

DISSERTATION

THE LIFEWORLDS OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN
SHORT-TERM EDUCATION ABROAD:
A CASE STUDY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

THE LEWORLD OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN SHORT-TERM EDUCATION ABROAD: A CASE STUDY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

First-generation college students remain underrepresented in short-term education abroad programs despite the documented benefits of global learning. This qualitative case study explored the supports, benefits, and transformative learning experience so first-generation students in a short-term program. It examined institutional factors influencing participation, the processes through which transformative learning occurred, and the support systems that enhanced accessibility and successful program completion,

Data were collected through participatory observations and interviews with first-generation students, administrators, and advisors. Findings showed that (a) personalized advising, (b) strong relational support, and (c) targeted financial resources played a critical role in students' program participation and success. Students demonstrated increased intercultural competence, confidence, and self-advocacy through reflective engagement abroad, although barriers such as limited outreach and financial complexity persisted.

This study underscored the need for proactive recruitment, transparent guidance, and sustained community support to broaden participation for first-generation students. Centering their voices highlights access and equity-driven strategies that reduce systemic barriers and foster transformative learning in global education.

Keywords: education abroad, short-term education abroad, access strategies, equity strategies, first-generation students, qualitative research, case study, transformative learning

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“We travel not to escape life, but for life not to escape us.”

—Robyn Yong

“I haven’t been everywhere, but it’s on my list.”

—Susan Sontag

We all have the energy inside us to change the world and shift the current paradigm. Sometimes we just need that extra push to understand the vividness the world can provide. Travel can be therapeutic, challenging, and incredible all at once. Often, we do not realize the insights or transformative power an experience abroad can provide until after the fact; and for some of us, once we do, we strive to go after that again and again.

This dissertation exists because of those who believed in my ability to make meaning of the world through travel, scholarship, and community. As a first-generation student, navigating higher education, let alone a PhD, meant charting a path that had not been traveled in my family before. The people acknowledged here sometimes held the map or simply walked beside me, reminding me that I belonged on this journey.

To my family, thank you for holding me in love across every border and boundary I have crossed. Your encouragement over the last 10 years of this PhD journey has been the most constant form of support, never doubting that I would get it done (eventually). You taught me that possibility is not defined by where we start, but by how boldly we choose to move forward.

To my friends, thank you for your patience with my disappearing acts during writing seasons, for cheering every milestone, and for always welcoming me back into joy, laughter, and normal life when academia felt all-consuming. Your friendship grounded me while I reached for what sometimes felt impossibly far away, especially during the isolation of the COVID years.

I extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Louise Jennings, for her steadfast mentorship, thoughtful guidance, and belief in both this research and in me. Your support has shaped not only this project, but also the scholar and practitioner I am becoming. To my co-advisor and committee members, Dr. Gene Gloeckner, Dr. Jody Donovan, and Dr. Peter Harris, thank you for challenging my thinking, strengthening this work, and bringing your shared commitment to transformative global learning. It has been especially meaningful to learn from fellow Semester at Sea voyagers who also know the power of the open ocean as a classroom.

To the first-generation students who shared their education abroad journeys with me, thank you. Your courage to explore the unfamiliar is the heartbeat of this work. My greatest hope is that this research contributes to expanding access so that more students like you can explore and discover what they are capable of and how they can contribute to this world.

To my colleagues, mentors, and the international education community, thank you for modeling what it means to champion global opportunities for all students. You inspire me to continue fostering programs that expand access, inclusion, and the transformative joy of travel and learning abroad. Special shout-out to the CSU Writes program and my writing partners over the years, I have learned that writing in community is the way in which I write best.

The truth about travel is that it can be time-consuming and imperfect. Educational travel will always hold an extravagance of emotions: awe and heartbreak, beauty and discomfort, often in the same hour. Travel can be exhausting, and I have often found comfort in the simplest things: familiar snacks in unfamiliar places, or phone calls from my mom, my sister, and my friends that made the world feel a little more connected during times of loneliness.

Whether you travel by car, plane, bike, ship, or foot, movement, exploration, and curiosity are accessible in many forms. Becoming a “global citizen” is not defined by miles

traveled but by how we see, understand, and care for one another across differences and cultures. I believe that as our global community grows more connected, we move closer to healing both ourselves and our world.

No matter your passion, your story, or how much you have or have not traveled, this opportunity exists if you seek it, manifest it, dream it, ask for it, or research it; whether near or far. All knowledge is worth having and pursuing. That truth has always driven my quest to explore this Earth.

I was gifted with the belief that I can enact change, and I believe we all can make differences, big and small, each in our own way. I have learned to see the world with open eyes, both its extraordinary wonders and its harsh inequities. And I remain committed to contributing to a future where education abroad is not a privilege, but a possibility for every student who dares to dream of getting that passport in hand and going out into the world.

Finally, to myself, thank you for saying yes to this PhD adventure, for pushing forward when the mountain was steep and the quantitative classes were extra hard; for writing through self-doubt and showing up even when exhaustion was loud; for believing that my story, and the stories of first-generation students everywhere, deserve to be honored.

This degree is more than a personal achievement. It is a celebration of every person who lifted me high enough to see possibility across horizons. May this work help ensure that more students feel empowered to go discover the world, and themselves, again and again.

And to my nephew Lazlo, may your Dr. Auntie L.J. always inspire you to see the world, to question it, and to change it for the better.

Always and forever to the next adventure and all the ones you choose for yourself. Around the world and back again.

“Many of us travel not in search of answers, but of better questions.”

—Pico Iyer

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Modern humans' journey to every continent and into the cosmos has been in pursuit of answers to intellectual and philosophical questions. Students attend institutions of higher education to expand their knowledge, broaden their horizons, and develop transferrable skills for the workforce. First-generation students bring unique perspectives to education abroad experiences, offering resilience and practical strategies for adapting to new environments (Berg et al., 2012). However, they have not been qualitatively researched as a student population in short-term education abroad programs. The term “lifeworld” in title of this study refers to all the immediate experiences, activities, and contacts that make up the world of an individual.

This dissertation outlines research in international education and presents a qualitative case study approach that investigated first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs. By examining the factors that (a) supported and (b) constrained participation, this study aimed to inform higher education institutions, faculty, and education abroad practitioners on how to assist first-generation students and enhance transformative learning. This introductory chapter provides context for education abroad, explains the study's purpose, and discusses the benefits and barriers of education abroad for first-generation students. It also covers the conceptual framework of the research, key concepts and definitions, an introduction to the research design and gap, and the study's scope, limitations, and significance.

Contextualizing Education Abroad

The early conceptualization of education abroad aimed to expose university students to different cultures, languages, and educational practices. Scholars have produced substantial literature on education abroad, covering topics ranging from the personal, academic, and professional impacts on student learning to institutional practices, policy frameworks, program

variety, and the globalization of higher education. Recent dissertation studies explored learning outcomes in short-term education abroad programs and first-generation student participation in full-time programs (see Table 1).

Early educators viewed education abroad as a pedagogical tool that emphasized experiential and transformative learning, aiming to enhance students' understanding of the world (Dewey, 1938; D. A. Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 2000). Over time, education abroad evolved to offer not only cultural and personal growth but also increased academic benefits and professional opportunities (Berg et al., 2012; Deardorff, 2006; Ripmeester & Teves, 2020). From its origins as the European "Grand Tour" of the 1890s to the Junior Year Abroad programs of the 20th century, the demographics of students participating in education abroad have remained relatively consistent, even as higher education has diversified (Vande Berg, 2007). In the United States, the federal government expanded its role in supporting education abroad by promoting international exchange and study opportunities for students (O'Meara, 2005). This effort began with the Fulbright-Hays Act in 1961, which provided funding and support for institutions to establish education abroad programs. The program later evolved into the Fulbright Scholars Program, which expanded opportunities for teaching, research, study, and professional exchange (Hughes, 2011).

Short-term programs, with their brief yet immersive nature, challenged students to adapt quickly to unfamiliar settings, fostering adaptability and resilience. The process of adaptation was more than cognitive; it involved "a change in the organization of lived experience which necessarily includes affect and behavior" (Berg et al., 2012, p. 109). These experiences outside the classroom complemented traditional learning, encouraging students to grow in unique and creative directions (L. Montrose, 2002). Empirical research on short-term education abroad

focused on intercultural learning. While some literature showed that a longer duration resulted in greater increases in intercultural competencies (Dwyer, 2002; Engle & Engle, 2004; Jackson, 2008; Kehl & Morris, 2008), other studies demonstrated that short-term trips may result in significant self-perceived changes and transformative learning (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Gardenier, 2014; Jackson, 2005, 2006).

Chapter 2 reviews the history and purpose of education abroad, providing a brief overview of its development and examining changes in the demographic makeup of students enrolled in these programs over time. Key student affairs theories that have influenced the educational goals of United States students who go abroad include Astin's involvement theory (1985, 1993), D. A. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Magolda's (2008) theory of self-authorship, as well as theoretical constructs related to international competencies, cultural adaptation, experiential learning, and transformative learning. Recent literature surveys how education abroad fosters global citizenship and leadership qualities, preparing students for roles that require cross-cultural collaboration and equipping them to become both global professionals and engaged global citizens (Coelen & Gribble, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study dissertation was to understand how short-term education abroad programs influenced the academic, personal, and professional development of first-generation students, as well as why some students chose these programs while others did not participate. Despite the previously researched benefits of education abroad, such as increased cultural competency, experiential learning, cultural adaptation, transformative learning, and enhanced career opportunities, first-generation students remained historically underserved in

these programs compared to their continuing-generation peers (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020).

This dissertation aimed to address gaps in the literature by examining the motivating factors that (a) supported or (b) constrained first-generation students' academic and personal success in short-term education abroad programs. The secondary goal was to understand the transformative nature of short-term education abroad for first-generation students and to identify strategies for (a) creating institutional support and (b) ensuring equitable access for all students. Finally, this research addressed which institutional support systems were most effective in providing equitable access for first-generation students. The benefits and barriers for first-generation students in education abroad are outlined below.

Benefits of Education Abroad (For First-Generation Students)

Past and current literature identifies multiple benefits of education abroad for students generally, with specific advantages for first-generation students. For example, Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) found that first-generation students participating in short-term education abroad programs gained a wide range of knowledge, including “appreciation of another country or culture, tolerance, patience, understanding, course-related knowledge, differences between home and host country, and language/communication issues” (p. 173). This aligns with theoretical concepts as desired outcomes, explored later in Chapter 2.

Mason and Garcia (2022) conducted a study in which interview participants highlighted social, academic, and professional benefits for first-generation students in these programs. Socially, education abroad helps first-generation students connect with the broader campus community, often through shared experiences with peers and faculty on faculty-led programs. Dwyer (2002) found that over 97% of students who participated in a short-term education

program reported personal growth from the experience, though this study did not delineate first-generation student status. Education abroad also supports student retention and academic success, helping students stay on track for graduation (Mason & Garcia, 2022). Another benefit noted in Mason and Garcia's (2022) research is the development of practical professional skills that enhance résumés and career readiness.

Barriers to Education Abroad (for First-Generation Students)

Mason and Garcia (2022) also identified key barriers for first-generation students seeking education opportunities abroad, including (a) financial constraints, (b) familial support, and (c) complex identity considerations. Financial barriers are often significant, as additional costs seem unrealistic, especially when participants are unaware of available scholarships and support networks. Some first-generation students are also primary contributors to their families' economic stability, adding another layer of responsibility (Mason & Garcia, 2022). Additionally, Pascarella et al. (2004) found that first-generation students tend to maintain strong family connections and help manage family obligations, which may lead them to believe that education abroad does not clearly align with the goal of obtaining a degree for improved job prospects. "The college campus can be foreign territory, and in effect, faculty and staff speak a foreign language from that commonly used in most working-class, first-generation students' households" (Donovan, 2007, p. 39).

With regard to identity, there is an intersection of multiple identities for first-generation students, for example, minority, low-income, and LGBT+. Mason and Garcia (2022) noted:

An additional consideration is how students may react to entering yet another experience where their first-generation identity distinguishes them from other students whose family members may have studied abroad or whose families have traveled to the region of study, giving

those students a level of comfort with how to navigate the experience, and leaving first-generation students to feel isolated by their lack of experience. (p. 11)

Hamir and Gozik (2018) found that institutional messaging from advisors and higher education leaders could also act as barriers. General education abroad recruitment materials may be less inclusive or may not emphasize short-term programs, some of which are specifically designed for first-generation students. Some students are not aware of their first-generation status when they enter higher education. This awareness, however, can shape the decision not to pursue education abroad, often influenced by non-cognitive variables, such as social class, culture, race, and group identity (Ward et al., 2012).

Although participation rates in education abroad have increased, especially for short-term programs, racial diversity among participants remains limited (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2023), despite growing recognition of the value of these experiences at national and institutional levels. Federal initiatives, such as the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961 and the Gillman/Lugar Act of 2000, provide scholarships for historically underrepresented and underserved students, including many who are first-generation (Benjamin, 2006; O'Meara, 2005). Additionally, institutions like Colorado State University offer programs such as passport scholarships to help cover initial costs, such as passport fees, which can be a barrier to the application process (Colorado State University, 2023). However, Donovan (2006) found that first-generation students and their families often have many questions about navigating higher education but may not know how to ask for help or where to find institutional support, indicating that access initiatives must be accompanied by proactive advising and clear guidance in order to effectively support first-generation student participation.

Researching the Gap in First-Generation Students in Short-Term Education Abroad

Understanding the benefits and barriers of education abroad for first-generation students is key to researching their motivations for participation and what transformative learning may occur. Ward et al. (2012) characterize first-generation students as both excited and fearful, hopeful and realistic, underprepared and determined. These concepts provide a foundation for this research, which explores the unique challenges and motivations first-generation students face in education abroad.

Research on first-generation students in short-term education abroad is critical, as these programs offer more accessibility than traditional, longer-term options due to lower costs, shorter time commitments, and less academic disruption. By investigating these students' motivations, challenges, and participation patterns, this research provides insights to help educators, policymakers, and institutions improve access and support.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework Overview

The literature review outlined in Chapter 2 focuses on key concepts related to education abroad and examines three foundational student affairs theories. A conceptual framework is introduced, including intercultural competence, experiential learning, cultural adaptation, and transformative learning (see Figure 3). The conceptual framework utilizes findings from the most current literature and expands on the central phenomenon, first-generation students' motivation factors in short-term education abroad programs. A theoretical framework offers a structure to support the research, making the findings meaningful and transferrable for other practitioners in similar contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The theoretical framework highlights the approach to surveying the participation, motivation, and praxis (practice) of first-generation students in short-term education abroad

programs. Martinez et al. (2009) observed, “Students often return from overseas experiences more engaged in their education, confident of their interpersonal and intellectual abilities, and committed to exploring how they can become active members of their communities” (p. 529). For first-generation students, transformative learning can influence identity development due to their unique positionalities in higher education.

The void in the literature regarding study abroad policies, practices, and program models that meet the needs of first-generation college students presents a tremendous challenge for faculty and higher education administrators who are interested in developing study abroad initiatives for this population. (Martinez et al., 2009, p. 529)

Researchers and practitioners are called to move beyond focusing solely on individual barriers and to address institutional barriers that limit participation in education abroad programs. By understanding and communicating the support networks behind first-generation students’ participation praxis, this research aimed to help empower institutions to better facilitate participation for this underserved demographic in an increasingly globalized workforce.

Research Scope

This dissertation research focused on first-generation college students enrolled in a public land-grant research university in the United States. The research group was a short-term program with all first-generation student participants. The participant observation research took place in Seville, Spain, over the first 7 days of the First Generation Abroad short-term program through Washington State University (WSU). The student, advisor, and administrator interviews investigated personal and institutional benefits and constraints before, during, and after participation, such as financial concerns, detailed program information, academic obligations,

and family responsibilities, as well as motivators such as career aspirations, cultural curiosity, and advisor mentorship.

Research Questions

Understanding the factors that motivate the often-underserved population of first-generation students in education abroad programs can help increase their participation rates and empower them to become more informed global citizens. The research questions that guided this dissertation were as follows:

1. What institutional factors support and constrain first-generation students' participation in short-term education abroad programs?
2. How does transformative learning occur for first-generation students participating in short-term education abroad programs?
3. What institutional support systems are most effective in enhancing the accessibility and successful completion of short-term education abroad programs for first-generation students?

Key Concepts and Definitions

Jaccard and Jacoby (2010) emphasized the importance of providing clear conceptual definitions of the major terms that frame a dissertation study. Below are key definitions of *education abroad/study abroad* and *first-generation college students* as they relate to this research.

Education Abroad/Study Abroad

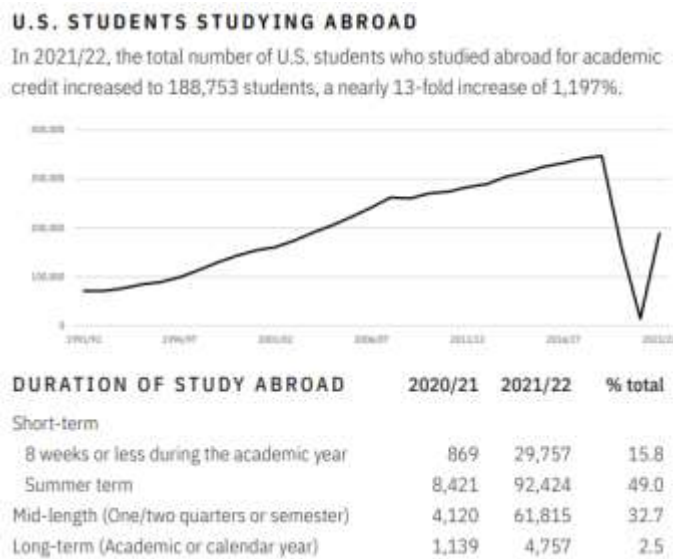
The terms *study abroad* and *education abroad* are often used interchangeably, with *education abroad* being the primary term in this study. Education abroad encompasses various credit-driven educational experiences that students engage in outside their home country. Purdue

University defines education abroad as any overseas experience that contributes to degree progress, whether for credit or not (Nolan, 2009). This broad definition includes traditional semester- or year-long programs, as well as internships, practicums, clinical rotations, service learning, independent study trips, and short-term programs. This study explicitly focused on credit-based short-term education abroad programs, which are often more accessible to both first-generation and continuing-generation students and are recorded on students' educational transcripts.

Short-term education abroad programs have become increasingly popular. In the 2009–2010 academic year, 56.6% of U.S. students participating in study abroad chose short-term programs (IIE, 2011). Total participation reached 270,604 students that year, three times higher than 2 decades earlier (IIE, 2011). Participation peaked in 2018–2019, with 347,099 students, 64.9% of whom enrolled in short-term programs, defined as summer sessions or programs lasting eight weeks or fewer (IIE, 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic and global travel restrictions caused a significant decline in participation, with a 53% drop in 2019–2020 and a further 91% decrease in 2020–2021 to 14,549 students (IIE, 2022). By 2023, participation rebounded to 188,753 students, marking a 13-fold increase from the previous year (IIE, 2023). The 2023 report was also the first to distinguish between summer programs and programs lasting eight weeks or fewer (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Open Doors Report



The data excluded noncredit activities abroad, such as work, internships, volunteering, and research abroad. Short-term programs were attractive due to their lower time commitment and greater affordability, making them especially appealing to students in structured academic fields, such as engineering and sciences, as these programs allowed students to earn academic credit while staying on target for graduation (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Kortegast & Boisfontaine, 2015).

First-Generation College Students

The concept of first-generation students emerged as an administrative designation to determine student eligibility for federally funded outreach programs for underserved students, such as TRIO programs, which were created under the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Ward et al., 2012). TRIO defines first-generation students as all students whose parents did not obtain a postsecondary degree. An alternative definition, drawing on Bourdieu's (1973) concept of cultural capital, suggests that first-generation students often lack the cultural capital related to

higher education that students from dissimilar backgrounds might receive from their parents. This lack of cultural capital also extends to navigating education abroad opportunities.

Over the last 3 decades, a cultural shift has changed the role parents play in their children's educational lives. Many parents have become highly involved throughout their children's education, maintaining connections even during college years (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007). As per Turek (2012), helicopter parents refers to the highly involved and hovering behavior exhibited by parents of the millennial generation toward their college-aged children. First-generation students, however, often experience more challenges than continuing-generation students due to a lack of the social and cultural capital traditionally passed down from parents (Gofen, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Saenz et al., 2007; Turek, 2012).

For first-generation students, gaining admission to a college or university program often represents a cultural shift. They must navigate the transition by "leaving behind" past values and "taking on" a new social identity that aligns with campus norms (Turek, 2012). This experience is frequently described as "living in two worlds," where students seek acceptance in their new academic environment while facing challenges related to family expectations (London, 1992; Turek, 2012). Additionally, education abroad programs are often viewed as supplementary by first-generation students and their families rather than essential to the primary educational goal of obtaining a college degree (Rendón, 1992).

Transformative Learning

The term *transformative learning* is intentionally used throughout this study, rather than *transformational learning*, to align with Mezirow's (2000) seminal theory and current scholarly usage within adult and higher education research. *Transformative* refers to the cognitive, emotional, and relational processes through which individuals critically examine assumptions,

revise their frames of reference, and develop new ways of understanding themselves and the world.

In the context of first-generation students studying abroad, transformative learning often emerges through experiences that challenge comfort zones, foster intercultural competence, and illuminate aspects of identity, belonging, and resilience within unfamiliar environments. This emphasis on transformation as a learning process, rather than a sole external change, accurately reflects the growth students describe as they navigate global contexts, engage in critical reflection, and reconstruct their sense of agency as emerging scholars and global citizens.

Research Design

This dissertation addressed the gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs through a case study methodology. The study examined the characteristics that supported and constrained academic and personal success within these programs. Through qualitative case study research, the study identified the motivating characteristics behind participation for this group, ultimately contributing to more equitable access to transformative international educational opportunities.

The intent was that the findings from this research, presented in Chapter 4, would inform higher education institutions on what support systems helped recruitment efforts and could be tailored to the needs of first-generation students, ensuring that these opportunities remain accessible, inclusive, and beneficial. Upon understanding the impact of short-term education abroad on first-generation students, this research highlighted how these programs foster academic persistence, personal growth, and career readiness. Given the limited empirical research on this specific topic, this dissertation aimed to contribute original insights to the field

and bridge existing knowledge gaps, ultimately enhancing discussion on diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education and education abroad.

Limitations

The goal for this dissertation was to offer valuable insights into the experiences of first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs, but as with all dissertations, it had some limitations. By focusing on a single university, the findings cannot be generalized to all first-generation students. However, the goal was to provide insights that could be transferred to other institutions with different or similar characteristics, such as community colleges, small private colleges, or minority-serving institutions (e.g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities [HBCUs], Hispanic-Serving Institutions [HSIs]). Qualitative and case study research in specific contexts offers meaningful insights for higher education institutes with similar goals or challenges.

Unique factors at the chosen university, such as specific education abroad program offerings, financial aid policies, program requirements, institutional support structures, and campus culture, may have significantly impacted participation rates and student experiences. These institution-specific elements may not reflect the broader challenges and opportunities faced by first-generation students at other institutions. Focusing on a single university also limited sample size, making it challenging to identify significant experiences. To mitigate this, detailed coding and descriptions of the data ensured triangulation.

Using triangulation helped avoid obvious errors or omissions. Triangulation involved the use of multiple data sources to cross-check and confirm results (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). These limitations underscore the importance of contextualizing the qualitative findings and carefully considering the specific institutional environment. Acknowledging these limitations is

crucial for accurately interpreting the research results and identifying areas of future research that could extend beyond a single institutional context.

Significance of Education Abroad Research

Education abroad programs are increasingly being evaluated based on various classifications and by the student populations they serve. These programs have expanded beyond language learning and are no longer seen as elite opportunities. They now offer more accessible options for a diverse range of students, including short-term programs in countries that are more appealing to first-generation students. Short-term programs are often focused on sustainability, global health, and social justice and aim to create globally responsible citizens who are aware of their impact on the planet and society (Sokkar, 2024). This research aligns with current DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) efforts in higher education. The skills developed through education abroad, such as global citizenship and social awareness, are particularly valuable to all students as they enter the workforce.

Summary

This introductory chapter outlined the dissertation study and research topic, detailing the purpose of the study, including the factors that supported and constrained first-generation students in short-term education abroad. It also identified the gap in the research, provided an overview of the literature review and conceptual framework, and presented the research questions, research design, and defined key concepts and definitions. Additionally, the limitations and significance of the proposed research were discussed.

The next chapter provides an in-depth review of the literature on education abroad, relevant student affairs theories that frame education abroad, and the theoretical constructs, including transformative learning, that inform student learning, as well as significant

dissertations that influenced this study. Chapter 3 outlines the case study methodology selected for this research. Chapter 4 presents findings from the qualitative case study, and Chapter 5 concludes by discussing the findings and implications.

Chapter 2 – Review of the Literature

This literature review provides a thorough examination of the key themes in education abroad, covering its history, purpose, and the diverse participants who engage in these programs. Education abroad has expanded over time, moving from long-term, elite opportunities to more inclusive and accessible short-term programs (Lidstone & Rueckert, 2007). These programs, typically lasting fewer than 8 weeks, allow students, particularly first-generation students, to gain global exposure and foster personal and academic growth.

First-generation students are defined as those whose parents have not earned a postsecondary degree, and they often face unique challenges in accessing education abroad opportunities. This literature review explores several student affairs theories that inform the study of education abroad, including Astin's (1985, 1993) involvement theory, which stresses the importance of student engagement in the learning process; D. A. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which highlights learning through reflection on direct experience; and King and Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, which focuses on the development of personal identity and autonomy.

This literature review also discusses theoretical constructs such as intercultural competence, experiential learning, cultural adaptation, and transformative learning, which are central to the long-term goals of education abroad. Critical study abroad research further informs the understanding of how these experiences impact students, particularly those from historically underrepresented and underserved backgrounds (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020). This literature review examines the implications of these theories and theoretical constructs for understanding the motivating characteristics of first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs, highlighting how institutional support and program design influence their

participation and academic success. Six dissertation studies are identified that relate to this topic, and Table 1 presents a summary of those results, including their findings and implications for future research.

Research Methods

The research methods for selecting relevant journals, books, articles, and past dissertations for this study followed Torracco's (2005) recommendations. The primary searches were conducted through Google Scholar and the Colorado State University library portal, with support from Colorado State University librarians. The search spanned from 2016 to 2025 and was guided by the most frequent keywords: *education abroad*, *short-term education abroad*, and *education abroad motivation factors/participation*. Then the phrase *education abroad* was substituted with the closely related term *study abroad*. However, for this study, *education abroad* was the preferred operational definition, as it encompassed the broad range of programs and opportunities available to students in the United States attending college overseas. After narrowing the focus to *first-generation college students*, keywords were used in combination with Boolean operators (*first-generation*, *first-gen*) to refine the search. The searches were conducted across two main databases: EBSCO and ProQuest.

Education Abroad History

In recent years, the increasing desire of students and universities to broaden educational experiences and internationalize campuses has elevated the importance of education abroad programs, especially short-term programs. Understanding the growth of these programs, as highlighted in Chapter 1, is key to appreciating their expanding significance on a global scale. Following World War II, as the United States emerged as a global leader, American higher education faced the challenge of enhancing knowledge about global systems (Goodwin & Nacht,

1991; McMahon, 1992). The 1960s and 1970s marked the baseline for much of the research conducted on education abroad programs:

During this time, knowledge, information, and training beyond national borders and institutional barriers became accessible as never before, providing a basis for the current climate within which academic personnel, research findings, and expertise exchange more freely than in any other era in the history of intellectual development. (McMahon, 1992, p. 465)

This exchange of information involved students from the United States, across numerous majors, traveling to other countries for various purposes. The dominant view at that time was that international experiences were primarily for cultural acquisition and enhancing social capital (Reilly & Senders, 2015). Researchers had not yet explored the psychological and emotional benefits of education abroad programs.

A significant shift occurred in 1989 when Open Doors began reporting on education abroad statistics. Sponsored by the United States Department of State, funded by the United States government, and implemented by the IIE (2022), Open Doors helped bring greater attention to the scope and impact of education abroad programs. IIE's mission is to empower individuals and organizations by leveraging international education to thrive in a connected world, focusing on advancing scholarship, building economies, and promoting access to opportunities (IIE, 2023).

Education Abroad Purpose

Globalization, marked by the dominance of multinational corporations, the blurring of national boundaries, and the rapid expansion of international trade, brings new challenges and opportunities for students, universities, and the workforce (Kezar, 2023). The purpose of education abroad programs is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed

for success in an interconnected world, especially postgraduation (IIE, 2022). Vande Berg (2007) emphasized that education abroad fostered a new student paradigm, where students actively participated in their learning with support from college and university education abroad professionals. Although students can acquire these skills through internationally themed programs and activities on their home campuses, education abroad is seen as the most direct path to global citizenship and is particularly valuable for developing career-ready skills (Ashwell, 2004; Reilly & Senders, 2015).

The National Association of International Educators (NAFSA) annual conference consistently calls for programs and research that emphasize the purpose and benefits of education abroad (Spencer & Tuma, 2002). According to international educators (IIE, 2022), education abroad was under-theorized and under-researched for many years. In the 1980s, the outcomes of education abroad programs were expressed as “exposure to and growing appreciation for cultural patterns different from one’s own and a greater awareness of values, lifestyles, behavior patterns in the individual’s own culture, and a heightened self-confidence and independence of thought and action” (Hill, 1986, p. 83). Although these outcomes are still considered beneficial, there is increasing weight to measure outcomes using both qualitative and quantitative methods, grounded in a theoretical understanding of what works and how it works for all students (Tolan & McCullers, 2018).

Education Abroad Participants

Traditional students begin their college careers in the early stages of development, often internalizing the values and norms of their campus or society (Kezar, 2023). As students progress, they might reach a stage of self-authorship, beginning in early development, where they become more likely to participate in an international experience (Brewer & Cunningham,

2009; Magolda, 2008). As per D. A. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, learning can occur through travel to another country and is influenced by various factors such as citizenship, gender, orientation, wealth, race, age, ethnicity, experience, education, and language (Brewer & Cunningham, 2009).

Education abroad programs have become more integrated into educational culture, promoted by institutional leaders, and contribute to the internationalization of college campuses (Vande Berg, 2007). These efforts are part of the internationalization of the college campus, which differs from globalization because it “focuses attention on the intentional actions of individuals, groups, and social institutions as they actively seek to cross national borders in pursuit of social, economic, political, or cultural benefits” (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012, p. 10). Approximately 350 colleges and universities in the United States participate in the Generation Study Abroad campaign, aiming to double the number of students who participate in education abroad (IIE, 2022).

As of 2019, fewer than 10% of higher education students in the United States participated in any education abroad program (IIE, 2022). Of those, fewer than 32% came from underrepresented backgrounds (American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, multiracial). Tillapaugh (2019) emphasized that if students are excluded from involvement programs, institutions must critically examine and reshape these opportunities to be more inclusive. Although participation in short-term education abroad increased over the past decade, as shown in Figure 1, this growth has not been proportional to the number of underrepresented or underserved students in higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted these numbers, with education abroad participation plummeting by 91% in 2020–2021 (IIE, 2020).

These programs fall under the purview of higher education and education abroad, along with initiatives to support first-generation students, who often face unique challenges compared to continuing-generation students. Despite growing interest in education abroad opportunities, first-generation students especially do not have an equitable understanding of the potential benefits to their college career (Sjoberg & Shabalina, 2010). This review underscores the need for research on the perspectives and experiences of first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs. Given these challenges, short-term education abroad programs emerge as a promising solution to increase access and equity for first-generation students.

Short-Term Education Abroad

Short-term education abroad programs, defined as those lasting less than a standard academic semester or quarter, grew significantly, with their market share doubling in the past 20 years (IIE, 2023). These programs appealed to students with demanding schedules, such as those in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, or to those who had not traveled outside the United States and were extremely close to family (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). Short-term programs also addressed the financial and work commitments that often prevented participation in longer study abroad experiences (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Lidstone & Rueckert, 2007). An institutional bias was formerly prevalent and in favor of more extended education abroad programs, based on the notion that “more is better,” but McKeown (2009) argued that short-term education abroad was better than none. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2007) also identified education abroad as a high-impact experience, finding that the duration was less important than the experience itself.

Short-term programs provided flexibility for students, including options for different locations, durations, and seasons, while still meeting credit requirements (IIE, 2022). These

programs honored the value of traditional study abroad while expanding access for a broader student demographic. As demand for short-term programs increased, the range of motivations among participants diversified. Meeting this rising demand required developing more quality programs across campuses. As stated, for some first-generation students, semester-long programs were neither appealing nor practical due to family, work, and academic obligations (R. Lewin, 2009). Lewin argued that education abroad must be prioritized collectively by institutions and educators to ensure equitable access to these transformative experiences.

Given the expanding scope of these programs, the “first come, first-deposit-down” approach was no longer effective (Spencer & Tuma, 2002). Recruiting diverse students enhanced the peer-to-peer reputation of short-term education abroad programs. The first step, according to Hamir and Gozik (2018), was to understand the benefits and barriers to wider participation. Despite greater attention to diversity from many international education organizations such as NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the IIE, and the Council on International Educational Exchange, participation among historically underrepresented and underserved groups remained low. Lewis and Niesenbaum’s (2005) study of a specific short-term education abroad program found that participation influenced future course selection, fostered interdisciplinary interest, and increased students’ perception of globalization, though it did not assess whether these outcomes were beneficial to students (or specifically first-generation students).

Hamir and Gozik (2018) noted that four Fs, faculty, finances, family, and fears, continued to hinder education abroad participation, especially among historically underrepresented and underserved students. Over the past 30 years, services were developed to address these barriers, like scholarship and funding opportunities. Short-term programs were promoted as accessible

entry points that supported workforce readiness postcollege, especially for first-generation students (Colorado State University, 2023; IIE, 2011). Offering these short-term experiences as credit-driven electives also increased demand and improved their reputation as pathways to career success (King & Magolda, 2005; Magolda, 2001). To underscore the importance of education abroad, the National Survey of Student Engagement (2018) emphasized that securing a passport and going abroad in an educational setting were crucial steps toward personal and professional growth.

First-Generation Students

Educators, administrators, parents, and community members all shared the responsibility of supporting students' educational journeys. First-generation students, defined by Tolan and McCullers (2018) as those whose custodial parents did not complete a 4-year college degree, often faced unique challenges due to limited parental support compared to continuing-generation peers. Many first-generation students either did not recognize their own distinct needs or were hesitant to acknowledge them. The Forum on Education Abroad released a research-to-practice brief on integrating study abroad to enhance the experiences of all underrepresented students, with a specific focus on first-generation students (Brunsting & McGlynn, 2023).

First-generation students comprised a significant and growing segment of higher education, estimated to range from 22–47% of student populations, depending on how institutions defined and tracked this group (Choy, 2001). According to the pre-pandemic *Open Doors* report (IIE, 2020), about 10.9% of all undergraduates studied abroad during their degree program, with underrepresented or minority students making up 30% of this group (American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, multiracial). However, this report did not specifically track first-generation students (IIE,

2020). The Forum on Education Abroad (2020) defined underrepresented students as those who had historically comprised a minority of the United States population and historically underserved students as those who had not been recruited to participate in education abroad, including, but not limited to LGBTQ+ students, students of color, undocumented students, non-traditionally aged students, and first-generation students.

In a case study on promoting access to education abroad, Tolan and McCullers (2018) found that while first-generation students could make up as much as 40% of the undergraduate population, they were highly diverse. Their experiences varied based on factors such as local demographics, feeder school districts, tuition rates, financial aid availability, and entrance requirements. Macro-level patterns showed that first-generation students were more likely to pursue vocational majors, identify as students of color, work extensively during school, come from lower-income backgrounds, and were less likely to pursue education abroad (Tolan & McCullers, 2018).

Research highlighted the need to strengthen support systems for first-generation students in higher education, as institutions might not fully understand or address their unique needs (K. Black & Voelker, 2008; Jehangir et al., 2012). Many first-generation students had already overcome significant barriers to gain admission to institutions of higher education. When they participated in education abroad, they brought valuable perspectives and cultural insights to these programs (Tolan & McCullers, 2018). Often successful in education abroad, these students benefited greatly from comprehensive support prior to enrollment, beyond financial aid alone, which increased their participation and enhanced their global competencies and transformative learning.

This support also had a broader impact, creating a positive influence within their peer groups and reshaping perceptions of education abroad programs (Tolan & McCullers, 2018). Programs tailored to first-generation students aimed to connect them with faculty and staff who could serve as role models and advocates. To maximize the benefits of education abroad, university and college professionals had to actively engage with these students (and their families) throughout their experience, before, during, and after their time abroad (Vande Berg, 2007).

Research by Kauffman and Kuh (1984) found that education abroad significantly impacted students' personal growth, fostering increased tolerance for ambiguity, more positive attitudes toward other cultures, and increased self-confidence. The challenges of these programs highlighted the need for thoughtful design, continuous assessment, and adequate support for diverse participants. G. Kuh (2008) contributed foundational work on liberal education and high-impact practices aimed at achieving inclusive excellence. Sponsored by American Colleges and Universities' *Liberal Education and America's Promise* (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2011), Kuh's report identified four essential learning outcomes, including "personal and social responsibility." This outcome emphasized global and civic knowledge, intercultural competencies, ethical reasoning, and lifelong learning skills. The Association of American Colleges and Universities' national survey on employer views showed that global knowledge received a mean rating of 5.7 out of 10 on a scale of essential learning outcomes (G. Kuh, 2008).

Although research on first-generation students' experiences with short-term education abroad was limited, program administrators increasingly used direct student feedback to identify effective practices and address ongoing barriers (Tolan & McCullers, 2018). The most recent and relevant study on the impact of education abroad participation in college student success among

first-generation students did not delineate short-term status. However, the Ogden et al. (2024) study drew on data from the multi-institutional Consortium for Analysis of Student Success through International Education (CASSIE) dataset to examine how participation in education abroad related to academic outcomes for first-generation college students. The authors used a rigorous multivariate matching methodology to account for background differences, such as academic preparation, demographics, and institutional context, thereby reducing self-selection bias.

Their findings indicated marked benefits for first-generation students who studied abroad. First-generation students who participated in education abroad had higher odds of graduating within 4 and 6 years, higher cumulative GPAs at graduation, and shorter time to degree compared to similar first-generation peers who did not study abroad. Importantly, the magnitude of the positive effect for first-generation students was greater than for continuing-generation students, suggesting that education abroad might serve as a particularly powerful “high-impact practice” for underrepresented or nontraditional students. Recognizing and empowering first-generation students is a relatively recent development. Although traditional student affairs theories apply to education abroad, they often fail to capture the individual experiences of these students. This dissertation aims to expand knowledge specifically in this area by first examining still-relevant theories and practices.

Student Affairs Theories

This section surveyed three prominent student affairs theories within the context of education abroad programs. Applying these theories to international education promotes equity, inclusion, and student development, especially when analyzed through critical frameworks and theoretical constructs that address the needs of today’s diverse student populations. The field of

student affairs encompasses a range of support services, programs, and activities offered by colleges and universities, all designed to assist students in achieving their academic and personal goals and supporting their overall success and well-being.

Student development theories include psychosocial and cognitive-structural approaches. Psychosocial theories address key challenges that students face as they begin their college journey and how they develop self-identity and relationships with others (Evans et al., 1998). Cognitive-structural theories describe development as sequential stages, which individuals progress through at their own pace. Each stage builds on the previous one, reflecting students' developmental growth as they move forward (Evans et al., 1998). The three theories discussed here were Astin's (1985, 1993) involvement theory, D. A. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, and Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship. Following these, the theoretical constructs for education abroad are outlined.

Astin's Involvement Theory

Alexander Astin (1985) defined involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that students devote to their academic experience. Involvement refers to students' observable actions rather than their thoughts or feelings, and it exists on a continuum, with some students highly engaged in academics, co-curricular activities, jobs, and international experiences, while others may only attend classes. Evidence from cognitive psychologists supports the idea that students learn by actively constructing knowledge rather than passively absorbing it (Vande Berg, 2007).

Astin believed that involvement includes both quantitative and qualitative elements, such as time spent on an activity and the seriousness with which it is approached (Evans et al., 1998). Astin proposed a proportional relationship between a student's investment and personal

development: the more involved a student is, the greater their developmental outcomes. For example, students who commit to learning a language and building relevant skills before their education abroad experience return with valuable insights they can share in job interviews. Students who can only recount superficial aspects of their time abroad may struggle to explain the educational value or omit their experience (Montrose, 2015).

Astin's theory focused on creating opportunities for student involvement rather than on development itself. Student affairs and international education professionals are responsible for fostering involvement both inside and outside the classroom (Evans et al., 1998). "According to the theory of student involvement, if a particular curriculum or a particular array of resources is to have its intended effects, it must elicit enough student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development" (Astin, 1985, p. 141). Astin's emphasis on time as a resource is particularly relevant for first-generation students who may juggle family, work, and other commitments. Astin (1985) argued that excessive involvement in nonacademic pursuits could reduce the time and energy students devote to their educational growth. In education abroad settings, however, engagement outside the classroom can enhance learning by maximizing real-world experiences.

A major limitation of Astin's involvement theory and other early student affairs theories is that studies applying them lacked diversity in their sample populations. The recognition of first-generation students as a unique demographic occurred over 20 years after Astin first presented his theory. Tillapaugh (2019) argued that student affairs professionals should critically evaluate student engagement and involvement to better support all students, not just those who fit traditional norms within their institutions. Although Astin's (1993) theory did not explicitly address education abroad, it suggested that active participation in education abroad experiences

could significantly benefit students' development, setting the stage for experiential learning theory and what mattered in college.

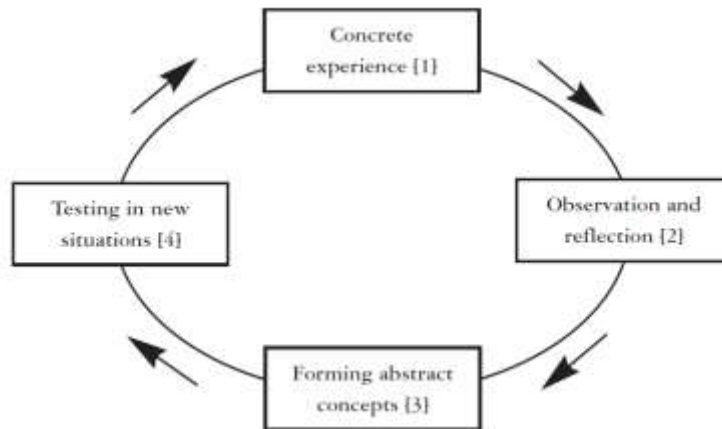
Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb posited that learning and acquiring knowledge were central life tasks (Evans et al., 1998). His experiential learning theory emphasized that learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world, relevant in both traditional and academic settings and education abroad (D. A. Kolb, 1984). Specialization, the second aspect of this adaptation, applies to education abroad, where social, educational, and organizational forces shape a student's growth, especially in a foreign cultural environment (D. A. Kolb, 1984). "By living, studying, and working in an unfamiliar culture, students are challenged to make sense of the novelty and ambiguity with which they are regularly confronted" (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012, p. 3). This process of making sense of new experiences fosters learning, which often leads to shifts in worldview, academic interests, and personal networks (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012).

Kolb's experiential learning model comprises four stages: concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This cycle, shown in Figure 2, helps structure experiences abroad by connecting theoretical knowledge to lived experiences, continuously reinforcing learning through reflection and application (Brewer & Cunningham, 2009). This model is particularly valuable in organizing pre-departure and reentry seminars and workshops for education abroad programs. The experiential model, rooted in Piaget's (1965) cognitive development theory, integrates experiences and ideas into knowledge through reflection and active application (Spencer & Tuma, 2002).

Figure 2

Experiential Learning Cycle



The four-stage cycle, as presented in Figure 2, was beneficial when organizing predeparture and reentry seminars for international exchange trips. Kolb’s experiential model, grounded in the cognitive development theory of Piaget (1965), was a “way to structure the relationship between the experiences students have and the ideas those experiences evoke, and how those experiences and ideas are transformed into knowledge (and skills) through reflection and exponentiation” (Spencer & Tuma, 2002, p. 208). A major limitation of Piaget’s theory of cognitive development was that he conducted his studies using only infant children as research participants. Kolb applied his theory to college students engaged in education abroad programs. Kolb’s theory, which drew on Dewey’s (1938) pragmatism, Piaget’s (1965) cognitive epistemology, and K. Lewin’s (1997) social science, emphasized the benefits of an environment with dialectical tension, where students learned by navigating conflicting perspectives. For first-generation students, experiential learning helped bridge the classroom with the world, offering a dynamic platform for personal and academic growth, which led to self-authorship.

Recent critiques of experiential learning theory focused on refining its approach. Passarelli and Kolb (2012) emphasized the need to design learning experiences that helped students fully integrate their experiences at increasing levels of complexity. Earlier critiques targeted the theory's intellectual origins from a postmodern perspective (A. Y. Kolb et al., 2014). Evans et al. (1998) suggested that Kolb's theory might be most valuable when applied as a tool for empathy and design in response to growing diversity among students, helping practitioners balance challenge and support (benefits and constraints) in varied learning experiences (Sanford, 1962, 1966, 1968). Education abroad offered rich and diverse learning environments that often pushed students to learn in unique ways (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). Sanford (1966) advanced the idea that individual development required both challenge and response, noting that change occurred when individuals encountered challenging situations (with support). People did not change unless they experienced a challenging situation, but challenge and support needed to be present in appropriate levels. Education abroad often pushed students outside their comfort zones (Spencer & Tuma, 2002).

All participants in the education abroad experience, administrators, staff, faculty, researchers, families, and students, were encouraged to understand this learning process. Familiarity with experiential learning theory before, during, and after education abroad enhanced learning outcomes for everyone involved. Without integrating these aspects into education abroad, especially short-term programs, the validity of the learning experience might be questioned. This concern was especially true for historically underserved student populations, such as first-generation students, who may have seen education abroad as unattainable or not worth the investment during college years.

Experiential learning provided a framework that enabled students to develop enduring attitudes and knowledge. These memories did not fade but instead became a part of their adult identities, reflecting a shift from external control to internal self-authorship (Magolda, 2001). The Description, Interpretation, Validation, Explanation (DIVE) model helped connect experiential learning theories to DEI principles (Brewer & Cunningham, 2009). Some critics argued that Kolb's model lacked attention to diversity, which led to the DIVE model to address this gap (Brewer & Cunningham, 2009). Overall, Kolb's theory of experiential learning emphasized the transformative potential of education abroad, as students immersed themselves, even for a short-term period, in new cultures, faced challenges, and expanded on their experiences, which led to self-authorship.

Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship

The theory of self-authorship explored how individuals developed external control to internal control with cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities as they faced the challenges of college and beyond. "Successful journeys, even short ones, require a good company" (Magolda, 2001, p. xv). Magolda described this journey as one that required support. In a longitudinal study of young adult development, Magolda (2001) examined both college years and the transition to adult life. The three key components of self-authorship included cognitive complexity, intrapersonal development, and interpersonal development and emphasized critical thinking, self-awareness, and social engagement. Cognitive complexity referred to an individual's ability to think critically, consider multiple perspectives, and make decisions based on their values. Intrapersonal development involved understanding one's identity, values, and emotions, whereas interpersonal development focused on engaging with others, appreciating diverse perspectives, and navigating relationships. Growth in these three

areas fostered self-authorship. “Stewarding this transformation, from naiveté to commitment, from primarily external to primarily internal definition, is a complex challenge” (Magolda, 2001, p. 25).

This challenge underscored the need for university administrators to support first-generation students as they explored opportunities beyond typical college and university experiences. Participation in education abroad fostered self-authorship as students engaged with diverse cultures, perspectives, and challenges. Magolda’s (2001) framework suggested that education abroad promoted college student development by encouraging them to reflect on their values, expand their perspectives, and navigate intercultural interactions.

First-generation students could bring this learning paradigm back to their campus, sharing their insights with peers and connecting them to career development opportunities postcollege. Magolda (2001) found that students nearing self-authorship felt increased confidence and direction, even if they had not fully acted on it. Education abroad helped first-generation students define a framework of “who I am,” solidifying an approach to life and career that allowed for openness to ambiguity and change (Magolda, 2001).

Magolda (2001) applied her framework in various contexts, including campus work settings and community leadership. King and Magolda (2008) later focused on intercultural maturity as a key outcome, arguing that DEI goals were best achieved with a holistic framework. Designing education abroad programs to foster cognitive complexity, intrapersonal growth, and interpersonal skills offered first-generation students well-rounded development as they prepared for the workforce. Education abroad experiences supported self-authorship by challenging students’ perspectives, promoting critical thinking, and deepening an understanding of their values and identities in a global context.

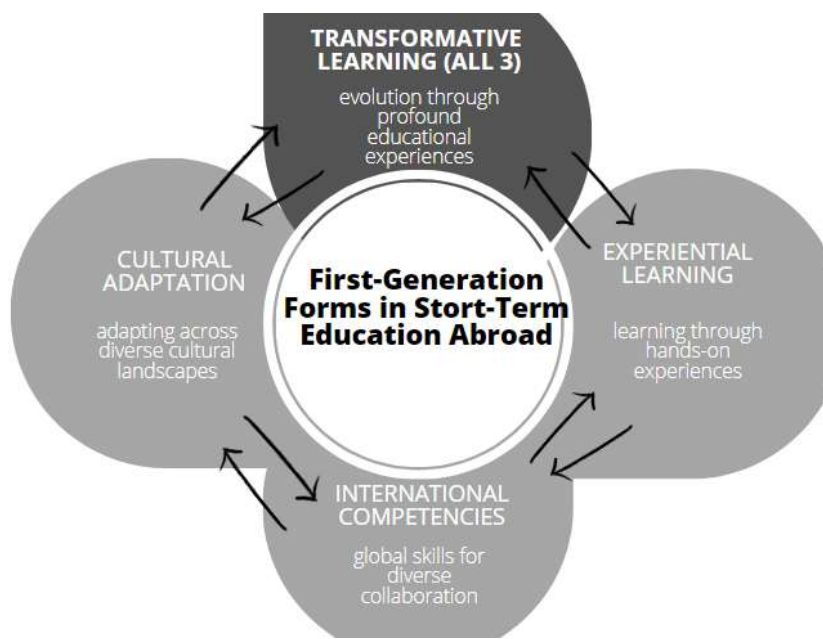
These three student affairs theories related to and influenced the theoretical framework or constructs of education abroad, including intercultural competencies, experiential learning, cultural adaptation, and transformative learning. They provided a robust foundation for fostering meaningful growth in students, especially those from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Together, these theories created a framework for education abroad programs that not only fostered intercultural competencies and cultural adaptation but also promoted transformative learning and personal development that endured beyond the short-term program experience.

Theoretical Constructs (and Forms) for Education Abroad

The four theoretical constructs presented in Figure 3, which was created for this research, identify intercultural competencies, experiential learning, cultural adaptation, and transformative learning as desired outcomes (referred to here as forms) of first-generation student participation in short-term education abroad programs.

Figure 3

Diagram of Four Forms Relating to Education Abroad



While these constructs applied to all students, the focus of this study was on first-generation students. The term “forms” rather than “outcomes” was used because forms lacked the finality of outcomes, indicating that learning (especially transformative learning) was lifelong and continued beyond the experience that prompted it (Gardenier, 2014). According to Gardenier’s dissertation research, what we knew could be measured as cognitive, and how we knew included changes in students’ forms of knowing. Transformative learning encompassed all three forms of intercultural competencies, cultural adaptation, and experiential learning.

Intercultural competence was built from global knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that enabled first-generation students to navigate cultural differences effectively. Living and studying abroad (short-term included) was a powerful form of experiential learning, offering firsthand encounters that built these competencies (D. A. Kolb, 1984). Immersion, even short-term, was central to cultural adaptation as it challenged students to adjust to new norms, thus reinforcing intercultural competencies. Through experiential learning, first-generation students actively engaged with new cultural settings, encountering diverse practices and perspectives that fostered adaptability and growth. Such experiences contributed to transformative learning, encouraging self-authorship and leading to a more inclusive worldview (Magolda, 2001; Mezirow, 2000). Interactions with different cultural contexts could lead a student to challenge existing beliefs and develop a broader, more inclusive worldview. Mezirow (2000) described this transformation as fostering an “evolving, growing self” capable of self-reflection and thoughtfully considered commitments. This transformation, in turn, strengthened intercultural competencies, completing the cycle of growth that was examined in detail in the following section.

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence theory suggested that individuals could develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to effectively communicate and interact with people from different cultures (Deardorff, 2006). Terms like intercultural communication competence, intercultural sensitivity, global competence, cross-cultural adaptation, and cultural intelligence referred to similar concepts describing students' responses to intercultural settings (Lou & Chan, 2022). Leung et al. (2014) examined competencies in organizational contexts, categorizing them by traits, attitudes, worldviews, and capabilities, or a combination of these elements.

To better understand qualitative assessments of intercultural competence in higher education, Lou and Chan (2022) reviewed 34 studies and identified 25 qualitative assessment methods, many of which were writing-based and expressive. While quantitative assessments alone might not fully capture students' intercultural competencies, qualitative approaches allowed for more nuanced expression (Gillespie, 2002; Sinicrope et al., 2007). Terenzini and Upcraft (1996) argued that assessing student outcomes was vital yet often poorly executed. In an analysis of intercultural competencies in short-term programs, Anderson et al. (2006) employed Kelley and Meyers' (1995) Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory in a pre- and post-test design. The results showed modest improvement in intercultural sensitivity, suggesting that short-term programs could have a positive impact on cross-cultural sensitivity.

Experiential Learning

Education abroad programs, both short-term and long-term, enhanced traditional classroom learning by offering transformative experiences that supported personal growth and development (H. T. Black & Duhon, 2006; Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Escamilla et al., 2009; Kuh, 1995; Mezirow, 2000). All players in education abroad, from administrators and faculty to

family and students, were encouraged to understand the learning taking place and aim to maximize it, especially for first-generation students. In *A Parent Guide to Study Abroad*, the authors emphasized the importance of putting global learning into practice: “learning how to interact with people from other countries and cultures, including those in the United States, will be essential for all careers be they in business, manufacturing, engineering, government, academia, or not-for-profit” (Berdan et al., 2015). Educators were advised to take purposeful and targeted actions during the study abroad experience to ensure that students learned and grew in a meaningful and appropriate manner (Berg et al., 2012).

D. A. Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model emphasized learning as most effective when it was based on concrete experiences. Expanding on this model, Passarelli and Kolb (2012) noted that learning in education abroad was an ongoing process rather than a single outcome. They highlighted that learning involved relearning, resolving conflicts, engaging holistically, and generating knowledge through transactions between individuals and their environments. Experiential learning abroad provided students with real-life encounters and supported self-authorship, helping them transition successfully into careers (Magolda, 2001).

Cultural Adaptation

Cultural adaptation theory explored how individuals adjusted to and felt comfortable in a new cultural environment. Due to their short but immersive nature, short-term programs challenged first-generation students to adapt quickly, building adaptability and resilience, skills they already possessed. Adaptation involved more than cognitive adjustment; “it is a change in the organization of lived experience which necessarily includes affect and behavior” (Berg et al., 2012, p. 109).

A form of cultural adaptability particularly relevant to first-generation students was community cultural wealth (CCW). Yosso (2005) conceptualized CCW as a critical race theory (CRT) challenge to traditional interpretations:

CRT shifts the research lens away from a deficient view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged.

Yosso (2005) outlined 6 forms of CCW, emphasizing that valuing these resources was essential for supporting marginalized and underrepresented communities. These included aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Recognizing these skills as strengths rather than barriers allowed educators and administrators to better support first-generation students. Wick et al. (2019) used CCW to explore how Latinx students in education abroad programs leveraged their cultural assets, such as language skills and social networks, to succeed. Wick et al. highlighted how an asset-based approach could contribute to first-generation students' success in these program settings, stating, "post-program, students appeared ready to examine how privilege and power function in the international context" (p. 80).

Transformative Learning

Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory posited that adults could experience profound shifts in perspectives, beliefs, and values through critical reflection. Mezirow described transformation as "a praxis, a dialectic in which understanding and action interact to produce an altered state of being" (Mezirow, 2000, p. xxii). Influenced by paradigms in scientific thought

(Kuhn, 1984) and Freire's (1970) social justice-focused conscientization, transformative learning addressed individual cognitive reorganization and development (Mezirow, 2000).

When applied to short-term education abroad, transformative learning offered new insights into how emotional responses served as catalysts for "frame shifts" central to intercultural competencies (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning helped explain the development of cultural adaptation, experiential learning, and intercultural competencies in the context of cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes (Mezirow, 2000, 2009). Transformative learning theory was used to examine the experiences of adults from the United States overseas (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Cranton, 2006; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011), and the traditional definition of transformative learning was "a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby come more open, permeable, and better validated" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 87).

For first-generation students, transformative learning fostered increased self-awareness and critical thinking. Students may have gained a deeper understanding of their (sometimes multiple) identities, strengths, and areas for growth through the challenges and opportunities offered abroad. They also developed skills in evaluating information, questioning assumptions, and approaching problems from diverse perspectives.

Transformative learning was often linked to university goals and career motivation, highlighting the benefits of education abroad for first-generation students. These experiences built skills and networks that enhanced career prospects, providing connections to peers, faculty, and professionals. While transformative learning could be challenging, involving discomfort and uncertainty, first-generation students might have faced additional challenges such as financial constraints, reentry issues, and family responsibilities. Support systems tailored to their needs,

including peer, mentor, and family guidance before, during, and after the program, helped them fully benefit from a transformative education abroad experience, which was the ultimate goal.

Educational Goals of Education Abroad

Educational goals for education abroad, including short-term experiences, aimed to increase knowledge, shape attitudes, and build confidence, skills that translated into marketable workforce abilities (Mills et al., 2010). Franklin (2010) found that global competencies developed during education abroad included language acquisition, knowledge gained, and shifts in personal values, attitudes, and interests. Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) hypothesized that concrete strategies would enhance learning outcomes, such as “linking the short-term education abroad experience to prior on-campus course work, engaging students in community-based research, engaging students in community service, and using education abroad to teach research skills and interdisciplinary connections” (p. 254). Lewis and Niesenbaum concluded that the training and experiences from short-term education abroad prepared students for careers that increasingly required interdisciplinary problem-solving and collaboration.

Researchers were encouraged to differentiate between short-term and long-term education abroad programs, as short-term programs became more prevalent post-pandemic (IIE, 2023), particularly for credit-driven short-term programs. The scope of coursework before, during, and after an abroad experience aligned with other researchers’ advocacy against “touristic” short-term programs (Jackson, 2009; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). Although touristic programs could be educational, they often lacked a structured curriculum with defined learning outcomes, including global competencies, and did not provide university credit. Jackson (2012) argued that while education abroad programs offered valuable opportunities for intercultural competence, achieving these outcomes required careful program design and assessment.

Savage and Wehman's (2014) study highlighted the limitations of using self-report questionnaires in quantitative methods. Social desirability could influence students to report positive outcomes rather than actual behaviors, even when responses were anonymous. Bringle et al. (2004) also noted that students might rely on inaccurate or biased memories in self-assessments, underscoring the need for researchers to intervene and attempt accurate qualitative data collection.

Critical Study Abroad

Critical study abroad was a structured way of framing this study in relation to the current state of the world. Leaders who had cross-cultural and multinational knowledge, skills, and abilities were valuable in the workforce. Kezar (2023) stated:

For example, researchers from a more traditional framework have identified the following competencies as particularly relevant for practicing leadership in a world increasingly defined by global capitalism: thinking globally, appreciating cultural diversity, developing technological savvy, building strategic alliances, demonstrating integrity and courage, initiating change, managing uncertainty, negotiating, bargaining, and improvising. (p. 26)

Short-term education abroad programs provided insights and values and could ignite a sense of global social responsibility in participants. "Interactions characterized by compassion, mutual respect, and support build the trust and positive emotional resources necessary to create space for learning, even when learning is challenging" (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012, p. 25). Reilly and Senders (2015) introduced the concept of critical study abroad, theorizing that the role of education abroad programs was related to the pedagogical value of the experience rather than just the social value.

Reilly and Senders (2015) stated that education abroad should be seen as an activist force in the service of global survival. Students, host families, educators, and practitioners could be co-researchers and participants in a holistic learning cycle that stressed action and reflection. They argued “Critical study abroad works to educate global citizens who have the skills and understandings of the “globally competent,” but who frame them with respect to the values of local community and human solidarity” (p. 258). New ways of framing education abroad opportunities, especially short-term programs, were emerging rapidly across the discipline. Auditing existing and established theories could help understand concepts such as leadership, hierarchy of needs, and organizational performance (Swanson & Chermack, 2013).

Reflection without action was referred to as only verbalism, and action without reflection was activism only for the sake of activism. Freire (2007) stated that action and reflection should take place sequentially. From a critical theory perspective, this relationship included understanding the factors motivating some first-generation undergraduate students from universities in the United States to decide to participate. Some did not or felt that they could not. Using critical inquiry, Freire spent time with specific communities, learning the words that were meaningful to the people and those that evoked responses (Crotty, 2015). Generative words helped form an understanding of “why the phenomenon happens,” one of the main ways to approach qualitative research. Based on Freire’s conscientization (mindfulness/self-awareness), authentic action and reflection were united.

The factors that supported or constrained education abroad had not changed substantially over the years, even in the post-pandemic world, but access to information, programs, flights, and financial aid increased dramatically. As stated above, the benefits of participation in short-term education abroad for all students included cultural experiences, the ability to acknowledge

and learn more about the self, and personal development. Likewise, the challenges that were helpful in a student's development as a future professional included adjustment, breaking stereotypes, culture shock, and assimilation (Bakalis & Joiner, 2004; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005).

Donovan (2006) provided an example of a first-generation student who studied abroad in France and later reflected on substantial personal growth resulting from the experience, including increased life skills, expanded coping strategies, and greater clarity in her values and beliefs. This example demonstrates how education abroad can contribute to personal development, identity formation, and increased self-awareness, outcomes that align closely with the principles of critical study abroad. These experiences suggest that education abroad is not only an academic or cultural experience but also a developmental process that can shape students' confidence, decision-making, and sense of purpose in a global context. The findings in this theoretical overview had implications for the research questions presented in this dissertation.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

This section explored the conceptual framework and theoretical constructs underlying short-term education abroad programs for first-generation students, directly relating to the research questions presented in this dissertation. Understanding the implications of intercultural competencies, cultural adaptation, experiential learning, and transformative learning was essential for understanding what motivating factors supported and constrained participation. The critical study abroad framework and its implications for global citizens were also highlighted. As demand for short-term education abroad programs expanded, it was crucial for educators and institutions to leverage these theoretical foundations to provide meaningful and transformative learning experiences.

Past Dissertation Research on Education Abroad and First-Generation Students

Table 1 below outlines the seven major dissertations from 2000 to 2024 that were foundational to the research and design of this study. Although not all of the dissertations related specifically to first-generation short-term education abroad programs, they all contained relevant findings and insights for future research.

The study abroad experiences of undergraduate students, particularly first-generation and minority students, were widely examined through various methodological lenses, revealing critical factors influencing participation, engagement, and learning outcomes. Kilpatrick (2000) explored how socially constructed habits and economic capital shaped student experiences in short-term study abroad, while Booker (2001) identified key belief-based factors differentiating applicants from non-applicants in study abroad programs. Andriano (2010) emphasized the role of diversity exposure in first-generation students' decisions to study abroad, complementing Turek's (2012) findings on the unique yet strong attachments between first-generation college students and their families. Gardenier (2014) demonstrated how short-term international programs contributed to transformative global learning, whereas Efthymiou (2023) highlighted the importance of pre-departure training in fostering intercultural competence. Finally, McKinney (2024) employed a critical race narrative inquiry to expose how education abroad personnel may unknowingly perpetuate barriers for Black and Latinx students. Together, these studies underscored the need for further research into institutional practices, student motivations, and programmatic interventions that could enhance study abroad participation and success for underrepresented student populations.

Table 1*Foundational Dissertations*

Author/ Date	Topic/Title	Method/ Design	Context/ Setting/ Sample	Findings	Future Research
Kilpatrick, 2000	More than ‘Meatballs and Wine’: Shaping a Critical Study Abroad Experience Through Arts Based Pedagogies	Qualitative Ethnographic and arts-based pedagogies	Thirteen undergraduate students in a short term, micro-campus study abroad program in Italy	Students are influenced by their socially constructed habits and their social and economic capital	More complex understanding of the student study abroad experience and reframing learning outcomes related to culture
Booker, 2001	Differences Between Applicants and Non-Applicants Relevant to the Decision to Apply to Study Abroad	Quantitative Factor Analysis Component Matrix	Large, public mid-western university, applicants to study abroad and interested non-applicants	Eight belief-based factors were identified by discriminant function analysis as making significant independent contributions towards differentiating the applicant and non-applicant groups	Include data from applicants to short-term and summer programs and explore why minority students are less likely to be interested in study abroad than non-minority students
Andriano, 2010	Study Abroad Participation and Engagement Practices of First-Generation Undergrad Students	Quantitative binary multiple logistic regression analysis	Secondary data from the 2003-2006 National Student Engagement College Student Report	Student’s exposure to diversity was impactful on the decision to seek and complete international study	Research must be done to understand why first-generation students may differ from all other students in higher education
Turek, 2012	Exploring The Relationship Between First Year First Generation Students and Their Parents	Qualitative Case-Study. Individual In-Depth Interviews, Focus Groups	Four Year College- First Generation, First Year students and their families	Families had a strong, but more un-traditional attachment relationship to their college children	Replicating the study at other institutions to obtain a deeper understanding of parent-child relationship
Gardenier, 2014	College Student Transformative Learning: An ethnographic case study of an alternative spring break program to Kenya	Ethnographic case study using interviews, focus groups, and direct observation (three journal articles)	‘Undergraduate Non-credit two-week alternative break program to Kenya	Short-term travel to low-income nations is a way to encourage undergraduate student global learning (the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and attitudes)	Longitudinal studies and a shift in focus among researchers and practitioners to a broader set of goals surrounding

					global responsibility
Efthymiou, 2023	A Case Study on the Role of the Pre-Departure Training in Study Abroad Experiences	Qualitative Case Study. Questionnaire, reflection essays, interview transcripts	Community College students in a Northeastern large urban setting in a short-term study abroad to Central Europe	Results suggested that pre-departure training developed global competence, intercultural sensitivity, and empathy as well as prepared students for active engagement	More institutions, faculty, and students should incorporate pre-departure training in short-term study abroad to make them well-rounded professionals
McKinney, 2024	Planting Gardens Versus Fighting Fires: A Critical Race Narrative Inquiry of Black and Latinx Students' Lower Participation in Education Abroad	Qualitative Critical Constructivist Critical Race Theory Narrative Inquiry and Critical Race Storytelling	Bricolage design centered on 16 participants (11 education abroad personnel and 5 Black and Latinx students) in two phases	Critical implication that education abroad personnel are overlooking their own influence as an underlying explanation for lower participation for Black and Latinx students	Steppingstone for future research to discover more about Educational Abroad Personnel usage of deficit mindsets

Summary

The research and dissertations reviewed emphasized the need to assess the transformative learning that occurred through short-term education abroad to demonstrate the value of these programs for all students (Sjoberg & Shabalina, 2010). The literature review highlighted the need for further research into the motivating factors driving first-generation student participation in credit-bearing, short-term international experiences.

A review of three prominent student affairs theories underscored the importance of active engagement, experiential learning, the balance between challenge and support, and the development of self-authorship in shaping the holistic growth of college students. Each theory provided unique insights into how students learned, adapted, and developed during their educational journey. Some of these theories, such as D. A. Kolb (1984) and Magolda (2008),

were particularly relevant to education abroad, but none focused specifically on first-generation students.

The most recent “Standards of good practice” by The Forum on Education Abroad (Brunsting & McGlynn, 2023) defined historically underserved populations in international education, which included first-generation students. The document also provided a guide for ethical decision-making in delivering education abroad experiences, emphasizing accountability, continuous improvement, and ongoing research, “We continuously make improvements to our programming and practices to benefit participants, stakeholders, and communities in which we operate” (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020, p. 53).

This literature review also revealed a lack of qualitative research on the lived experience of first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs. The Institute for the International Education of Students (IIE, 2023) published the annual *Open Doors* report on international student exchange and conducted a groundbreaking longitudinal study on 50 years of education abroad alumni (Kimberly, 2010). The study, however, focused on how the experience impacted student participants’ lives rather than their careers. Despite numerous studies demonstrating the benefits of education abroad programs, participation rates had not increased in parallel with college attendance (IIE, 2020).

As business leaders increasingly valued international experiences abroad, short-term international programs gained recognition for their contribution to global learning. Research must focus on the motivating factors for the limited number of first-generation students in short-term education abroad and identify what drove their participation. In *Rethinking College Student Development Theory Using Critical Frameworks*, Abes et al. (2019) emphasized the importance

of a critical perspective on student involvement and engagement, exploring why minoritized students often rejected campus involvement, including education abroad programs.

This review of the literature highlighted the need for research dedicated to understanding the participation praxis of first-generation undergraduate students in short-term education abroad programs. Chapter 3 outlines the case study methodology used in this dissertation, including the research philosophy, sampling strategy, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations. It also addresses issues of credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Past and current generations of students, those described as Gen Z, Millennial, Gen Y, or Gen Alpha travelers, are defined here as a collective group of college-bound students ages 18–35 who share a generational passion for affordable and sustainable international travel, as highlighted in a recent survey report (EF Education First, 2024). This chapter details the research methods and procedures that were utilized to understand first-generation students and the factors that supported or constrained their involvement and transformative learning in short-term education abroad. It covers the research philosophy, sampling strategy, data collection methods, credibility, reliability, trustworthiness, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations.

Three landmark works of prominent case study methodologists in education were used to inform the research. Yazan (2015) noted: “Despite being one of the most frequently used qualitative research methodologies in educational research, the methodologists do not have a full consensus on the design and implementation of case study” (p. 135). This foundational understanding of case study methodology lends itself to a robust research philosophy for exploring the lived experiences and contextual factors influencing first-generation students’ participation in short-term education abroad programs.

Research Philosophy

Qualitative research is the naturalistic study of social meanings and processes, using observations, interviews, and the analysis of text and images collected in a natural or “real life” setting (Grey, 2014). In contrast to quantitative research, which uses statistical methods to capture broad generalizations about populations, qualitative researchers use in-depth studies of the social world to analyze how and why groups think and act in particular ways (Stanford Library, 2024). It is exploratory research aimed at discovering the main aspects of an under-

researched problem, which in this dissertation was the constraints and support systems of first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs. Stake (2005) stated, “For a qualitative research community, case study concentrates on experiential knowledge of the case and close attention to the influence of its social, political, and other contexts” (p. 444).

The three primary approaches to case study methodology are grounded in foundational works by Yin (2017), Merriam (1998), and Stake (1995). Although these approaches differ in various aspects, each offers valuable insights that can be integrated. Merriam (1998) advocated for an epistemological foundation of constructivism in qualitative case studies, emphasizing that “the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (p. 8). Stake (1995) viewed qualitative case study researchers as interpreters who gathered and reported their interpretations of the constructed knowledge obtained through research. Yin (2017), by contrast, approached case study research from a positivistic paradigm and did not separate quantitative and qualitative methods, asserting that both shared a fundamental common ground. In evaluating and conducting a comparative analysis of these three case study approaches, Yazan (2015) concluded that researchers could eclectically combine elements from each, selecting those that best supported their research design.

This bounded case study focused on a short-term education abroad program that included first-generation students during the entire time of their experience. This included pre-departure online sessions and assignments, the course syllabus, emails, and reflection activities. Data were collected before, during, and after the trip, and the goal was to understand the lived experiences of first-generation students through participant observation, a focus group interview, and

individual interviews with the students, advisors, and the education abroad program administrators.

Sampling Strategy

In research, the population refers to the entire group from which the findings and conclusions are drawn. In this study, the first-generation students, advisors, and administrators who participated in the First Generation Abroad short-term education abroad program through WSU, sponsored by CEA-CAPA, were considered a single embedded case study to understand the transformative learning that occurred. The study used purposeful sampling to select participants. This non-probabilistic sampling method involved intentionally selecting participants from the identified bounded system using a subjective (nonrandom) approach. The data collected from the participants were much more informative than the overall sample size for qualitative research, and the more varied the information collected from the student participants, the more the “information has power” (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 1753). Purposeful sampling accepted that the researcher sought to discover, understand, and gain insight from the participants who were the information-rich cases (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This single case study design, with multiple data sources, provided empirically rich, context-specific, holistic accounts for phenomena and contributed to theory-building rather than theory-testing (Willis, 2014; Yin, 2014).

Washington State University’s 5-week summer program, First Gen Abroad (1GA), was designed specifically for students who were the first in their families to pursue higher education (Washington State University [WSU], 2025). Launched in 2015, the program typically enrolls around 20 students each year and has offered experiences in Costa Rica, Italy, and Spain. According to the university, “First Gen Abroad is WSU’s study abroad program exclusively for

students who are first in their family to attend college,” and the program website highlights that “Our five-week programs are specifically designed to be affordable, relevant, and fun!” WSU was also recognized as a First Forward Institution, a national distinction awarded by the Center for First-Generation Student Success, an initiative of the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) and The Suder Foundation (WSU, 2025).

Data Collection Methods

As a case study that incorporated multiple approaches to data collection (Yazan, 2015), there were several phases of data collection that took place in-country during the short-term education abroad experience, as well as once students returned to their home campus. This included participant observations and on-site fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group upon completion of the program, and the collection of course documents and student artifacts. All the interviews took place over Zoom after the program and were recorded and then transcribed and analyzed using Trint and Dedoose qualitative analytic software. The convergence of a variety of data sources in case study research supported research quality and contributed to the validity in analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Participants and Participant Observation

All twenty-two students admitted to the First Gen Abroad (1GA) program for 2025 were initially introduced to this study by the researcher during the pre-departure course online classes. Following this introduction, Washington State University advisors distributed the informed consent form electronically through university email. Only one participant responded to the email request, underscoring that this current cohort of college students frequently do not respond to email requests. To ensure equitable access and provide clarity, the study was re-introduced in

person during the introductory welcome meal in Sevilla, Spain, where printed consent forms were distributed, questions were encouraged, and voluntary participation was emphasized.

One student withdrew from the program prior to arrival abroad, resulting in twenty-one eligible participants. Once presented in person, all twenty-one students signed consent for participant observation. Nineteen of the twenty-one students additionally consented to the interview component of the study. These nineteen students were contacted multiple times by email, first collectively and then individually once the program had completed starting on August 30th, 2025 through September 28th, 2025, with reminders of the voluntary nature of participation and the incentive offered. In addition to the nineteen participants from 2025, 2 student ambassadors from previous 1GA programs, those who presented during the pre-departure course were contacted over email about the study, with no response. Ultimately, nine student participants completed interviews, a 43% completion rate for the interview portion of the study, which included 2 students in a focus group and 7 individual interviews.

Table 2 presents the entirely first-generation 2025 cohort, reflecting a high representation of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, specifically Hispanic. As shared in the semi-structured student interviews, the majority of the 1GA 2025 cohort were children of immigrants whose only prior international travel involved returning to their family's home country to visit relatives, not traveling abroad for educational purposes. Many expressed never having left the state of Washington, the United States, or having been on a plane before. Two of the student participants in 1GA had international student status.

Nationally, approximately one percent of U.S. college students participates in study abroad in a given year, and about one-third of those participants identify as students of color, including in short-term programs (IIE, 2023). In comparison, this First Gen Abroad cohort

reflects comparatively higher racial and ethnic diversity, providing important context for interpreting the findings.

Table 2

Racial/Ethnic Identities of 2025 1GA Cohort

Race/Ethnic Identity	Number of Students	Percentage
African American	1	4.8%
Asian	1	4.8%
Asian and White	1	4.8%
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	4.8%
Hispanic	10	47.6%
Hispanic and White	5	23.8%
White	2	9.5%
Total	21	100%

Note. Data on race/ethnic identity provided by Washington State University 1GA advisors. ($N = 22$)

In addition to student participants, all 4 program advisors and 2 university administrators associated with CEA-CAPA and the 2025 1GA program provided informed consent and elected to participate in interviews. This triangulated data collection approach allowed for a stronger representation of multiple perspectives within the case context. Pseudonyms were chosen by participants or assigned to enhance the confidentiality of the student responses (Esterberg, 2002). However, most of the 1GA participants expressed confusion over the idea of pseudonyms and asked me to provide them.

Kortegast and Boisfontaine's (2015) study on student's education-abroad practices for negotiating stated that "all students expressed desire for opportunities to share with others what they learned and experiences during their study abroad" (p. 816) and participant observation research allows the researcher to collect data unobtrusively, observing characteristics, behaviors, or social interactions without relying on self-reporting. This includes taking detailed notes and writing rich descriptions of relevant observations during education abroad programs. Field notes

are not a complete record of what occurs, but serve as selective accounts of actions, questions, and reflections from the participants (Grey, 2014). In this study, participant observation occurred before, during, and after the short-term education abroad program and was followed by individual and focus group interviews to complete the data collection process.

Semi-Structured Student Interviews

Qualitative research is expressed in words, artifacts, and papers, and using participant observations and open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews provides rich data. This form of interviewing is more in-depth than an ordinary conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Interviews are typically framed around guiding topics and questions, with an interview protocol that allows the interviewer to remain responsive to participants' answers, especially regarding their first-generation status.

Grey (2014) stated, "The use of semi-structured interviews also allows the researcher to 'probe' for more detailed responses where the respondent is asked to clarify what they have said" (p. 382). In past research on education abroad, interviews proved useful as participants enjoyed discussing their experiences. This approach focuses on the meanings that participants ascribe to the phenomenon (Grey, 2014).

In this study, the student interviews were conducted post-trip and were designed to answer the research questions by exploring what factors supported or constrained their participation (e.g., finances, parental support, peer encouragement, program length) and what transformative learning occurred. An interview protocol specific to the education abroad program was developed, and questions and procedures were outlined in Appendix A. These questions were piloted in a Colorado State University qualitative research methods course, then revised to include follow-up and open-ended prompts to elicit richer responses. Institutional

review board approval and ethical protocols, as observed in past dissertations reviewed in Chapter 2, were followed.

Semi-Structured Advisor and Administrator Interviews

Collecting observations from education abroad advisors and conducting interviews with those who designed, implemented, and participated in the 1GA model enriched the data. These professionals provided key insights into individual student development and the role of advisors and instructors in shaping learning outcomes. Participants agreed that effective advisors and instructors support student learning by considering personal development and learning styles (Arghode et al., 2017).

The administrator for the WSU 1GA program was CEA-CAPA, a third-party education abroad provider. Including CEA-CAPA staff in interviews was essential, as they played a central role in program design and delivery. Their perspective helped explain how the curriculum was structured to support first-generation students, how institutional collaboration functioned, and how student learning outcomes were implemented abroad. These insights contextualized participant experiences and strengthened the overall analysis of institutional and pedagogical supports for first-generation students.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a qualitative research method that brings together a small group of participants to discuss specific topics in a moderated setting. This dynamic is often enhanced through visual prompts such as journals or photos (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Morgan, 1997). A focus group is not simply a group interview; it is intended to foster a cascade of ideas where one response triggers additional thoughts (Grey, 2014). Kortegast and Boisfontaine (2015) observed, “Students were much more comfortable talking about their experiences when

prompted by others because they perceived others' questions as genuine interest" (p. 817). The discussion included topics such as: (a) reentry experiences, (b) conversations with family and friends post-travel, (c) peer relationships, (d) personal learning and development, and (e) lifestyle shifts after returning home.

Transformative learning concepts introduced in the literature review were also revisited. Following Morgan's (1997) recommendation, the focus group began with a moderator introduction. All methods employed in this data collection phase contributed to the credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness of the study. However, in this study, only two participants signed up for the focus group, so those two were included with the individual semi-structured interviews.

Course Materials and Artifacts

A copy of the pre-departure syllabus was provided to the researcher for review as part of the document analysis. During in-country fieldwork, student participation in both classroom and extracurricular activities was recorded using a photo attendance sheet developed by WSU advisors, which helped correlate field observations with individual engagement.

A reflection activity developed by the researcher was implemented after the first week of coursework during a Sunday Supper volunteer reflection dinner. This "Mad Lib"-style printed document asked students to articulate their motivations, expectations, and goals. With participant consent, these reflections were incorporated into the research dataset. These data, along with textual artifacts and visual materials, contributed to a holistic understanding of student development and transformative learning. Additionally, social media content shared by WSU advisors and tagged by participants was observed as a source of qualitative data (Paulus et al., 2013). The reflection activity is documented in Appendix B.

Data Analysis Techniques

Qualitative researchers interpret dense, text-rich data to identify themes and insights aligned with their research questions. Merriam (1998) described case study analysis as recursive, intuitive, and responsive. Yazan (2015) emphasized that case study researchers use multiple strategies to explore social phenomena in depth.

This study used thematic analysis to group coded data by recurring themes (Freeman, 2017). Transcripts were processed using Trint for accuracy and identification of key quotations and learning outcomes. Dedoose software was used to facilitate open coding and in vivo coding, starting with a deductive code set informed by the literature and theoretical framework (see Appendix C), followed by inductive codes drawn from student language. Visualizations such as Packed Cloud code frequency maps were used to display dominant terms from interviews and focus groups (Efthymiou, 2023) and are presented in Appendices E–G.

For case study research, Merriam (1998) encouraged researchers to interact actively with the data, suggesting that they “think of yourself as having a conversation with the data, asking questions of it, making comments to it, and so on” (p. 181). As part of thematic analysis, researchers examine the commonalities in the data, the differences in the data, and the relationships between the various elements of analysis (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Efthymiou’s (2023) dissertation on the role of pre-departure training in study abroad identified codes, such as intercultural communication, global citizenship, collaboration, empathy, and career development, which influenced the codes for this dissertation.

Phases of Data Analysis

The constant comparative method from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2017) guided the organization of data into groups. The analysis proceeded in structured phases, some

occurring concurrently (such as Phase I and Phase IV), whereas others occurred either during, before, or after the program, addressing specific analytic questions as listed below.

Phase I: Thematic Analysis of Field Notes: The analytic questions were as follows:

- a. What opportunities for learning were evident before, during, and after the trip?
- b. What barriers were present before, during, and after the trip?

Phase II: Thematic Analysis of Student Interviews: The analytic questions were as follows:

Analytic questions:

- a. How did you learn about this program?
- b. What role did your identity as a first-generation college student play in your decision to join the program?
- c. How did your institution support you in preparing for the program?
- d. How did your community support you in preparing for the program?

Phase III: Thematic Analysis of Instructor Interviews: The analytic questions were as follows:

- a. What questions would the instructors like asked of the participants?
- b. Was first-generation student status addressed in the course?
- c. What transformative learning did the instructor think occurred for the students while abroad?

Phase IV: Analysis of Course Materials and Artifacts: The analytic questions were as follows:

- a. In what ways might the course materials reflect assumptions about students' prior knowledge, experiences, or cultural capital?

- b. How were financial, academic, or logistical challenges acknowledged or addressed within the course materials?
- c. How did the artifacts promote a transformative learning experience for all students?

Phase V: Integration of Phases I–IV: The analytic questions are as follows:

- a. What common themes emerged across field notes, interviews, and course materials regarding the challenges and support systems for first-generation students?
- b. How did the experiences and reflections of students align with or diverge from instructor perceptions and program materials?
- c. What patterns were observed that revealed the institution’s strengths or areas for improvement in supporting first-generation students abroad?
- d. What recommendations could be drawn from the data to improve program accessibility, inclusivity, and impact for first-generation students?

These analytic questions provided a framework for analyzing the different phases of data collected, helping to identify gaps, strengths, and opportunities for enhancing the experiences of first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs. The data were analyzed and reviewed multiple times. As Bazeley (2013) emphasized, field notes during participant observation were used alongside full transcriptions to identify codes, categories, and themes: “Data have to be documented to become useful as a source and then as evidence for analysis” (p. 63). Bazeley noted that the key to data analysis is hard thinking and ongoing work, qualitative research requires the strategies of reading, reflecting, playing, and exploring.

Credibility, Reliability, Trustworthiness

Qualitative approaches to research achieve rigor by building credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness (Grey, 2014). As the researcher, I have *emic* (insider) knowledge of and

association with short-term education abroad programs. As part of the observational study and post-data collection, I also worked to maintain an *etic* (outsider) perspective (Patton, 2014). Researcher reflexivity was used to critically reflect on the researcher's position and how it influenced the study. As Banks (1998) noted, "biographical journeys of researchers greatly influence their values, their research questions, and the knowledge they construct," and "the knowledge they construct mirrors their life experiences and values" (p. 4).

As a first-generation student, I had not studied abroad during undergraduate years due to perceived financial and academic barriers, despite having scholarships and a graduation plan. Faculty advisors did not encourage this endeavor. However, through over 20 years of professional experience working with education abroad programs, including advising and leading groups on short-term and semester-based programs, I have observed the powerful impact of transformative learning and the development of global citizenship among student participants.

During initial conversations with WSU, CEA-CAPA, and student participants, I shared my experience leading educational programs abroad and disclosed my first-generation student background. As a scholar-practitioner, I approached the study with insider knowledge while maintaining transparency about the research goals, voluntary participation, and participant anonymity. This transparency helped establish trust among students, advisors, and administrators. All participants signed an informed consent form, which explained their right to withdraw without penalty and clarified that they could choose which insights and information to share. A sample of this consent form is provided in Appendix C.

Summary

As presented in the previous chapters, this dissertation research examined the experiences of first-generation students in a short-term education abroad program using a case study

methodology that included participant observation, semi-structured interviews (individual and focus group), advisor interviews, and administrator interviews. The goal of the study was to understand the factors that supported and constrained first-generation student participation and to explore the transformative learning that occurred. As Kortegast and Boisfontaine (2015) concluded:

Given the rise of short-term study abroad experiences as the primary method of providing students with international learning opportunities, coupled with significant institutional and personal resources allocated to short-term study abroad programs, we need to be concerned with the depth of learning resulting from these experiences. (p. 823)

The current expansion of accessibility and availability, alongside growing research on short-term education abroad programs, has significant implications for first-generation students. These programs enhance transformative learning outcomes as students enter the workforce in an increasingly interconnected world. In today's global climate, there is a clear demand for professionals with a global mindset who can contribute to education, business, and sustainability. Achterberg (2002) asked, "The key question for higher education in the twentieth century, 'What does it mean to be educated,' has changed to 'What does it mean to be educated in an era of globalization'?" (p. 18). As highlighted in the literature review, first-generation students who participated in education abroad, particularly in short-term programs, were more likely to develop a global identity and desire to contribute to social change. Ogden et al. (2024) found that "the magnitude of benefits offered by studying abroad was greater for first-generation students than for continuing-generation students."

Building on this understanding of the transformative potential of short-term education abroad for first-generation students, the next chapter turns to the analysis of data collected

through 1GA interviews, observations, and program materials. Chapter 4 explores the key themes that emerged from these findings, highlighting how institutional practices, program design, and student experiences intersected to shape participation, learning, and outcomes.

Chapter 4- Findings

The purpose of this dissertation study and the findings presented in this chapter was to examine how first-generation college students' access and experience were supported and constrained throughout short-term education abroad programs, with a focus on identifying institutional factors that influenced participation and contributed to successful completion and transformative learning. This chapter presents the findings from a qualitative case study inquiry of the WSU 1GA program administered by CEA-CAPA Study Abroad. CEA CAPA has 75 years of experience offering “programs around the world that aim to develop students academically, professionally, and culturally to become the next generation of thoughtful, thriving leaders” (CEA CAPA, 2025). Guided by a single embedded case study approach and thematic analysis methodology, the chapter draws on data from researcher field observations and program documents to understand the lived experiences of first-generation students, as well as interviews with students, advisors, and administrators who support education abroad and first-generation students on this program.

The analysis in this chapter is organized to address the study's guiding research questions:

1. What institutional factors support and constrain first-generation students' participation in short-term education abroad programs?
2. How does transformative learning occur for first-generation students participating in short-term education abroad programs?
3. What institutional support systems are most effective in enhancing the accessibility and successful completion of short-term education abroad programs for first-generation students?

Through a careful examination of the data using a qualitative case study methodology, this chapter illuminates both the opportunities and challenges that shaped how first-generation students engaged in and benefited from short-term education abroad programs. By identifying patterns across all stakeholder perspectives, the findings highlight key themes related to access, motivation, institutional support, and transformative learning. Additionally, the analysis considers how program design and implementation influenced student outcomes and overall program effectiveness. Together, these findings deepen understanding of how short-term education abroad programs can promote equity and inclusion for first-generation college students and provide the foundation for the discussion and results presented in Chapter 5.

First Generation Abroad (1GA) at Washington State University

This study focused on the experiences during the 1GA program at WSU during the summer of 2025, from May 25 through June 19, as well as the pre-departure seminars and courses that occurred prior to departure. 1GA is an education abroad initiative uniquely tailored for first-generation students at WSU and across all campuses, including satellite locations (Pullman Main Campus, Vancouver, Tri-Cities, and Global). The WSU website describes being “first-gen” as being the first in one’s family to attend college (WSU, 2025). This program is part of WSU’s broader commitment to first-generation student success, under the First at WSU umbrella. By focusing exclusively on first-generation undergraduates, 1GA aims to make education abroad more accessible to a group that may face greater financial, informational, or social barriers to going abroad.

The 1GA program typically runs during the summer (late May to late June), lasting about 4–6 weeks. During the education abroad experience, students take 2 courses (totaling 6 credits) taught in English by local or host-country faculty at the in-country study center operated by the

program provider, CEA-CAPA. Courses taught in English are advantageous for students in that, regardless of their host community language proficiency, they can make academic progress (Goertler & Schenker, 2021). In the past 15 years, the program has taken place in Spain, Italy, and Costa Rica, with an average of 20 students per summer session. According to program advisors, this cohort size is ideal for reducing program costs and maintaining a beneficial student-to-advisor ratio.

The courses are intentionally selected to support cultural learning; for example, offerings in the Summer 2025 Seville, Spain session included COM 340: Communication & Global Competence and CUL 340: Food & Culture in Spain. As a cohort model, all 1GA participants take the same 2 classes simultaneously, 4 days a week (Monday through Thursday) for the entire duration of the program. Alongside academics, the program integrates excursions to famous landmarks, a guided overnight trip to Portugal with the WSU advisors, and a structured volunteer project that engages students with the local community.

Preparation for 1GA begins well before departure, with cohort meetings held over Zoom through UNIV497. These pre-departure sessions help participants set goals, learn what to expect before, during, and after their time abroad, and build relationships with each other and the 1GA WSU advisors. One participant shared in her interview, “Those classes helped me also like kind of talk to more people that I was gonna go to Spain with ... I wasn’t a complete stranger to anybody.” In contrast, another student shared, “I was not super engaged in that class ... it did help me get a little bit more like acquainted to the culture a little bit ... but everything I mostly learned was over there.” Once in-country, students continued to meet as a cohort in classes and with the WSU staff advisors, mostly before and after each Monday through Thursday class on the CEA-CAPA Sevilla campus. The advisors, in collaboration with CEA-CAPA, were also

responsible for organizing an introduction dinner and reflection activities to help students process and make sense of their experiences. Two WSU advisors from the university's committee were designated to live in Sevilla, Spain and continuously advise the cohort for the entire duration of the education abroad program, providing immediate on-site support.

In the interview, one advisor shared, that after a 2-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 1GA resumed travel to destination countries like Seville (Spain) and Rome (Italy). This return signaled both institutional resilience and the program's value: according to program leadership, cohort size and student enthusiasm reflected strong demand and commitment. That same advisor noted that, based on the 2025 cohort experience and interest, there was potential to run 2 concurrent 1GA programs in 2 countries in 2026.

Participant Experience on 1GA

In the host country of Spain, the 1GA cohort engaged in rigorous but accessible coursework. The 2 courses offered not only fulfilled academic credit requirements but also framed students' international experience in a meaningful way. Courses were taught in English. The classes served as "walking classrooms" where learning was not limited to lectures and occurred during excursions and cultural immersion activities (WSU, 2025). One participant, Leanna, explained in her interview, "The education program there was great. The teachers were phenomenal ... the system that they had through CEA-CAPA I really enjoyed." Leanna also shared, "They also had it set up so that we had like cathedral tours ... built into the program ... I didn't have to spend the extra money to go, as well as the weekend trip to Portugal." As described by program leadership, students visited works of art, architectural sites, and diverse neighborhoods, allowing them to learn through direct engagement with the host culture.

During 1GA, student participants spent their free time after class exploring the city independently or with each other, such as an after-class excursion to the city aquarium organized by a student who invited the entire cohort and the researcher. Weekend travel was also encouraged and discussed, and the cohort gave presentations on possible in-country and out-of-country excursions during the pre-departure course as part of their learning assignments. The cohort model enabled peer bonding; traveling with fellow first-generation students created a shared sense of identity and mutual support. Students were encouraged never to travel alone while in-country. Advisor-facilitated in-country meetings, such as a Sunday Supper gathering, further deepened connections, helping students process their experiences together week after week. For example, I was invited to lead a Mad Lib-style reflection activity for the cohort at a local tapas restaurant after the first week of classes, which is presented in the course materials and artifacts section. The observational notes also present another central component of the program, a volunteer/service project. Students were split into 2 groups and partnered with a local organization, organized by WSU and CEA-CAPA, to engage with the local community. Through volunteerism, participants gained insight into social issues, contributed to the community meaningfully, and built empathy around local issues such as the unhoused population of Sevilla, Spain.

Support Structures for 1GA

Washington State University and CEA-CAPA provided extensive logistical support to make the program accessible. Advisors served on a year-round committee and tabled early every fall semester to answer questions and generate a mailing list of interested first-generation students. The advisors at the tabling session were accompanied by previous program participants, known as 1GA ambassadors. One advisor stated that these students often returned to share how

the experience was “transformational or transformative” after they had time to reflect. However, another advisor noted, “many of the students we first meet that are first-gen in our tabling and presentations may not even know what studying abroad is because ... they are the first in their family to come to college.”

In addition to explaining first-generation abroad status and the 1GA program at WSU, advisors assisted with application procedures, scholarship identification, passport and travel document procurement, parent discussions, and flight arrangements. An example from the 2025 cohort emerged of a student who initially missed the 1GA deadline but was accompanied by his father to an advisor meeting. An exception was made for admission by the WSU advisors after discussion of the student and parent investment in participation.

Affordability was a cornerstone of 1GA. The program fee, insurance, and in-country excursion costs were fixed, and additional estimated costs such as airfare and personal expenses were communicated to students with transparency and guidance on constructing budgets. One administrator emphasized the importance of explaining budgeting before going abroad: “when students get here, everything seems so inexpensive ... but it’s a little bit of a veneer ... money goes quickly.” Financial aid was highly encouraged and widely used by almost all 1GA participants. Program advisors encouraged students to apply for scholarships such as the Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarship and to leverage WSU-specific funds.

Program eligibility was broad: it was open to first-generation undergraduate students from any WSU campus and major, provided they maintained a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0. This inclusive approach ensured students who might not otherwise have access to education abroad had a pathway to this global experience. A key component of the program was that advising staff remained a constant in-country presence, helping students navigate cultural

adjustment, logistical challenges, safety, and family concerns. This fostered a sense of belonging and security in WSU 1GA. As one program administrator noted, “they miss family a lot while they’re here.”

Outcomes and Impacts for 1GA

Although the coursework did not count toward WSU’s cumulative GPA, it appeared on students’ transcripts and could fulfill major, minor, or elective requirements. According to WSU, an academic outcome of 1GA was to support students’ academic growth by promoting cross-cultural communication skills, global competence, interdisciplinary understanding (WSU, 2025), and aspects of transformative learning. According to the 1GA website, many students reported increased self-confidence, a broader worldview, and enhanced cultural awareness (WSU, 2025). In cohort and reflection sessions, students reflected on their first-generation identity in an international context, deepening their sense of belonging and agency. Prior to the education abroad experience, student participants enrolled in UNIV497 twice a week for 10 weeks before departing for Spain. Although all 4 1GA committee members served as instructors in the class and were interviewed for this research, only two served as on-site advisors for the program. These advisors promoted aspects of global competencies and served as guides to students in translating these new skills for future professional opportunities. Advisors worked with students after 1GA to frame their education abroad experience in terms of internships, scholarships, and career applications.

After conversations with WSU and CEA-CAPA staff, and IRB approval, I joined pre-departure classes and the first week of in-country courses with the 2 elected advisors and student participants and gathered field notes. These notes provided another layer of insight into how first-generation students experienced the outcomes and impact of the WSU 1GA program in real

time. Researcher observations were documented throughout pre-departure meetings, on-site program activities, group excursions, and informal interactions among students, advisors, CEA-CAPA instructors, and staff.

The observational field notes offered contextual detail that complemented the interview data, capturing behaviors, group dynamics, moments of engagement or tension, and environmental factors that shaped students' experiences. By examining these observational patterns, the analysis identified themes that reflected how students navigated cultural adjustment, built a 1GA community, and interacted with institutional CEA-CAPA structures during the program. The following section presents these themes to illustrate how the observed program environment aligned with, reinforced, or diverged from the perceptions described in participant interviews.

Researcher Field Notes

The field notes collected during the first week of the WSU short-term education abroad program in Sevilla, Spain served as an important complementary data source to the interview and course and artifact findings. While interview data provided detailed descriptions of participant experiences, field observations offered real-time insight into how the program operated in practice and on-site in Spain. The field notes documented observable behaviors, interactions, and engagement across classroom activities, host family residential site visits, and community-based learning experiences. Phase I of the analysis, as outlined in the methodology chapter, focused on identifying patterns within these observations through a thematic approach guided by two analytic questions:

- (a) What opportunities for learning were evident before, during, and after the trip?
- (b) What barriers were present before, during, and after the trip?

The following section presents a descriptive summary of the key patterns and themes constructed from the field notes, offering an objective account of how students interacted with course content, peers, advisors, the researcher, the country, and the program environment.

Field Notes Emerging Patterns and Themes

All 21 in-country student participants agreed to participate in the researcher observations. The study was first introduced during the pre-departure courses and an initial consent form to participate was sent out, with only 1 respondent. During the first day of the program and the introductory meeting in-country at a local Sevilla pizza restaurant, hard copies of the research consent form were explained again, provided, and signed by all in-country participants. The first week of field observations revealed a highly engaged and participatory 2025 cohort, with students demonstrating consistent enthusiasm across classroom lessons and experiential activities. Their involvement in mapping cultural regions, tasting local foods, and completing collaborative assignments showed strong investment in hands-on, sensory, and interactive learning. Students also displayed growing cultural awareness as they compared United States norms with Spanish practices, analyzing differences in time orientation, language use, gender-inclusive terminology, and social customs. For example, one student shared her adaptation process to understanding the Spanish culture of “staring” versus “smiling” in the streets of Sevilla and noted that smiling at strangers is less common in Spain and might even indicate romantic interest. Identity exploration was a central element, with students reflecting on privilege, cultural values, and intersecting identities, while peer collaboration fostered belonging, particularly as heritage Spanish speakers served as linguistic and cultural bridges. After multiple cycles of coding, these observations highlighted a cohort deeply engaged in experiential learning, supported by humor, social connection, and mutual learning.

Theme #1: Connections Across Contexts

Students consistently linked classroom concepts to real-world experiences, making visible connections between discussions of food, culture, ethics, and communication and their interactions in the local community. This integration strengthened their understanding of cultural norms and encouraged reflective interpretation of new experiences and a sense of belonging in the program. Awareness of privilege and power also surfaced frequently, with students grappling with United States cultural dominance, international perceptions, and their own positionality, even among those who identified as belonging to underrepresented populations. This occurred not only with the highly engaged students in the front of the classroom, but across the entire cohort, including those who often sat in the back. The CEA-CAPA instructors assigned to WSU 1GA were skilled at ensuring that all students remained engaged and alert during class, despite the heat and less-than-ideal classroom conditions. In class, identity negotiation became an ongoing process as students navigated new social contexts, reflecting on how their sense of self shifted across interactions with peers, hosts, and community members, including WSU advisors and CEA-CAPA staff. Language played a vital role in these connections, as multilingual exchanges and peer translation deepened inclusion and highlighted the situated nature of communication and connection.

Theme #2: Connection to Theoretical Constructs

The field observations strongly aligned with the study's guiding constructs. Evidence of transformative learning appeared through students' critical reflection, shifts in perspective, and questioning of previously held assumptions, often sparked by literature discussions in the classroom, cultural comparisons, and the service-learning experience. A developing sense of belonging emerged across the cohort, reinforced by group projects, shared cultural experiences,

and supportive interactions with advisors, host families, and community organizations. The prevailing classroom atmosphere was that the 1GA participants were not “tourists” in Spain; they were there as students to learn and engage with the community and culture. One student stated, “In classes we had an assignment where we had to talk to a local ... integrating into the culture is I think good for first-generation students ... I definitely did not feel like a tourist ... I live here now.”

Experiential learning functioned as a central bridge between theory and practice: tasting new foods in class and outside class on their own, navigating public spaces, engaging in service learning, and visiting cultural sites enabled students to apply classroom concepts immediately, strengthening self-confidence and intercultural competence. As Passarelli and Kolb (2012) note, concrete experience activates the whole learner- thinking, feeling, perceiving, and doing- which made these sensory and embodied activities powerful entry points for deeper learning and meaning-making. Table 3 comprises the researcher field note observations of all activities that occurred within the first week of 1GA and organizes them into the areas of transformative learning and sense of belonging, an underlying current of the themes.

Table 3*Summary Field Notes into Transformative Learning and Sense of Belonging Outcomes*

Activity / Experience	Transformative Learning Outcomes	Sense of Belonging Outcomes
Communication & Global Competence Classes (afternoon class)	- Critical reflection on identity, privilege, and social norms - Perspective-taking on race, nationality, and culture - Awareness of ethical imperatives in intercultural communication	- Peer discussions and group exercises fostered cohort cohesion - Safe environment for sharing personal thoughts and cultural experiences - Instructor's personal anecdotes increased relational connection
Food & Culture Classes (morning class)	- Experiential knowledge of Spanish foods, regional traditions, and culinary history - Understanding cultural symbolism (e.g., bread types, olive oil production) - Application of classroom content to real-world contexts	- Collaborative group mapping and presentations strengthened peer interaction - Shared laughter and engagement enhanced classroom community - Heritage Spanish speakers contributed to inclusive participation
Service Learning: Brigada Nocturna	- Application of intercultural communication in real-world settings - Reflection on social inequalities and ethical responsibilities - Development of empathy and situational problem-solving skills	- Cohort bonding through shared volunteer activity - Students gained confidence navigating unfamiliar social environments - Interactions with the local community fostered relational awareness beyond the cohort
Host Family Experiences (Evening Meals with Host Family)	- Insight into daily Spanish cultural norms and social etiquette - Exposure to intergenerational and familial communication patterns - Reflection on personal identity in new cultural context	- Sense of safety and inclusion within home setting - Informal conversations reinforced peer and researcher relationships - Positive interactions encouraged social integration into local culture
Self-Organized Excursions (Sevilla Aquarium, Plaza Visits)	- Exposure to new cultural and environmental experiences - Reflection on global and local differences (e.g., cost, accessibility, animal care) - Informal learning through observation and discussion	- Peer bonding through shared exploration - Opportunity to interact casually strengthened informal social networks - Reinforced group identity as part of first-gen cohort abroad
First Week in-class Group Projects	- Integration of prior knowledge into cohesive presentations - Development of research, teamwork, and communication skills - Reflection on regional, cultural, and historical insights	- Strengthened peer relationships via collaboration - Recognition of individual contributions reinforced group belonging - Shared celebration of achievement enhanced cohort pride

Researcher Reflections

Overall, the 2025 1GA cohort demonstrated impressive resilience, adaptability, and engagement despite environmental challenges, such as long days, intense heat, and late-night service learning (and this was in week one of four of the entire program). Their collaborative spirit, sense of belonging, reflective dialogue, and willingness to confront complex cultural questions revealed early indicators of intercultural growth. Heritage Spanish-speaking students played a key role as cultural brokers, promoting inclusivity and peer learning.

The combination of classroom activities in the first week and immersive experiences proved essential in deepening students' understanding of cultural contexts and enhancing their confidence in navigating unfamiliar environments in Spain (and other regions of Spain and countries the students elected to visit on their own) for the remainder of the program. These observations underscore the transformative potential of short-term education abroad programs for first-generation students and illustrate how intentional program design can support meaningful cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Student Interviews Patterns and Themes

The second phase of the findings draws on seven in-depth individual interviews and one focus group with two participants. Initially, I planned to have multiple focus groups of 3-4 student participants. However, since only two students elected to participate in the Focus Group, their answers were incorporated into the analysis of the individual student interviews. This combination of individual and group interview participants adds to the depth to the overall student narratives and offers valuable insight into the ways institutional support, community networks, and individual resilience contribute to meaningful engagement in global learning.

Using a thematic analysis approach (Bruan & Clarke, 2006), transcripts were coded for recurring patterns, concepts, and meanings related to participants' experiences before, during, and after the program. Codes were refined into categories, which were then clustered into overarching themes that illustrate both the challenges and the transformative potential of education abroad participation for first-generation students. All nine were first-generation students who participated in the WSU 1GA short-term education abroad program administered by CEA-CAPA. All 21 1GA students who were in the country and agreed to the observational portion of the study were contacted by email to participate in the individual interviews or focus groups. Multiple emails were sent with reminders about the incentive to participate, but ultimately, nine total students completed interviews, resulting in a 43% participation rate.

These interviews provide rich insight into how students made sense of their experiences before, during, and after the program, offering nuanced perspectives on access, identity, support systems, and personal development. Using an inductive thematic analysis approach, patterns were identified across participants' narratives in relation to four central areas of thematic analysis: how students learned about the program, how their first-generation identity shaped their participation, what forms of institutional support they encountered, and how family or community networks influenced their decision to study abroad. Table 4 presents these themes to illustrate the factors that shaped students' engagement and the ways in which transformative learning unfolded within the context of a short-term education abroad experience. Table 4 includes a summary of the semi-structured student interview themes, and then the next section delves into the interviews, providing student quotes that directly correlate to the themes identified in the analytic process.

Table 4*Summary of Student Interview Themes*

Participant	Pathways to Participation	Role of First-Generation Identity	Institutional Support	Community Support	Transformative Learning / Personal Growth
Anay (F)	Learned through a family friend's social media post.	Aware of first-gen status since high school; program's marketing attracted her.	Minimal support; primarily financial guidance.	Mother supportive but non-directive.	Growth through reflection and compassion; appreciated slower lifestyle.
Butterfly (F)	Discovered through institutional email.	Recognized identity as part of her college journey.	Detailed advising and financial guidance.	Family adjusted responsibilities to support participation.	Gained independence, curiosity, and desire for future travel.
Celeste (F)	Learned through program marketing and advisor guidance.	Valued program's recognition of first-gen status; sense of belonging.	Pre-departure advising and program guidance.	Family supportive; encouraged participation.	Expanded openness, intercultural empathy, and awareness of global career opportunities.
David (M)	Learned through advisor recommendation; wanted to travel without delaying academics.	Recognized first-gen identity; motivated by program's focus on first-generation students.	Support from advisor and global learning office.	Family supportive; financial and emotional backing.	Increased confidence, career awareness, and future educational opportunities.
Jackie (F)	Informed by advisor; initially questioned eligibility.	Gained clarity and validation from advisor.	Regular guidance on paperwork and logistics.	Mother and sisters encouraging despite concerns.	Learned to be spontaneous and socially engaged.
Leanna (F)	Learned through campus outreach and faculty contact.	Identity reinforced sense of belonging.	Minimal preparation beyond meetings.	Mother accompanied her abroad.	Gained global perspective and gratitude.
Rachel (F)	Learned through peer network and advisor.	Viewed program as beneficial for first-gen students.	Consistent advising and reminders.	Family supportive after initial hesitation.	Strengthened empathy and cultural understanding.

Tabitha (F)	Learned from university email targeted to first-generation students.	Felt validated seeing a program designed for first-gen students.	Strong pre-departure support; detailed modules.	Co-workers supportive; others hesitant.	Gained confidence and motivation for future academic goals.
Tony (M)	Encouraged by mentor/advisor.	Aware of being first-gen but not central to his decision.	Organized curriculum; limited mention of support.	Parents fully supportive.	Developed comfort in discomfort; valued global experience.

Note. Themes were drawn from individual interviews conducted with nine first-generation students who participated in the 1GA education abroad program (N = 9). (M) denotes male participants and (F) denotes female participants. Some quotes were not directly attributed to students to maintain participant anonymity.

To contextualize the individual interview findings, the following sections present a thematic synthesis of students' experiences and perspectives. These themes were generated through an inductive analysis of the interview data and are intended to highlight shared patterns while acknowledging variation across participants. The themes summarize how students learned about the program, understood their first-generation identity, experienced institutional and community support, and articulated personal growth and transformative learning resulting from the short-term education abroad experience. Presenting the themes in this way provides a structured overview of the qualitative findings and serves as a foundation for the results and discussion presented in Chapter 5.

Theme 1: Pathways to Participation — Learning About the Program

Students learned about the education abroad opportunity through a combination of institutional outreach and personal networks. Tabitha, Butterfly, and Leanna discovered the program through targeted university emails that explicitly highlighted first-generation participation. Butterfly shared that she missed the first-gen student orientation due to a clerical error and had not previously utilized the first-gen center for resources: "So it wasn't until this

study abroad that I came back into the first-gen bubble of the university.” Anay emphasized, “One of the strengths I would say is it’s marketing to specifically first-generation students. I feel like that’s a pretty big amount of students who want to go abroad but are worried about it or who think that they can’t do it.” One program advisor echoed this, noting the significance of 2024 being the first year that a system-wide email reached all WSU campuses, including global online students. Another student recounted getting the email, researching the city, and thinking it looked “cute,” though she admitted, “I was really nervous because like I said, I’d never done anything like that before.” The first-gen messaging helped them identify the program as “something for students like me,” as Tabitha described. She added, “You only live once ... so do it to the fullest. And that’s what doing this trip really encouraged me to do.”

Relational networks were equally influential. Tony was encouraged to apply by his mentor and fraternity advisor Alejandro, who was also a 1GA advisor. Rachel learned through a peer already in communication with the advisor, stating, “We were both kind of like helping each other plan for it ... we got excited ... and we both are beginning to be teachers.” Another student encountered the program through a family friend, saying, “I saw her picture and I asked her quickly about it because I was worried about possible racial things I would go through in Spain,” showing the importance of trust and representation in motivating first-generation education abroad participation.

David and Celeste also described how both institutional support and peer encouragement influenced their participation. David recalled learning about the opportunity from an academic advisor who reassured him that studying abroad would not delay his graduation. He reflected, “Given that it’s first generation, you don’t really have much of an understanding ... of navigating like how university works ... being brand new and not really having other family that have gone

through similar situations.” Celeste initially learned about the program through general campus messaging but ultimately decided to go after repeated encouragement from first-gen friends, helping her see the program as something within reach. Students frequently emphasized how direct encouragement and visible first-gen representation helped them see themselves as legitimate participants, which reinforces the theme of pathways to participation. One student stated, “I never thought study abroad was for someone like me until my advisor said, ‘You should really think about this, you belong here.’” Another reflected, “When I saw their posts, it clicked that people like us actually get to do this.”

Across interviews, students consistently described their decision to apply as emerging from the intersection of formal WSU outreach, advisor guidance, and relational affirmation. These layered pathways helped them recognize education abroad as a viable and intended opportunity, one they not only qualified for, but were actively encouraged to pursue by friends, advisors, their university, and family. This combination of communication, reassurance, and representation formed the foundation of first-generation students’ initial engagement with the program.

Theme 2: The Role of First-Generation Identity

All nine participants recognized their first-generation identity as a factor shaping their academic journeys and, for some, their decision to pursue education abroad. Tabitha remarked, “Seeing something about first gen and study abroad, those two terms put together I had never seen before. Now I can finally do something with this first-generation stuff.” Butterfly similarly noted, “It was first gen, and I’m first gen ... it was just kind of a reminder ... so I decided to apply for it.” Several students described how advisor support clarified eligibility and reinforced belonging. Jackie, unsure whether she qualified, said, “The program advisor ... reassured me that

I still qualified as a first-generation student and that my participation would be valuable.” Rachel noted that the advising process helped her recognize the program’s benefits and described how the experience shaped her approach to working with children from diverse backgrounds.

Family dynamics also influenced students’ identity and readiness. Anay shared, “She wasn’t exactly like pushing me forward ... but she was there ... if you wanna do it, do it.” Another student said, “Finally my mom was like, I’ll go with you. And I was like, okay, well, if we did it together to start, I think I’d be able to continue it on my own.” Jackie emphasized, “My family was like my main encouragement ... my mom was nervous for me, but she was like, no, you gotta do it, but they did sometimes make it more nerve-wracking because they told me like be careful because people could get kidnapped.” These narratives illustrate how familial support can sometimes hinder but also reinforce first-gen students’ confidence and readiness to participate in education abroad programs.

Some students described first-gen identity-related challenges. Celeste noted, “First-generation students might also not have access to other resources, like being able to go to certain people for help with scholarships or all the application process.” She added that she chose IGA because of the title, “I think that’s what drew me into it because I knew that I wanted to study abroad, but I didn’t know what or where ... I knew I was gonna be with other people that have like similar backgrounds as me.” Tony reflected on navigating unfamiliar contexts, saying, “The number one thing is just my comfortability with being in an environment that I’m not used to ... it was okay to feel the way that I felt.” Butterfly linked identity and confidence to future aspirations even though she had not engaged in first-gen WSU programs prior to this opportunity and was initially hesitant, the program helped her overcome fears and build confidence, as in introvert. She stated, “I feel more confident now that I can live in a different country,” and

appreciated using her passport “to get a stamp” for something other than visiting her home country. Only two participants, Butterfly, and one other participant who declined to be interviewed, but was a part of the observational notes, were originally from countries outside the United States.

Collectively, these perspectives show that intentional recognition of first-generation identity in program recruitment, advising, and support systems fosters belonging, mitigates perceived barriers, and enhances students’ willingness to engage in global learning. For these 1GA participants, first-generation status was both a motivator for participation and a lens through which they interpreted and expanded their international experiences, ultimately shaping personal growth, academic confidence, and career ambition after this 1GA education program abroad

Theme 3: Institutional Support and Preparation

Institutional support was key to preparing students for participation, offering practical guidance and building confidence. Pre-departure classes, financial advising, and advisor mentoring from both WSU and CEA-CAPA were noted as particularly impactful. As Efthymiou (2023) found in a study of community college students participating in a short-term study abroad program in Central Europe, “pre-departure training developed global competence, intercultural sensitivity, and empathy as well as prepared students for active engagement,” underscoring the importance of structured preparation in fostering both skill development and confidence. Tabitha remarked, “Those classes were awesome. They really took the time to let us know about everything that could possibly happen ... how to dress, what amenities to bring, what to expect being in a different culture, the food, the climate, everything.” She was critical of the re-entry presentations, noting they focused too much on “how to sell yourself in the corporate world.”

Butterfly reflected on financial guidance provided by the institution: “We were encouraged to apply for the Gilman scholarship, the CEA-CAPA scholarships ... and also told how to use financial aid and, as a last resort, loans.” She demonstrated how institutional support helped mitigate financial barriers often faced by first-gen students and how she was still able to participate despite not receiving any scholarships.

Tabitha, who was encouraged to apply for CEA CAPA and Gilman scholarships and felt she was told she would “definitely get it” and ultimately didn’t receive the scholarship, said, “I’ve gotta go to work now and really work my butt off to make up that slack because I’m an adult and I don’t have, you know, a lot of the support financially like my classmates have.” But at that point she was determined to be able to participate in 1GA. Rachel emphasized the importance of support in navigating logistics and feelings as well as financial support: “The program advisors ... were very helpful in keeping students on track with paperwork and requirements, as well as checking in regularly to ensure students were feeling prepared and supported ... making sure (first-gen) pursue an education.” Celeste described the practical benefit: “I was just more nervous about navigating through the airports ... and knowing what to pack.” Rachel also expressed discouragement around finances, but the importance of how “asking questions that you really want to know the answer to is important to make a decision about whether you want to study abroad or not.”

David and Celeste similarly highlighted the institutional network’s role, with David reflecting on the impact of advisor and peer support: “being able to go with other students was a big plus ... helped me navigate the whole living situation and going around country and even the classroom stuff and also the advisors that were there with us,” while Celeste noted that the guidance she received prepared her to engage fully in the cultural and personal aspects of the

program and prepare her for “traveling by myself for the first time, especially overseas ... I was just more nervous about navigating through the airports ... and knowing what to pack.” Celeste also shared that the pre-departure classes helped her maintain the mindset that she was going to travel soon and how to prepare a good budget.

Several students emphasized that institutional support extended beyond logistics to fostering a sense of confidence and self-efficacy. Tony explained, “I think about how CEA CAPA described it, it’s like it’s a curve, right? I’m in a new country kind of thing.” He highlighted how preparatory resources allowed him to approach the unfamiliar with curiosity rather than anxiety and that he “just had to come with an open mind.” Anay similarly described how awareness of program-specific resources reinforced her sense of preparedness: “If they’re worried about finances ... talk first with your advisors, your counselors, teachers ... you can find help in the weirdest ways,” pointing to the importance of accessible institutional guidance for first-generation students navigating complex decisions about participation in 1GA. She also stated, “I wanted to see what would fit me the best and what would be worth time wise (and) worth the money.”

Family support often interacted with institutional preparation to further enhance readiness. One student described how her mother’s willingness to accompany her initially complemented the institutional support, and she felt confident once 1GA started because “it was arranged through CEA CAPA. And I think a lot of the times like vacationing is a hassle because you have to book the hotels and think about food, but all of that was already prepared for me through WSU and CEA CAPA.” Jackie also highlighted the blend of family and institutional support: “the support from both (Alejandro) and like WSU and my family was just great ... it made the transition much easier, and I felt more confident once I got there.” She noted that the

pre-departure classes helped her feel prepared to navigate cultural norms abroad. Yet across her interviews, Jackie's reflections also revealed the emotional and logistical hurdles that persisted despite strong support and she described struggling to apply for her passport, "the first time I did it wrong, I remember crying to my sister and I was like, I just can't ... and it made me kind of want to give up a little bit", feeling stressed about finances, and even finding packing overwhelming. These moments illustrate how first-generation students can experience parallel confidence and vulnerability in the lead-up to travel, even within highly supportive structures. Tabitha also described how institutional resources helped manage anxieties about leaving home: "The anxieties that you have about leaving home are okay ... just take the leap ... everything back home will be okay without you," demonstrating how preparation extended beyond practical logistics to psychological readiness.

Other students emphasized the institutions' role in bridging gaps that might otherwise challenge first-generation students. Leanna noted, "I didn't really know anybody going into it ... I think I had one meeting with my advisor (Alejandro) when I first thought seriously about it," highlighting how even minimal contact with institutional staff was crucial in providing reassurance, but that the mental preparation and financial part was stressful. Additionally, Leanna noted that unlike a lot of her first-gen peers, she didn't speak Spanish, so she was really nervous, but stated "I will say that the that it was [advisor-]led was a big part for me because I knew that even if I didn't make friends or whatever, there would be staff there that are like required to help me."

The importance of the introductory language lesson was discussed as a comfort for non-Spanish speaking students in-country, "I felt like I was learning with my peers as opposed to just me and the others learning by ourselves ... so everyone was learning something," Leanna added

that the administrators were specifically supportive, and she noted that the advisor even attended the after-hours language lessons. Similarly, Butterfly observed that encouragement to seek scholarships and financial guidance from advisors was essential in making participation feasible, illustrating the multifaceted nature of institutional support, although she and Tabitha were both disappointed about not receiving the specific scholarship that they had been encouraged to apply for through their advisors and WSU.

Overall, students described institutional support as multifaceted and essential, especially in bridging first-generation knowledge gaps and promoting readiness, aligning with best practices for equity-focused global education (IIE, 2023). These combined supports helped students overcome challenges and engage more fully in transformative global learning. As discussed in the Turek dissertation and later in Chapter 5, community and familial support can further influence participation beyond institutional support (Turek, 2012).

Theme 4: Community and Family Support

Community and family networks were identified as essential sources of support, influencing students' decisions to participate in the education abroad program and helping them navigate pre-departure and in-country challenges. Many students described their families as both practical and emotional anchors during the preparation process, especially maternal support as a central influence. Leanna noted, "It was mostly my mom and my friends that I talked to about it ... if we did it together to start, I think I'd be able to continue it on my own," highlighting the role of family in fostering confidence for first-time travelers.

Anay stated that one important aspect of IGA was how to "become more attractive to first-generation students" by addressing how to broach the topic with parents, who are often "really worried about their children or their students going abroad." Jackie emphasized the

encouragement she received from her mother and sisters, showing how familial support could help overcome initial hesitations. Although she was in Spain, Jackie appreciated the support from peers and advisors, explaining, “It’s just a different type of connection you make ... you’re alone in a beautiful way, but you have each other to rely on.” Any also described a more neutral, yet supportive, role from her mother: “She wasn’t exactly like pushing me forward ... but she was there ... if you wanna do it, do it,” reflecting a balance of autonomy and guidance.

Peers, mentors, and advisors were equally influential in shaping participation. Tony credited his fraternity advisor, who was also the education abroad program advisor Alejandro, with motivating him to join: “He advised and persuaded me to participate ... that’s why I decided to join the program.” Tony added that although he already had an education abroad experience in Guatemala, “Although I will say it was a little intimidating with all the costs and stuff, (Alejandro) broke it down pretty easily for me and that became something where I saw as a possibility to do it and it happened.” Rachel emphasized the role of a friend in helping her navigate the application process and going together, noting, “I feel like at the end of the experience you kinda look back and realize ... the full circle moment ... of feeling a little stressed, a little overwhelmed, but by the end of it you’ve just taken in so much of the culture and you’ve put yourself into so many new experiences and you’ve made so many friends and it’s like that’s what you really benefit from.” David and Celeste echoed similar sentiments about peer and advisor support, noting that structured guidance combined with personal encouragement fostered confidence in both logistical and social aspects of the program.

The supportive role of family and community extended into financial and logistical realms as well. Butterfly shared, “My parents were very excited ... they had to adjust and figure out who’s gonna babysit siblings while gone,” highlighting practical arrangements that facilitated

participation. Tabitha acknowledged that support was not uniform across her social network, explaining, “A lot of people were weary of me doing it ... but I did have the strong encouragement of a younger coworker friend,” illustrating how external encouragement could buffer against uncertainty or skepticism. Collectively, these narratives demonstrate that a combination of family, peer, advisor, and mentor support provided both emotional reassurance and practical assistance, enabling first-generation students to confidently engage in the education abroad experience.

Theme 5: Transformative Learning and Personal Growth

All participants reported meaningful personal growth resulting from their experiences abroad, although the degree and form of transformation varied. Tabitha described becoming more self-aware and motivated to “prepare for the next step after the program” and how, because she had been in other cultures, “it makes just interpersonal communication to strangers so much easier.” Butterfly and Jackie developed greater independence and spontaneity. In the semi-structured interviews, it was reported that there was an enhanced sense of adaptability and comfort in unfamiliar settings. One pre-med major stated that they had an expressed appreciation for asking about healthcare in Spain, sharing, “It was definitely something that I am looking forward to talk about ... just any future opportunities.” Butterfly stated, “I would want my own little family to be a traveling family ... I think I just found a new excitement for travel and I don’t think of everything that could go wrong immediately when I think of travel.”

Many students commented in their interviews about adjusting to Spanish cultural norms, such as later dinner hours and the idea of *sobremesa*, the Spanish tradition of lingering after dinner for social connection. They also noted exposure to different foods through Sunday Suppers, host family meals, and the extreme heat of June 2025. The first week in Spain saw

temperatures exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit almost daily. The afternoon *siesta* became both a cultural adaptation and a practical necessity. Some students mentioned challenges with air conditioning in host family homes, noting disparities in accommodations between male and female students. Several female students noted that male students had better AC access and would sometimes host them to “cool off.”

Another dimension of transformative learning emerged as participants reflected on the physical and social rhythms of daily life in Spain. The walking culture of Sevilla and reliance on public transportation provided additional learning. One student compared this to the United States, noting that walking instead of driving created a new perspective on mobility. Another commented on Spanish drinking culture, one who did not drink, stating, “It’s a part of socializing and they don’t necessarily drink to get drunk ... that’s something I found admirable.” These realizations prompted students to reconsider their assumptions about lifestyle, health, and social interaction, highlighting how the experience facilitated meaningful personal growth. Jackie reflected on increased engagement, “I get involved in like a lot of school stuff now, which I never did,” and “Being in a different country with some random people, I learned to be more trustworthy and open-minded.” She continued, “I thought Spain was going to change my life forever ... but it just added more to my good qualities or like it added more different angles to how I want to see the world ... and I also kind of realized I don’t like certain aspects of myself, like I was complaining too much.”

Rachel described the Brigada Nocturna service program with CEA-CAPA, which focused on supporting the unhoused population. She said, “It just makes you realize the different people living in one area and how different everybody’s lifestyle is.” Another student recalled, “When we had to go feed the homeless ... I was hot, tired, irritated and I remember complaining

... then we had gone to the church and I remember coming out and I was just crying because ... I feel so ungrateful to complain about a beautiful thing that I'm doing right now in a beautiful country." These reflections showed a shift in perspective, appreciation for basic comforts like AC and food, and the value of living in the moment.

Leanna expressed deeper empathy and appreciation for global perspectives, stating, "Just because it's not what you're used to doesn't mean it's weird ... it really helps you to see life through a new lens." As a future teacher, she noted, "You need to be able to get along with people different from you and navigate how to be around them." Anay reflected that study abroad didn't "completely change [her] life," but "solidified [her] thoughts" and deepened her self-understanding. She described becoming "more compassionate" and learning to "slow down," which aligns with Mezirow's (2000) theory that transformative learning can occur through affirmation and integration into a new country and culture, and that these experiences expanded or reinforced existing values, rather than replacing them.

Students frequently cited stepping outside their comfort zones as central to growth. Tony stated, "It's just the holistic impact that it makes in your life that really allows you to grow as a person, as it did for me. I would say it's a thousand percent worth it." Leanna shared, "Going there and experiencing ... stepping outside of myself and what I'm used to ... helped me think more critically about things." David emphasized the confidence gained from navigating challenges abroad, "Once you get through that you realize I can do this, and I can do other things. I can do hard things." Butterfly added, "In another country ... I just think the fun that I could have."

Students also connected the experience to expanded empathy. Celeste said, "It just challenged me to be more open-minded ... it helps you be more humane ... more accepting," and

Rachel stated, “It made me recognize how different other people might feel going into a new country ... making sure I’m doing my part to make someone feel welcome.” Celeste reflected, “When it comes to traveling and learning about different cultures ... I did learn from this and the classes overall ... that my way of living or my values or my beliefs isn’t the right way or necessarily the only right way.” She added that education abroad felt like going to a different dimension. Anay’s reflection on compassion and slowing down demonstrates that transformative learning can also manifest through reflection and affirmation of existing values, rather than radical change. She shared, “it just highlighted that even more to me that I really like meeting new people and learning about new customs and actually traveling and becoming part of a culture instead of just going for a vacation.”

The 1GA education abroad experience also influenced career aspirations. Celeste noted, “Now I know there’s more job opportunities ... I could go internationally and do other things outside of the U.S.,” and shared that she had since added a business minor. Butterfly stated, “It makes me think that maybe I could volunteer for a lot of international travel ... I think I now know how to navigate different cultures.” Tabitha reflected on her small-town life, “The biggest thing ... I was a lot more content with my life before and now I’m not very content with my life ... I need to, you know, just take the steps so I can get to the next chapter.”

Students also developed relational and social skills. Celeste said, “I was able to have the courage to take on this opportunity and do it all by myself, which was really rewarding because now I am left with good memories and a good experience.” Celeste also shared that, “I think that this experience is definitely one that I would look back to always and say this was the best time of my life.” One 1GA student stated, “I learned to be involved more ... doing more group activities ... being involved felt really great.” Her comments illustrate how participating in

collaborative and social experiences abroad enhanced both her confidence and interpersonal skills. She went on to share that “the stories you get to come back with are just elite,” emphasizing the pride and excitement she felt after returning home. She also noted that the experience “will look good on like any resume that I have,” and explained that now, having lived it, she hopes to encourage her future high school students to pursue similar opportunities, saying, “I can help them understand better.”

These reflections highlight the ways students drew upon and expanded their existing community cultural wealth, as described by Yosso (2005), including aspirational, social, and navigational capital, to engage fully in the program and build meaningful connections across contexts and through transformative learning. Jackie finished her interview by stating, “If I ever have the opportunity I would study abroad again, again, again, again until I’m out of money, out of energy or out of ... my last breath on this earth.”

Collectively, these narratives indicate that the 1GA education abroad program facilitated a multi-dimensional process of transformative learning, encompassing critical reflection, intercultural competence, personal confidence, and career development. By integrating immersive experiences with support systems, the program enabled first-generation students to adapt to new cultural contexts while expanding their personal and professional horizons.

Summary of Student Interview Findings

The individual student interviews revealed five interrelated themes. First, pathways to participation were shaped by both relational networks and targeted institutional outreach, highlighting the importance of advisors, peers, and first-generation–focused messaging. Second, recognition of first-generation identity fostered a sense of belonging and confidence, influencing students’ motivation to apply and engage. Third, institutional support varied, with advising, pre-

departure preparation, and guidance on financial aspects serving as key enabling factors. Fourth, family and community provided critical emotional and logistical support, with maternal involvement often central to students' decision-making. Finally, transformative outcomes encompassed increased self-awareness, independence, compassion, and intercultural empathy, reflecting personal, social, and professional growth. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that first-generation students' participation in short-term education abroad programs is shaped by a dynamic interplay of institutional, relational, and individual factors that both enable and constrain access.

Across student interviews, the most significant institutional constraints centered on financial barriers and unclear funding structures, which consistently shaped first-generation students' participation. Several students described relying on scholarships that did not materialize, receiving smaller awards than expected, or experiencing confusion about the total cost of the program. These gaps created stress during planning and, in some cases, resulted in personal debt. Because many first-generation students lack family financial safety nets, even modest unmet need became a substantial barrier. Students also noted that while the university offered pre-departure courses and orientation sessions, aspects of this preparation felt redundant or disconnected, with online modules perceived as repetitive and less useful than in-person seminars. This inconsistency reduced the perceived value of institutional preparation and suggested a need for more streamlined and intentional program design.

Students also identified several program-level barriers related to travel logistics and navigational support, especially for those traveling abroad independently for the first time. Concerns about navigating airports, managing connecting flights, packing appropriately, and traveling without a familiar companion highlighted gaps in institutional scaffolding for first-time

travelers. Additionally, some students experienced heightened anxiety due to family fears and safety concerns, which institutions did not always directly address through communication or reassurance. While these issues are partially personal or familial, they become institutional barriers when universities do not proactively provide resources, messaging, and support structures to counter misinformation or fear-based narratives. Collectively, these findings reveal that despite strong program strengths, persistent barriers in funding clarity, logistical preparation, and tailored first-generation support continue to constrain equitable participation in short-term education abroad programs.

Although the student interviews illuminate the personal, relational, and institutional factors shaping first-generation participation and experiences abroad, it is equally important to consider the perspectives of those facilitating and overseeing the program. Advisor and administrator interviews provide insight into program design, recruitment strategies, support structures, and perceived challenges from an institutional standpoint. Examining these perspectives alongside student experiences allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the program operates, the mechanisms that enable student success, and areas where institutional practices can be enhanced to better understand the supports and constraints surrounding first-generation student participation in short-term education abroad programs.

Advisor and Administrator Interview Patterns and Themes

This section presents findings from individual interviews with four advisors from WSU and two administrators from the program provider, CEA-CAPA. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive understanding of how short-term education abroad programs are designed, implemented, and experienced by 1GA students and add findings and depth to the research questions guiding this dissertation. Advisor interviews focused on the day-to-day, student-facing

aspects of the program. Using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the analysis examined advisors' insights into the 1GA program.

Advisors emphasized the importance of intentional scaffolding, culturally responsive pre-departure courses, and structured academic and emotional support to meet students' needs, particularly in their daily experiences while abroad. They also highlighted the role of institutional mechanisms, such as detailed pre-departure modules, and the influence of family and community on students' readiness and confidence. Their observations consistently indicated the personal and academic growth students demonstrated throughout the program.

Administrator interviews provided a broader institutional lens, expanding upon and contextualizing advisor insights. Administrators articulated program-level strategies informed by more than 15 years of 1GA program history, including structural supports tailored for first-generation students, sustained partnership development, and ongoing evaluation of program efficacy. Although advisors described interpersonal examples of student transformation, administrators emphasized the program's intentional design elements, such as transparent communication, embedded support systems, and staff training, that establish the conditions for transformative learning. They also affirmed that first-generation students contribute unique strengths and face distinctive challenges in the education abroad context, highlighting the need for comprehensive support that extends across the pre-departure, in-country, and re-entry phases.

Together, the advisor and administrator interviews offer complementary perspectives: advisors illuminate the lived experiences and developmental trajectories of students in real time, and administrators provide insight into the broader institutional frameworks and philosophies that shape those experiences. Both groups identified recurring themes related to perceptions of first-generation student needs, institutional support and program infrastructure, family influence

and community engagement, as well as transformative learning and personal development. The initial stage of analysis explored advisor and administrator interviews independently; however, the thematic alignment across both participant groups led to the integration of themes to preserve anonymity. These converging insights deepen understanding of how short-term education abroad programs can be intentionally designed to foster student confidence, support academic and intercultural growth, and facilitate meaningful transformation for first-generation participants. Table 5 contains a synthesized summary of themes identified in the advisor and administrator interviews, capturing key patterns that inform the discussion that follows.

Table 5

Summary of Administrator and Advisor Interview Themes

Participant	Role of First-Generation Identity	Institutional Support	Community Support	Transformative Learning / Personal Growth
Alejandro (M)	First-generation students demonstrate strong resilience and motivation but rely heavily on family approval in decision-making.	Advisors provide structured and intentional pre-departure support to address academic, cultural, and logistical concerns.	Family encouragement is crucial for participation, particularly when parents or guardians lack travel experience.	Students become more open to future international engagement and develop confidence that extends into academic and career choices.
Alice (F)	Many first-gen students initially perceive study abroad as ‘not for them,’ requiring proactive reassurance to shift beliefs.	Peer mentors and staff encouragement foster a sense of belonging and build trust in the process.	Cohort-based models promote strong peer networks among first-gen participants.	Students show increased empowerment, global awareness, and a stronger sense of personal capability post-program.
Carlos (M)	First-gen identity often intersects with limited exposure to travel, which can heighten the transformative effects of global experiences.	Strong advisor-student relationships and financial guidance are essential in reducing doubts and perceived risks.	Peer and advisor emotional support helps students navigate early fears about leaving home.	Students expand their worldview, develop greater independence, and express ongoing interest in future travel or careers abroad.
Carmen (F)	Programs intentionally account for barriers related to unfamiliarity with processes and limited prior travel experience.	Continuous guidance through every phase of travel contributes to higher levels of readiness.	Students deeply value the opportunity due to limited cultural and financial capital within their home communities.	Students exhibit notable increases in self-confidence, independence, and appreciation for global learning opportunities.

Kimberly (F)	First-gen identity influences motivation to persevere through challenges in new environments.	Dedicated structures and continuity in staffing ensure consistency in student support.	Reflection activities deepen students' appreciation for their families' immigration and language experiences.	Participants return with heightened autonomy, problem-solving abilities, and pride in overcoming unfamiliar challenges.
Leah (F)	Students may not always recognize diverse cultural backgrounds or previous travel as strengths within education abroad settings.	Financial advising and wraparound services help mitigate key participation barriers.	Communication with families builds understanding of the academic and personal value of education abroad.	Students strengthen their sense of capability, develop cross-cultural readiness, and gain clarity in future educational goals.

Note. Themes drawn from individual interviews conducted with advisors and administrators involved in the 1GA program ($N = 6$). (M) denotes male participants and (F) denotes female participants. Some quotes were not directly attributed to students to maintain participant anonymity. Advisor and administrator distinction was not made it maintain participant anonymity.

The combined perspectives presented in Table 4 offer a consolidated view of how advisors and administrators understand the supports and constraints first-generation students face in the 1GA program. Their insights reveal shared priorities related to student needs, barriers to participation, institutional support structures, and the transformative outcomes that emerged through the 1GA short-term abroad experience. The subsequent sections draw from these interviews to elaborate on the major themes identified across roles, highlighting how program design, support systems, family influence, and developmental outcomes intersect to shape first-generation students' participation and growth in short-term education abroad.

Theme 1: Perceptions of First-Generation Student Needs

Across both advisor and administrator interviews, participants emphasized that first-generation students enter short-term education abroad programs with distinct needs shaped by limited prior exposure to international travel, financial uncertainty, and a lack of familial familiarity with education abroad. As one advisor noted, "Going across the waters is a very different experience," and "Once first, you always feel first, that sense of trailblazing." Echoing

my lack of education abroad background as a first-gen student, another advisor remarked, “I would name it as a regret that I didn’t do a study abroad program when I was in undergrad.”

When first-generation students receive full support systems, especially through advisor presence on-site, one administrator reflected on years of 1GA experience, stating:

First-gen students tend to be very open and communicative about these challenges and their values, which is often, very directly tied to their identities. And they’re open about expressing those and that makes a world of difference. To be able to provide guidance and help them through those things. A lot of behind the scenes work that takes place between the leaders of the campus and the organization ... ensures that what is built and what we’re going to deliver on, really in the best sense of the word, in a partnership is solid.

Administrators emphasized that when first-generation students have strong, on-site support and feel safe expressing their identities and challenges, it enables more effective guidance, deeper trust, and a collaborative behind-the-scenes partnership that strengthens the overall program experience.

Advisors consistently identified these unique needs as central to program design. They described students’ initial apprehension around travel logistics, such as obtaining a passport or navigating layovers, and the broader challenge of unfamiliar cultural contexts. Intentional structures, including cohort models, pre-departure courses, and sustained mentoring, were articulated as essential for reducing anxiety and establishing trust. As 1GA advisor explained, “Like most first-gen college students, there isn’t a generation of being told how to go about doing certain things.” Several advisors referenced the need to address feelings of many first-generation students of being outside of knowing important things that directly correlate to the university experience or more specifically, education abroad. Another advisor observed, “The

idea of traveling with other first-gen students is what attracts them to this program ... the idea of having a traveling advisor ... is a different factor than they would find with other study abroad programs.” She continued, “When you work with a lot of first-gen students, getting to college was the big dream ... it’s not just about surviving here, but thriving here and having even bigger dreams.”

Most interviewees reflected on their own first-generation status and the barriers they encountered when considering education abroad. Several commented on how socioeconomic status and lack of information within families often translate into fear that prevents students from applying. Another stated, “There’s an emotional side to study abroad for everyone, not just first-gen students ... issues of separation from their communities and their families.” Carmen emphasized how program design directly addresses these fears. She described her own experience:

It was probably one of the most defiant things I did ... I kind of packed my bags ... I went to the parent-child meeting by myself and I was just going to make this happen ... and it was one of the things they were most proud of me for doing.

Alejandro emphasized resilience and humility, saying, “First-gen students soak it in like a sponge ... and are so grateful for the time and energy you give to help them prepare.” Yet he also noted, “Their decision to even consider traveling abroad is not something they see themselves doing ... and it’s really sad.”

Kimberly and Leah echoed the importance of consistent outreach and extensive preparation during the early term on-campus tabling and the on-line pre-departure courses, which helps address students’ limited exposure to international travel and ensures they feel supported before leaving the U.S. Even before they consider an education abroad program, the support is

coming from multiple means as soon as first-gen students enter the institution, and they emphasize that it is something that all first-gen students should have been aware of and potentially interested in since their first day on campus. Leah went on to state, “it’s like the core of myself, it resonated with my own abroad experiences because it is transformational.” She also acknowledged that “many of our travelers come from really traditional family backgrounds, and their families and communities want to keep them home and keep them safe” and that “we can provide a structured opportunity for first-gen students to experience another country and another way of study ... take that experience and continue to pass it on, that’s really powerful ... and the best way to go abroad.” She further identified that her own unstructured experiences abroad at a young age were very different from what she has seen with 1GA and that “I wouldn’t recommend my way of going abroad.” In part, because she was very much on her own the entire time.

Another advisor stated that for first-gen students, in terms of safety and security abroad: Higher education institutions need to really have a good process and plan in place for appropriate outreach, appropriate support ... we are applying actual research that we have seen in studies and applying what we then know to work ... connecting the dots so that (first gen) know the value.

Building on these insights, advisors stressed that meeting first-generation students’ needs requires intentional, research-informed safety and support structures, ensuring that outreach is clear, proactive, and grounded in evidence so students both feel secure and understand the value of the experience.

All four advisors on the 1GA committee help to co-teach and lead the pre-departure courses, and although the administrators met with the advisor committee prior to the summer session, they did not meet many of the participants face-to-face until the in-country introductions

at the CEA CAPA center in Sevilla. Once in-country on the program, advisors and administrators stressed the importance of providing consistent, proactive support to help students navigate both logistical and emotional challenges. One advisor noted, “We’re there with you every step of the way,” illustrating the value of continuous guidance throughout the study abroad process.

Financial concerns emerged as a recurrent theme. Leah stated, “Financial support systems are really critical ... independence needs to be accompanied by encouragement and partnership,” demonstrating that financial barriers can be mitigated through relational support. Alejandro added, “A lot of our first-gen students are very family-oriented and need their family to support them ... they don’t have the resources ... they’re scared to even think about doing this.” He further explained that many families lack a comprehensive understanding of the university experience, making education abroad appear distant or inaccessible. “They are a very relational family unit,” he said, “They’re not going to let you go unless they know someone is going with you or exactly who is going to help you.” When families receive early, clear explanations of the program structure and staff support, they become more confident, engaged, and enthusiastic about their student’s participation. This underscores that a critical need for first-generation students and their families is transparent, trust-building communication that demystifies the program and clarifies the support systems in place.

Administrators offered a broader institutional view, reinforcing advisors’ observations about the distinct backgrounds and experiences of first-generation students. They noted that many participants had rarely traveled internationally, and when they had, it was typically to visit family rather than for study or exploration. They emphasized that recognizing these differences is essential for tailoring outreach, advising, and preparation materials. Administrators also highlighted the emotional dimensions of these experiences; one recalled a student saying, “I

never thought this kind of program would be for people like me,” illustrating the self-doubt that can accompany first-generation students’ early engagement with education abroad. However, they also observed that once trust-based relationships are established, students become more open about their concerns. As one administrator explained, “Assuming support is there, first gen students tend to be very open and communicative about challenges tied to their identities” and “there were actually students who they learned about the program through a student who had done it the previous year.” Both advisors and administrators agreed that peer-to-peer outreach has the greatest impact, demonstrating the ripple effect of first-generation engagement and representation.

Collectively, these insights reveal a shared vision: first-generation students thrive in study abroad programs when they receive relational, culturally responsive, and comprehensive support. As one administrator affirmed, “There is this stick-together sentiment and a pride that not only are we first-gen, but we’re first-gen doing this ... that’s a pretty cool thing that came through loud and strong ... we’re the shape of tomorrow ... we’re a force to be reckoned with.” Addressing financial barriers, creating structured preparation, involving families, and building early trust all contribute to making study abroad both accessible and transformative for first-generation students.

Theme 2: Institutional Support and Program Strategies

Across advisor and administrator interviews, participants emphasized that robust institutional support systems and intentional program strategies are essential to fostering first-generation student success in short-term education abroad programs. One administrator described the program as “a real 360 wraparound for the students,” a model particularly vital for short-term programs in contrast to traditional semester-abroad models. The short-term structure,

as several noted, allows students to recognize that “it’s a short-term adaptation and they could probably do anything for a few weeks.” Yet research cautions that “in spite of many positive accounts of development in the area of intercultural competence, sensitivity, [and] adaptability, not all students develop equally” (Goertler & Schenker, 2021, p. 117), highlighting the importance of intentional strategies and comprehensive support structures to promote equitable growth for all participants.

Advisors described a range of intentional approaches designed to reduce barriers and foster student confidence, beginning with early outreach and proactive engagement. Specifically, one advisor emphasized, “It comes down to the quality of the advising and the trust they have in the advisors ... it facilitates their decision-making and ease.” One of the administrators echoed and further articulated:

If there is an advisor who’s able to provide some sort of safety net, they can always turn to them, whether online or physically if they’re traveling with the program or if the program is entrusted to people who will be there to support the student and those support systems are clearly identified. I think it helps immensely for the student to decide to come on the program. And it also helps the family feel far more at ease.

Both advisors and administrators highlighted the necessity of structured preparation, including pre-departure classes, individualized advising, and early financial planning. These strategies address practical barriers such as acquiring a passport, booking travel, and managing packing logistics. They also recognized that emotional readiness is key, particularly because “some of the challenges students come with to college ... play out in a pretty stressful environment when it’s all new and uncertain.”

Carmen underscored the role of mentorship across the 1GA experience, noting, “If you have the desire to do it, we will help you figure it out and get there.” She also explained, “We are intentional with how we do our outreach and the providers that we partner with and the courses that we select, recognizing that many of our students have different experiences.” This intentionality, she noted, begins through campus dialogue and university-wide messaging that affirms the program is for all first-generation WSU students. Carmen and Kimberly emphasized the impact of alumni and ambassador outreach, noting how former students help prospective participants visualize the experience and articulate how it aligns with future goals. Carmen recalled, “The best messages we get from past participants ... ‘I got this job because I mentioned study abroad, and I feel like it helped seal the deal.’” Kimberly added that storytelling from alumni serves as powerful student-to-student outreach.

Leah described the wraparound nature of support structures such as pre- and post-advising, noting that even remote pre-departure courses via Zoom gradually acclimate students to expectations. Carlos stated that orientation materials must address the full spectrum of the experience, from academics and housing to health, safety, and professional development.

Administrators also observed that few institutions or program providers directly address family fears, particularly financial concerns, which can significantly influence first-generation students’ decisions and comfort levels. This gap is consistent with research showing that first-generation students often participate less in extracurricular and co-curricular activities (Goertler & Schenker, 2021), suggesting that they may have fewer prior experiences navigating complex university processes or optional programs like education abroad. As a result, families may feel even less equipped to understand the structures, costs, and benefits of studying abroad,

reinforcing why intentional, transparent communication and support are essential components of meeting first-generation student needs.

From an administrative oversight perspective, effective communication with first-generation students must go beyond marketing materials and extend into the relational support structures that surround the program. As one administrator explained,

The messaging should be all about both personal, academic, and professional growth. But that alone would be empty words if it's not backed by someone who they feel is there for them, can guide them. The rapport established with the advisors and the people who are going to take care of them, preparing them for the program, while being on the program, is equally important as any messaging that you put out.

The rapport established with advisors, both in preparation for the program and during the experience abroad, was described as equally important as any formal information provided. This perspective underscores that for first-generation students, trust, continuity of support, and strong advisor relationships are foundational components of program effectiveness.

Financial advising was consistently identified as essential. Leah noted, "Financial support systems are really critical ... encouragement and partnership are needed." Alejandro reiterated that many students "don't even know about available funding," and that even tech-savvy students benefit from step-by-step instruction. Carmen explained, "We have worked through some hurdles that have been systematic in terms of a barrier for [first-gen] students." One advisor estimated, "I would say 95% of first-gen students can afford to go because they are income-challenged," qualifying them for federal and state grants applicable to summer programs. Carmen reported that in the 2025 cohort, four students were awarded Gilman scholarships. Research supports this focus, noting that for education abroad participants, "financial concerns

are often ill-founded since student loans and scholarships tend to apply... and additional scholarships for education abroad are available” (Goertler & Schenker, 2021, p. 60) and that misinformation about costs often originates with parents or advisors, though this literature does not specifically address the unique barriers faced by first-generation students. This institutional backing is especially critical in helping advisors effectively guide students and their families through financial concerns, ensuring that both participants and advisors feel supported throughout the program.

Advisors also conveyed that institutional backing is vital to their own capacity to sustain the program. One explained that strong supervisor and campus-level support enable instructors to lead the courses effectively and build meaningful student relationships. Kimberly emphasized the importance of program stability post-COVID, stating, “It needs to be something that has a foundation ... institutionalized and organized.” She emphasized that students need to trust their support networks, advisors, peers, and program staff, and recognize the importance of asking “certain questions and know that you’re going to get the answers that you need in order to make some of these decisions,” particularly around financial constraints. Both administrators and advisors noted the ongoing uncertainty surrounding historically available funding for education abroad, observing that “price point will continually be a challenge.” They stressed that maintaining and promoting 1GA relies in part on connecting first-generation students with peers who have previously participated in education abroad programs. The ambassador peer network, composed of alumni from prior 1GA cohorts, proved especially valuable during campus tabling and recruitment efforts.

Despite future uncertainties around funding, advisors and administrators agreed that affordability must remain a guiding principle. This administrator shared a past participant’s

reflection, noting, “I never thought this kind of program would be for people like me,” noting how this testimonial underscored the value of preserving 1GA. Alejandro added that ambassador networks are instrumental in helping new students navigate concerns, academic, cultural, and even dietary. “First-gen students are really resilient and humble,” he said, noting that seeing others like themselves succeed is a critical motivator and suggesting that students respond particularly well to relatable role models who share their first-generation background. These mentors provide guidance on both practical matters—such as navigating food allergies abroad—and strategies for self-advocacy. Carmen reinforced the importance of community, noting that 1GA participants, especially after the program, cherish their experiences abroad because they recognize the rarity of the opportunity; although the program is technically available, it is not equally understood, accessed, or experienced by many of their first-generation peers on campus. On-program, students relied heavily on one another, particularly for language translation and navigating cultural differences. The two advisors serving in-country in Spain during 1GA, observed that this peer support was especially critical for the two students who were originally from other countries, as they were able to model acceptance and understanding of cultural differences for their first-generation peers.

Administrators reinforced these insights from advisors, emphasizing that comprehensive support systems, in addition to individual interventions, shaped student persistence and engagement. Both administrators stressed the longevity of the 1GA working relationship and how in-country mentoring from advisors and structured program design help students manage both logistical and emotional challenges inherent to global travel as well as focusing on the constant dialog and transparency between the university and the program provider, with one administrator calling it a “dynamic organism.”

Carlos stressed that trusted advisors are especially impactful, noting that when students have reliable guidance, “it becomes a lifetime sort of goal to continue to travel” and recognized the impact of education abroad post-program and into career aspirations. Alice similarly emphasized the power of individualized encouragement, sharing that students often gain the confidence to participate when they hear, “You can do this...you’re not afraid,” reflecting the transformative impact of targeted support and that since her own education abroad experience. She continued, “it’s sort of been a lifelong love affair ... and then that led to wanting to learn Spanish ... a lifelong of living and learning in different places.”

Administrators also emphasized the importance of intentional scaffolding to address students’ prior experiences and knowledge gaps. Many first-generation participants had limited exposure to international travel beyond visiting family abroad, making program orientation and advising critical. As one administrator explained, “particularly with this cohort, much of the international travel that they’ve done would be visiting family to perhaps where their parents are from, as opposed to what we see in the traditional student population that comes through our doors.” Student interviews further highlighted an additional barrier: some participants have undocumented family members, which can create uncertainty or anxiety about leaving the country and potentially putting themselves or their family at risk. These factors underscore the need for careful preparation and targeted support to ensure that first-generation students can fully engage with the education abroad experience.

Alice emphasized the importance of differentiating outreach and preparation, noting that recognizing students’ varied backgrounds enables more effective support. She also highlighted the value of consistency from the application process through the online pre-departure courses and into the in-country experience, stating, “there were faces ... a voice that they recognized, not

just a name at the end of an email.” Advisors and administrators agreed that clear communication, early financial advising, structured coursework, and ongoing mentorship collectively enhance first-generation students’ readiness and success. This support is particularly critical in engaging parents and facilitating initial conversations, allowing students to make informed decisions about participation.

Together, these perspectives from advisors and administrators illustrate that institutional support for first-generation students requires intentionality, consistency, and culturally responsive design. Strategies such as pre-departure courses, financial guidance, mentoring, and stable program structures create the conditions for students to engage fully, navigate challenges, and ultimately thrive during their 1GA education abroad experience.

Theme 3: Family Influence and Community Engagement

Family support was consistently identified as a defining influence on first-generation student participation. Advisors emphasized that family buy-in is often decisive. Alejandro stated, “Family is everything ... students really have to get their parents’ approval.” Leah added that some students need encouragement from home to feel secure, although others persist even amid familial hesitation, such as the student whose grandmother opposed her going abroad. Kimberly described how students often reflect on their parents’ immigration journeys, using those stories as a source of resilience. She recalled one student saying about her parents, “They didn’t fluently speak the language ... and now I understand what they went through.” Carmen noted that students “don’t take 1GA for granted. They know that not everybody in their family will have this opportunity.”

Carmen emphasized the need to frame study abroad intentionally for parents. At WSU, study abroad is embedded into early orientation for first-generation families. Alice affirmed this

strategy, noting that when families understand the goals and structure of the program, students feel more confident in their decision. Alice also emphasized WSU's unusually high level of mentorship, which she believed fostered early trust.

One advisor discussed gender dynamics, as most education abroad programs are female dominant in participation, describing the confidence gained by female participants who traveled and reflected together. She explained that, for the women who traveled, the experience fostered "confidence in themselves as independent, autonomous beings." Students echoed this sentiment in their interviews, emphasizing the value of a supportive cohort. Kimberly reflected on a previous IGA program she had advised, stating, "The women who were traveling together... seemed to be much less judgmental than what we experience in the U.S ... there was a freedom that I saw that I have not seen, sadly, with a lot of women in the U.S." These observations illustrate how family engagement, mentoring, and cohort support were viewed by advisors and administrators to collectively contribute to first-generation students' confidence, sense of belonging, and transformative experiences abroad.

Carlos emphasized that parental encouragement is often instrumental in fostering first-generation students' confidence and persistence: "I think first-generation students tend to be very open and communicative about these challenges ... once families have that buy-in, it makes it way easier for the student to commit." Advisors also noted that many families lack direct experience with education abroad, making intentional communication about the program's benefits essential. As one explained, "Students sometimes need reassurance that this is a safe and valuable opportunity, and that's where engaging their families comes in."

Collectively, advisors and administrators agreed that family support, combined with community engagement through peer networks, advisors, and alumni mentors, can create a

strong foundation for student participation and success. Interviews and reflections on 1GA over the years highlighted that:

First-generation college students tend to be more resilient than their peers ... while they might be at a disadvantage when they start, they're probably at a greater advantage when they're finishing ... if the support systems in place are there...they are able to deal with adversity and challenges on site, often better than their peers.

These findings underscore that, from the perspective of participating advisors and administrators, family influence and broader community engagement are critical to first-generation students' ability to navigate challenges, build confidence, and fully benefit from transformative education abroad experiences.

Theme 4: Transformative Learning and Personal Growth

Advisors and administrators consistently observed that participation in the First Gen Abroad program fosters significant personal growth and transformative learning for first-generation students. Carmen noted that students not only gain confidence, independence, and a broader global perspective, but also recognize the unique impact of studying abroad on their overall college experience. Many former first-gen student who did not participate in 1GA shared with Carmen that, if they had any regrets, it would be missing the opportunity to participate, and those that did participate called it “a highlight of their (university) career.” Beyond personal enrichment, Carmen emphasized that the program challenges students to reconsider their identities and assumptions, particularly “what it means to be American in the context of another country,” highlighting the deep intercultural and self-reflective learning that defines transformative experiences.

Alejandro emphasized the profound impact of education abroad on worldview, self-confidence, and the desire to pursue further international opportunities. Reflecting on his own experience, he explained, “It just opened up my eyes, my mind, and the world...there are many other places, not just the U.S., where one could lead and live a very wonderful life.” He observed similar growth in this first-generation cohort, noting that students learn “who they are in this outside world ... leaving the United States ... they’re learning critical thinking and then also conversational pieces that they can have with locals and then also with each other.” For first-generation students, he explained, the program pushes them to envision themselves in new opportunities that may differ from their previous experiences. Many students expressed sentiments both at the beginning and the end of the program along the lines of, “so cool, I would never have thought that I could find myself doing this, living this, and experiencing this.”

For all the advisors, but especially for the advisors who were present in-country during the education abroad program, mentoring participants and staying connected after the program, helping students leverage their abroad experiences for future academic and career opportunities, remains a highlight of the 1GA program. A uniquely transformative outcome noted in the interviews was the students’ desire to share their education abroad experiences with family and friends, particularly among those who had never traveled internationally before. Alejandro observed, “They will always have moments of self-reflection when you give them the opportunity to do so ... the love is just poured out there and they’re able to really, really inspire others ... their whole lives have been transformed and changed.” This reflection highlights how 1GA experiences not only foster personal growth but also motivate students to extend the impact of their learning to their broader communities, creating a ripple effect of transformation beyond the individual participant and onward to their families and peer networks.

Kimberly emphasized the development of autonomy and problem-solving skills, noting, “The confidence ... independence and autonomy of knowing that they can be in a situation where they don’t know the language ... all while taking rigorous courses.” She explained that while the experience can feel overwhelming at first, student enthusiasm and excitement serve as powerful motivators for transformative learning, shaping their identities and sparking meaningful discussions with first-generation peers on campus and family members at home. Kimberly also highlighted the importance of cultural exchange and expanding global perspectives, stating that it “opens up their whole worldview ... gives them a feeling of both significance and insignificance ... and also a level of confidence.” Across these observations, advisors and administrators agreed that the transformative outcomes were closely tied to students’ first-generation backgrounds, the intentional design of the program, and the consistent support provided by on-site advisors. This was noted by an advisor:

We also talk about the transformation in terms of skills and qualities employers seek with students that have gone abroad. Those are really powerful messages that are also very true and they’re very basic ... it would be hard to come back after four weeks in another country having not changed. And mostly the changes will be positive.

Administrators similarly emphasized the profound personal growth experienced by first-generation students and described student’s increasing confidence, self-efficacy, and belief in their ability to engage in international experiences, stating, “They can do this, they can go abroad ... they’re not afraid.” At the same time, administrators and advisors acknowledged the challenges students faced in Spain, including the climate/heat, time management, and programmatic adjustments such as sharing a room for the first time. It was also noted that although most students are first-generation, they have grown up in the U.S., and feedback

throughout the program often focused on practical concerns like air conditioning and food, highlighting how students learned to reconcile that “things are different in other parts of the world, and it doesn’t mean that they’re less or worse ... just different.”

Another recurring topic in both student and staff interviews involved social norms around alcohol consumption and nightlife. These topics emerged as nuanced challenges, particularly within the cohort-based model and given the first-generation population. Advisors described students showing care for one another, prioritizing collective safety during after-class social activities. To address this, the program’s orientation included cultural adaptation sessions and safety checkpoints. Advisors, administrators, and in-country faculty maintained close communication, ensuring students could ask questions and receive guidance. It was explained by an advisor, “A really eye-opening piece of drinking culture and going-out culture ... some of our students were able to reach out and talk to us about that ... really wanting to navigate and understand that we were there to listen ... we weren’t going to be just judging them.” This combination of structured support and peer accountability fostered both independence and personal growth, reinforcing the transformative potential of the 1GA experience.

This emphasis on trust, combined with transparency, was repeatedly cited as a pillar of the 1GA model. Administrators explained that the program’s uniqueness lies in its embedded, in-country advising presence. These advisors, as one stated, are “deeply connected to students’ daily experiences” and are able to respond in real time to emerging concerns. One advisor acknowledged that nightlife-related issues are complex, noting, “Participants are adults, and there is no simple answer to this issue,” but emphasized the importance of maintaining a nonjudgmental, responsive support system throughout the program.

Carlos articulated broader program outcomes, citing increased independence, global awareness, and resilience. He observed that IGA's intentional structure, including mentorship, pre-departure programming, and the cohort model, amplifies the program's transformative potential. Another advisor shared, "I do see the impact of first-gen students following up with other options, whether it's the confidence to apply for a job on campus that they might not have felt qualified for before." Carmen described first-generation students as particularly open to transformation, noting, "They are very open to the experience, maybe compared to others that might have different expectations or privileges that they are used to." She elaborated:

You mostly learn about yourself. That is one of the biggest learning outcomes, seeing what you are made of when push comes to shove in a whole new environment and how you overcome it. Confidence as a traveler ... sometimes that is just invaluable. And one thing from first-gen backgrounds is that they don't take it for granted. They really cherish the good times and the bad times because they know that not everybody gets to do this ... not everybody in their family or their community. They are living out that dream and that experience and sharing it back home.

Together, these findings align with Mezirow's (2009) theory of transformative learning, underscoring that the study abroad experience leaves lasting effects on students' personal development, familial ties, academic engagement, and career trajectories.

Summary of Advisor and Administrator Interviews

The advisor and administrator interviews provided valuable insight into how first-generation students experience short-term education abroad programs from the perspective of those guiding and supporting them. Advisors highlighted the unique challenges these students face, including limited prior exposure to international travel, financial constraints, and the

broader impact of being away from family, noting that for first-generation students, time abroad can affect not only program costs but also family income.

As previously discussed, many participants contribute materially to their households through paid employment, direct financial support, childcare responsibilities, or summer and agricultural labor. These contributions reflect forms of **familial and social capital** as conceptualized by Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, in which family interdependence, collective responsibility, and reciprocal support are central assets rather than deficits. Consequently, students' absence during a short-term program can disrupt established care arrangements and reduce household earnings, extending the financial and relational implications of participation beyond the individual student to the family unit.

Advisor and administrator interviews additionally highlighted several structural and program-level barriers that uniquely shape first-generation students' experiences in the 1GA program. One of the most persistent challenges is financial insecurity, not only assembling a viable funding package, but also lacking prior experience with budgeting, independent living costs, and managing daily expenses abroad. Administrators noted that even in a relatively affordable location like Sevilla, spending can quickly accumulate, and inequities emerged between students who arrived with discretionary funds and those who did not. Additional constraints included uncertainty related to undocumented family members at home, anxiety about leaving the country, and the emotional weight of navigating tight-knit family responsibilities while abroad. These factors created a layer of vulnerability that shaped decision-making and the overall adjustment process.

Programmatically, the shift in 2025 to a multi-campus cohort introduced logistical and relational barriers. Students often had weaker pre-departure rapports with peers and leaders,

resulting in slower community-building once abroad. Administrators also emphasized that the high-touch nature of the program, central to its success, creates an ongoing challenge to sustain, especially as demand grows. Maintaining adequate staffing, mentor involvement, and culturally responsive wraparound support is critical but resource intensive. Additional adaptation barriers included navigating cultural norms in Spain, understanding host-country formality, adjusting to climate, shared living arrangements, and differences in food systems, particularly significant for students with allergies. Overall, these constraints underscore the need for intentional, well-resourced structures that address not only financial and logistical challenges but also the cultural and relational dimensions of first-generation student participation.

These advisor and administrator interviews emphasized the critical role of tailored institutional support and program strategies, the influence of family and community engagement, and the transformative learning outcomes observed among participants. Collectively, these findings underscore the intentional design and implementation of the 1GA program to promote access, engagement, and personal growth for first-generation students. This ethos was captured by one advisor, stating:

I want our students to be fully challenged and respected...have a sense of belonging and all of what that means in terms of being treated with dignity and respect, and knowing that you can't just say ask your parents to support this, that is not going to be in their realm of possibility ... it doesn't mean that they are any less than. It just means that they have a very different lived experience.

The interviews offered an institutional-level perspective, highlighting how program policies, resources, and strategic structures shape first-generation student participation. Administrators emphasized mentorship, preparatory guidance, financial support, and structured

programming as essential for helping students navigate both logistical and emotional challenges abroad. They also stressed that intentional program design, relational support, and family engagement collectively foster confidence, persistence, and transformative learning outcomes among first-generation participants.

Another newer advisor to the 1GA committee summarized the profound impact of the program, stating:

Number one, they never thought they saw themselves doing it. And then number two, they say it changed their lives. And number three, that because it changed their lives, their whole outlook on just who they are in the world and then what other are like in other areas of the world just really got them to think about okay, you know, moving forward, what am I gonna be able to do, to be able to communicate with myself in that outside world that I have experience about? And then getting their families to go there and then encouraging others in their lives.

Taken together, the advisor and administrator interviews offer a multi-dimensional understanding of the structural, cultural, and interpersonal factors that shape first-generation student participation in short-term education abroad. They illustrate how the 1GA program has evolved over time in response to student needs, institutional learning, and global realities. The findings also underscore the importance of continued dialogue around best practices, future constraints, and sustainable program growth. By aligning thoughtful design, strategic outreach, family engagement, and culturally responsive mentorship, the 1GA model demonstrates how education abroad can become not only possible, but transformative, for first-generation students.

Synthesis of Data Analysis

Phase V of the analysis involved integrating findings from field notes, student interviews, advisor and administrator interviews, and course materials to generate a comprehensive

understanding of the experiences of first-generation students in the short-term education abroad program. This phase examined convergence and divergence of themes across all data sources using four guiding analytic questions outlined in the methodology chapter:

1. What common themes emerge across field notes, interviews, and course materials regarding the challenges and support systems for first-generation students?
2. How do the experiences and reflections of students align with or differ from advisor perceptions and program materials?
3. What patterns reveal the institution's strengths or areas for improvement in supporting first-generation students abroad?
4. What recommendations can be drawn from the data to improve program accessibility, inclusivity, and impact for first-generation students?

The integrated findings presented in this section summarize cross-cutting patterns that emerged across all qualitative sources, offering a cohesive overview of how program structures, instructional practices, and student experiences intersect within the education abroad context. Field notes documented additional patterns related to peer support, identity exploration, and the influence of program design on student engagement and participation. When reviewed holistically, the data sources provided a unified depiction of the institutional factors that supported or constrained student participation, the key elements of transformative learning, and the mechanisms by which institutional support systems enhanced accessibility, engagement, and program completion.

Across all qualitative sources, several consistent patterns emerged. Students described rich academic and cultural learning opportunities, supported by high levels of engagement in both classroom and experiential settings. Advisors and administrators observed parallel areas of

growth, including increased confidence, autonomy, and global perspective. These outcomes were closely tied to intentional program supports, including structured pre-departure and post-return advising, consistent check-ins, peer mentorship through ambassador networks, and clear communication from trusted advisors. Students benefited from these wraparound structures, which helped them navigate unfamiliar contexts, understand expectations, and build confidence in their decision-making both academically and personally. Family engagement was also critical, particularly when families gained a clearer understanding of the program and were assured of safety, financial support, and advising structures. These supports collectively fostered transformative learning experiences, identity exploration, and meaningful personal growth.

Despite these strengths, the data also revealed consistent constraints affecting participation and experience. Financial concerns remained a prominent barrier for many first-generation students and their families, even when scholarships, Pell grants, or other aid were available. Advisors noted that uncertainty around funding, combined with limited prior exposure to higher education or international travel, often caused stress for both students and families. Logistical challenges were also evident, including coordinating pre-departure preparation across multiple campuses, navigating housing arrangements abroad, and ensuring sufficient in-country support. Cultural adaptation presented additional challenges, as students confronted unfamiliar norms, social expectations, and group dynamics that sometimes led to discomfort or isolation.

Advisors and administrators emphasized that while these barriers were real, intentional supports, such as structured peer networks, proactive guidance, and clear communication, helped mitigate their impact and enabled students to fully engage in academic, cultural, and personal learning experiences. Together, these findings indicate that the First Gen Abroad program provides a strong foundation for student engagement and transformative learning while also

highlighting the ongoing need to address financial, logistical, and cultural constraints. By integrating comprehensive support structures with intentional programming, the institution can enhance accessibility, inclusion, and the overall quality of the short-term education abroad experience for first-generation students.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 presented the findings from all qualitative data sources. These findings were analyzed through a multi-phase approach that first examined themes within each data type and then synthesized patterns across the full dataset. The chapter explored the academic, cultural, and interpersonal experiences of first-generation students in a short-term education abroad program, along with the institutional strategies, instructional approaches, and contextual conditions that shaped those experiences. By identifying opportunities for learning, barriers to participation, and the role of support systems, this chapter offered an in-depth, descriptive account of how students engaged with curriculum, adapted to the host environment, and interacted with peers and mentors. An important note from an advisor was that, “The way we deliver our curriculum and support students has to be pretty dynamic and nimble.”

The integrated analysis also illuminated areas of alignment and divergence between student experiences, advisor perspectives, and program frameworks, providing insight into the strengths and limitations of current practices. Consistent themes emerged across sources related to first-generation student needs, institutional support and outreach, family engagement, and transformative learning. At the same time, nuanced differences were noted in how students experienced institutional mechanisms and how staff interpreted their effectiveness.

Collectively, the findings contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between personal, relational, and institutional factors that influence first-generation student

participation and success in short-term education abroad. These insights directly inform the study's guiding research questions and underscore the complex ecosystem required to make such programs equitable and impactful. Chapter 5 builds upon these results by interpreting their broader significance, linking them to the study's theoretical framework, and exploring implications for institutional policy, educational practice, and future research in international education and first-generation student success.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

This chapter presents an integrated interpretation of the findings drawn from participant observation field notes, course materials and artifacts, and student, advisor, and administrator interviews. Building on the thematic analysis presented in Chapter 4, this chapter extends the analysis by examining how the findings align with the dissertation's research questions and the theoretical frameworks of intercultural competence, experiential learning, cultural adaptation, and transformative learning. By weaving together participant perspectives and observational insights, this chapter provides a deeper understanding of the conditions and experiences that shape first-generation student engagement in short-term education abroad. Through multidimensional interpretation, the chapter explores how institutional practices, program design, personal identity, and in-country experiences converge to influence learning, participation, and development among first-generation students.

This chapter also includes a synthesis of the voices across all data sources to illuminate the complex interplay of structural and interpersonal factors that support or constrain first-generation student success. In doing so, it connects the empirical findings to the study's theoretical foundation and underscores the transformative potential of short-term education abroad. The discussion also identifies critical implications for advancing access, equity, and retention within international education programming for first-generation students.

Connection to Research Questions

The findings presented in this study respond directly to the three central research questions that guided this dissertation. This section interprets how academic structures, financial and social support systems, identity considerations, and program implementation shaped students' experiences abroad. Each research question is addressed individually, integrating

student, advisor, and administrator insights alongside field notes and program artifacts. Table 5 includes the summary of the focal points associated with each research question and presents a synthesized overview of the key findings prior to a more detailed discussion.

Table 6

Research Questions Focus and Summary of Findings

Focus Research Question	Focus	Summary of Findings
Institutional Structures and Participation What institutional factors support and constrain first-generation students' decision-making and participation in short-term education abroad programs?	Recruitment, policy, funding, advising practices, program design, and campus culture.	Findings demonstrated that targeted communication, financial aid options, first-generation-centered outreach, and proactive advising supported program access. However, systemic barriers, including limited awareness, affordability challenges, complex processes, and inconsistent institutional messaging, constrained participation. Students' reliance on self-navigation and family uncertainty further compounded inequities in access.
Transformative Learning Experiences How do first-generation students experience transformative learning throughout their participation in short-term education abroad programs?	Development of intercultural competence, self-efficacy, identity shifts, and reflective learning processes.	Findings illustrated that transformative change emerged through cultural immersion, advisor support, and strong peer connections. Students reported increased confidence, expanded worldviews, and clearer academic and career aspirations. Reflective practices, formal and informal, helped students integrate new perspectives, navigate challenges, and recognize growth tied to their first-generation identity.
Institutional Support for Success and Completion Which institutional support systems are perceived by first-generation students as most effective in enhancing program accessibility and successful completion?	Pre-departure preparation, on-site support, mentorship, post-program integration, and wraparound resources.	Multilayered support, from clear expectations and relationship-building before travel to culturally responsive guidance abroad, was essential to retention and success. Participants emphasized trust in program leaders and structured community-building as critical components. Post-program encouragement to leverage skills and future opportunities helped sustain the experience's long-term impact.

Note. Findings synthesized from Chapter 4 qualitative results across student interviews, instructor and administrator interviews, field notes, and course materials, and interpreted here in Chapter 5 through the study's theoretical frameworks.

Research Question 1

The first research question was: What institutional factors support and constrain first-generation students' participation in short-term education abroad programs?

The findings of this study indicate that institutions play a pivotal role in shaping first-generation students' access to and success within short-term education abroad programs. Across data sources, three primary institutional supports emerged within this embedded case study of the 1GA program at WSU. These included (a) intentional outreach and advising structures tailored to first-generation needs, (b) comprehensive pre-departure preparation, and (c) financial guidance and access to targeted funding.

When advisors and program staff were proactive in communicating opportunities, demystifying the application process, and building early rapport with students, first-generation participants reported increased confidence in navigating international travel and academic expectations. Structured pre-departure programming, including logistical preparation, group meetings, and advisor-student relationship development, further contributed to reducing uncertainty and enhancing student readiness. Additionally, transparency regarding scholarship eligibility, true participation costs, and available financial resources shifted perceptions of affordability and feasibility.

At the same time, several institutional constraints continue to inhibit equitable participation. First-generation students' limited awareness of education abroad often reflects broader institutional communication gaps. In the absence of personalized invitations, a clearly identifiable program name (such as "1GA"), or consistent messaging that frames education abroad as both attainable and relevant, students may internalize the belief that such programs are not intended for them. Financial challenges persist, particularly when aid is inconsistently

communicated or requires complex navigation. Furthermore, staffing limitations and variability across campus departments contribute to inconsistent advising quality, especially during the critical early decision-making period. Family hesitancy, often rooted in concerns about safety, cost, or unfamiliarity with international travel, also intersects with these institutional gaps, particularly when families are not included in orientation efforts or outreach.

Collectively, these findings suggest that first-generation participation is not solely a matter of student motivation but reflects the degree to which institutions design, communicate, and implement programs with first-generation students in mind. Institutions that integrate culturally responsive advising, transparent communication, targeted financial support, and inclusive program design are better positioned to transform barriers into pathways. Conversely, institutional inconsistencies reinforce existing inequities and limit the transformational promise of education abroad for first-generation students.

Research Question 2

The second research question was: How does transformative learning occur for first-generation students participating in short-term education abroad programs?

The findings presented in Chapter 4 in regard to Research Question 2 suggest that transformative learning for first-generation students participating in short-term education abroad programs is a multidimensional process, shaped by personal identity, institutional support, peer interactions, and immersive cultural experiences. Across course materials, observational field notes, student interviews, and advisor and administrator interviews, a consistent pattern emerged: students engage in meaningful self-reflection and perspective-taking when confronted with experiences that challenge their prior assumptions and expand their understanding of the world. For first-generation students, these experiences are often intensified by their limited prior

exposure to international travel, heightened awareness of logistical or financial barriers, and the need to navigate new environments without familial precedent.

Institutional structures play a pivotal role in facilitating transformative learning. Advisors and administrators who highlight and describe programs intentionally designed to address the unique needs of first-generation students are seen as paramount by first-gen students to participation, including structured pre-departure classes, one-on-one advising, and continuous mentorship throughout the study abroad experience. These supports helped first-gen students anticipate and manage both practical and emotional challenges, from navigating unfamiliar airports and transportation systems to understanding cultural norms and academic expectations abroad, as well as discussions with family members. The cohort model fostered peer connections among first-generation participants, providing both social support and opportunities for collective reflection. First-gen students on 1GA reported that being part of a community of peers facing similar challenges allowed them to normalize difficulties, share strategies, and build confidence, thereby enhancing their capacity for self-reflection and personal growth.

1GA student interactions with the host culture were also central to transformative learning, as revealed in the researcher field observation notes. Exposure to new cultural contexts prompted them to adapt, problem-solve, and reconsider their assumptions about social norms, communication styles, and ways of thinking. Advisors and administrators of the program noted that first-gen students often approach these challenges with humility, resilience, and openness, which in turn amplifies their learning outcomes. Experiences, such as navigating language barriers, living independently in unfamiliar environments, and engaging in cultural exchange and community outreach fostered both cognitive and emotional growth. Students described increased

self-efficacy, independence, and a broadened global perspective, reflecting the experiential and reflective cycles described in Kolb's experiential learning framework.

The qualitative data collected in this dissertation study also indicated that transformative learning is intertwined with cultural adaptation. Students negotiated uncertainty, stress, and unfamiliarity while integrating new ways of interacting with peers and community members. Administrators emphasized that first-generation students frequently experience a first-time "departure from the familiar," which magnifies the impact of these cross-cultural encounters. This process encouraged problem-solving, flexibility, and the development of coping strategies, allowing students to transfer these adaptive skills to both academic and personal contexts, and to their potential future careers and aspirations.

Finally, transformative learning was reinforced through the development of intercultural competence. Students not only gained knowledge about other cultures but also developed empathy, cross-cultural communication skills, and an awareness of their own cultural identities in relation to others. The combination of guided reflection, mentorship, and cohort-based support enabled students to integrate these experiences meaningfully, resulting in enduring shifts in worldview, personal values, and future aspirations (for themselves and their family members), whether they related to travel or career goals. Advisors and administrators consistently highlighted that participants expressed a strong desire to continue international engagement, pursue further global opportunities, and apply newly developed skills in their academic and professional lives.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that transformative learning for first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs is a process that occurs at the intersection of experiential learning, reflection, cultural adaptation, and the development of

intercultural competence. Institutional supports, community networks, and structured programmatic interventions scaffold these experiences, allowing students to navigate challenges and capitalize on opportunities for personal growth. The research indicates that even short-term education abroad experiences can produce profound, lasting transformations when programs are intentionally designed to address the specific needs, strengths, and identities of first-generation students.

Research Question 3

The third research question was: What institutional support systems are most effective in enhancing the accessibility and successful completion of short-term education abroad programs for first-generation students?

The findings indicate that the successful participation and completion of first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs rely heavily on a combination of intentional institutional support systems, proactive advising, and structured programmatic interventions. Across advisor and administrator interviews, student interviews, and field observations, several critical supports emerged as most effective. These included (a) comprehensive pre-departure preparation, (b) personalized advising and mentorship, (c) targeted financial guidance, and (d) cohort-based social and peer networks. These supports function collectively to reduce barriers, enhance confidence, and ensure that students are well-prepared to navigate both logistical and cultural challenges abroad.

Pre-departure preparation was consistently identified as a cornerstone of effective support. Students and advisors described structured sessions, delivered through online meetings, in-person gatherings, or synchronous Zoom calls, as instrumental in building both practical skills and emotional readiness. These sessions addressed topics such as travel logistics, cultural norms,

safety, academic expectations, and communication strategies. Through anticipatory guidance and intentional scaffolding, pre-departure programming helped first-generation students overcome uncertainty, develop self-efficacy, and lay a foundation for both participation and transformative learning.

Personalized advising and mentorship, particularly on-site and in-country during the 1GA program, emerged as another critical institutional mechanism. Advisors and instructors emphasized the importance of one-on-one support throughout inquiry, application, and participation phases. In-country mentorship, especially from advisors who identified as first-generation or who had personal education abroad experience, created opportunities for relationship-building, affirmation, and encouragement. Students described these interactions as central to overcoming doubt, navigating institutional procedures, and building the confidence to persist through unfamiliar challenges.

Financial guidance and access to targeted funding also played a central role in increasing accessibility. Students reported that one-on-one advising sessions demystified financial aid policies, clarified scholarship eligibility, and offered step-by-step support in navigating funding applications. Parents were often included in these conversations, highlighting the relational nature of financial guidance in first-generation households. Students consistently articulated that this support determined whether they viewed the program as possible, and advisors described these conversations as moments where institutional care and commitment became visible.

Finally, cohort-based peer support networks served as a significant enabler of initial interest and successful completion. Shared experiences with fellow first-generation students during pre-departure sessions helped normalize uncertainty, fostered belonging, and built momentum toward program engagement. In-country reflections, WhatsApp group messages, and

mutual peer-to-peer and advisor to participant encouragement contributed to a sense of resilience and continuity. These informal support structures extended the formal advising process, providing day-to-day encouragement and helping students process their experiences as they unfolded.

Together, these findings indicate that effective institutional support systems operate across academic, financial, logistical, and social domains to create an environment where first-generation students can access, participate in, and complete short-term education abroad programs. Programs that integrate pre-departure preparation, personalized mentorship, financial advising, and peer-based community building are particularly successful in reducing barriers, enhancing student confidence, and fostering both academic persistence and personal growth. These supports align with the four theoretical frameworks guiding this study, as they scaffold experiential learning, support cultural adaptation, build intercultural competence, and create the foundation for transformative learning.

Connection to Theoretical Framework

As illustrated previously in Figure 3, the theoretical framework highlights the interconnected nature of experiential learning, cultural adaptation, intercultural competence, and transformative learning as the conceptual foundation for analyzing first-generation students' experiences. Experiential learning theory positions learning as a process whereby "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984), emphasizing the central role of concrete experience, reflection, and meaning-making. The findings from this study indicate that first-generation students' participation in short-term education abroad programs was shaped by the dynamic interplay of experiential opportunities, supportive institutional structures, and peer and community networks that enabled this transformation to occur. Importantly, these networks

reflect forms of community cultural wealth, as first-generation students draw upon familial, social, and navigational capital to access and persist in global learning environments (Yosso, 2005).

Across all three research questions, students engaged in transformative learning through critical reflection, perspective-taking, and self-reassessment prompted by cultural, social, and academic challenges. Mezirow (1991) describes transformative learning as a process through which individuals “transform their frames of reference” by critically examining previously held assumptions. Participants’ narratives reflected this process as students reconsidered their identities, worldviews, and sense of belonging in global contexts. These shifts also align with Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory of self-authorship, which emphasizes the development of an internal voice through which individuals come to “construct their own beliefs, identity, and social relations.” As students navigated unfamiliar cultural settings, they increasingly relied on internally defined meaning-making rather than externally imposed expectations.

These experiences were scaffolded by experiential learning processes, including hands-on engagement with unfamiliar environments and structured cycles of reflection, aligning with Kolb’s (1984) assertion that learning is most powerful when experience and reflection are intentionally linked. Students’ ability to navigate new cultural norms and social expectations demonstrated processes of cultural adaptation, while their development of cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and global awareness reflected intercultural competence. As Deardorff (2006) defines it, intercultural competence involves “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes.” Participants’ growth in openness, self-awareness, and relational engagement illustrates this developmental process within short-term program contexts.

Institutional supports, including pre-departure preparation, personalized mentorship, financial guidance, and cohort-based programming, were instrumental in enabling these learning processes, reducing barriers, and fostering student confidence and persistence. From a Community Cultural Wealth perspective, these supports functioned as institutional mechanisms that recognized and leveraged students' existing forms of capital rather than framing first-generation status as a deficit (Yosso, 2005). At the same time, these structures supported students' movement toward self-authorship by creating environments that encouraged reflection, agency, and decision-making (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that thoughtfully designed short-term education abroad programs can foster meaningful personal, academic, and intercultural growth for first-generation students. These results illustrate how experiential learning, cultural adaptation, intercultural competence, transformative learning, community cultural wealth, and self-authorship operate as interdependent processes shaping transformative global education experiences. Ultimately, these findings affirm that meaningful access to short-term education abroad for first-generation students emerges not by chance, but through intentional, equity-driven program design that leverages students' cultural wealth, supports developmental growth, and redefines global learning as a shared institutional responsibility rather than an individual burden. The following section builds on these conclusions by outlining implications for practice; for students, for advisors, for administrators, and offer actionable strategies for institutions seeking to design more inclusive, equitable, and developmentally supportive short-term education abroad programs for first-generation students.

Implications for Practice

The results demonstrate that intentionally designed short-term education abroad programs can yield significant developmental benefits for first-generation students, while also advancing advisor engagement and institutional goals. By understanding and responding to the specific needs and strengths of first-generation learners, universities can increase both access and effectiveness in global education initiatives.

These implications are organized into three interconnected focus areas, including (a) enhancing student development and success, (b) supporting advisors and administrators in fostering transformative, inclusive learning environments, and (c) strengthening institutional capacity and commitment to equity in global engagement. Together, these recommendations emphasize the shared responsibility of educational institutions in cultivating accessible and empowering education abroad experiences for first-generation students.

Student Benefits

The findings of this study affirmed that first-generation students experienced meaningful academic, personal, and intercultural benefits when short-term education abroad programs were intentionally designed to meet their unique needs. Early and personalized advising emerged as a critical component, helping students navigate unfamiliar processes and easing the uncertainty associated with traveling abroad for the first time. When advisors developed relational trust, students felt more confident in pursuing the opportunity and in their ability to succeed throughout the experience.

Additionally, transparent communication about costs and dedicated financial support, most often through financial aid, played a pivotal role in reducing financial anxiety, one of the most significant barrier to participation, and encouraged students to commit to the program. The

strong sense of community fostered through the cohort structure and shared first-generation identity enhanced confidence, belonging, and motivation, demonstrating that peer and mentor networks were as essential as logistical support.

Further, the program's intentional integration of reflective activities and meaningful cultural engagement throughout the program promoted transformative learning, enabling students to recognize growth in independence, adaptability, self-advocacy, and global awareness, sometimes during and most often after the program. Finally, participants expressed the need for more structured re-entry support to process their learning and to leverage newfound skills within their academic and career paths. Although WSU advisors were committed to helping participants with their future academic goals and aspirations, this should be communicated more thoroughly through university channels.

Collectively, these implications indicate that when institutions and program advisors prioritized equity-driven design, including (a) proactive advising, (b) financial accessibility, (c) community-building, and (d) guided learning, first-generation students were not only more likely to participate in education abroad, but were also able to experience its full benefits. Short-term education abroad programs could become powerful catalysts for personal empowerment, persistence, and social mobility when student needs were anticipated and intentionally supported across the entire education abroad lifecycle.

Advisor/Administrator Benefits

The findings of this study reinforced that advisor leadership was a cornerstone of a successful short-term education abroad experience, particularly for first-generation students. In this study, the term “advisors” for the IGA program was used to replace “faculty.” The in-country faculty, or instructors, teaching the courses through CEA-CAPA were integral to student

learning in-country, but not to the same extent as the advisors who traveled with the students and participated actively in their pre-departure courses.

The advisors in this program gained the opportunity to deepen their teaching and advising practices through pre-departure engagement and on-site presence by developing relational and culturally responsive approaches that affirmed student identities and experiences abroad. When advisors intentionally acknowledged the distinct challenges first-generation students faced, such as navigating unfamiliar academic expectations or managing emotional vulnerability while far from home, they strengthened trust and shaped more inclusive learning environments. This heightened awareness not only contributed to students' confidence and engagement but also expanded the advisors' own pedagogical skills in global and equity-driven education for first-generation students.

The 1GA advisors also described personal and professional rewards that stemmed from witnessing students' transformative learning firsthand. These experiences could renew their motivation, expand their own intercultural perspectives, and foster a sense of purpose tied to student success beyond the classroom. Supporting students through reflection, curiosity, and discomfort allowed advisors to observe growth in real time, reinforcing the value of international experiential learning as a high-impact educational practice. Additionally, collaboration with on-site staff and administrators broadened advisor networks and encouraged interdisciplinary innovation in program design and delivery.

Further, involvement in education abroad contributed to advisor development by enhancing their ability to create more opportunities for scholarship, curriculum enhancement, and leadership within the institution. Documenting student learning, co-creating applied research, or presenting program outcomes could advance careers and strengthen the integration

of global citizenship goals within academic departments and the university. As institutions increasingly prioritized participation among underrepresented student populations, the 1GA advisors became essential partners in advancing equity, advocating for structural improvements, and championing accessibility in international education.

Institutional Benefits

This study's findings demonstrated that expanding equitable access to short-term education abroad generated significant institutional benefits that went beyond individual student outcomes. When universities invested in first-generation participation, they advanced broader commitments to inclusion, student success, and social mobility, core values often articulated within institutional mission statements. By addressing systemic barriers such as limited outreach, financial hurdles, and assumptions about who was "meant" to participate in education abroad, institutions reinforced a campus culture where education abroad was understood as an attainable opportunity for all students, not a privileged few. Increasing first-generation engagement ultimately boosted overall participation, enhanced retention, and strengthened graduation rates, positioning education abroad as a powerful tool in institutional effectiveness and accountability metrics.

Moreover, institutional visibility and reputation in education abroad programs improved when these programs demonstrated success in reaching diverse learners. Strategically designed marketing and storytelling that uplifted the voices of first-generation students helped shift perceptions and inspire future participation. These narratives became compelling evidence to donors, accreditors, and community partners that the institution was taking meaningful action to fulfill equity-driven goals. Collaborative partnerships between education abroad offices, various academic departments, and student support divisions, such as financial aid, multicultural

services, and TRIO programs, created a more integrated and proactive approach to advising and recruitment for education abroad overall. Strengthening these internal linkages enhanced operational efficiency and promoted a unified commitment to dismantling participation gaps.

Additionally, findings from this research highlighted the value of IGA as an advisor-led initiative and as a catalyst for innovation and strategic growth in global learning portfolios. Supporting advisors through workload recognition, pre-departure training, intercultural pedagogical development, and ongoing administrative guidance increased program sustainability and quality. Institutional investment in these efforts promoted not only advisor retention but also student retention and leadership development, further embedding global engagement into the academic fabric of the university.

Ultimately, universities that actively prioritize first-generation involvement in education abroad demonstrate a forward-looking vision, one that recognizes global competence as essential to the evolving workforce and societal well-being. Through intentional policy design, ongoing partnership with program providers, resource allocation, and continued monitoring of equitable outcomes, institutions can position themselves as leaders in inclusive international education, ensuring that transformative global learning is woven into the educational experience for every student at the university.

Implications for Future Research

Future researchers on first-generation students in short-term education abroad programs should continue to explore how different institutional structures, program models, and support interventions influence student outcomes. Longitudinal studies would be especially valuable to examine whether short-term mobility experiences contribute to sustained academic success, increased global engagement, and long-term professional growth for first-generation participants.

In this study, I attempted to contact past participants from previous First-Gen Abroad cohorts to gather insight into their ongoing academic and post-graduate trajectories; however, limited institutional tracking and outdated records made it challenging to reconnect with former students. This gap highlighted a limitation and the need for more comprehensive data systems and intentional alumni follow-up, particularly for first-generation students who may not remain actively connected to the university after graduation. Establishing mechanisms to track the continued impact of education abroad on first-generation alumni would not only strengthen future research, but could also inform program improvement, funding advocacy, and the development of targeted support that extends well beyond the return flight home.

Limitations

This dissertation study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The research focused on a single short-term education abroad program at one institution, which may limit the generalizability of results to broader higher education contexts. The participant sample was relatively small and voluntary, which could introduce self-selection bias among students who were more willing to share their experiences. Another source of bias stems from the gender imbalance in the sample; only two of the nine student interview participants were male, mirroring the broader gender disparity in education abroad participation. Although field note observations reflected the full cohort, with only four of the twenty-one participants identifying as male, this imbalance still shaped the perspectives represented in the qualitative data.

Additionally, data were collected within a specific cultural and programmatic context, meaning that institutional practices, faculty approaches, and student support structures may differ elsewhere. Time and resource constraints also limited the ability to identify and interview a

greater number of past participants, which would have contributed to a more robust longitudinal understanding of the lasting impacts of transformative learning and career development.

Although the two student ambassadors who supported the cohort during the pre-departure course were contacted, neither responded to interview requests, further narrowing the perspectives included in the study. Despite these limitations, the study provides important insights into the experiences of first-generation students abroad and offers a strong foundation for continued investigation and implementation of the 1GA model across other institutions of higher learning.

Conclusion

This dissertation explored the experiences of first-generation college students participating in a short-term education abroad program, highlighting the critical role of institutional support, intentional program design, and culturally responsive pedagogy in shaping their success. The findings affirm that when first-generation students feel invited, recognized, and supported through dedicated advisors, targeted interest specifically for first-generation students, and purposeful communication, they are more likely to view education abroad as attainable and beneficial.

The inclusion of clear language, such as explicitly identifying a program as “First-Gen Abroad,” sends a powerful message of belonging and validates student identity as an asset. As the only program of its kind currently identified at a U.S. institution, 1GA serves as a national model demonstrating that representation and visibility matter, and that institutional acknowledgment can disrupt long-standing barriers in education abroad participation. It is the hope of this research that these findings will motivate and influence other universities and international education abroad professionals to develop similar identity-affirming programs that

empower first-generation students, as well as other underrepresented student populations, to see themselves in the world and confidently claim their space within it.

Of additional importance, the study reaffirms the essential role of on-site advisors who understand both the academic and cultural transition students experience abroad. Advisors who accompany students can provide real-time guidance, ensure student safety and well-being, and foster reflective learning that enhances intercultural growth. For first-generation students, many of whom are navigating unfamiliar environments with limited prior global exposure, this relational and accessible support structure becomes a cornerstone of confidence, persistence, and transformative learning. These findings suggest that institutions must prioritize advisor training, staffing models, and equitable funding to ensure that students are fully supported throughout the entire education abroad process: pre-departure, in-country, and post-return.

The contributions of this study extend beyond a single program or campus. The strategies identified, including early outreach, affordability pathways, structured reflection, and community-building, offer scalable and transferable practices for the broader field of international education and multiple university systems. By centering first-generation students in program design and policy decisions, universities can meaningfully expand access and empower students who have historically been excluded from global learning opportunities. The stories and successes of the students in this research serve as compelling evidence that short-term education abroad can be a transformative milestone in their academic journeys, future aspirations, and personal and professional development.

Ultimately, this dissertation underscores that education abroad should not be a privilege reserved for a few; it must be an inclusive and intentional component of higher education. When we create programs that affirm identity, provide robust support, and celebrate diverse ways of

engaging with the world, we not only enhance student outcomes, but we advance equity across international education. As this work continues to evolve, the voices of first-generation students, and other underrepresented student populations, must remain central to shaping a more accessible, just, and globally connected future.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Topic: The Lifeworlds of First-Generation Students in Short-Term Education Abroad: A Case Study of Transformative Learning

Time of Interview:

Date:

Duration:

Recording:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

1. Thank you for consenting to this interview. Please start by telling me more about yourself, where you were born, where you grew up, where you currently reside, and your study interests.
2. Tell me about your overseas travel experience before this education abroad program.
3. Had your parents traveled abroad?
4. How or when did you decide you wanted to participate in this education abroad program?
5. What kind of support systems did you have in place making this decision?
6. What kind of support systems do you feel were missing? (Probing question- did you consult with your parents in the decision-making process?)
7. What was the hardest part about preparing to go abroad for this trip?
8. What was the easiest part about preparing to go abroad for this trip?
9. Did you have a scenario during your time abroad that required you to adapt to a situation? What changes did you make in your behavior to adapt?

10. Did you have a scenario that questioned your values during your time abroad? How did you handle the situation?
11. Can you describe any strengths of the program- before, during, or after?
12. Can you describe any weaknesses of the program- before, during, or after?
13. What do you think you learned overall from this education abroad experience?
14. It is not unusual for students to claim that studying abroad changed their lives. Do you believe your life is different because of studying abroad? If so, how?
15. What would you say to your fellow peers to encourage them to participate in an education abroad program?
16. Were you aware of the term first-generation or your status as a first-generation student prior to this education abroad program? When did you learn?
17. How do you think this education abroad program might influence your career decision?
18. Thank you for sharing more about your education abroad experience with me. Your answers will aid me in this research. Is there anything I did not ask that you would like to share or any final comments?

APPENDIX B: RESEARCHER DESIGNED REFLECTION ACTIVITY

My First Week in Sevilla: A First-Gen Reflection Mad Lib

Name: _____ Date: _____

This week in Sevilla, I learned that studying abroad is not just about _____
(noun), but also about _____ (verb ending in -ing) and feeling
_____ (emotion).

One class lecture that stood out to me was _____
(subject or course name) because it made me think about
_____ (something new you learned). I
didn't expect to feel _____ (emotion) during class, but I did!

Walking through the _____ (place in
Sevilla) made me feel _____ (emotion). I never imagined I'd be surrounded
by _____ (plural noun) and hear so much
_____ (sound or language) at once.

The biggest cultural difference I noticed was _____
(cultural observation).

At first, it felt _____ (adjective), but now I'm starting to feel more
_____ (adjective) about it.

A moment I'll never forget is when I _____ (past-tense
verb).

It taught me that

(life or learning lesson).

Being a first-generation college student here makes me feel _____

(adjective) because _____

(personal insight).

I realized this week that I am more _____ (adjective) than I thought I was.

Three words to describe my first week abroad on this program:

1. _____ (word) 2. _____ (word) 3.

_____ (word)

This last weekend I was excited to

_____ (past activity). I'm

proud of myself for _____ (action or

achievement) and I most look forward to

_____ (future activity).

I am excited to see to see what week 2 brings in Spain on this First Gen Abroad program! ✨

APPENDIX C: ADULT PARTICIPATION INFORMED CONSENT

ADULT PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

Department of Education

Participant Study Title:

First-Gen Abroad

Formal Study Title:

The Lifeworlds of First-Generation Students in Short-Term Education Abroad: A Case Study of Transformative Learning

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Louise Jennings and Dr. Gene Gloeckner

STUDENT INVESTIGATOR(S): Lauren Jane Hartig

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

For questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Lauren at 314.443.6293 or

lauren.hartig@colostate.edu

For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted, contact the CSU Institutional Review Board

at: CSU_IRB@colostate.edu.

CONCISE STATEMENT OF STUDY

This research study is aimed at first-generation students and the learning that occurs in short-term education abroad programs. You may be interested because you are enrolled in UNIV 497: First-Generation Abroad through Washington State University. This research study will take approximately a few months before, during, and after the completion of your program. There are very minimal risks to participating in this study, some of the focus group or individual interview questions may make you feel uncomfortable, but you will get the questions beforehand, and you can always skip any questions you don't want to answer. You can find more details on this study following in the body of this consent form.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this research study is to encourage more first-generation students to participate in short-term education abroad and discover what was learned during the experience.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You are being asked to participate in the study because you are enrolled in UNIV 497: First-Generation Abroad for 2025 through Washington State University.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

As the student researcher, I will be attending some of the pre-departure online meetings and observing the online Canvas discussion boards as well as attending classes with you in Spain for the first week. Once you have completed your education abroad coursework in Spain and returned home, I will be asking you to either participate in a recorded focus group of four-five of your classmates or an individual interview with me online. The focus groups and interviews will

be time-blocked for an hour and a half to two hours. There will be an incentive of a giftcard to participate in the focus group or interview!

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: complete the consent form either online in Canvas or in person in Spain and/or sign up for a recorded focus group or interview in late summer or early fall.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There may be no direct benefit to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn more about first-generation students in education abroad. The opportunity to reflect on your own experiences abroad could also be helpful to you.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

There are no known risks included with this study. While the level of risk is minimal, you may become uncomfortable with some questions related to your first-generation student status.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will be entered into gift card drawing for participating in this study. You will have an approximate 1 in 23 chances of winning.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?

All information gathered in this study will be kept as confidential as possible. Your privacy is very important, and the researchers will take every measure to protect it. Your information may be given out if required by law; however, the researchers will do their best to make sure that any information that is released will not identify you. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. For this study, we will assign a pseudonym, or you get to choose one, for the data collection so that the only place your name will appear in our

records is on the consent and in our data spreadsheet which links you to your code. Only the research team will have access to the link between you, your code, and your data. All records and recordings will be stored in a cloud-based storage system; at CSU for three years after completion of the study. After the storage time, the information gathered will be destroyed. There are organizations that may inspect research records that may include yours. These organizations are required to make sure your information is kept private, unless required by law to provide information. Some of these organizations are:

- The Institutional Review Board, IRB, is a group of people who review the research with the goal of protecting the people who take part in the study.
- Department of Health and Human Services, the Food and Drug Administration, and similar ones if other countries are involved in the study.

Your identity/record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU or WSU officials for financial audits.

Participation in a focus group involves some loss of privacy. The researchers will make every effort to ensure that information about you remains confidential but cannot guarantee total confidentiality. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this research study. While we will ask all group members to keep the information they hear in the focus groups confidential, we cannot guarantee that everyone will do so, but you will have the option to be off camera and change your name to a pseudonym.

If you choose to take part in this study your private information collected for this study will not be used or distributed for future studies, even if we remove all identifiers linking you to your information.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or at any point during the study with no risk to your grade or status. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with Washington State University or Colorado State University. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study. Participation or withdrawal at any time has no impact on your WSU course grade and the researcher will not have access to that information.

Participant Consent:

Your online signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and voluntarily wish to participate in this research- all or part of it. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 4 pages. You also have the opportunity to consent or decline through email or in person in Spain in May of 2025 or any point in the study.

PART I: OVERALL CONSENT

Researcher can proceed with field study observation, individual interview request, and focus group requests.

YES _____ NO _____

SKIP IF COSNSENT TO OVERALL STUDY

PART I A: FIELD STUDY

Researcher participant observation of education abroad program during online preparatory course and in Spain (including classes, Canvas assignments, discussion boards, and community activities).

YES _____ NO _____

PART II B: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Researcher can send a separate email invitation to sign up for individual online interviews upon completion of the course.

YES _____ NO _____

PART III C: FOCUS GROUPS

Researcher can send a separate email invitation to sign up for one of three focus groups upon completion of the course

YES _____ NO _____

SING HERE ONLINE OR IN PERSON IN SPAIN:

Signature of participant

Date

Name of participant

Proposed pseudonym (name you would like to be identified as in the study)

Signature of researcher

Date

Name of researcher

APPENDIX D: CODEBOOK

Codebook Aligned with Theoretical Frameworks

1. Transformative Learning (TOP Parent Code)- evolution through profound educational experiences.

Use when participants describe perspective shifts, deep reflection, or changes in worldview.

Child-Codes

- Disorienting Dilemmas

(unexpected challenges, culture shock moments, incidents that triggered reflection)

- Critical Self-Reflection

(thinking deeply about beliefs, identity, values)

- Perspective Transformation

(shifts in worldview, new understanding of self/others)

- Newfound Confidence & Agency

(empowerment, increased self-belief)

- Identity Development

(growth tied to first-gen identity, cultural identity, or personal identity)

- Revised Future Aspirations

(career/academic plans changing due to program)

2. Experiential Learning (Parent Code)- Learning through hands-on experiences.

Use for learning through hands-on, immersive, or applied experiences.

Child-Codes

- Concrete Experience

(program activities, site visits, real-world engagement)

- Reflective Observation

(students processing what happened, journaling, or group reflection)

- Abstract Conceptualization

(linking experiences to academic content or theory)

- Active Experimentation

(applying new skills, testing ideas, trying new behaviors)

- Engagement with Local Community

(interacting with residents, hosts, local organizations)

- Instructor Facilitation

(instructor strategies to deepen experiential learning)

3. Cultural Adaptation (Parent Code)- adapting across diverse cultural landscapes.

Use when students describe adjusting to life/culture abroad.

Child-Codes

- Initial Adjustment Challenges

(homesickness, culture shock, food/language difficulties)

- Communication Strategies

(how they navigated misunderstandings or language issues)

- Coping Mechanisms

(how they handled discomfort, stress, unfamiliar environments)

- Adaptive Growth

(becoming more comfortable, flexible, independent)

- Moments of Cultural Misunderstanding

(incidents requiring adaptation, conflict, or clarification)

- Support During Adaptation

(instructor, advisor, peer, or administrative support)

4. Intercultural Competence (Parent Code)- Global skills for diverse collaboration

Use when participants discuss understanding, navigating, or appreciating cultural differences.

Child-Codes

- Awareness of Cultural Differences

(recognizing that norms, values, or communication styles differ)

- Cultural Curiosity & Openness

(seeking to learn, ask questions, understand differences)

- Perspective Taking

(empathy, seeing from another culture's viewpoint)

- Intercultural Communication Skills

(effective communication across cultures)

- Reduction of Bias or Stereotypes

(letting go of assumptions, development more nuanced understanding)

- Increased Global Awareness

(understanding global issues, inequities, social structures)

- Identity-in-Culture Awareness

(how their identity interacts with other cultures)

5. Possible Cross- Construct Codes

- First-Generation Identity Influences Learning

- Program Structure Supporting Learning

- Peer Dynamics Affecting Learning
- Instructor Role in Learning
- Barriers to Learning or Adaptation
- Moments of Breakthrough of Insight