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Reentry and Reflection for Study Abroad Returnees at the University of South Carolina

Paige N. Pierce

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REENTRY AND REFLECTION FOR STUDY ABROAD RETURNEES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH CAROLINA

By

Paige N. Pierce

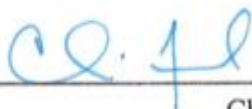
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Approved:



Magdalena Grudzinski-Hall, PhD
Director of Thesis



Chrissie Faupel, MA
Second Reader

Steve Lynn, Dean
For South Carolina Honors College

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Summary

Following my study abroad experience in Salamanca, Spain I struggled with reverse culture shock and the reentry process. I did not engage in reflective processes or activities for integrating my experience into my life back at the University of South Carolina. In my initial meeting with Dr. Magdalena Grudzinski-Hall, my thesis director, she pointed out how much I lamented over reentry and the effect it had on me rather than my time abroad itself. I was originally planning to create a guidebook for students preparing to go abroad, however she encouraged me to pursue the avenue of reentry instead: conduct a research project on what happens when USC students like myself come back and do not know how to express themselves with their “new identity”.

Reentry is less implemented in the field of study abroad education compared to predeparture preparation. This could be a result of multiple factors including lack of manpower, difficulty to reach returnees, and limited research on best practices. Currently, USC offers several integrative learning and outlets for reflection that returnees may benefit from. These methods are all voluntary and most do not directly target students returning from abroad (e.g. contain reflection components that study abroad returnees can use as platforms to speak on their experience).

Data for this study was collected through interviews with USC staff and faculty who were considered by myself and my directors to be integral in the campus’s education abroad initiative. The data was found by coding the transcribed interviews based on a legend of common themes found across all six interviews.

A general consensus from interviews was that purposeful reflection or an organized discussion panel following students’ return to USC from their experience abroad is highly

valuable. It was encouraged that more mechanisms be made available for returnees and these be heavily campaigned for to increase attendance. Interviewees also shared an aspiration to make reentry a larger program at USC as a contribution not only to the students but also to the campus initiative to internationalize.

Abstract

Reentry is a growing practice in education abroad programming, however it remains significantly less developed than pre-departure preparations despite the increasing numbers of U.S. students going abroad in college. This project is a qualitative study looking at how the University of South Carolina (USC) addresses reentry for its students returning from their education abroad. Faculty and staff from six departments at USC were interviewed for data collection on the topic of reentry for the returned student. These stakeholders were chosen based on their professional positions and involvement in internationalization and study abroad education. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and manually coded by the primary investigator. Five key themes were identified: Value of integrative learning following an experience abroad, acceptance and encouragement of diversity, personal growth and development following an experience abroad, campaign for reentry and studying abroad at USC, internationalization of USC. Based on the data findings and their comparative results to the existing literature, three conclusions were reached: 1. Reflection stimulated through integrative learning is a key tool in a returnee's personal growth during their reentry, 2. integrative learning is a growing practice at USC that can be used as a driver for reentry, and 3. existing reentry mechanisms at USC are varied but require more publicity and options for greater participation.

Keywords and Definitions

Reentry

“The continuum of experience and behaviors which are encountered when an individual returns to a place of origin after having been immersed in another context for a period of time sufficient to cause some degree of mental and emotional adjustment prior to optimal functioning in the ‘new’ environment” (Westwood, Lawrence, & Paul, 1986)

Reverse culture shock

“The process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one's own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time” (Gaw, 1999)

Returnee

“An education abroad participant who has returned to the home institution after completion of her or his program” (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2011).

Integrative learning

An understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus (Excerpted with permission from *Assessing Outcomes and Improving Achievement: Tips and tools for Using Rubrics*, edited by Terrel L. Rhodes. Copyright 2010 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities).

Internationalization at home

Efforts to internationalize a university's home campus so that its students are exposed to international learning without leaving the home campus (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2011).

Intercultural competency

The ability to relate and communicate effectively when individuals involved in the interaction do not share the same culture, ethnicity, language, or other common experiences (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2011).

Introduction

In the Spring of 2015, I studied abroad in Salamanca, Spain for four months. Like many before me: I had departed from my sphere of comfort and dove headfirst into unfamiliar territory, my thoughts, perceptions, behaviors, and interests were almost entirely new. I returned to the University of South Carolina with what can only be described as a transformed identity. My family, friends, and myself bore witness to these changes, but were less capable of pinpointing them.

In the semesters preceding my experience in Spain, I considered myself to have ethical principles and morals that resonated progressiveness, tolerance, and overall objective understanding on topics of controversy. In retrospect though, my scope of sociopolitical cognizance had not extended much beyond the environment I was raised in. While I was fortunate enough to travel before I started college, it was solely within the country I was born in; I lacked the experience of outside cultures to challenge me. Returning, my perceptions about politics, morals, and even humanity were significantly expanded upon. Subject matter I formerly viewed as black and white transitioned into a broad spectrum. Grey areas in the middle became integral to my interpretations, and I was ashamed at myself for not having seen them this way before. Questions regarding social or political topics I answered while consciously making an effort to view them equitably. After my four months in Spain, I became truly aware of the vastness of the world.

Though the transition from high school to university had a significant effect on my behaviors and ideologies, studying abroad pushed my critical thinking, logic, and sense of empathy much further than I could have anticipated—a common theme seen in the interviews

from Root & Ngampornchai's article (2012). I do not know if I would hold the same views I currently do, nor be in the same major of study.

Shortly after returning to the States, I switched my degree from Exercise Science to Public Health as a direct result of my experience in Spain. I was a firsthand witness to the healthcare systems of Spain and other countries in the European Union. This involvement stimulated my desire to contribute effectual change to the U.S. public health sector. I developed a passion for the social and political issues public health addresses following discussions and disagreements with classmates of mine in Spain. These events spurred me to transition from a degree focused on macro-levels of change.

Much of these transitions I experienced were a result of the people I surrounded myself with in Spain. My friends from abroad and I acknowledge that we reference our lives on the timeline continuum of “before I went abroad”, “when I was abroad”, and “after I came back from being abroad”. Our newfound identities were not only outlined by internal factors, but external ones as well—time and place. This whiplash effect of the unfamiliar becoming the familiar, then back again following my return was one of many contributing factors to the identity struggle I faced during my reentry process.

Reverse culture shock was an innocuous, three-word phrase to me before I actually returned to the United States. I had heard it was more difficult to overcome than culture shock for most students; while I believed this, I underestimated the effect it would have on me. I had been plucked from my blissful lifestyle in Salamanca where I was challenged daily to communicate in another language and participate in a new set of cultural norms. I felt lost and uncomfortable in my hometown that summer. Once my fall semester at the University of South Carolina started again, I immediately applied to become ambassador for the program I studied

abroad with, and relished any conversation with hopeful study abroad students. I worked with the university's Study Abroad Office during the international students' orientation, exclusively listened to Spanish music, and organized a scrapbook of my memories from Spain. I grasped at any chance to tether my identity to the one I developed abroad. My repeated sentence starter, "when I was abroad", became so cliché that I started to bore myself as I told and retold anecdotes to anyone willing to listen. Like many before me, my academic and work responsibilities gradually took precedence; I was slowly letting myself drift from the activities I felt connected me to my international experience. The divergent side of myself I had transitioned to was slipping away. Despite my attempts to maintain the culture unconsciously fostered within myself, it was dissipating as my semester in Salamanca became more distant to me. I was losing the ability to articulate what my experience had done for me and how I was cultivating my new identity.

Reflection on my education in Spain, while painfully nostalgic, became critical to my understanding of the reformed self I developed there and continued to develop after returning. My hope is that this senior thesis may be a tool for education abroad alumni to utilize their identities towards not only their personal benefit, but also the benefit of the University of South Carolina. I also hope to find, through interview with key faculty stakeholders on campus, what responsibility USC has to its returnees, and what responsibility these students have in turn to the university.

Literature Review

The Identity Crisis of a Returnee

The universally understood problem and potentially unanswerable question returnees are plagued with after spending time abroad is the disposal or conciliation of values and norms acquired from their cross-cultural experience (McGrath 1964, Haines 2013, Pritchard 2011, Constantinian, Guinyard, Hermosisima, Lehman & Webb 2008). McGrath (1964) identifies this confusion to be embodied as a “marginal man. . . [who is] in transition between cultures”. According to Haines (2013), the returnee experiences an internal strife from their purposeful, but ephemeral journey. Reentry marks a returning to their home and departure from their newfound home, and thus causes a disruption in their sense of time. Most returnees, whether aware of it or not, seem to associate their identity with geography and time (Haines, 2013). According to Pritchard (2011), these identity shifts seem to be more summative than substitutive, and the individual fosters “multiple cultural identities”.

In a study by Pitts (2016), a common theme amongst returnee participants was their discovery of an authentic version of themselves in their host countries. Haines (2013) notes that “...returnees are uncertain whether they wish to reveal themselves as the new people they have become or the people they used to be before they left.” Returnees contextualize their cultural experiences, both abroad and returning home (Constantinian, Guinyard, Hermosisima, Lehman & Webb, 2008); a connecting thought between Haines (2013), and Pritchard’s (2011) respective theories of the sojourner’s self-identification regarding their surroundings, and the returnee’s multifaceted identity. Constantinian, Guinyard, Hermosisima, Lehman, and Webb (2008) propose that individuals who engage in experiences abroad foster a sense of awareness “that there is no essential or fundamental self found anywhere”. According to Kim (2006), the

development of one's identity has been oversimplified, with arguments that transformations are generally polarized into forms of pluralism or assimilation. Americans, who make up a country built on immigration, often embody a position coined 'integrationism', which merges the two conditions (Kim 2006). Returnees embody a fluidity which juxtaposes attempts to maintain human migration as a rigid systematic operation (Haines 2013).

In Gray and Savicki's 2015 study, a common theme found from returned student surveys is the stress of reestablishing themselves at their home university. It is difficult to discern whether or not this is a result of the start of a new semester, however it can be assumed that reentry has an effect on students' stressors (Gray & Savicki, 2015). La Brack (2013) explains that a struggle in returning versus leaving rests in the idea of:

... home-culture-as-familiar/foreign-culture- as-new-and-exciting dichotomy. Going to a new environment needs preparation; returning home is simply returning to the familiar.

While returnees attest to internal change and transition following their experience abroad, there is a common sense of ambiguity in discerning one's own personal growth, adding to their sense of disconnect (Pitts, 2016).

Utilization of Acquired Skills

Sojourners face an additional struggle upon their return from abroad: utilizing their recently acquired skills. LaBrack (1993) explains this, noting that these new skills and behaviors (which include but are not limited to adaptation, language, and intercultural competency), face the high possibility of being forgotten from lack of regular use.

The transition towards intercultural competency is formulated by Bennett (2004), in the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (see Figure 1 in Appendix D), where he marks

a six-phased transition from complete ethnocentrism to complete ‘ethnorelativism’—a term he coined as the opposite of ethnocentrism. Ethnorelativism represents “experience of one’s own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities”. The latter three stages moving towards ethnorelativism are acceptance, adaptation, and integration. It is pointed out that the acceptance phase tends to produce a condition coined the “fluent fool” (Bennett 1997), where acquired language and behavior skills tend to be misappropriated and lack usefulness until they are coupled with the latter two phases.

Flexibility is a commonly named skill for returnees which they gain and develop abroad, then continue to utilize after leaving (Haines, 2013, La Brack, 2013, Root & Ngampornchai, 2012, Kim 2006, Weinmann & Bragg, 1993). Many students interviewed in Root and Ngampornchai’s (2012) study reported the importance their education abroad experience placed on patience, open-mindedness, and flexibility. Kim analyzes this construct at an intrapersonal level, noting that adaptability developed via globalization within the individual is “human plasticity” of sorts (2008). Using the phrase “intercultural personhood”, Kim (2008) explains that the exposure to and integration of different cultures into one’s identity:

Their individuated and universalized identity orientations defy the simplistic and conventional categorizations of people and reveal a way of being in the world. Instead, their intercultural orientations can help to hold together, integrate, and elevate diverse cultures, to help fellow citizens see their collective ‘blind spots,’ and to discourage excessive claims for cultural identity. (pp. 367)

The peak level of intercultural competency explained by Bennett (1997), is Integration (see Figure 1). While Integration is not necessarily more interculturally competent than the latter stage of Adaptation, it “describes a fundamental shift in one’s definition of cultural identity”

(Bennett 1997). The importance of developing one's intercultural sensitivity lies in one's ability to experience alternative cultures from the perspective of those native to it. Should individuals transition into Adaptation and then possibly Integration, they establish within themselves an "intercultural worldview" (Bennett 1997).

Intercultural competency and sensitivity are highly valuable skills gained by persons who spend an extended amount of time abroad (Bennett, 1997). Root and Ngampornchai (2012) found that the impact of studying abroad promotes the aforementioned development of skills and behaviors in returnees, however the depth of their understanding and awareness tends to be lacking—a theme expanded on in Pitts' (2016) study. In order for students to truly strengthen their newfound skills and become fluent in their cultural competencies, it is suggested that institutions provide students with mentoring and training that encourage returnees to reflect on their experience (Root & Ngampornchai, 2012, Pitts, 2016). By encouraging integrative learning mechanisms, returnees may develop a more concrete understanding of their personal growth and acquired skills so that they can articulate them in both professional and personal contexts (Pitts, 2016).

Existing Programs

There are several programs established at the USC, in Columbia, South Carolina, with intent or potential to support study abroad alumni once they return to their home campus. Beginning in the Fall 2016 semester, UNIV 201: Navigating Cultures was established as a 3-credit hour course. Its objectives include fostering a sense of cultural competency, reflecting on and communicating the significance of a global experience, and developing leadership and managerial skills. A growing program at USC is Graduation with Leadership Distinction (GLD), developed through USC Connect (the institution's integrative learning initiative) and designed to

engage students in beyond-the-classroom experiences through five pathway options. For students who have studied abroad, there is the Global Learning pathway:

Completing the Global Learning pathway will help you explore the significance of your study abroad experience through ideas of multiculturalism, diversity, cultural awareness, and globalization. The Global Learning pathway emphasizes the personal, educational, and professional development that occurs from learning in/about another culture. It also pushes you to apply your learning toward interacting and solving problems in the real world (USC Connect, n.d.).

A few weeks prior to their semester back at USC, the Study Abroad Office invites returnees to participate in the international student welcome orientation activities. These include giving international students tours of campus, serving as a panel to answer their questions about the culture and academics at USC, and serving as a guide through their initial entry process. They are also invited to apply to work in the study abroad office as Peer Advisors to their fellow students looking into going abroad. Recently, the office has begun hosting a forum called Beyond the Awesome. This event is meant to help returnees process their time abroad by engaging in storytelling and connecting their experiences to professional goals. Currently, there is no mandate on reentry for returnees at USC. The programs and activities listed above are voluntary.

The Current Study

Problem Statement

How can students reentering the University of South Carolina following their education abroad cultivate their new identity, and how can the University further encourage this?

Overview

The current study has been addressed using a qualitative approach. Faculty and staff from six different departments on the University of South Carolina's campus were selected to be interviewed as stakeholders on addressing reentry to USC for the study abroad returnee. Five of the interviews were with individuals representing their department, and one interview consisted of a panel of three faculty members. Stakeholders were selected based on their positions at the university as drivers for the internationalization of the campus. The purpose of this project is to examine existing reentry opportunities on USC's campus, how returnees may capitalize on their study abroad experience once they have returned, and what can be done to expand reentry programs at USC for its returnees. This study adds to the current literature by gathering data from faculty members rather than student returnees, providing a three-dimensional view of the reentry process on university campuses.

Methods

The data for this study was collected through six separate interviews with selected USC faculty and staff. The stakeholders were contacted and their written consent was received to participate in the study as interviewees and disclose their names and biographies (listed in Appendix A). Prior to the interviews, the researcher's study was determined to be exempt from the Protection of Human Subjects Regulations by the University of South Carolina's Institutional Review Board. Once this approval was met, stakeholders were contacted again to set up times and places for the interviews. The interview questions were disclosed to them before the interview. Each interview consisted of six questions pertaining to the research question, listed in Appendix B. Interviews were audio-recorded then transcribed verbatim using InqScribe software.

Each interview took place in the stakeholders' respective offices on the USC campus. The questions remained the same with each stakeholder, however some were presented with additional background information at the interviewer's discretion based on the interviewee's initial interpretation of the question. Follow-up questions were added spontaneously in some instances to clarify or expand upon a thought brought up by the interviewee. Interviews lasted between 15 and 40 minutes, with an average interview time of 25 minutes. The questions were intended to be open-ended, focusing on the reentry process for the USC returnee, individual and institutional responsibilities during reentry, and the scope at which reentry opportunities exist and could be expanded on at USC.

Prior to transcribing, the researcher selected themes from the literature review and listed those of importance to the study. Possible themes from the interviews were listed and categorized into a legend following interview transcription, included in Appendix C. The legend

was used as a guide to manually code the interviews by the researcher, with more detailed subcategories identified during the coding process. Six themes were initially found to be the most prominent amongst the interviews, however after further review two were merged on account of their consistent overlap. When statements from the interviews fell into more than one of the identified themes, they were counted for each. The researcher discussed findings with her two co-investigators, who recommended that the statements be included in multiple categories. Keywords brought up by interviewees were noted, listed above, and discussed further below.

Findings

This study's findings were derived from direct quotes of the transcribed interviews. Statements and phrases were categorized under what were originally identified as six themes. At the counsel of the researcher's co-investigators, two categories were merged due to their significant intersections. The overlaying themes found in the data are as follows:

- Value of integrative learning following an experience abroad
- Acceptance and encouragement of diversity
- Personal growth and development following an experience abroad
- Campaign for reentry and studying abroad at USC
- Internationalization of USC

It should be noted that the third category, *Campaign for reentry and studying abroad at USC*, includes the latter phrase due to the frequency that it was referenced. While this study is aimed at the reentry process of studying abroad, much of the interviews expanded on the necessity to bring in more students to go abroad, which will be further discussed below. Amongst the aforementioned categories, there were significant trends found across the different stakeholders' interviews. Common keywords appearing in different interviews, similar but divided reactions to questions, and outlying information are discussed.

Value of integrative learning following an experience abroad

A large portion of the interviewees' responses pointed out the importance of integrative learning as an effective and useful tool in returnee's reentry to USC. One stakeholder emphasized that reflection brings purpose to what has been experienced. Ms. Bailey Lee, a Student Advisor from the Study Abroad Office emphasized the importance of reflection by explaining its use at multiple levels:

Learning to articulate [your experience] in the different scenarios and different contexts—whether that is professional, on a peer level, in a classroom and you're relating it back to something that you're learning. . . I think it's important just because it is so applicable to different parts of your life. . . You may reveal part of what you learned about yourself to your family that you may not reveal to an employer.

She later explained that whether or not an initial reflection brings about a significant understanding of what was learned, it builds a foundation that will reveal itself in layers over time. This idea of reflection over time was repeated amongst other interviewees. Mr. Christopher Reid, Coordinator of Integration and Retention Services at the International Student Services Office, made a point that reflection should be looked at from multiple temporal distances based on his own experience—when he first reflected on living abroad he had very different feelings and perspectives than he does two years following. Ms. Keara DeKay, Lead Student Advisor at the USC Study Abroad Office, stated:

I don't necessarily think that it is something you would just do the semester after you come back. . . There are always layers that can be uncovered as you're thinking about those experiences. I think sometimes it even takes a little bit of

time for you to grow as a person before you can realize "oh, this is where this idea or this influence came from".

Ms. Lee expanded on this thought:

. . . you can't learn everything in a two-hour workshop, it builds a foundation for the future. . . Having a foundation for it and having it as a practice to reflect on instead of just going abroad and passively just having that experience. . . it's working towards a bigger goal. Even if the bigger goal is just sharing empathy in all of that, but not just a personal experience.

This idea that reflection for the returnee will change over time after starting at the baseline during reentry was common. It was widely agreed upon that returnees come back wanting more than anything to share their experience but do not know how or where to begin. Dr. Van Scoy, Executive Director of USC Connect, summed it up with this remark on how reflection and integrative learning during reentry are essential to the returnee, but must be preceded from a more cathartic standpoint:

People are grappling with that when they're studying abroad, and they're grappling with it when they come back. They're dealing with "Oh wow, I did it! And I want to encourage other people—they can do this too!" And so you have to deal with that level. It all can't be just the intellectual piece of "how does this relate to your major? What does this mean for your future?" You've got to deal with the other part first.

There were multiple mentions of the USC Connect program, Graduation with Leadership Distinction (GLD) by stakeholders. Dr. Van Scoy, who leads GLD, explained the extensiveness of the process and its mission to promote integrative learning through beyond the classroom

experiences. She and Mr. Reid both recalled study abroad alumni who completed their GLD under the Global Learning pathway and credited much of their academic, professional, and emotional success to it. It provides returnees with opportunity to purposefully engage in their reflection process on their experience abroad, allowing them to use it as a tool in academic and professional contexts.

When asked what responsibility returnees may have to the campus after living abroad, Dr. Paul Allen Miller, Director of Global Carolina, and Dr. Van Scoy countered that returnees have a responsibility to themselves. Dr. Miller stated:

[For] the experience to really do what it is supposed to do, requires reflection. It requires you to understand what you've done, to put that into conceptual and propositional language, and to then be able to take those concepts and propositions and apply them in other areas of your life.

Similar views were echoed amongst the other stakeholders: returnees owe it to themselves to reflect and process their experience. All interviewees pointed out that reflection (no matter the mechanism) gives returnee's a sense of how they have grown—an invaluable tool for the job market.

Consistently, the university as a whole was tagged as having a responsibility to provide these opportunities for integrative learning to returnees. When asked about specific department's responsibilities to the returned students, it was explained that the most effective and efficient ways of engaging students to partake in a reentry process would be to make it a campus-wide initiative. Dr. Van Scoy and the Study Abroad Office panel emphasized the importance of bringing reflection related to post-study abroad into the classroom by collaborating with faculty. Dr. Van Scoy described a budding program on the campus aiming to tackle this:

We have a new program, with faculty across the campus who are each working with four students working on GLD. That's going to give those faculty [members] an understanding of this process and how these students think and the thinking process they have to go through. We have found that these faculty [members] take that back and rethink their other courses.

Acceptance and encouragement of diversity

Nearly every stakeholder showed a level of apprehension towards the term “responsibility” when asked with the first question: *Does the returned student have a responsibility to their campus, and if so, what is this responsibility?* It was answered by replacing “responsibility” with “opportunity”, and often with regard to endorsing diversity on campus. Dr. Snyder’s quote best encompasses the response amongst interviewees:

The vast majority of students here haven't traveled abroad. Many students don't know that that is something that they should do. So whether that means that [returnees] have a special responsibility here, I don't know, but there's certainly an opportunity here for [them].

It was commonly mentioned that the responsibility (or opportunity) returnees may have is rooted in their exposure to new cultures. Allison Kretschmar, a Student Advisor at the Study Abroad Office, responded to the first question by stating “. . . [It] is their responsibility to use that knowledge to help create those [conversations] in classrooms to bring that perspective and in that way help grow campus.” In support of the literature, all interviewees noted a broadened sense of empathy and tolerance when listing traits returnees develop, but acknowledged that this is not exclusive to returnees. Ms. DeKay explained this when asked about the returnee’s responsibility:

[The] more conversations you can have about difference, the more ideas you're creating, the more empathy you're creating for differences. That is not necessarily a responsibility of people who are studying abroad, but a responsibility of everyone. . . We hope that [students who go abroad] have these experiences that make them want to come back and share with the University and their peers to create a better world that way.

Dr. Snyder made a point that the initial experience abroad turns individuals into enthusiasts for foreign culture and subsequent sojourns lead to their discernment of these cultures. Dr. Cox made a similar point that there is a responsibility within the returnee to “disrupt” the norms of their campus’s culture and “make sure it experiences change at the same rate the rest of the world does.”

[Personal growth and development following an experience abroad](#)

This emotional struggle returnee’s face was addressed by all stakeholders, and understood to be the impetus leading to the personal growth and development they experience during reentry. Dr. Cox emphasized the feelings of isolation returnees go through but explained the positive consequences it has:

. . . then there are reentry issues that are emotional. "The issues of my sorority just don't matter to me in a way they did for six months. Somehow who is on student government is much less important in the global scheme of things. . . " And that's a sense of alienation. At the same time, it's a sense of empowerment because [you've] seen so many bigger things. But it can also be alienating because nobody understands where [you've] been and what has happened to [you]. And that's true in the individual sense, but in the collective sense that is

not true. Because everyone has had that experience. So they all haven't had your experience, but they have been disrupted, and so they all feel alienation in some form or another.

Dr. Miller first explained that returnees' tendency to compare their home culture against the culture they experienced abroad is valuable, despite the annoyance it causes their peers. He called it "a productive form of alienation". The two also shared the perspective that returnees critiquing of the cultures they experience abroad and at home are a facet of personal development during reentry. Dr. Miller made this statement on the subject:

One of the things in reentry that can be disorienting too—and this is stronger the longer you're away—is coming back and seeing your own culture from a different place. Things that seemed so natural that you did not even notice before, suddenly appear strange.

Dr. Cox, Director of the Walker Institute, explained it this way:

I think the more you are introduced to [a culture], the more you find aspects you like and don't like. And it's that sort of discrimination that makes you go from being "foolish" about it, to being more discriminating, more sophisticated in your awareness of different cultures. It also helps you reflect on your own culture.

It was universally agreed upon, as seen under the *Integrative Learning* category, that the best way to facilitate one's personal transformation is through purposeful reflection. Ms.

Kretschmar summed it up with this statement:

. . . if you are a student who has been gone for a long period of time and you are having that reentry struggle, emotionally, that's a really hard time so reflecting on

that can help you figure out what the root of where that anger or frustration or sadness is coming from.

Often stakeholders discussed the necessity to simply talk about the experience, no matter the context. For example, Mr. Reid made this statement:

If it is such a huge experience. . . it's a huge impact. You have to take the time to process it. You can't have something happen to you that has such an impact on you without doing the work to comprehend what that impact is.

Basic processing was agreed to be a beneficial outlet for the returnee to begin their reflection process, which could lead into the more formal discussions and mechanisms, such as programs like GLD or Beyond the Awesome. Dr. Van Scoy emphasized that formal reflection processes should be mandated for returnees because it is an easily missed opportunity:

All of this technology—you can get knowledge anywhere—but why are students paying all of this money to come here when they can look up everything they want to know on the internet? It's because the difference it makes in their own personal and professional growth and development. To be here, and not just be taking classes, but being engaged beyond the classroom and have people challenging their ideas.

[Campaign for reentry and studying abroad at USC](#)

When asked about mandating reentry at USC for study abroad returnees, nearly every interviewee shared the same opinion: Requiring it may be counterintuitive to the overarching goal of getting students to study abroad in the first place. Dr. Snyder, the Study Abroad Office Panel, Dr. Miller, and Dr. Cox did not think requiring it would be helpful, but promoted establishing more methods for returnees to utilize during their reentry process.

‘Encouragement’ was preferred over requirement when discussing reentry mechanisms. Dr. Snyder stated:

Every time we establish a new mandate for programs and participation, we probably make it just that much harder for students to participate. So my first instinct is to say "no", because if we have a requirement that students do x, y, or z, then there's going to be fewer students doing this at all.

Ms. DeKay shared this perspective:

. . . it would be beneficial to have it be a requirement, I just don't know if it's practical at all. You also have to think about the different types of experiences students are having. . . Each experience has its own set of requirements but the way that they reflect on those types of programs is going to be very different.

Providing multiple options for returnees to use as cathartic outlets or tools for professional and academic skills was a general consensus amongst stakeholders. Dr. Cox and Dr. Van Scoy, brought up the importance of molding the environment so that participation in reentry is attractive and essential to USC’s returnees. All stakeholders agreed that a wide variety of options and larger campaign mechanisms for reentry are necessary—whether by mandate or not.

Dr. Van Scoy, who stated she would like to see it made a requirement, proposed the following:

. . . what we have to do is promote it and get some more sections of U201 there, continue to work with faculty who have students who are studying abroad and talking with them about how they are helping students to reflect on this experience when they come back. We need to do a better job of encouraging students to do GLD because at least they will get the reflection there. I would

love for there to be a requirement if there's any way that we can make it feasible and until we can get it a requirement, we need to do everything we can to promote it and make it attractive.

Just as it was widely agreed upon that no single department should bear the responsibility of instigating reentry, the importance of publicity for current reentry and reflection mechanisms was emphasized. Many stakeholders referenced GLD and its relevance to a returnee should they choose the Global Learning Pathway.

Dr. Van Scoy shared a specific idea for reentry to USC: a three-hour workshop held on a Saturday during the beginning of the semester following a returnee's experience abroad. To address the concern of attendance she explained that it should be presented to students as an expectation and a necessity—but not necessarily a requirement:

Promote it as being a fabulous experience, it's going to help you use it to your best advantage here at Carolina, you need to attend this workshop and here is when it's going to be. Remind them before they go, while they are there, and as soon as they come back.

Stakeholders suggested the increased recruitment of returnees to promote studying abroad to their classmates. It would, they suggested, provide an outlet for the returnee to share their experience and be a great publicity tool for the university as a means of getting more students to go abroad. Dr. Snyder focused on this. He brought up that returnees will always be willing and eager to “evangelize” for going abroad, but was concerned if there are enough outlets and whether or not they are widely known.

. . . we should come up with other opportunities for outreach. For me the question becomes. . . what kind of forum, what kind of audience, how do we get

them to be there? [. . .] The real question is how do we provide you with forums for doing that.

Before these statements he discussed the possibility of returnees leading mandatory study abroad information sessions with incoming freshmen and Greek life pledges, with emphasis on groups that are known to be “pockets of resistance” when it comes to studying abroad during college.

Dr. Cox and Dr. Miller each suggested similar mechanisms. When asked about his department’s responsibility to the returnee during reentry, Dr. Miller stated:

Our major responsibility for the returning student is to give them opportunities and forums to pursue this reflection, to formulate it in meaningful ways—that would be in writing, in speaking, in action—to support them in the transition process.

Internationalization of USC

The importance of storytelling when describing one’s experience abroad was addressed in responses to the first interview question. Interviewees highlighted the value in sharing because of the university’s goal to internationalize. The advantages of returnees sharing their stories goes beyond their own benefit: they share a role in the internationalization of USC. Returnees’ discussions and reflections, as many interviewees made clear, are not to be mistaken as a responsibility to USC to internationalize the campus. It is, however, an institutional goal that can be achieved by providing returnees with reentry opportunities. This is explained by Ms. Lee:

In terms of reentry, I think the move towards internationalization of campuses makes it an institutional responsibility, not just a Study Abroad Office responsibility. Which means buy-in from different departments across campus.

[Graduate with Leadership Distinction] is one of those ways students can reflect. I don't know if that came from an initiative to internationalize campus, but that was to help students reflect more in general. . . In that way, it's part of a bigger picture. . . It puts it back on the institution as a whole.

Dr. Cox shared this thought, and explained that one of USC's goals is to "internationalize the education experience" by encouraging students to be "aware of the world and cultural difference" until it becomes standard. In regard to his department and the Global Studies academic program, he stated:

Our responsibility [at the Walker Institute] is to make sure that when [students] return [from abroad], they continue to be challenged as global citizens and that they continue to be challenged by people who speak different languages and engage in different cultural practices, and know that South Carolina is not an escape from "out there". Out there is here too, and that is part of being in a more globalized world.

Most departments at USC that are international drivers, such as Global Carolina, do not target returnees once they are back. It was recognized, however, that the mission and goals of Global Carolina align with that of returnees. Global Carolina was explained by Mr. Reid as an umbrella term for the multiple organizations aimed at driving the university towards internationalization of campus culture and curriculum. When asked about the returnee's responsibility to their campus, he stated:

We absolutely want people to tell their story because we want people to returnees to share their stories so their friends and colleagues and classmates who are listening to this can say "Oh that sounds great, I want to do that too." . . .

Something is going to appeal to everybody and I think it's important that the students get out there and talk about their experiences. Especially as we try to internationalize the campus. . . we want a global perspective to come through.

Discussion

Reentry, despite being an underutilized practice (La Brack, 1993), is growing in the field of study abroad. In the current study, it was widely agreed upon that reentry mechanisms at the University of South Carolina are targeted from multiple vantage points, but have room for improvement. Interviewees were divided into two categories of focus for suggested reentry mechanisms: intrapersonal and interpersonal means of reflection.

Suggested intrapersonal mechanisms focused on individual reflection and processing of the experience. Learning to articulate one's experience in various contexts via reflection pieces and workshops—all with the intention of laying the groundwork for what will continue reveal itself over time. A common difficulty returnees face in reentry revealed by the current and past studies is effectively communicating and integrating their experience into their lives at home (Pitts, 2016). By engaging in deliberate reflection—such as writing essays or participating in workshops like Beyond the Awesome—returnees may capitalize on their ability to communicate their experience abroad in a variety of contexts. Graduation with Leadership Distinction through the Global Learning pathway at USC drives the integrative learning process in returnees via reflection and was referenced many times in the interviews. The drawback to this program is the workload and dedication it requires of those students who pursue it. While it may contribute a greater return-on-investment for the study abroad alumnus, it may not be practical or plausible for other alumni.

Interpersonal mechanisms are directed at bringing the reflection process outwards. Many stakeholders proposed reentry methods driven by conversation and open discussion. While there are some methods like these in place at USC, the general consensus in this study was that there need to be more coupled with increased advertising. These outlets (formal panels or informal

meet-and-greets) would accomplish multiple goals: augment the University's internationalization of campus, provide returnees with channels to share their experience, and stimulate interest in peers to pursue an experience abroad. In order to increase attendance, promotion and encouragement is preferred over requirement. This is the current approach at USC, therefore it should become priority to, as one interviewee stated "[shape] the environment to create the outcome [desired], rather than making rules to do that." Increasing publicity for reentry and study abroad can accommodate the desired campaign for reentry and USC's goal of internationalizing its campus.

The subjective nature of an experience abroad and numerous inputs affecting it (length of time abroad, purpose, place, et cetera...) substantiates that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to the question of how to address reentry at USC. A buffet-like approach to the campus's reentry implementation would be most effective: provide returnees with multiple options upon their return to campus with objectives aimed to engage them in purposeful, thoughtful reflection.

Reflection is essential to a returnee's success during their reentry process. The current study underscores integrative learning and its perceived role in a returnees' cultivation of their transformed identity. Students reentering USC have purposefully removed themselves from the boundaries of campus. They return with new perspectives, behaviors, and tolerances. From the data, it can be concluded that experiences abroad, when purposefully reflected on and articulated through integrative learning mechanisms, may facilitate personal and professional growth and development. As returnees continue to develop their identities, their acquired ethnorelativism and intercultural competencies may not only inspire others to travel abroad, but also galvanize such understanding in their peers.

The data also indicates that personal growth in returnees happens in multiple stages: the first is in their initial exposure to and acceptance of a foreign culture. The embracement of diversity is the beginning of a returnee's transformation. The reflection processes which occur during reentry and then throughout their lifetime are subsequent. These initial commitments to reentry activities are necessary in "laying the foundation" for personal growth and integrative learning. Reflection thereafter engages the returnee to think critically and continuously apply their acquired skills to their personal and professional lives. This study adds to the existing literature by presenting data from internationally-focused faculty and staff at the University of South Carolina. It provides a specific perspective of the reentry process at a large, public university in the Southeastern portion of the United States.

On a personal level, the data from this study has provided me with the clarity to better define the effect my experience in Spain had and how the integrative reflection process of conducting this study has affected me. From a broad scope, I acknowledge that my discernment skills have vastly expanded and I am able to recognize that the determination of what is acceptable and unacceptable varies across all settings at multiple levels. The idea of 'norms' has limits beyond the boundaries of specific cultures; consequently, I consider 'normalcy' to be highly contextualized largely indefinite at determining what could be right or wrong. Further, my sense of loyalty to people in my life and passion for topics I care about have become defining characteristics which I did not recognize in myself prior to conducting this study.

Limitations of the study and suggestions

This study had a small sample size and was conducted solely amongst faculty and staff members at the University of South Carolina. Future studies addressing similar subject matter may not be comparable because of the site-specific data collected. Some of the questions asked

were misinterpreted or not answered to the full extent that the researcher anticipated. While some explanations were improvised, this caused discrepancies amongst interviews. A standardized approach would have accounted for this limitation. For example, prepared quotes from existing literature to explain questions during interviews, and follow-up questions to be sent to the interviewees. Follow-up questions after transcribing the interviews would be beneficial for shedding light on subjects the researcher anticipated hearing more on (e.g. identity crisis, specific acquired skills).

Due to this report's exclusion of student perspectives, it is recommended that future studies exploring this topic or related topics survey returnees. A possible future exploration could be the comparison of pilot reentry activities for returnees (for example, a workshop, discussion panel, and control group of returnees). Another exploration would be a study of how faculty are utilizing integrative learning and reflection pieces in their curriculum and the effectiveness of it.

For students who are about to go abroad, there is currently no precedent for reentry at USC. It would be beneficial, during their predeparture orientations, to present them with a questions such as:

- Why is it important for students to study abroad? Why is it important for you to study abroad?
- What are you hoping to gain from your study abroad experience?
- What method of reentry would you most benefit from? (list examples)

Conclusion

From the data, three overarching conclusions were drawn: 1. Reflection stimulated through integrative learning is a key tool in a returnee's personal growth during their reentry, 2. integrative learning is a growing practice at USC that can be used as a driver for reentry, and 3. existing reentry mechanisms at USC are varied but require more publicity and options for greater participation. Data from the current study indicates the desire for and support of more reentry mechanisms offered at the University of South Carolina for its education abroad returnees. These mechanisms should not be limited in their target goals as a result of variance occurring across education abroad experiences and within the individual students. By increasing awareness of reentry mechanisms which currently exist and launching campaigns for new programs, returnees may be able to effectively reflect on their experience, and consequently improve their articulation skills on the subject. On a personal note, completing this thesis has aided me in my own reflection process of my experience abroad. The process of the literature review coupled with the current study gave me a sense of clarity on how my perceptions and habits have developed since my education abroad.

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Appendix A

Biographies

Robert Cox, PhD

Dr. Cox is the Director of the Walker Institute, which hosts a Bachelor of Arts in Global Studies and six minor degree programs that engage students in the interdisciplinary study of world affairs and cross-cultural understanding. Dr. Cox's research examines public policy issues in advanced industrialized societies. Many of his publications have examined the politics of welfare reform in European countries. His recent research focuses on the role of the European Union in promoting sustainability programs among its member states.

Keara DeKay, M. Ed

Keara DeKay, M. Ed. is currently the Senior Study Abroad Advisor at the University of South Carolina. She has worked in the field of international education for over three years and currently serves as the SCAIE Education Abroad representative. Keara has traveled to over 20 countries, and has spent extensive time in Nigeria, Germany, and South Korea. She earned her M.Ed. in Higher Education Administration from the University of Texas at Austin, and her B.A. in European Cultural Studies and German from Brandeis University.

Allison Kretschmar, M. Ed

Allison Kretschmar, M.Ed. currently serves as a Study Abroad Advisor at the University of South Carolina. Allison has worked in higher education for over five years, with one of those years being in international education. Allison completed her Bachelor's degree at Mars Hill University, and completed her Master's in Higher Education at the University of South Carolina.

She studied abroad for two semesters in Denmark, and taught English in South Korea from 2010-2011.

Bailey Lee, M. Ed

Bailey Lee, M.Ed. currently serves as a Study Abroad Advisor at the University of South Carolina. She has worked in the international education field for three years and higher education generally for almost 5 years. Bailey studied abroad in Ecuador in 2009, and she taught English in Spain from 2010 to 2011. Bailey received her Bachelor of Art in English and Spanish from the University of Mississippi, and she received her Master of Education in Higher Education and Student Affairs at the University of South Carolina.

Paul Allen Miller, PhD

Dr. Miller, Vice Provost and Director of Global Carolina is responsible for growing international recruitment among students and developing international relationships worldwide. He also oversees the Rule of Law Collaborative, manages the University of South Carolina Press, and coordinates the Classroom Enhancements and Space Needs and Planning (SNAP) committees.

Christopher Reid, MSW

Christopher Reid, MSW, coordinates student services for international students on personal, cultural, and immigration concerns. Chris was previously a student advisor with ISS, and he has extensive experience working with internationals both domestically and abroad. He has worked in numerous capacities with Columbia's resettled refugee population, and from 2012-2015, Chris lived in Mwanza, Tanzania doing grassroots development work with women's cooperatives, youth groups, and local organizations.

Irma Van Scoy, PhD

In Fall 2011, Dr. Van Scoy became the Executive Director of USC Connect, the university's initiative to enhance students' education through the integration of learning within and beyond the classroom. Dr. Van Scoy guided the creation of Graduation with Leadership Distinction, the signature program of USC Connect, and now oversees its implementation. She works with faculty and staff in the development of integrative learning opportunities and coordinates efforts across Columbia and the Palmetto College Campuses. Her areas of expertise include integrated learning and collaboration in teaching and learning at all levels, and early childhood through higher education.

David Snyder, PhD

In 2014 Dr. Snyder was appointed Faculty Principal of the Carolina International House at Maxcy College. Under his leadership the International House has become a premier destination for international-themed residential learning, defined by its signature co-curricular program, Carolina Global Scholars. In addition to his academic work in and out of the classroom, Dr. Snyder promotes the university's commitment to diversity and inclusion by serving on the President's Diversity and Inclusiveness Advisory Committee and as a Fellow of the Office of Diversity's Dialog in Race and Reconciliation Collaborative.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Does the returned student have a responsibility to their campus? What is this responsibility?
2. Why is it important for returnees to reflect on and be able to articulate their experience abroad?
3. What is your department's responsibility to the returned student and how should this responsibility be upheld before they go abroad, during their time abroad, and/or after they return from abroad?
4. Should participation in reentry to USC's campus be made a requirement for students who go abroad and if so, is there a specific method by which it should be done?

Appendix C

Coding Themes Selected for Analysis

Coding Legend	Number of Statements Identified	Example statements
Value of integrative learning following a study abroad experience	34	Beyond the classroom experience; Reflection process following the experience; Importance and value in reflection as a multi-step and lengthy process; Engaging faculty to implement integrative learning; Utilizing Graduate with Leadership Distinction; Reflection is necessary to grasp what was learned; Responsibility of USC
Acceptance and encouragement of diversity	25	Exposure to change from the normalcy of USC; Acceptance and adoption of diversity; Challenging the norm once returned; Promoting and endorsing diversity on campus; Recognizing where there is little progression and working to change it; Opportunity to stimulate change;
Personal growth	29	Responsibility to themselves (the returnees) to reflect and learn from their experience; Opportunity to expand on their intellectual, professional, and emotional development after having an experience abroad by reflecting on it; Articulating experience abroad effectively and in various capacities; Shift of priorities and goals following return; Identity shift or life-changing experience from exposure to new cultures
Campaign for reentry and studying abroad at USC	53	Making reentry events known to returnees and making them attractive; Collaborative efforts between departments; University-wide initiative to stimulate reflection process and/or reentry activities; Emphasis on reentry during predeparture orientation; Use of returnees as a publicity tool for study abroad recruitment; Requiring then mandating reflection once returning from abroad; Not requiring but strongly encouraging reentry events; Current mechanisms that exist to help returnees with reentry
Internationalization of USC	14	Becoming global citizens and being engaged in the world; The available on-campus opportunities promoting internationalization; University-wide goal to internationalize the campus; Understanding the world is becoming smaller as globalization grows; Importance of intercultural competency.

Appendix D

Figure 1



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