

# Beyond Borders: How Study-Abroad Programs Foster Cognitive, Emotional, and Professional Transformation

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## Abstract

This study examines the extent to which study-abroad experiences promote transformative learning by influencing students' thinking, emotional development, and professional preparedness. A mixed-methods design was used to gather insights from participants in a short-term international program in the Bahamas, focusing on how cultural immersion and structured reflection influence personal development and global awareness. The analysis shows apparent shifts in participants' perspectives, adaptability, and intercultural understanding. The results support the fostering of meaningful transformation. Although issues of access and equity persist, the study concludes that international education remains a practical approach for fostering empathy, global citizenship, and critical thinking within higher education.

**Keywords:** study abroad, transformative learning, experiential learning, intercultural competence, global citizenship, higher education, reflective practice

## 1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the landscape of higher education is increasingly defined by cross-border mobility, global interaction, and a pressing need to prepare students for a world marked by interconnectedness and diversity. For many institutions, study-abroad programs have transitioned from optional add-ons to central components of the undergraduate experience. These programs are no longer seen simply as travel opportunities or language-learning venues; instead, they are recognized for their capacity to cultivate intercultural competence, adaptability, critical thinking, and global citizenship (Bain & Yaklin, 2019; Strange & Gibson, 2017). Immersed in unfamiliar cultural, linguistic, and societal environments, students are challenged to engage in new worldviews, navigate ambiguity, and reflect critically on their own assumptions (citation). In short, such programs can foster not only academic enrichment but profound personal and intellectual transformation (citation). As globalization accelerates, higher education institutions face mounting pressure to evolve their curricula and co-curricular offerings accordingly. Economic integration, cultural pluralism, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and rapid technological change have heightened the need for graduates who can think globally, act ethically, and adapt creatively (Perry, Stoner, & Tarrant, 2012). Study-abroad experiences align strongly with these imperatives by situating learners beyond their familiar cultural boundaries, thereby inviting the kinds of disorienting dilemmas that challenge taken-for-granted frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991). In this way, international mobility emerges as a powerful pedagogical strategy rather than simply a scholarly enhancement.

At the heart of this transformative potential lies the theoretical foundation of transformative learning. Jack Mezirow's seminal work (1991) proposed that adult learners undergo a perspective transformation when confronted with experiences that cannot be assimilated into existing meaning schemes, leading to critical self-reflection, discourse, and ultimately, new frames of reference. In the study-abroad context, students frequently encounter cultural norms, languages, ethical issues, and social systems that are radically different from those of their home context, thereby triggering the very kinds of disorienting dilemmas central to transformative learning (Strange & Gibson, 2017). Empirical studies confirm that students participating in international immersion often exhibit evidence of cognitive, affective, and behavioral shifts, including questioning previously held beliefs, developing greater cultural self-awareness, adopting more inclusive worldviews, and acting differently upon their return (Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Stone, 2017).

Complementing transformative learning theory, experiential learning frameworks help explain how the transformation occurs. David Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning comprises a cyclical process: concrete experience → reflective observation → abstract conceptualization → active experimentation. Study-abroad programs naturally embody this cycle: students engage in concrete immersion in another culture; reflect on their reactions, assumptions, and new information; abstract meaning from their experiences in relation to global, cultural, and personal issues; and then experiment, for example, by applying new insights in their host culture or when they return home. The convergence of immersive experience and structured reflection thus amplifies the potential for holistic learning encompassing identity, values, cognition, and praxis.

Empirical evidence supports these theories. For instance, research using the Learning Activities Survey (LAS) found that a substantial portion of study-abroad participants reported transformative learning outcomes following international immersion. Stone (2017) reported that 58 % of students in a particular study exhibited measurable transformation according to the LAS. Moreover, Foronda and Belknap's (2012) investigation of nursing students studying abroad in low-income countries showed that the experience significantly increased awareness of socio-economic relations, structural inequities, and human interconnectedness. In their words, such immersion can "increase student awareness of socioeconomic relations, structural oppression, and human connectedness" (Foronda & Belknap, 2012, p. 157). Furthermore, Bain and Yaklin (2019) emphasized that a truly transformative study-abroad experience is "more by design than default" (p. 1), underscoring the importance of intentional program structure, reflective practice, and institutional support.

While the benefits of studying abroad are compelling, they are not uniformly distributed across student populations. Access, equity, and program design issues shape who participates and who benefits (Sweeney, 2013). Historically underrepresented students, first-generation, low-income, or minority students often face structural constraints such as cost, limited information, perceived cultural unfamiliarity, and lack of institutional encouragement (Sweeney, 2013; Adams, Robinson, Osho, & Adejonwo2006). Additionally, program-specific factors such as length of stay, preparation before departure, level of cultural immersion, mentoring, and re-entry support have been found to influence the depth and durability of transformation (Bain & Yaklin, 2019; Strange & Gibson, 2017). As Bain and Yaklin (2019) note, simply sending students abroad is not sufficient; the design and pedagogy surrounding the experience determine whether transformation occurs.

These considerations set the stage for the present research. This study aims to explore how, why, and to what extent study-abroad experiences foster transformation in students' cognitive, emotional, and professional domains. Specifically, three interrelated research questions guide this investigation: (1) What types of transformation do students experience through study abroad? (2) What factors contribute to or hinder these transformations? Moreover, (3) How do students integrate these experiences into their personal and professional lives? Addressing these questions through qualitative and quantitative inquiry enables a more nuanced understanding of transformation as a dynamic and situated phenomenon, rather than a mere byproduct of travel. From a practical perspective, this research aims to provide actionable recommendations for educators, administrators, and policymakers responsible for designing and delivering inclusive and impactful study-abroad programs. In an era characterized by cultural polarization, global health challenges, ecological urgency, and shifting workforce demands, students must emerge not only with disciplinary knowledge but with adaptability, reflexivity, intercultural awareness, and global agency. When effectively structured and supported, study-abroad programs can serve as catalysts for such holistic preparedness. However, to fulfill this promise equitably, we must understand the mechanisms and conditions under which transformation occurs and, importantly, for whom.

By integrating the lenses of transformative learning theory and experiential learning, and drawing on student narratives, program design factors, and institutional practices, this study aims to identify the cognitive, emotional, and professional dimensions of transformation and provide recommendations to foster inclusive and accessible global learning opportunities. Ultimately, the goal is to contribute to the field of international education by mapping pathways through which study abroad can be leveraged as a meaningful strategy for student growth, global citizenship, and socially responsive leadership.

### *1.1 Rationale for the Study*

As higher education becomes increasingly globalized, there is a growing need to understand how study-abroad experiences foster transformation, particularly among students from diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and racial backgrounds. Although research consistently documents the academic and personal benefits of international education, most empirical studies have focused on students from predominantly White institutions and Western contexts, leaving significant gaps in understanding the perspectives of underrepresented and marginalized populations (Sweeney, 2013; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). These gaps risk reinforcing inequities in global learning by overlooking the ways in which social identity, access, and institutional support influence transformative outcomes. Therefore, exploring how study-abroad experiences contribute to cognitive, emotional, and professional transformation across diverse demographics is vital for designing equitable and inclusive programs in higher education.

Furthermore, the relevance of studying abroad extends beyond personal development to the global challenges that define the twenty-first century, such as cultural polarization, environmental degradation, and economic inequality. Students who engage in international learning environments are uniquely positioned to develop the critical consciousness and intercultural empathy necessary for addressing these global issues (Deardorff, 2020; Perry, Stoner, & Tarrant, 2012). When students encounter disorienting dilemmas situations that challenge their assumptions and perspectives they often emerge with a more profound sense of global citizenship and ethical responsibility (Mezirow, 1991; Strange & Gibson, 2017) Thus, understanding the mechanisms through which study abroad fosters such transformation is crucial for educators and policymakers seeking to cultivate globally minded graduates who can act responsibly in an interdependent world.

The present study aims to explore the transformative impact of study-abroad experiences on students. Specifically, it seeks to identify the cognitive, emotional, and professional dimensions of change that occur during and after international programs. Through qualitative analyses of student narratives and institutional practices, the study aims to illuminate the processes that facilitate or hinder transformation and provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the transformative potential of study abroad programs. By addressing these aims, this research contributes to a more inclusive and socially responsive understanding of global education.

Therefore, this current research seeks to explore the nature and depth of transformation students experience through study-abroad programs. It aims to understand what forms of personal, academic, and professional change emerge as students engage in intercultural learning environments. The study also examines the internal and external factors that contribute to or limit these transformations, including program design, mentorship, cultural immersion, and access to resources. Additionally, it examines how participants incorporate their study-abroad experiences into their future goals, career paths, and ongoing personal development, thereby offering insights into how international education can catalyze lasting growth and global competence.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Theoretical Frameworks*

#### *2.1.1 Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow)*

Jack Mezirow's (1991, 1997) Transformative Learning Theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how study-abroad experiences catalyze personal, intellectual, and cultural transformation. Mezirow proposed that adults engage in perspective transformation when they encounter disorienting dilemmas, events that challenge existing worldviews and require critical reflection to reconstruct meaning. Through this process, learners revise previously held assumptions, develop new frames of reference, and become more inclusive, self-aware, and autonomous thinkers. He defined transformative learning as "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference...to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5).

In study-abroad contexts, such disorienting dilemmas frequently arise through cultural immersion, communication barriers, or ethical tensions that compel students to reassess their beliefs and values. Research demonstrates that this process leads to measurable cognitive and affective change, as students develop empathy, critical consciousness, and intercultural sensitivity (Taylor, 2007; Strange & Gibson, 2017). Merriam (2004) emphasized that transformative learning requires a mature level of cognitive functioning and the capacity for rational discourse abilities often cultivated during higher education. These principles make Mezirow's theory particularly relevant for understanding how study-abroad programs promote deep, reflective learning that goes beyond surface-level exposure to other cultures.

### 2.1.2 Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb)

Complementing Mezirow's framework, Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process consisting of four interrelated stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This model posits that effective learning emerges from the transformation of experience into knowledge. Study-abroad programs embody ELT by immersing students in real-world contexts that require ongoing adaptation and reflection. Students participate in new cultural or academic environments (concrete experience), reflect on their reactions (reflective observation), develop abstract insights about cultural differences or global systems (abstract conceptualization), and apply those insights in interactions and future decisions (active experimentation). Kolb's model has been widely validated across various fields, including business, medicine, and intercultural education, because it captures the iterative nature of learning through practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). In the context of study abroad, experiential learning bridges theory and practice, enabling students to test hypotheses about cultural norms, social behaviors, and professional ethics in real-time. This process fosters adaptability, problem-solving, and self-directed learning competencies critical for global citizenship and employability (Perry, Stoner, & Tarrant, 2012).

### 2.1.3 Intercultural Competence and Global Citizenship

Intercultural competence, the ability to communicate and behave appropriately across cultures, is a central outcome of global education. Deardorff (2006, 2020) defines intercultural competence as an ongoing developmental process encompassing attitudes (openness, curiosity, respect), knowledge (cultural self-awareness and worldviews), and skills (listening, interpreting, and relating). Similarly, global citizenship expands this framework to include empathy, social justice, and sustainability as moral dimensions of intercultural engagement. Reysen and Katzarska-Miller (2013) proposed a model linking global awareness and normative environments with identification as global citizens. Their findings suggest that when students perceive their peers and institutions as supportive of global engagement, they are more likely to internalize prosocial values and act in the collective well-being. This insight underscores the role of institutional culture in shaping transformative learning outcomes. Study-abroad programs that integrate reflective pedagogy and intercultural dialogue promote not only competence but also ethical responsibility, preparing students to navigate complex global issues such as inequality, migration, and climate change.

## 2.2 Benefits of Study-Abroad

### 2.2.1 Academic Development

Extensive research supports the academic benefits of participating in a study abroad program. Language acquisition and cognitive flexibility are among the most frequently cited outcomes. Zalbidea, Issa, and Faretta-Stutenberg (2022) found that even short-term immersion programs led to sustained improvements in linguistic proficiency and psychobehavioral flexibility. The study revealed that students continued to demonstrate increased fluency and confidence weeks after returning home, indicating that transformative learning persists beyond program duration. Similarly, King and Young (2021) noted that international experiences enhance metacognitive awareness and critical thinking by exposing learners to diverse educational systems and problem-solving approaches. Beyond language, study abroad promotes interdisciplinary integration and intellectual risk-taking. Students are encouraged to draw connections between local knowledge and global frameworks, fostering analytical reasoning and creativity (Paige et al., 2009). These academic gains position study-abroad participants for greater success in graduate education, employability, and research endeavors requiring global literacy.

### 2.2.2 Personal Growth and Identity Formation

The personal dimension of study abroad is equally transformative. Gan and Kang (2022) observed that students frequently experience heightened self-awareness, resilience, and cross-cultural understanding as they navigate challenges abroad. Participants reported reevaluating their values, expanding their empathy toward others, and developing a more integrated sense of identity. This process parallels Mezirow's (1991) notion of critical reflection as the catalyst for identity transformation. Other studies echo these findings, highlighting how immersive environments foster emotional intelligence and intercultural maturity. For instance, Strange and Gibson (2017) found that reflection journals and structured debriefing sessions helped students articulate shifts in their worldview, suggesting that intentional pedagogical scaffolding magnifies the transformative potential of study-abroad experiences. Ultimately, such programs cultivate dispositions essential to lifelong learning: openness, curiosity, humility, and tolerance for ambiguity.

### 2.2.3 Career Readiness and Global Employability

Study-abroad participation has also been strongly linked to improved professional outcomes. Graduates with international experience demonstrate higher adaptability, leadership capacity, and communication competence attributes that are valued by employers in a globalized economy (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Jones, 2013). Organizations such as AACSB International (2018) and PwC (2020) emphasize global competence as a strategic workforce priority, urging universities to incorporate cross-cultural exposure into their curricula. In practical terms, exposure to international workplaces or multicultural teams enables students to apply theoretical learning to develop transferable skills, including negotiation, collaboration, and ethical decision-making. According to Perry et al. (2012), students who reflect on professional and cultural differences during study abroad report improved confidence in addressing complex workplace problems. Consequently, studying abroad serves not only as an educational experience but also as a bridge to global employability and leadership development.

### 2.2.4 Challenges and Barriers

Despite its advantages, access to study-abroad opportunities remains unequal. Financial cost, visa restrictions, language proficiency, and lack of institutional support often limit participation, particularly for low-income and minority students (Sweeney, 2013; Salisbury et al., 2009). These inequities are compounded by perceptions that study abroad is a privilege for affluent or majority-group students. Brux and Fry (2010) found that minority students encounter structural barriers, including inadequate outreach, limited scholarships, and program designs that fail to account for diverse cultural needs. They argued for the intentional integration of inclusive excellence principles and policies that recognize and value diversity within global learning contexts. Inclusive programming not only increases access but also enriches the collective intercultural learning environment by fostering dialogue among multiple perspectives.

Institutional commitment is another decisive factor. Strange and Gibson (2017) observed that pre-departure orientation and post-return reflection significantly influence whether students perceive their experiences as transformative. Without these supports, learners may fail to connect their international experiences to personal growth or academic objectives. Therefore, universities must adopt holistic models that integrate financial aid, mentorship, and curriculum alignment to maximize equitable participation.

### 2.2.5 Existing Research Gaps

Although research on study abroad has expanded rapidly, several key gaps remain. First, most studies rely on short-term data collection, which is often conducted immediately before or after students' return, providing limited insight into long-term impacts. Niehaus and Rivera (2019) identified a shortage of longitudinal research assessing how studying abroad influences career trajectory, civic engagement, or sustained worldview change. Longitudinal methodologies are essential to capture how transformation evolves and stabilizes over time. Second, the literature continues to underrepresent the voices of marginalized individuals. Sweeney (2013) and Salisbury et al. (2009) emphasized the need for studies focusing on first-generation, low-income, and minority students to ensure that global education advances rather than reproduces social inequality. Research grounded in critical and intersectional frameworks could reveal how race, gender, and socioeconomic status mediate transformative outcomes. Third, there is a limited analysis of institutional factors, such as program design, faculty mentorship, and assessment practices, that either enable or hinder transformation. Strange and Gibson (2017) argued that transformation is "by design rather than by chance," suggesting that structured reflection and culturally responsive pedagogy are prerequisites for meaningful change. Addressing these gaps will not only strengthen theoretical understanding but also inform evidence-based practices that democratize access to global learning.

The reviewed literature underscores that study abroad is a powerful pedagogical tool capable of fostering cognitive, emotional, and professional transformation. Grounded in Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Kolb's experiential learning cycle, these experiences promote intercultural competence and global citizenship when thoughtfully designed and inclusively implemented. However, inequities in access and a lack of longitudinal, diverse, and theoretically integrated research limit the field's ability to generalize findings. The present study seeks to bridge these gaps by examining the mechanisms of transformation across diverse populations, thereby contributing to the creation of inclusive, equitable, and impactful study-abroad programs.

### 3. Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the transformative impact of study-abroad experiences on students. A mixed-methods framework provides a comprehensive understanding of transformation by combining the numerical generalizability of quantitative data with the contextual richness of qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative phase utilizes structured interviews to identify patterns, frequencies, and correlations among variables such as cultural adaptation, self-efficacy, and global competence. Utilizing structured interviews facilitated an objective and consistent process for comparing student responses (citation). The qualitative phase complements this by capturing the depth of participants' lived experiences through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals.

This design aligns with transformative learning and experiential learning frameworks, which emphasize reflection, meaning-making, and personal change (Mezirow, 1991; Kolb, 1984). The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods enables triangulation, which involves cross-validating findings from multiple data sources to enhance the validity and reliability of the results (Patton, 2015). By adopting this approach, the study not only measures the extent of transformation but also explains the processes and contextual factors that unfold through it.

#### 3.1 Participants

The target population consisted of undergraduate and graduate students who had completed a study-abroad program within the past five years. Students were recruited from the College of Agriculture and the College of Business to participate in a short-term global learning opportunity. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure diversity in terms of gender, race, socioeconomic background, and academic discipline (Palinkas et al., 2015). Including a diverse cohort enabled comparative analysis across demographic groups, addressing the representation gap identified in previous research (Sweeney, 2013; Salisbury et al., 2009). The study anticipates enrolling approximately 25 students for the quantitative survey phase and 11 participants for the qualitative interviews and focus groups. This sample size strikes a balance between the need for statistical rigor and the depth of qualitative insight, ensuring sufficient data saturation for interpretive validity (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020).

#### 3.2 Data Collection Methods

##### 3.2.1 Surveys and Questionnaires

Participants were engaged in structured interviews to collect demographic data, program details (including duration, region, and academic focus), and their perceived outcomes related to intercultural competence, personal growth, and professional development. The instrument incorporated validation measures such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer, 2012) and Global Perspective Inventory (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Engberg, 2014), modified to reflect study-abroad contexts. Likert-scale items will capture self-reported transformations across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions.

##### 3.2.2 In-Depth Interviews and Follow-up Conversations

Qualitative data were collected through structured interviews and follow-up conversations designed to elicit reflective narratives about students' cross-cultural experiences. The follow-up conversations added richness to the data. These conversations explored disorienting dilemmas, adaptation strategies, and moments of self-discovery, all of which are consistent with the principles of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997). The follow-up conversations facilitated shared reflection, enabling participants to build upon each other's insights and identify common themes across their experiences (Morgan, 2019). Each session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent.

##### 3.2.3 Reflective Journals or Portfolios

To deepen their understanding of the reflective dimension of learning, participants were invited to share excerpts from journals, blogs, or digital portfolios they completed during or after their study-abroad experience. These documents served as supplementary qualitative data, providing longitudinal insights into how perceptions and values evolved (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis on qualitative data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. Coding was both inductive (emerging from data) and deductive (guided by transformative learning and experiential frameworks). NVivo software assisted in managing and categorizing textual data. Narrative analysis was used to trace developmental trajectories of transformation, emphasizing how students construct meaning from their experiences (Riessman, 2008). Quantitative

data from surveys were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics via SPSS. Descriptive analyses (means, frequencies, and standard deviations) summarized patterns of transformation. In contrast, inferential analyses (t-tests, ANOVA, and regression) will examine differences in relation to demographic factors and program variables. The integration of results from both data strands will occur in the interpretation phase, ensuring that quantitative trends are contextualized through qualitative narratives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

### *3.4 Ethical Considerations*

Ethical integrity is a central component of this research. Prior to participation, all individuals received an informed consent form that outlined the study's purpose, its voluntary nature, potential risks, and the confidentiality measures in place. Participants were assured that pseudonyms would replace identifying information, and all digital data would be encrypted and stored securely. Cultural sensitivity guided both data collection and analysis, ensuring respect for participants' diverse backgrounds and worldviews. The researchers engaged in reflexivity, such as ongoing self-awareness of biases and positionality, to maintain objectivity and minimize cultural imposition (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before data collection to ensure adherence to ethical research standards. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

Ultimately, the methodological framework ensured that the study not only met rigorous academic standards but also honored participants' voices and lived experiences. By integrating multiple data sources and perspectives, the research team aspired to generate a nuanced, credible, and socially responsible understanding of how studying abroad fosters personal and professional transformation.

## **4. Results**

### *4.1 Transformative Outcomes*

#### **4.1.1 Cognitive Shifts and Worldview Expansion**

The analysis revealed that students experienced notable cognitive transformations through their participation in the Bahamas study-abroad program. Most respondents reported an expansion in worldview, indicating that exposure to diverse cultural, economic, and environmental contexts fostered critical reflection and intellectual growth. This aligns with Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning, which posits that "disorienting dilemmas" challenge existing assumptions and lead to the reconstruction of meaning perspectives. Participants frequently cited increased cultural awareness, a greater appreciation for sustainability, and a deeper understanding of global interdependence. For example, agriculture majors noted that visiting farming operations expanded their understanding of sustainable food systems and inspired some to explore related academic pathways. In contrast, business students emphasized how exposure to international markets, supply-chain practices, and real-world enterprise challenges strengthened their interest in global commerce and strategic management. Students from both groups agreed that the experience enhanced their appreciation of each other's fields and broadened their overall academic perspectives. This demonstrates how experiential engagement promotes higher-order thinking and intercultural competence (Kolb, 1984; Deardorff, 2020). Quantitatively, the cognitive transformation was reflected in high mean ratings for Cultural Awareness ( $M = 4.5$ ) and Educational Value ( $M = 4.5$ ) on a five-point scale, indicating that participants perceived the program as both intellectually stimulating and educationally meaningful.

#### **4.1.2 Emotional and Interpersonal Growth**

Emotional growth emerged as one of the most pronounced outcomes of the program. Students consistently described increased self-confidence, empathy, and resilience as a result of navigating unfamiliar environments. Many participants highlighted "networking," "bonding," and "connection-building" as essential aspects of their personal development. These findings correspond with the affective dimensions of transformative learning theory, which emphasize emotional engagement and relational learning (Taylor, 2007). Thematic analysis identified Personal Growth ( $M = 4.5$ ) and Memorable Experiences ( $M = 4.5$ ) as the most highly rated aspects. Respondents expressed that collaborative experiences, such as group reflection, peer support, and cultural immersion, cultivated empathy and global sensitivity. Furthermore, emotional intelligence was enhanced as students learned to manage ambiguity and adapt to different social expectations, demonstrating growth in intercultural maturity (Bennett, 2008).

Qualitative narratives reinforced this trend: students described feeling "more open-minded," "more confident in public interactions," and "grateful for shared experiences." These reflections illustrate the holistic nature of emotional learning that occurs in well-designed international programs

### 4.1.3 Academic and Career Trajectory Changes

Career reflection and academic redirection were consistent outcomes across respondents. The findings revealed a moderate to high impact on career interests ( $M = 3.875$ ). Several students reported that the experience inspired them to integrate global perspectives into their professional goals, especially in fields such as agriculture, sustainability, and community development. Others expressed that the trip reinforced their preexisting career interests, suggesting that it confirmed their aspirations in environmental science, education, management and marketing, or public policy. These findings echo Crossman and Clarke's (2010) argument that international exposure enhances career readiness by developing adaptability and intercultural communication skills. Moreover, the combination of academic enrichment and professional reflection exemplifies the experiential learning cycle, where concrete experiences translate into actionable career insights (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Overall, the integration of field-based learning and cultural observation encouraged students to reimagine their academic pathways as globally relevant and socially impactful.

## 4.2 Influencing Factors

### 4.2.1 Program Structure and Duration

The structure and organization of the study-abroad program had a significant influence on the transformative outcomes. Respondents expressed satisfaction with university-provided resources but identified logistical and organizational improvements as key to enhancing future programs. The need for more pre-trip preparation, detailed itineraries, and structured schedules was frequently emphasized. Findings from the study data indicate that transformation was most effective when the program design facilitated reflection, punctuality, and clear communication. This finding supports Bain and Yaklin's (2019) assertion that "a transformative study-abroad experience is more by design than by default." Short-term programs, when carefully structured, can yield outcomes comparable to long-term immersion experiences by incorporating guided reflection and mentorship.

### 4.2.2 Cultural Immersion

Cultural immersion was a central catalyst for transformation. Students valued hands-on experiences, such as farm visits, engagement with Bahamian families, visits to the Bahamas Development Bank and the Bahamas International Securities Exchange, the Bahamas Chamber of Commerce and Employers' Confederation, as well as exploration of local traditions. The frequent mention of "immersion," "cultural," and "connections" underscores the depth of experiential engagement achieved during the trip. Respondents noted increased empathy toward other cultures and a broader understanding of global interdependence. This aligns with Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence, which emphasizes attitudes of openness, curiosity, and cultural self-awareness as prerequisites for effective intercultural communication. The findings confirm that experiential immersion promotes both linguistic and cultural adaptability, which are essential for developing global citizenship (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2013). This was evident in the students.

### 4.2.3 Support Systems and Mentorship

Institutional support emerged as a critical factor shaping student experiences. The mean rating for Program Support ( $M = 4.0$ ) reflected general satisfaction, though participants identified areas for improvement, including funding transparency and better communication regarding logistics. Qualitative responses emphasized the importance of faculty mentorship and peer collaboration, both of which served as emotional anchors during the trip. These findings corroborate Strange and Gibson's (2017) argument that pre-departure orientation, mentoring, and post-return reflection amplify the transformative potential of international education. When support systems are consistent and culturally responsive, they not only enhance student well-being but also sustain reflective learning processes throughout the study-abroad journey.

## 4.3 Student Narratives

### 4.3.1 Personal Stories of Challenge, Adaptation, and Growth

Student reflections vividly illustrate the transformative nature of the Bahamas study-abroad program. One participant described the trip as "life-changing," emphasizing how immersion in Bahamian culture reshaped their perception of community and sustainability. Another student recounted learning "the importance of punctuality and adaptability," noting that navigating cultural differences required flexibility and mutual respect. Several narratives expressed regret over "missed opportunities for community service," revealing a desire for deeper engagement with local communities. However, even these reflections denote a critical awareness of social responsibility, an essential element of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997). Participants also emphasized the importance of "bonding and sharing" as powerful emotional experiences that foster unity and lifelong friendships.

Collectively, these narratives demonstrate how students moved through the phases of disorientation, adaptation, and reintegration characteristic of transformative learning theory. The journey from cultural challenge to self-empowerment reflects the development of global citizenship and intercultural maturity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). The Bahamas study-abroad experience led to a multidimensional transformation among participants. Quantitative results revealed significant gains in cultural awareness, personal growth, and educational value, while qualitative narratives highlighted deep emotional connections and cognitive expansion. The most influential factors in facilitating transformation included intentional program design, immersive cultural engagement, and robust institutional support. Ultimately, the study underscores that when structured intentionally and inclusively, short-term international programs can yield profound learning outcomes, cultivating students who are more self-aware, socially responsible, and globally competent.

## 5. Discussion

The findings from the Bahamas study-abroad program strongly affirm the applicability of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1997) and Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2017) in understanding how students evolve through global education experiences. As shown in Table 1, participants reported exceptionally high mean ratings in Cultural Awareness ( $M = 4.5$ ), Personal Growth ( $M = 4.5$ ), and Educational Value ( $M = 4.5$ ), signaling both cognitive and affective transformation. These results reflect Mezirow's notion of "perspective transformation," where exposure to disorienting dilemmas such as adapting to new social norms or confronting unfamiliar cultural values leads to reflective learning and revised meaning structures.

Table 1. Mean Ratings of Transformative Learning Dimensions Among Study-Abroad Participants

Dimension	Mean (M)	Interpretation
Career Impact	3.88	Moderate-High influence on career interests
Cultural Awareness	4.50	Significant increase in cultural sensitivity and worldview
Personal Growth	4.50	Substantial self-discovery and emotional maturity
Educational Value	4.50	High appreciation for experiential, hands-on learning
Program Support	4.00	Generally strong, with some logistical gaps
Community Involvement	3.50	Moderate participation in community service
Memorable Experiences	4.50	Highly memorable and emotionally meaningful

Note. Data summarized from participant interviews and reflections in the Bahamas study-abroad program (2025).

Likewise, the program's emphasis on hands-on agricultural visits, intercultural interactions, and reflective discussions mirrors the cyclical stages of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Students not only acquired factual knowledge about sustainable agricultural practices, but also integrated those insights into their evolving identities as global learners. Figure 1 illustrates this alignment, where the highest rated domains correspond directly to Kolb's transformative phases of learning. The process of experiential engagement, whether through fieldwork or peer collaboration, provided authentic contexts for critical reflection, reinforcing the claim that deep learning occurs when cognition and emotion intersect (Taylor, 2007).

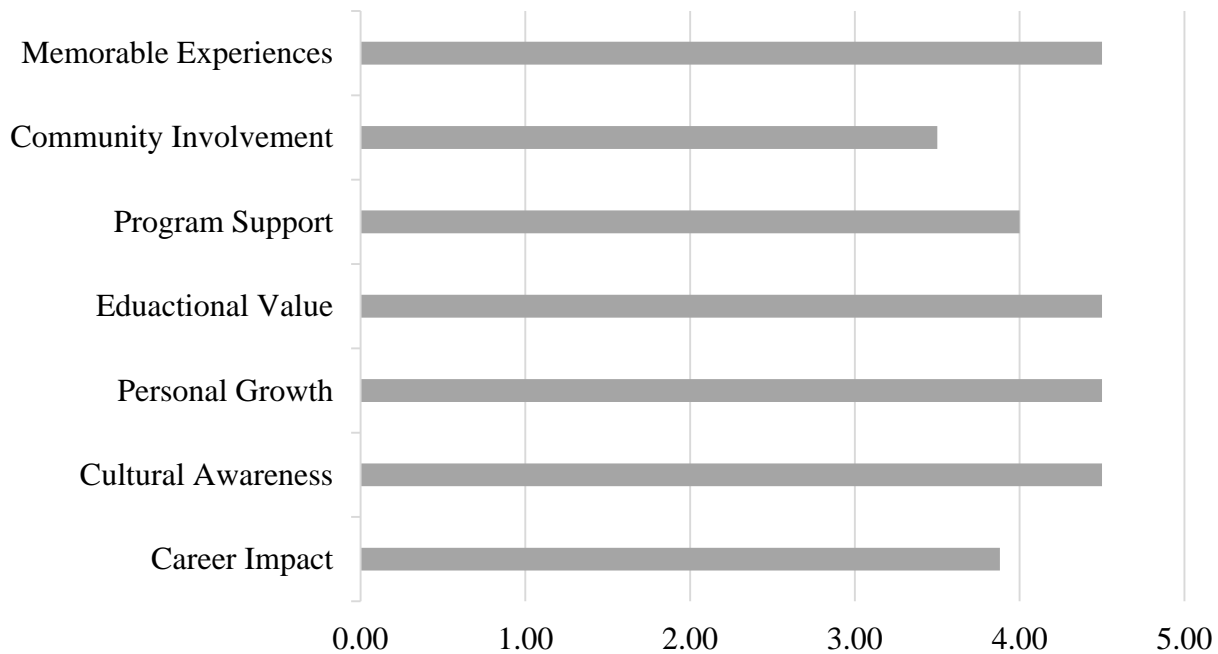


Figure 1. Mean Ratings Across Seven Transformative Dimensions Mean Rating (1-5)

5.1 Comparison with Existing Literature

The results corroborate prior research, which asserts that study-abroad participation fosters multidimensional growth encompassing intellectual, emotional, and professional development (Deardorff, 2020; Strange & Gibson, 2017). Similar to findings by Gan and Kang (2022), participants in this study described heightened self-awareness and resilience, as represented in Table 2, where students’ quotes emphasize empathy, adaptability, and career redirection. One participant stated, “Meeting local families helped me appreciate different ways of living,” exemplifying the affective transformation that Mezirow (1991) identifies as central to perspective change. Moreover, Figure 3 demonstrates that cultural awareness, personal growth, and educational enrichment collectively accounted for nearly two-thirds of all thematic responses. This proportional dominance aligns with the findings of Zalbidea, Issa, and Faretta-Stutenberg (2022), who discovered that immersive short-term programs yield enduring cognitive and psychosocial benefits. The present findings also align with Crossman and Clarke’s (2010) observation that international learning experiences enhance employability and global readiness by developing intercultural communication and problem-solving skills.

Table 2. Themes and Representative Participant Quotes

Major Theme	Representative Quote	Illustrative Outcome
Cognitive Shift	“I started to see agriculture not just as farming but as sustainability for communities.”	Integration of global sustainability concepts
Emotional Growth	“Meeting local families helped me appreciate different ways of living.”	Increased empathy and intercultural sensitivity
Career Reflection	“The trip inspired me to consider a career in environmental policy.”	Realignment of academic/career goals
Networking & Support	“Our group became like a family-supportive and motivating.”	Strengthened interpersonal and peer networks

Note. Qualitative excerpts were coded thematically using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach.

At the same time, students in this study voiced logistical and institutional challenges, echoing Sweeney’s (2013) and Brux and Fry’s (2010) critiques regarding inequitable access and program design. The call for better pre-trip organization and transparent financial planning (Table 3) reinforces the assertion by Bain and Yaklin (2019) that

“transformative study-abroad experiences are more by design than by default.” Thus, while the Bahamas program successfully achieved transformational learning outcomes, further structural refinement could maximize its inclusivity and impact.

5.2 Implications for Practice

The convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence underscores that the quality of program design, not merely its destination, determines the depth of student transformation. As reflected in Table 3, participants emphasized the importance of structured itineraries, punctuality, and mentorship. These insights suggest that program coordinators should integrate guided reflection sessions, daily debriefings, and cultural orientation modules to help students contextualize their experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the program.

Table 3. Key Programmatic Factors Influencing Transformation

Factor	Evidence from Data	Implication for Program Design
Pre-trip Preparation	Students requested earlier meetings and detailed itineraries.	Establish structured orientation and goal-setting workshops.
Duration & Structure	The short-term format was successful when daily reflections were included.	Embed guided reflection sessions into short-term programs.
Cultural Immersion	Visits to farms, business enterprises, and local communities enhanced engagement.	Prioritize immersive, hands-on activities.
Mentorship Support	Faculty mentorship and peer bonding enhanced comfort.	Pair students with mentors for continuous feedback.
Financial Support	Some faced unplanned expenses.	Increase funding transparency and contingency planning.

Note. Synthesized from coded qualitative responses and student recommendations.

Experiential learning frameworks emphasize that reflection serves as the bridge between experience and meaning (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Structured pre-departure workshops can introduce key intercultural theories, while on-site reflective journaling (linked to Kolb’s “reflective observation” phase) can sustain critical thinking throughout the trip. Figure 3, the word-cloud visualization, further validates this point: dominant terms such as growth, career, connections, and support reveal that students valued interpersonal relationships and mentorship as much as academic content. The intentional inclusion of these relational dimensions enhances the transformative potential. Furthermore, program planners should adopt scaffolded learning approaches where reflection begins before departure, intensifies during immersion, and concludes with post-return integration. This continuum encourages participants to translate short-term learning into long-term behavior change, fulfilling Mezirow’s (1997) emphasis on sustained perspective transformation.



Figure 2. Common Words and Phrases in the Study Abroad Experience

### 5.3 Enhancing Pre-Departure and Re-Entry Support

The findings also demonstrate the need for robust support systems across all phases of the study-abroad experience. Students who received consistent faculty mentorship and peer support reported greater emotional resilience and intercultural maturity (see Table 2). This is consistent with Strange and Gibson (2017), who found that mentorship enhances reflective dialogue and mitigates emotional dissonance during cultural adaptation.

Pre-departure preparation should focus on cultivating cultural humility, being aware of risks, and ensuring logistical clarity. Institutional offices should provide intercultural communication training and sessions addressing unconscious bias and privilege to prepare students for ethical engagement abroad (Deardorff, 2006). Upon return, re-entry seminars should facilitate reintegration by helping students articulate their growth through presentations, portfolios, or digital storytelling. These structured reflections convert isolated experiences into transferable competencies that are applicable in both professional and civic life.

### 5.4 Policy Recommendations

Despite the clear benefits illustrated in Table 1, participation in study-abroad programs remains disproportionately skewed toward students with higher socioeconomic status (Salisbury et al., 2009; Sweeney, 2013). The Bahamas findings confirm that financial and logistical barriers persist, as several students referenced the need for more precise funding mechanisms and additional scholarships. Policymakers and institutional leaders should therefore prioritize equity-based funding structures, including micro-grants, need-based aid, and partnerships with local organizations to expand access for underrepresented populations. Moreover, embedding study-abroad components within existing curricula (e.g., service-learning or research-based courses) can reduce costs while maintaining academic rigor. This aligns with Deardorff's (2020) recommendation for mainstreaming global learning across disciplines rather than limiting it to elite programs. Increased investment in short-term, high-impact models, such as the Bahamas initiative, can produce equitable and transformative outcomes without requiring extended international residence.

### 5.5 Promoting Inclusive Global Education

The commitment to widening participation in international education should move beyond simply increasing enrollment and instead focus on instructional approaches and program structures that honor students' varied backgrounds and experiences. As shown in Table 3, components such as broad student representation, thoughtfully planned activities that respect cultural contexts, and guided support from mentors play a key role in strengthening academic and personal development during the program. These practices align with Sweeney's (2013) framework of "inclusive excellence," which advocates institutional commitment to diversity as a core component of global engagement. Furthermore, government agencies and higher-education consortia should encourage partnerships between minority-serving institutions and international universities to co-develop exchange programs, emphasizing mutual learning and shared perspectives. Such initiatives democratize global education by positioning students from all backgrounds as contributors to, rather than mere recipients of, international knowledge exchange.

At a broader level, universities should integrate global citizenship education, rooted in empathy, justice, and sustainability, into their general education curricula (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2013). Embedding these principles reinforces the connection between individual transformation and collective social responsibility. The Bahamas program's outcomes, particularly the cognitive and affective shifts summarized in Figures 1–2, exemplify how study abroad can serve as a microcosm for cultivating globally minded citizens capable of addressing contemporary challenges such as cultural polarization and environmental crisis.

### 5.6 Synthesis and Future Directions

The findings illustrate that transformative outcomes are multifaceted, influenced simultaneously by individual reflection, experiential immersion, and institutional design. Cognitive, emotional, and professional growth occurred synergistically, as represented in Tables 1-2 and Figures 1-3, validating the integrated use of Mezirow's and Kolb's theories. The alignment between quantitative means and qualitative narratives also reinforces methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility of conclusions (Patton, 2015). Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to evaluate the durability of these transformations over time, as recommended by Niehaus and Rivera (2019).

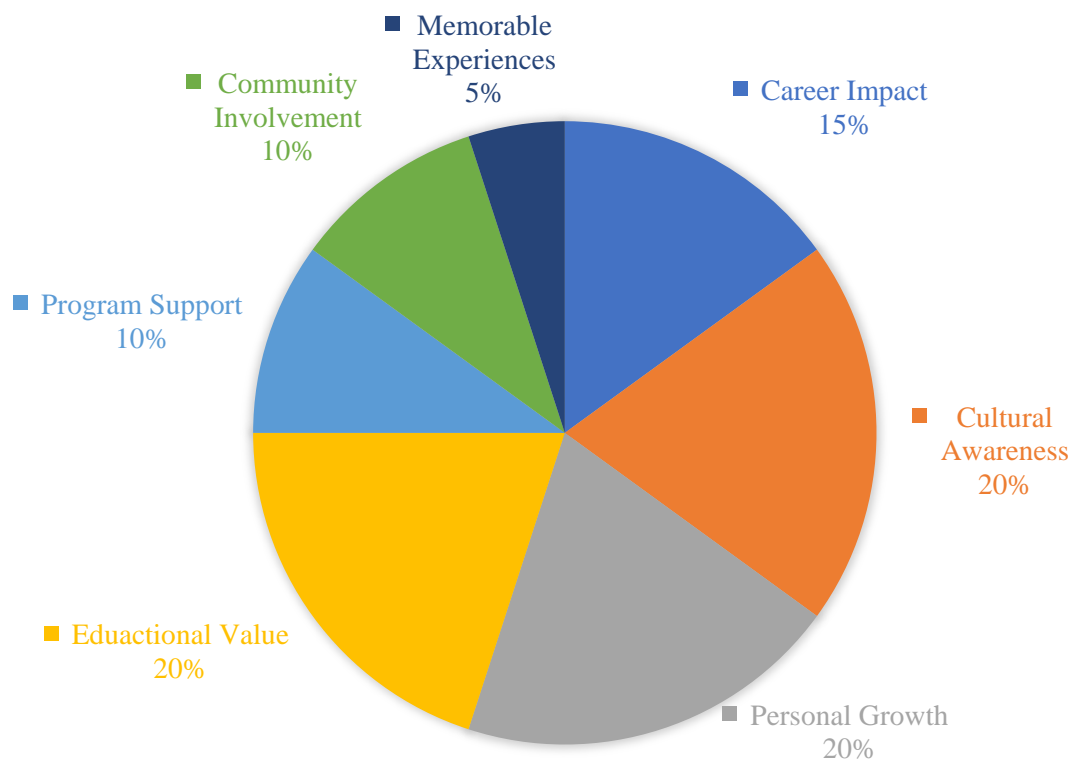


Figure 3. Distribution of Transformative Themes in Participant Responses

Tracking participants post-graduation would illuminate how intercultural competence translates into sustained civic engagement and global leadership. Additionally, comparative studies across regions and demographic groups could provide deeper insight into how social identity mediates transformative learning processes. Ultimately, the Bahamas study-abroad program demonstrates that when international education is intentionally structured, reflectively scaffolded, and equitably supported, it becomes a powerful catalyst for personal, academic, and social transformation. Through the integration of experiential and transformative learning principles, higher education can cultivate graduates who not only understand the world but are also prepared to make a positive impact on it.

## 6. Conclusion

The Bahamas study-abroad program provided compelling evidence that thoughtfully designed global learning experiences can produce enduring cognitive, emotional, and professional transformation. Students reported high levels of cultural awareness, personal growth, and educational enrichment, reflecting both Mezirow's (1991, 1997) transformative learning framework and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. The data revealed that immersion in unfamiliar cultural contexts, coupled with structured reflection, prompted participants to reassess their values and broaden their worldviews. These findings align with prior studies, which have shown that disorienting dilemmas such as confronting cultural differences serve as catalysts for perspective change and global consciousness (Taylor, 2007; Dearthoff, 2020). The program also demonstrated that intentional design is central to achieving transformation. Short-term initiatives can yield long-term benefits when they include pre-departure orientation, guided journaling, mentorship, and post-return integration. Participants valued relational aspects of community, connection, and faculty support as much as academic learning. Such holistic engagement fostered empathy, intercultural maturity, and a sense of social responsibility, confirming that study-abroad programs are most effective when they balance intellectual rigor with emotional and ethical development (Strange & Gibson, 2017). Equally important, the study illuminated the intersection between access, equity, and impact. Although transformative outcomes were widespread, participants identified challenges related to funding, logistics, and inclusion. These findings underscore calls by Sweeney (2013) and Salisbury et al. (2009) for institutions to expand participation among underrepresented students through adequate funding and accessible program designs. The Bahamas initiative thus highlights that transformation is not automatic but contingent on both design quality and institutional commitment to diversity.

Overall, the evidence suggests that when deliberately structured, the study cultivates graduates who are more globally competent, ethically conscious, and professionally adaptable. All qualities are essential for leadership in an interconnected world. These insights contribute to a growing consensus that transformative and experiential pedagogies must become integral to twenty-first-century higher education. Despite its significant contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted with a limited sample size drawn from a single short-term program, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Although the mixed-methods approach enhanced validity through triangulation, larger and more diverse samples would strengthen future conclusions.

Second, the self-reported nature of interview data introduces potential biases, such as social desirability and selective memory. Participants may have overemphasized the positive aspects of their experiences or lacked the necessary temporal distance to reflect fully. Employing longitudinal follow-ups or third-party evaluations could mitigate these issues. Third, the study's focus on a single geographic context, the Bahamas, means that findings may not fully capture variations in cultural complexity, institutional support, or host-country dynamics found elsewhere. As Bain and Yaklin (2019) argue, the transformative depth of a program is often context-dependent, shaped by local partnerships, the quality of mentorship, and societal engagement.

Finally, resource constraints limited the scope of analysis to immediate outcomes rather than long-term behavioral change. Because transformation is an evolving process, its durability beyond the program's completion remains uncertain. Nonetheless, these limitations provide valuable direction for methodological refinement in subsequent investigations.

### *6.1 Suggestions for Future Research*

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine how transformations endure over time. Tracking graduates one, three, and five years after participation could reveal whether intercultural competence, civic engagement, and ethical awareness persist and translate into professional or community leadership (Niehaus & Rivera, 2019). Long-term data would also clarify how reflection continues after the program and how participants reintegrate their global learning into their domestic contexts. Such approaches would respond directly to calls within the literature for assessing sustained impact rather than short-term sentiment (Strange & Gibson, 2017).

Comparative studies across multiple institutions, disciplines, and host regions are needed to identify patterns and contextual differences in transformative learning. Cross-institutional collaboration could reveal how variables such as program length, disciplinary focus, mentorship models, and cultural settings shape outcomes. Including minority-serving and community colleges would enhance equity in research representation and generate insights into how diverse institutional missions influence student development (Sweeney, 2013). Similarly, comparative regional analysis examining programs in the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, and Asia could highlight how sociocultural environments mediate learning and identity transformation.

Future studies should continue to integrate transformative learning, experiential learning, and intercultural competence theories, while exploring new frameworks such as social identity theory and critical pedagogy. Mixed-methods approaches remain invaluable, but researchers may further employ advanced analytic techniques, such as structural equation modeling or qualitative longitudinal analysis, to uncover the relationships between reflection, emotion, and behavioral change (Patton, 2015). A broader theoretical synthesis will ensure that study-abroad research evolves in tandem with the complexities of globalization and diversity in higher education.

Ultimately, the Bahamas study-abroad project demonstrates that intentional, inclusive, and reflective global education can not only transform how students think but also who they become. By intertwining experiential practice with critical reflection, such programs nurture the empathy, resilience, and moral imagination required for global citizenship. The evidence suggests that transformation is neither accidental nor ephemeral; it emerges through structured experiences, supportive mentorship, and sustained reflection. As higher education grapples with global challenges, including cultural polarization and environmental crises, study-abroad initiatives must shift their focus from tourism to purpose-driven learning. When supported by strong standards, thoughtful guidance, and genuine concern for student growth, these programs serve as training grounds for developing future global leaders who approach the world with insight, empathy, and determination.

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