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Effects of Short-Term International Study Trips on Graduate Students in Higher Education

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This article focuses on the impact of international short-term study trips on the multicultural competence of graduate students in higher education administration. The analysis demonstrates graduate students' attainment in all three areas of multicultural competence: awareness, skills, and knowledge. Utilizing semantic network analysis and qualitative content analysis, the study provides empirical backing to research on the benefits of short-term study abroad for adult learners and extends findings to the field of higher education administration.

Introduction

The international imperative across the professional field of higher education administration has received a strong emphasis in the last decade. The 2014 recommendations of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], the main association guiding standards across higher education programs and services, include “understanding and appreciation of cultural and human differences” and “global perspective” under their student learning and development domains and dimensions (CAS, 2014, pp. 5–6). Similarly, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) emphasize the necessity to infuse cross-cultural perspectives and international competencies throughout professionals’ training—it is higher education professionals who are responsible to help open students’ horizons to global issues and create supportive environments for the international student community (ACPA/NASPA, 2015). Indeed, student affairs professionals create learning environments for students through both cocurricular programming and direct course offerings, and “it is vital that they be culturally sophisticated and globally aware to ensure they, in turn, are able to develop such a capacity within students” (Schultz, Lee, Cantwell, McClellan, & Woodard, 2007, p. 617). In light of

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this, global awareness and multicultural competence are increasingly becoming important components of the training of higher education professionals.

Today, most graduate programs for higher education professionals across the United States expose their students to international issues and cross-cultural perspectives in a variety of ways. Direct exposure through study trips is present in many programs. In their 2007 survey, Schultz et al. found that study abroad opportunities in the international dimensions of student affairs work were present in 57% of the graduate programs, but only a handful of these programs involved more than one or two students a year. Schultz et al.'s study did not distinguish between the different kinds of international study trips with respect to duration and destination, and one presumes that they targeted all kinds of opportunities. Schultz et al.'s study remains the most recent explorative investigation into the progress and nature of internationalization across higher education preparation programs. In their findings, internationalization was incorporated into higher education programs in a variety of ways but remained uneven across programs. Today, short-term international study trip opportunities abound across graduate programs in higher education, covering a variety of countries, and focusing on the higher education system of the foreign destination.

Whereas much research has focused on study abroad programs in general, international study trips developed by higher education graduate programs with the aim to expose professionals-in-training to international issues have remained under-studied. Scholars have demonstrated a host of benefits from study abroad programs related to growth in students' cross-cultural sensitivity, personal awareness, and cognitive achievements (Brigham, 2011; Cisneros-Donahue, Krentle, Reinig, & Sabol, 2012; Giedf, Gokcek, & Ghosh, 2015; Heinzmann, Kuenzle, Schallhart, & Mueller, 2015; Salisbury, An, & Pascarella, 2013; Vande Berg, Paige, & Hemming Lou, 2012). In addition, although with mixed results, research has demonstrated positive outcomes of short-term study abroad programs (Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016; Dunn, Dotson, Cross, Kesner, & Lundahl, 2014; Walters, Charles, & Bingham, 2016). However, the majority of research on study abroad programs has focused on general study trips involving mostly undergraduate students. Studies on the learning outcomes for graduate students, who tend to be older and often more mature, and who usually bear family and job responsibilities in life have been more rare, as have studies on structured, specialized, short-term study abroad programs that have been integrated into a given program's curriculum as building blocks towards the program's learning outcomes. Research on the effects of structured international experiences on graduate students in higher education administration is no exception. While more and more graduate higher education administration programs incorporate structured study trips abroad, there is still little empirically based investigation into how these trips influence student learning, what the contribution of international exposure to students' multicultural awareness is, and how best to align such international exposure opportunities with overall program outcomes.

The present study aims to address the gap in research on international exposure of higher education professionals in training. The study centers on the major effects of higher-education-focused, structured, faculty-led, short-term study trips on the multicultural competency of graduate students in higher education administration. The study employs semantic network analysis methodology to explore the content of the journals of three international study cohorts of PhD and master's students who travelled in three different years and to three different sets of destinations. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the major effects of short-term international study trips on the multicultural competence of the participating graduate students?

2. Do effects differ by destination, race/ethnicity, age, and prior travel?

Benefits of Structured International Study Trips

Research has demonstrated that study abroad programs work as transformational experiences for college students (Crabtree, 2008). Considered high impact practices (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010), study abroad programs have been found to yield gains in intercultural competence, global mindedness, self-awareness, cross-cultural sensitivity, ability to learn, personal growth, multi-cultural awareness, and professional development (Brigham, 2011; Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Giedf et al., 2015; Heinzmann et al., 2015; Salisbury et al., 2013; Vande Berg et al., 2012). While the majority of the research has focused on long-term traditional study abroad programs of at least a semester of immersion in the host culture, learning gains from structured, short-term study trips have also been identified. Scholars have reported on the positive impact of short-term study trips on students' intercultural sensitivity and learning (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Anderson et al., 2016), transformative learning (Walters et al., 2016), cultural awareness and self-confidence (Curtin, Martins, Schwartz-Barcott, DiMaria, & Ogando, 2013; Dunn et al., 2014), and racial awareness (Castellanos, Gloria, Mayorga, & Salas, 2007; King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Lee & Green, 2016; Mueller & Pope, 2003).

Most of the research on study abroad programs has covered primarily general types of programs geared towards undergraduate students. A handful of studies have analyzed short-term study trips that involved graduate students from different academic fields and disciplines including counseling (Ribeiro, 2004; Smith, McAuliffe, & Rippard, 2014), family therapy (McDowell, Goesling, & Melendez, 2012), education (Squire et al., 2015), and early childhood education (Vatalaro, Szente, & Levin, 2015). Those studies have found short-term, international study trips particularly well-suited for adult learners and reported on raised critical consciousness, increased social awareness, personal transformation, gender identity development, and multicultural sensitivity as a result of the trips.

Studies focusing specifically on the effects of organized, short-term, international study trips on students in higher education are rare. One notable exception that reports on positive effects of short-term study trips comes from the profession of student affairs. In their study, Haber and Getz (2011) recorded gains in intercultural competence for their 11 graduate students in student affairs who spent two weeks in Qatar. Although effects are yet to be documented in research, today, an increasing number of graduate programs in higher education administration emphasize study trips as a sound way to broaden students' cross-cultural perspectives, comparative understanding of higher education, global awareness, and multicultural competencies. A cursory review of the 147 graduate programs in higher education listed in ACPA's program directory (programs cover a range of specializations related to campus administration and student affairs) reveals that at least one third of these programs offer international study trips (ACPA, 2015). The growing diversity on college campuses and across the United States necessitates preparation programs that can strengthen their graduates' abilities to guide diverse student populations. According to Schulz et al. (2007), exposure to international issues prepares graduates of student affairs programs to be informed guides to students in their preparation to join a globalized economy and society, to offer creative programming and solutions after learning from other countries' approaches, to help promote tolerance and multiculturalism amongst the campus community, to better serve international students, and to help promote the positive image of U.S. institutions.

Theoretical Framework

The academic community strongly believes that students training to enter the profession of higher education administration or student affairs must possess a set of competencies enabling them to deal with multicultural issues (Castellanos et al., 2007; Jablonski, Bresciani, Lovell, & Shandley, 2006; King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Pope & Reynolds, 1997). Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004) defined multicultural competence as “the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to work with others who are culturally different from self in meaningful, relevant, and productive ways” (p. 13). Multicultural awareness refers both to the assumptions and values that guide one’s interactions with people who are culturally different and to one’s self-awareness of those values. Multicultural knowledge is comprised of content knowledge about the cultural groups professionals work with and about important cultural constructs such as racial identity and acculturation. Knowledge helps prevent stereotypical approaches to working with different people. Finally, multicultural skills involve the behaviors that allow professionals to apply their cultural knowledge and awareness such as ability to understand how culture impacts speaking and conduct, or ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultures (King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Pope et al., 2004).

As the profession of student affairs has gradually adjusted to effectively meet the needs of growing campus and social diversity, it has embraced a multicultural competence framework where each of the domains of knowledge, awareness, and skills serves as a prerequisite to work with individuals of any background and integrate in a diverse society (Castellanos et al., 2007; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Development of multicultural competence has also become mandatory for higher education administration graduate programs. The multicultural competence framework, developed by Pope and Reynolds (1997), serves as the theoretical guide to this study.

Methodology

This study employs semantic network analysis, which allows researchers to conduct “highly automated” qualitative analysis of textual information utilizing “*quantitative* procedures” (Danowski, 1993, p. 198). Semantic networks are based on word associations within a given context and a given social community thus capturing underlining messages. These messages emerge at the semantic level, in the original language in which they were expressed. In network approaches, content analysis begins with the identification of word-pair link strength. Centering on the “range of word cooccurrences” in texts, network analysis slides “a window” of several word positions through the text, “counting and aggregating all word pairs within the window” (Danowski, 1993, p. 202). With the application of different statistical tools, these word-pair connections are then used to map the network of words comprising the text under analysis, graphing central words (vertices), the distances, and the connections amongst them. Semantic network scholars have demonstrated that “the frequency, co-occurrence, and distances among words and concepts allow researchers to explore meaning embedded in the text” (Yuan, Feng, & Danowski, 2013, p. 5). Word groups, or clusters, point to prevalent themes and ideas in the network. Statistical tools also allow for comparisons amongst different networks and between message variables and other related contexts.

Data Sources

This study utilized the journals of three cohorts of graduate students in higher education from a large public university in the Midwest, travelling to three different sets of countries between 2012 and 2015. The study trips were part of the International Summer Leadership

Academy in the university's higher education graduate program, and lasted anywhere between 15 and 21 days. The first study trip took 12 PhD and 3 master's students to Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom in the summer of 2012. The second study trip involved 11 PhD and 2 master's students traveling to China in the summer of 2013. Finally, 13 PhD and 5 master's students participated in a study trip to Belgium, France, and the Netherlands in the summer of 2015. In total, the three study trips involved 46 graduate students in higher education.

The trips were faculty led and followed a similar overall structure. Each trip was linked to two semester-long graduate courses. Course-content-based assessment took place prior to and after the trip. While the two trips to Europe did not involve language learning (English served as the language of instruction and communication for these two trips), the trip to China was preceded by a semester-long course in conversational Chinese. In addition, each study trip was preceded by a semester-long orientation, during which participants discussed the host country cultures, watched movies and discussed articles related to their expected visits, shared goals, expectations, and apprehensions, and worked through the logistics of each day of the trip. Finally, participants in each of the trips spent a day reflecting on their experiences a month after their return home.

The study trips themselves included opportunities for formal, informal, and experiential learning. Visits to national and regional governmental agencies, associations, and institutions of higher education were linked to lectures, presentations, and workshops on an array of topics related to the higher education system of the country or the region, its administration and governance, the policies that guided its functioning, the academic and social lives of its community, and the challenges they faced. Informal learning opportunities were often linked to the research teams to which each student was assigned. These teams included students or professionals from both Europe/China and the United States, and their task was to spend the semester developing a project together. During the trip, students and their European/Chinese partners took every opportunity to spend time together, visit the host's institutions or families, share a walk, go shopping, sightsee or eat together, or play sports. Experiential learning opportunities were expressed in interactions with students from host institutions, cultural activities, engagement with local professionals, sightseeing, and immersion in the host culture. A culminating experience for the trip was each student's participation and presentation at a one-day long international seminar focusing on comparative issues of higher education.

For the purposes of their field study, students were tasked to maintain daily journals, reflecting on knowledge, awareness, and skills they were able to detect, as well as on the impact of the trip on them in general. Journals were submitted to the students' faculty leader, and one of the authors of the present study, on two occasions: in the middle of the trip and at the end of it. Artifacts and photos were often included with the students' reflections. Prior research has noted the value of reflective journals in education and their utility in assessing student learning (Bisman, 2011; Boud, 2001; Creme, 2005; George, 2002). Reflective journals are personal narratives in which students lay out their thoughts, ideas, comments, feelings, and attitudes on the course and their journey of learning (Bisman, 2011). Journals record thoughts and ideas, and in turn encourage reflection, thus stimulating deep learning (George, 2002). For the purposes of the present study, students were contacted a year after each trip's experience, long after any work related to the trip was completed, with a request for consent to utilize their journals' texts. Once consent was granted, the journals' texts were blinded and poured into a large, aggregated, textual file.

Methods of Analysis

Danowski's (2013) Wordij software package of programs for content analysis was used in combination with NodeXL (Smith et al., 2010), UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002), and NetDraw (Borgatti, 2002). Wordlink and Conversions, two of the programs in the Wordij package, identify frequently used words and word pairs, and point to links amongst central words. NodeXL and UCINET utilize Wordlink output files to chart the semantic networks of the analyzed content and identify thematic clusters. These tools thus assist in the identification of concepts and themes central to the texts and situated within their specific contexts. NetDraw utilizes UCINET outputs to graph and analyze semantic networks. QAPNet and ZUtilities, two other programs in the Wordij software package, help compare semantic networks of different groups. Finally, while software analysis helped us identify prevalent themes, structure the semantic network, and compare group outcomes, examples from the text directly linked to central word pairs helped us provide illustrations to our findings.

We conducted the semantic analysis of the texts in two stages. In Stage 1, the journals of all 46 graduate students were collected and aggregated in a large data file of plain text for content analysis that was intended to help us address Research Question 1. Utilizing Wordlink, we then counted all words and word pairs in raw form from all journals, except for a short stoplist (or list of words to exclude) of proper nouns and connecting words. Next, with the help of NodeXL, we explored the network's word clusters, contained in the product files of Wordlink, to identify main themes. In addition, we used UCINET and NetDraw to graph the semantic network of the journals, pointing to central words (vertices) in the network and to their connections with other words. Next, for most central words, we examined links to other words up to two steps with the help of the Wordij's NodeTric tool. Finally, we manually traced central words throughout the text to situate them within the specific context of use and pulled examples from the text to illustrate our points.

In Stage 2, to address Research Question 2, which asked for content analyses of different groups, we grouped the journals according to destination, race/ethnicity, age, and prior travel, and turned them into aggregated group files of plain text. Among the journal writers, 30 (65%) were White students, 16 (35%) were African American (11), Hispanic (4), and Indian American (1); 27 (59%) were women, and 31 (68%) were above the age of 35 at the time of travel. Only 9 (19%) of the participants had traveled abroad prior to this trip. As in Stage 1, our first move in the analysis was to count with the help of Wordlink all words and word pairs in raw form from each group's journals. Wordlinks' product group files were then compared with the help of Wordij's QAPnet and Z Utilities tools.

Results

Research Question 1: What are The Major Effects of Short-Term International Study Trips on The Multicultural Competence of The Participating Graduate Students?

To address this question, we identified the central words in the semantic network and the themes in the cluster analysis that related to the three aspects of multicultural competence (Pope & Reynolds, 1997): awareness, skills, and knowledge. The results presented in the following are organized under each of these three aspects (Figure 1).

Awareness. Cluster analysis pointed to raised inner and outer awareness as the most important outcome of the study trips. The pronoun "I" emerged as central to the first, and largest, word cluster in the network. "I" also centered at the core of the overall semantic network, signaling the highly self-reflective nature of the students' experiences (Figure 2). The semantic proximity of "I" to "awareness" and "knowledge" (see Figure 2) underlined students' efforts to analyze what they were learning and experiencing throughout the trip. On the one hand, the centrality of "I" to the journals' network can be

Figure 1. Major effects of study trips on the multicultural competence of graduate students.

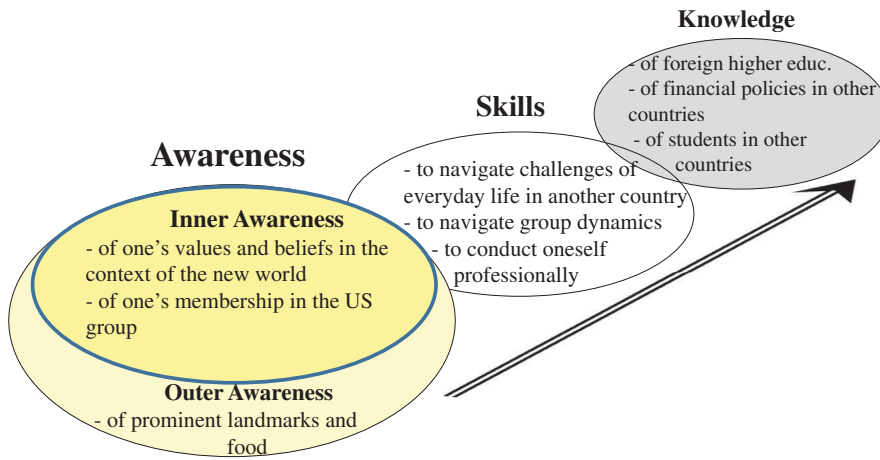
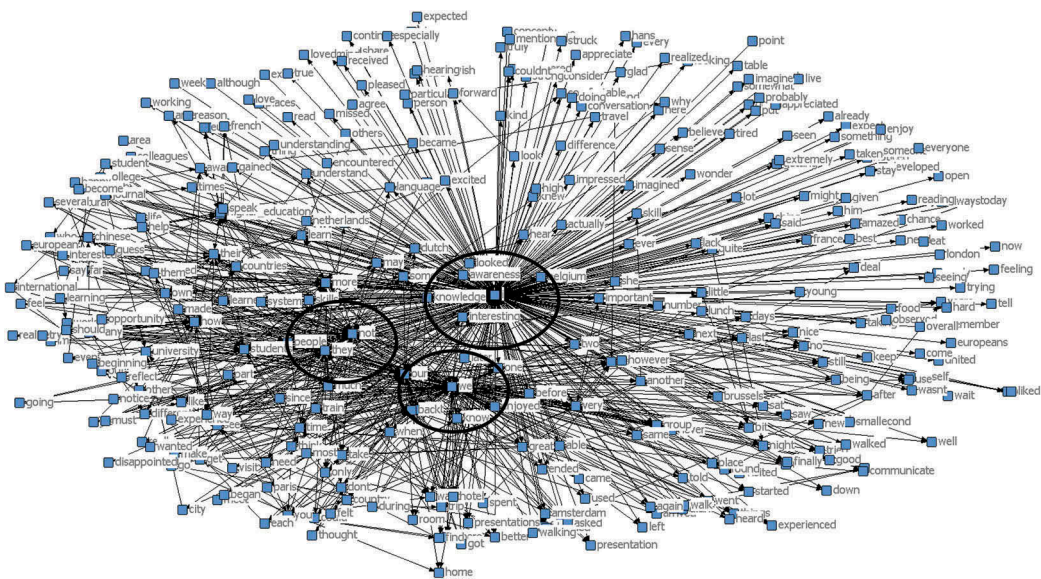


Figure 2. The semantic network of students' journals.



explained with the nature of the journal assignment, which asked students to spend time documenting their experiences. On the other hand, however, critical self-reflection accompanies travel abroad. Indeed, prior research has identified heightened self-reflection and evaluation of personal perspectives as major outcomes of the encounter with unknown cultures. In this case, however, self-awareness emerged as the most overpowering learning outcome of international study travel.

Inner awareness at the heart of the experiences.

In the semantic network, the “I” core was closely connected to the other two anchors of network centrality: the one shaped by “not” and “they,” and the other by “we” and “our.” The three knots of network centrality are visible on Figure 2. The proximity of these core knots illustrates two different aspects of inner self-awareness that students experienced. First, the closeness of the knot centered around “not” and “they” nuances the intensity of personal introspection. Students underwent a reevaluation of their values and beliefs, a reevaluation accompanied by the juxtaposition of one’s perspectives with those encountered. The frequent use of “not” indicates a high level of negativity on the students’ part. The pair “not I” had a very high frequency of occurrence and was most often followed (when traced for linkages up to two steps) with verbs of sensing, believing, thinking, and becoming aware such as “think,” “aware,” “found,” “could,” “fell,” “like,” “felt,” “see,” “believe,” and “never.” On the one hand, these associations point to surprise, shock, discomfort, and disbelief at the foreign encounters. On the other hand, the centrality of the negation “not” signals a shared analytic style of thinking (Pennebaker, 2011) spurred by the different experiences. Analytic style of thinking is revealed in the writing of people who are trying to parse and understand the world of “they” around them.

The second aspect of inner self-awareness is closely related to students’ self-identification as citizens of the United States and as integral members of the travel group. This aspect is signaled by the proximity of the other knot of centrality, grouped around “we” and “our,” to the semantic network center, as well as the very high frequency of the “I-we” and “I-our” pairs, both of which emerged amongst the most frequent pairs in the network. Two-step linkages showed that some of the time, the identification with “we” related to “us as Americans.” Equally, “we” often linked to “us as the group.” The travel group was seen as the safe shell of learning and experiencing, the known zone cushioning the experiences of each member. Tracing the central words throughout the text, it was not uncommon to locate direct student testimonies regarding strengthening ties within the group, emerging friendships, and the value of processing experiences with other fellow Americans. As one student stated,

This experience proves time together with people I know, but not really know, can be fortified with meaningful experiences like this one . . . Through the past couple of weeks the cohort has really gotten close . . . We talk and talk all the time . . . This was my awareness and consciousness gain.

Outer awareness.

Cluster analysis demonstrated heightened awareness towards the new surrounding world. Before leaving for the study trip, students in each cohort read extensively on each country’s history and national character, and on important landmarks in the cities they visited. Prior discussions with each cohort aimed at situating educational developments and policies within the history and culture of each country. The aggregated journal text illuminated students’ heightened awareness to prominent cultural landmarks and food. In addition to “I” as a central word in the first, and largest, word cluster in the semantic network, “Luxembourg gardens,” “Versailles,” and “chocolate” featured prominently amongst the first set of words. These words highlight most students’ over-powering impressions of the physical encounter with a different world. Once signaled by the semantic network, we combed the text for direct illustrations. As one student shared,

I actually cried when I visited the Notre Dame, the massiveness of the Cathedral was breathtaking (yes there is that word again). I couldn’t believe where I was at, I couldn’t imagine what work and talent were brought together to construct this building. All the buildings there. . . I was in awe.

The numerous artifacts (maps, souvenirs, tickets to sites, scrapbooks) and photos attached to the journals attest to the enormous impact cultural landmarks made on the students. Students also

overwhelmingly shared their experiences with the international cultures through food. Hundreds of pictures recorded meals and snacks. The general words “food,” “drink,” and “eat” appeared more than a thousand times throughout the journals. Often, students would include detailed descriptions of particular meals or drinks.

Skills. The second theme captured by the semantic clusters linked to the development of skills related to logistics of traveling abroad and the navigation of group dynamics. Central words in the second largest cluster in the network pointed to growth in skills in two important areas. First, students recorded learning to navigate everyday living challenges of transportation, nourishment, hygiene, dress, and conduct in the international worlds. Central words related to train stations, water ports, bicycles, and city walking. “Vastly” and “different” captured students’ exposure to these daily experiences in foreign cities. Tracing the words through the text provided numerous examples. In one student’s words,

I felt like I was able to learn new navigation tactics, and even acquired a semi-solid grasp of the metro station and its routes and how to navigate them, or where to look for bike rentals . . . The way people dress in Europe is different than what we experience in the US . . . left the jeans in the hotel . . .

Second, the words “group” and “skills” were also amongst the first set of central words in the cluster. Learning to travel with colleagues, to navigate travel challenges together, and to engage with group members emerged as an important skill from these trips. As a student commented,

. . . in Shanghai tensions started to flare up, this is just the nature of travelling with a large group, away from home . . . when frustrations began to appear on people’s faces for whatever reason (room issues, roommate issues, bus issues, etc.). Luckily, everyone was mostly professional about their small frustrations and we were able to continue the week of work without any major blow-ups or incidents.

In context, examples also opened up references to professional conduct, both within and outside group interactions. As a student shared, “I learned composure in presenting and elsewhere when traveling with the group . . . these Europeans like to play devil’s advocates with their questions . . .”

Knowledge. “Education,” “allocated [funds],” and “students” were at the core of the third main cluster in the semantic network. The study trip incorporated various college visits, educational sessions, and workshops with international partners. The journals revealed knowledge acquisition regarding the educational systems of the countries we visited. Examining links to other words up to two steps revealed connections to “their” education, that of the “Dutch,” the “European,” and “China.” And the close connection with “not I” and “not we” reflect student processing of information regarding the vast differences in the educational systems they were witnessing. An especially impactful learning outcome here related to policies of widespread state funding common to all visited countries. “Allocation” of funds for students in particular and of higher education in general emerged as a revelational piece of knowledge for the whole group. As one student noted,

. . . it was somewhat entertaining (and disheartening) to hear that students pay 590 Euro per year for university. Of course, we have all known that university is inexpensive here, but there is still the sticker-shock of considering the relative craziness of the ever-rising U.S. tuition prices.

Word connections also illuminated the “student-centered” prominence. Tracing “student-centered” through the text provided numerous examples where participants reported learning that U.S.-based student-centeredness remained stronger than that in the visited countries.

Research Question 2: Do Effects of International, Short-Term Study Trips Differ By Destination, Race/Ethnicity, Age, and Prior Travel?

To address Research Question 2, we utilized Wordij's QAPnet tool, which provides a measure of the similarity of two semantic networks utilizing a correlation coefficient, and the Z Utilities tool, which calculates proportional differences in the use of words and pairs between groups. To form the groups for comparison, we combined the journal texts from each respective student group. Similar to the analysis of all journals, we used a short stoplist of words that included proper nouns and connecting words.

The comparisons between different semantic networks indicate the levels of similar experiences of diverse students (Table 1). The lowest level of similarity emerged between the students who went to Europe and those who went to China ($r = 0.497$), with only a quarter of the participants sharing similar experiences. The highest similarity of experiences was between White and African American/Hispanic/Indian American students ($r = 0.77$). A high correlation was also seen between the semantic networks of the participants older than 35 years of age (68%) and those younger than 35 ($r = 0.7$) as well as between the networks of those students traveling for the first time internationally (19%) and those who had traveled before ($r = 0.71$).

Z-tests helped us further explore the differences by group. The Europe v. China comparison revealed that the group that went to China utilized negations, including "I not" (-3.43), "I didn't" (-6.42), "we didn't" (-4.9), and "I don't" (-5.85), at a much higher rate than the group that went to Europe. The China group also expressed surprise ("I surprise," -3.56) at a much higher rate and used much more cognitive words such as "I think" (-3.02), "I learn" (-4.2), "I thought" (-3.4), "I see" (-4.9), "I believe" (-3.5), "I noticed" (-5), "I realize" (-3.6), "I observed" (-4.4), "I felt" (-4.3). Cognitive words, according to Pennebaker (2011), reflect people's increased efforts to understand what is happening. The larger cultural differences that the group encountered in China offer some explanation of students' experiences there. In addition, the China group also showed more feelings of enjoyment and amazement ("I enjoyed," -3.5; "I amazed," -4.8; "I wonder," -3.9; "excited learn," -4.1; "very enjoyable," -3.9).

The Z-tests also helped explain some of the different experiences between the African American/Hispanic/Indian American students and White students. A much higher reference to "I" (9.85) emerged amongst African American/Hispanic/Indian American students, rather than "the group" (-2.93), which was utilized much more by the White participants, indicating a higher distance felt by the African American/Hispanic/Indian American students from their

Table 1

Comparisons Between the Semantic Networks of Different Groups

Comparison Groups	Europe Trip v. China Trip	White Students v. African American/Hispanic/Indian American Students	Students above 35 years of age v. Students below 35 years of age	First-time travelers v. Not-first-time travelers
Correlation measure (r)	$r = 0.497$	$r = 0.77$	$r = 0.70$	$r = 0.71$
Explained variance	25%	59%	49%	50%

travel group that was predominantly comprised of White students. Another important finding in this group comparison pointed to the frequent use of the word pair “I-brown” (5.3) used only by the African American/Hispanic/Indian American students, indicating a heightened racial/ethnic alertness in travelling throughout Europe and China. Tracing the word connections in the text provided various examples in context. As one student wrote,

... but on the streets of China, I felt alienation for my blackness. And as farfetched as this might sound, the desire would become overbearing to escape the stares that weren't always so friendly or the wanna-be photographers taking pictures without my permission ...

At the linguistic level, the African American/Hispanic/Indian American student group utilized 29,096 words altogether, of which 2,080 were unique words. Unique words form the network vocabulary. In comparison, the White student group used 83,597 words altogether of which 3,897 were unique words. After normalizing for differences in the sample size of the two groups, the White student group used 65% more words than the African American/Hispanic/Indian American student group. However, after normalizing, the two groups' vocabularies did not differ. Thus, despite the differences in the frequency of use and the combination of certain words, the shared vocabulary indicates consensus regarding the experiences of the White and African American/Hispanic/Indian American students, and explains the semantic similarity of the two networks.

Some differences between those younger and older than 35 also surfaced. Whereas those older than 35 expressed their amazement at a higher level (“I amazed,” -2.4), those below 35 recorded at a higher rate a whole range of reflections, emotions, and learning, including “I think” (9.86), “I gained” (7), “I never” (6.23), “really how” (5.5), “I how” (5.3), “skills gained” (5.2), “reason I” (5.2), “I feel” (4.9), “really know” (4.8), “I thought” (4.6), and “very happy” (4.5). The heightened use of cognitive words demonstrated younger learners' efforts to parse the new world and experiences at a higher level, and to make sense of the new culture.

Finally, the experiences of those students traveling abroad for the first time and those who had traveled before overlapped to a large extent. First-time travelers utilized words of awareness, hesitation, and confusion at a higher rate such as “may we” (3.4), “I don't” (3.22), “may I” (3.2), and “awareness we” (3.2). In addition, first-time travelers used 39% less words to describe their experiences, while their vocabulary was comprised of 32% less words.

Discussion of Major Findings

Regardless of the diverse destinations and the varying group composition, the journals of graduate students revealed that international study travel had a powerful effect on them. Consistent with prior research (Ribeiro, 2004; Smith et al., 2014), this study showed that direct short-term exposure to other countries and their educational systems was very beneficial for adult learners, both first-time and not-first time travelers. The analysis demonstrates graduate students' attainment in all three areas of multicultural competence: awareness, skills, and knowledge. In this respect, the study provides empirical backing to research on the benefits of study abroad programs, and extends findings to the field of higher education administration. From a methodological perspective, the semantic network analysis approach yields valuable insights into the prevalent students' thoughts and experiences thus demonstrating its high utility for higher education research.

Although gains in awareness in general were recorded throughout the journals, gains in students' self-awareness emerged as the primary finding of the study. Students' journals signaled reflective processes that evaluated individuals' experiences against new contexts as well as against

the experiences of the travel group. Prior research has demonstrated the strong impact of direct short-term exposure to other countries on students' self-awareness (Haber & Getz, 2011; McDowell et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2014; Vatalaro et al., 2015). In their study, McDowell et al. (2012) reported on changes in students' worldviews and how "their cultural pre/misconceptions were often challenged as a result" of their graduate students' short-term study trips to the Middle East and Asia (p. 368). Similarly, the students in the present study recorded high levels of self-reflection and awareness, and demonstrated intensive evaluation of their inner positions. These efforts were common to all students, regardless of their race/nationality, age, and travel destination. In addition, as the study demonstrated, experiences and reflections of first-time travelers were not very different than those of the students who had traveled before. Although scarce, prior research on effects of first-time travel abroad for undergraduate students has demonstrated that in cases when students joined study abroad for the first time, their learning outcomes did not differ from those of more experienced travelers (McKeown, 2009; Tarranta & Lyons, 2012). Some small differences in this study between the first-time and not-first-time travelers were noted mostly in the level of hesitation and confusion.

Feelings of negativity accompanied students' thoughts, often a result of processing the differences they encountered. Negativity and self-reflection were particularly intensive with the student group that traveled to China, where cultural differences, as compared to Europe, were perceived as much larger, as well as with African American/Hispanic/Indian American students. The latter group also demonstrated higher levels of racial awareness, which aligns with prior research (Castellanos et al., 2007; King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Mueller & Pope, 2003).

A second significant finding of the study points to the value of short-term study abroad trips to establishing lasting relationships amongst participants. The findings of the study speak of increased self-awareness as a member of a U.S. group, as well as of enhanced skills in navigating group dynamics. Throughout the travel, students documented growth in personal and professional connections with members of their group. The study trip enhanced the cohesion amongst the U.S. students, forcing them to get to know each other better, to learn from each other, to help each other process experiences. Some differences in self-awareness as a group member were noted amongst African American, Hispanic, and Indian American participants, who indicated a higher distance from the predominantly White travel group. Professionally, the study also pointed to increased skills in conduct and appearance as a result of the international trip. Prior research (Barden & Cashwell, 2014; Smith et al., 2014) has noted the importance of short-term study trips to meaningful interactions with peers and representatives of the local culture and the value of peers in processing experiences.

Third, this study demonstrated the power of direct international exposure—even if for a short period of time—in honing students' skills to navigate life, travel, and professional conduct as well as in enhancing knowledge about other systems of higher education and their students. All graduate students in these trips devoted their lives to higher education and students in the United States, and they paid very close attention to the international higher education system. Prior research from graduate programs (Haber & Getz, 2011; McDowell et al., 2012) speaks to the growth in specialized knowledge as a result of international study trips. Education, students, and funding policies were amongst the central themes students reflected on and carried with them from the trips in this study.

Implications for Practice and Conclusion

The study's findings enrich our understanding of the impact of direct international exposure on graduate students' multicultural competence, and provide insights regarding useful approaches

in the efforts to integrate direct international exposure across preparatory programs. Several recommendations stem from the findings. First, international study trips afford the opportunity for higher education professionals-in-training to encounter themselves, to look at their own values and beliefs through a different perspective, and to re-evaluate their positions in light of a new diversity of positions. Travel study trips, especially short-term study trips considered suitable for adult learners, are thus beneficial to opening students' horizons and should be infused as permanent graduate program components. Two, travel destinations to countries that are more culturally different than the United States would require additional preparation and discussions. We believe that the involvement of members of the destination culture in the pre-travel preparations would further strengthen student readiness to travel. Three, group travel provides strong opportunities for collegial bonding and peer collaboration. Short-term study trips would be beneficial to students' relationship-building but would be also extremely beneficial to programmatic efforts to stimulate cohort cohesion and support program perseverance especially for PhD students.

Four, although many higher education students in the United States today are exposed to discussions and virtual presentations (through TV, movies, in-class videos, the Internet), direct exposure was an important aspect of this study's trips. Direct exposure, captured in references to cultural landmarks and food, helped enhance students' awareness of other worlds, their knowledge of higher education in those worlds, and their skills to navigate travel and group dynamics, and to conduct themselves professionally. Whenever possible, direct exposure through study trips should be the preferred program alternative. Finally, group dynamics and the higher distances to the group recorded by under-represented students should alert program designers and stimulate them to search for inclusive strategies from early on in the planning process.

From a methodological perspective, this study employed an innovative data collection and data analysis approach. Student journals represent a rich source of information into students' thoughts and experiences, while semantic network analysis offers a sound approach to textual exploration. The value of semantic network analysis lies in its ability to direct researchers to prevalent themes in texts. Thus, semantic network analysis could be of much use to researchers in identifying a-priori categories before in-depth qualitative analysis, mapping overarching categories, or tracing thematic directions throughout texts. In this respect, semantic network analysis emerges as a valuable methodology lending a unity of qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis.

This study provides empirically based evidence regarding the impact of international study trips on student learning. The trips' shortness and direct exposure were critical features of the study travel, and travel destinations made a difference for student learning. Whereas students of different race/ethnicity and ages shared learning outcomes, African American, Hispanic, and Indian American participants, younger, and first-time traveling students recorded more intense experiences. With its findings, this study contributes to both the research and the practice of study abroad and the preparation of effective higher education professionals.

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