific ways that peers influenced the study abroad experiences of students. Overall, we believe that the findings from this investigation will add to the understanding of factors that influence study abroad student outcomes. This information may also have implications for the preparation that students receive prior to study abroad, curriculum development, program structure, and the debriefing that might occur throughout and after the study abroad excursion.

## **Methods**

### *Procedures and Participants*

The present study took place on a 2017 Semester at Sea (SAS) Spring voyage where the students spent a semester visiting and studying in Mexico, Hawaii, Japan, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, India, South Africa, Ghana, Morocco, and Germany. SAS is a semester-long study abroad program that takes place on a cruise ship that has been transformed into a floating university setting. It has a library, a student union, a fitness center, two dining halls, swimming pools, a basket-ball arena, and music room. On each study abroad voyage, approximately 600 students, 200 crew members, and 30 faculty members spend the semester visiting 10 to 11 countries across five continents. The SAS program aims to provide "real life" experiences to promote cultural immersion,



cultural diversity, experiential learning, service-learning, and a sense of international community. Additional information on the SAS program can be found their website (<https://www.semesteratsea.org/contact/about-us>).

The SAS program is different from other study abroad programs offered by universities because the program incorporates visits to several different countries. An additional unique aspect of the SAS program is that students represent numerous universities across the world and therefore do not know each other prior to embarking on the voyage. For the duration of the four months, students live in close physical proximity to one another and complete numerous activities together, such as studying, having their meals in a common area, attending lectures in the student union, and participating in competitive events (i.e., SAS Olympics, talent shows, essay competitions).

The data analyzed for this study was obtained using a questionnaire that was administered at the end of the SAS experience. The third author was a faculty member on the SAS voyage and recruited participants by requesting permission from six other faculty members to distribute the questionnaire in their social science courses on the ship. The purpose of the study was thoroughly explained to the students and they were assured confidentiality and anonymity. Furthermore, this study was conducted with the approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and permission was obtained from the Academic Dean of the SAS program. The questionnaire was comprised of questions to gather information on participants' race/ethnicity, age, major, GPA, past international travel experiences, as well as multiple open-ended questions, one of which asked students to indicate the ways that peers influenced their study abroad experiences.

Eighty college students studying abroad on the SAS voyage participated in this study. In terms of race, most of the participants self-identified as White ( $n = 52$ , 71%). The racial make-up of the remaining students in the sample included 11 percent identifying as Latina(o), 8 percent as Asian, while some students indicated that they were two or more races ( $n = 5$ ). There were also two participants who identified as African-American, and one student who stated that they were Pacific Islander. The students in the study were between 18 - 23 years of age ( $M = 20.23$ ,  $SD 1.09$ ) and

most of the participants were female ( $n = 63$ , 87%). Furthermore, a large number of the participants (60%) reported being born in the United States and all participants indicated having travel experience abroad. Most of the study participants were in their junior year of study ( $n = 34$ , 47%), while 16 students were sophomores (22%) and 15 (21%) were seniors.

### **Analysis of Data**

The data consisted of 80 short answer responses that described student perspectives on how their peers influenced their study abroad experiences. The research team, consisting of three members, coded the data using qualitative content analysis techniques. A code was assigned to each comment based on meaning conveyed in students' responses (Eisner, 1998). Multiple codes were assigned to comments if more than one idea was present in the response. The first stage of data analysis consisted of the research team working independent from one another to identify themes present in the data. Then, the researchers compared their coding of the data. When there was agreement across all three researchers, the theme was adopted. When discrepancies emerged, the researchers discussed their coding, until consensus was reached.

### **Results**

Four major themes emerged from the data for the question "*How did your peers influence your study abroad experience?*" Participant responses were overwhelmingly positive on the impact of their peers. Overall, peers influenced their classmates in the following ways: 1.) Provided socio-emotional support; 2.) Encouraged personal growth and self-discovery; 3.) Provided safety and practical support; and 4.) Provided exposure to culture and diversity. Additionally, a fifth theme emerged that reflected how peers did not support or did not have a positive impact on participants. Details for each theme are described below. Table 1 presents an overview of participant responses from each theme, including a description and select responses to demonstrate main themes.

#### **Provided Socio-Emotional Support**

The most common theme reported by participants pertained to

socio-emotional support that was provided by their peers. Many participants mentioned that their peers made their study abroad experience “fulfilling,” “fun,” and “so much better.” Participants also discussed how their peers provided companionship during their voyage. For example, one participant explained, “I was able to compare and reflect on experiences with people who understand study abroad programs. It made the trip a lot of fun.”

In addition to providing companionship and fun, participants also referenced that their peers provided social support. Many comments mentioning social support provided by peers were directly linked to the challenging nature of study abroad. For example, participants responded, “My peers helped me cope with the intellectual and emotional challenges of travelling” and “They helped me to make good memories, supported my ups and downs, and experienced in-country activities with me.”

### **Encouraged Personal Growth and Self-Discovery**

The second most common theme that emerged pertained to peers impacting participants’ growth and self-discovery. These responses referenced how peers helped participants gain new and unique perspectives. For instance, one participant explained, “I enjoyed being able to relate to my peers from their experiences but also learn from what was different. They really helped me to change my perspective on life and the world in a good way.” Another student mention how their peers helped them learn about themselves, “I traveled with a lot of different people and I’m glad I did. I learned a lot about myself as a traveler depending on the people I was with.”

Responses also suggest that peers positively impacted students’ growth and learning. One participant discusses this growth by saying, “Having someone to experience it all with made me bolder in part and more comfortable and be able to devote myself fully to my experiences.” Similarly, another participant references their academic gains by saying “They challenged me to learn outside of the classroom and apply what I’ve learned in class to my experiences in country.”

Additionally, students offered that their interpersonal skills were further developed by their peer relationships. For example, one participant stated that their peer relationships resulted in

“Learning to work in a group.” While another student said that their peers “Made me more outgoing, sociable, and have an open mind” and another participant indicated that because of their peers they experienced “Active listeners and deep conversations and learned new perspectives.”

### **Provided Safety and Practical Support**

The third theme that emerged relates to peers helping to ensure safety and provide practical support to the participants while traveling. Many students discussed how their peers ensured that they stayed safe while exploring the port cities. For example, one student articulated that their peers: “Helped me to take more chances, but also helped me to stay safe.” In addition to encouraging safety, peers also provided practical support to help participants navigate the port cities. One participant explained, “My friends on the ship were able to help me through tough travels and figuring out navigating in the country.” Likewise, another participant noted, “The friends I made on the ship, helped me have the best experience possible. They helped me feel safe and organized so that we could experience everything we wanted.”

### **Provided Exposure to Culture & Diversity**

The final theme from the data pertains to participants’ peers providing them additional experiences with culture and diversity during their study abroad program. Some participants mention that their peers being from different backgrounds benefitted their learning experiences, such as “My roommates were from Norway and Singapore, we had great conversations and made comparisons to the US” and “My peers brought diversity and intriguing perspectives on the various perspectives and topics.” As one explains, a unique benefit of their study abroad program was the diversity in student participants:

“My peers have been my biggest blessing. They absolutely made my study abroad experience. Being able to open my world to students from over 35 countries and learning about people and cultures vastly different than my own has completely changed my perspective.”

### **Peers Had No Impact or a Negative Impact**

In addition to the four main themes that emerged in the data, five

participants noted that their peers had either a negative impact or no impact on their study abroad experience. Participants who responded that their peers had a negative impact commented that their peers “hindered” their learning, “discouraged” them, and were there “for the wrong reasons.”

### **Discussion**

The objective of this study was to investigate the influence of peers on study abroad experiences during a SAS voyage. The data demonstrated that peers played an integral role in the study abroad experience across a number of domains. Previous research has highlighted both the positive (DeGraaf et al., 2013) and negative (Marcantonio et al., 2019) role peers play in study abroad. An overwhelming majority of participants in this study indicated that their peers played a positive role, however, there were a few students who reported that their peers had a negative impact or no impact on their experience at all. There were also several students who indicated that the impact that their peers had on them would stay with them long after the program was over. The most popular theme was that of peers providing “socio-emotional support.”

Our findings support previous research (Bretag & van der Veen, 2017) regarding the connection between study abroad participation and increased interpersonal skills. Many students in the present study indicated that through their peer relationships, they were able to develop key interpersonal skills like being “active listeners,” becoming “more outgoing and sociable,” and engaging in “deep conversations.” Our data reveal there is learning that occurs through peer-social bonds. If students are solely in classroom settings, they may miss opportunities for learning through peer-to-peer interactions. Students in our sample had ample opportunities to socialize with their peers through social activities at night (e.g., SAS Olympics, ice-breakers, happy hour, host family dinners). It is also important to note that the strong peer bonds evident in our data may reflect the structure of this study abroad program and their targeted attention to bringing students together every night. In other words, study abroad programs that do not focus on cultivating students’ social connections may not have the same impact for peer relationships while abroad.

Due to the key role that peers played in the study abroad

experiences of our participants, faculty and study abroad program organizers should pay particular attention to supporting students in the development of positive peer relationships at program orientation meetings and during their program. It is imperative for faculty leaders and program administrators to recognize the importance of peer relationships for study abroad outcomes and that students' relationships with their peers be prioritized when preparing students for programs abroad. Our findings also highlight the importance of study abroad programs shifting their focus beyond that of academic work to material that fosters relationship building and interpersonal skills.

A few participants reported that their peers negatively impacted their study abroad experience. These negative responses may be due to the diversity of students partaking in the study abroad program. Students were from various countries and cultural backgrounds, which may have presented differences that select students were not able to overcome. Some students, particularly the ones who expressed positive feedback on how their peers introduced them to culture and diversity, may have been better prepared to overcome these differences. Other students may have been more challenged by the cultural distances that existed between themselves and other students. One student responded with a noteworthy comment, indicating that they learned "how important peers and friends are because I did not make any close connections in the program." This comment suggests that even students who did not have strong social connections with peers on the study abroad program recognize in retrospect the importance of these peer relations.

Future research should continue to explore the role of peers in study abroad. The results from the present study provide a strong foundation for the development of quantitative assessments of how peer relationships contribute to study abroad outcomes. Specifically, the creation of a scale to assess peer relationships would allow for rigorous statistical analysis of how peer relationships are connected to student outcomes like cultural sensitivity, global mindedness, development of empathy, and multiculturalism which are deemed critical outcomes by study abroad experts. Quantitative analyses can also provide more information on the factors that support or discourage positive peer relationships during study abroad

excursions. Additionally, scholarship that further examines the specific ways that peers influence personal, academic, social, intellectual, and professional growth of one another can be a useful line of research. Furthermore, unpacking some of the challenges that are presented by peer relationships during study abroad would also yield useful information for orientation purposes, program and curriculum development, and program debriefing. It would also be informative to explore how peers may have different influences based on the type of study abroad program. The program studied in the present investigation was a long-term study abroad and therefore peers may have been more central to the experiences; therefore, exploring how peers influence learning and personal development in short term study abroad is also warranted. Lastly, the long-term impact of peer relationships made during study abroad should be investigated, as previous research suggests these relationships can have an enduring influence on the personal development of students (DeGraaf et al., 2013).

### **Implications and Suggestions for Faculty Leaders**

Findings highlight the need for faculty leaders to support students in developing positive peer relationships during study abroad. The following suggestions are presented for faculty leaders and study abroad curriculum based on findings from the present study. These suggestions are also guided by Vygotskian and Piagetian perspectives that emphasize the social aspects of acquiring knowledge and collaborative learning.

First, study abroad faculty leaders can foster skill development around interpersonal interactions to support peer relationships. Activities and curriculum that help students build strong interpersonal skills, especially with cross-cultural relationships in mind, is critical for study abroad programs. Specifically, faculty leaders can incorporate exercises into their curriculum that promote active listening techniques, as well as opportunities to practice conflict resolution strategies. Faculty leaders should also highlight communication differences across cultures. Detailing how communication and relationships differ between collectivist and individualist cultures may prepare students to effectively manage different communication methods they encounter with diverse peers. This curriculum is especially important in the case of SAS,

as student participants are from diverse cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds.

Faculty leaders should also provide a foundation for students to build early connections that positively impact the learning students experience through peer relations. For short-term study abroad programs, faculty leaders can hold classes or social functions for the students prior to departing on the study abroad voyage. Faculty leaders can also provide activities that are structured in groups to promote the formation of social bonds, such as culturally grounded ice-breaker activities.

Second, faculty leaders should consider incorporating student reflection assignments on peer relations throughout the study abroad experience. These reflection activities may be useful in helping students recognize the importance of these connections and the ways that they can maximize these relationships during and after their voyage. For instance, at the beginning of the program, faculty leaders can have students consider why strong peer bonds may enhance their study abroad experience. Throughout the middle of the study abroad program, faculty can check-in with students on how peers are or are not supporting their experience and have students set goals to increase connections with peers. At the end of the program, faculty leaders could have students reflect on how they may want to stay in touch with peers after the program concludes.

Third, faculty leaders can include activities in the curriculum for peer collaborative learning in the host country. Opportunities for social interaction that are outside the classroom setting should not be overlooked. For example, when navigating the host country, faculty leaders could divide students into small groups, and provide them with a required arrival time at a destination address. This activity would allow students to use teamwork to navigate public transportation, communicate with country locals, and problem-solve together to find their way to the destination, all while immersing themselves in the host country. These activities may enhance student bonding.

Finally, faculty leaders can incorporate academic group work in the host country. Faculty could have students develop group presentations or projects that fit in the study abroad curriculum. These group projects would allow students to work together, but provide opportunities for them to apply content they



learn to the host country. For instance, students could design small service learning projects to complete together. They could also develop short workshops to delivery to a group of local students.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

Although the present study addressed a gap in the study abroad research, this study is not without limitations. Because the data used for the study came from students' written narratives, the researchers were not able to further probe the participants to expand upon their responses as they would have been able to do in a focus group setting. This resulted in limited details about certain peer experiences. Another limitation is based in the homogeneity of the participants in the study, therefore limiting the generalizability of findings. Although the students who participated in the SAS voyage were from diverse ethnic backgrounds and various countries, the students who engaged in the present study were mostly White, in their early to mid-20s, belonged to the middle-or-upper socioeconomic class, and were female. This is a general challenge for study abroad research as most students who participate in programs tend to come from higher socio-economic background and are usually of European decent (Lewis & Gould, 2016). Moreover, the sample that participated in the study did not include all of the students who were on the SAS voyage that semester. Therefore, it is possible that students who completed the questionnaire for the present study had unique characteristics that may not have been reflective of the entire student population.

Overall, our findings expand the understanding of factors that support positive study abroad experiences. Most importantly, our work addressed a gap in the research by demonstrating the multiple ways that peer relationships impacted how students experienced their time abroad. This study also supports the importance of peer learning and the key role that peer relationships play in personal development. Finally, the findings presented here can inform study abroad program development, curriculum design, learning activities, and future research on study abroad outcomes.

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**Table 1. The Impact of Peers on Study Abroad Experiences Themes, Definitions, and Exemplars**

Theme	Definition	Exemplar
Socio-emotional Support	Descriptions of the various ways peers provided emotional and social support.	"They gave me support when needed. Active listeners and deep conversations..." "My peers helped me cope with the intellectual and emotional challenges of travelling." "They helped me to stay positive, go with the flow, and have fun." "They helped me with smooth travelling, make tough days go by faster, and enjoy the experience much more."
Personal Growth and Self-development	Descriptions of the ways that peers contributed the personal growth and development of students.	"They challenged me to learn outside of the classroom and apply what I've learned in class to my experiences in country." "Getting to share the experience with peers was a journey of growth for all of us together." "They made me feel confident and comfortable while trying new things." "Some pushed me into new experiences. They also helped me to reflect."
Safety and Practical Support	Descriptions of the ways peers provided advice on how to approach travel and maintain safety.	"The friends I made on the ship, helped me have the best experience possible. They helped me feel safe and organized..." "My friends on the ship were able to help me through tough travels and figuring out navigating in the country." "Helped me to take more chances, but also helped me to stay safe." "My friends were encouraging me and made me feel safe."
Exposure to Culture and Diversity	Descriptions about the ways peers exposed students to perspectives on diversity and culture.	"My roommates were from Norway and Singapore, we had great conversations and made comparisons to the US." "My peers brought diversity and intriguing perspectives on

the various perspectives and topics.”  
“My peers have been my biggest blessing. They absolutely made my study abroad experience. being able to open my world to students from over 35 countries and learning about people and cultures vastly different than my own has completely changed my perspective.” “They gave me a great background of different cultures.”

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