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## **Draws and Drawbacks of an Oxford Study Abroad Experience**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Using qualitative research methodology, we interviewed 23 American students participating in a study abroad program at Oxford University in the U.K. Results showed four primary draws to participating in the study abroad program and two perceived drawbacks. Positively, Oxford's first appealing dynamic related to the tutorial system and students' expanded range of options for specialized topics as well as in-depth study. Next, participants highly valued Oxford's academic rigor, which accompanied the university's unique approach to education. Third, Oxford's location in England appealed to our participants. Finally, students reported hopes that future benefits would result from their decisions to attend Oxford and perceived associations with Oxford's prestige. As participants weighed these benefits of studying at OU, they contrasted the positive dynamics with two major drawbacks: finances and missed U.S. experiences. Nevertheless, our participants unanimously affirmed their respective decisions to study at Oxford and highly recommended the experience to future potential applicants.

**KEYWORDS:** Oxford; Study Abroad; Qualitative Research; International Education; Tutorial Education; Higher Education

**S**tudy abroad (SA) programs have become an important and rapidly growing facet of many American universities' academic programs. While the SA program has been more common in Asian and other nations (Masuda, 2012; Zhou, 2011), only recently has the American collegiate system significantly advanced the opportunity for its

students to complete a portion of their studies in another country. In fact (Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012) assert that the past decade has seen an unusually sharp increase in the number of students enrolled in study abroad programs. Two factors seemingly play into the rising popularity of study abroad programs, since they are repeated in the research literature most frequently: increasing globalization and an unprecedented demand for cultural awareness.

As the world grows smaller and becomes more connected, the need for communication and business commerce to cross borders accelerates. Chapman (2012) and Turos (2011) cite the rise of international companies as one reason for the growth in international education. According to Palmer (2015) this trend of globalization requires a new crop of globalized leaders. This is a concrete goal that SA programs help to achieve. These novel needs in industry are part of what drives the second factor in the SA program's increased availability: the necessity for cultural awareness. Bellamy and Weinberg address this construct in terms of universal mandate, whereby SA programs can provide valuable exposure for helping individuals to develop that type of awareness. The British educational system, for example, motivates students toward this anticipated end by requiring all language students to spend at least one year in the nation where that language is natively spoken (Alred & Byram, 2002). This protocol aids in improving students' cultural awareness because it transforms the acquisition of language from a classroom activity to a distinctly immersive cultural experience (Wilkinson, 2002). American SA programs also have begun to shift away from directing students primarily to culturally similar nations like England and Australia and to include less analogous countries such as those in Asia and Africa (Mkandawire-Valhmu, & Doering, 2012; Trent, 2012). This trend partially is due to American faculty encouraging students to expand their cultural horizons and explore radically different perspectives toward life, education, and subject content (Siegler, 2015).

With the growing presence of SA programs in the American education system, researchers have given some attention to outcome assessments. The reported results generally have been positive, especially with respect to achieving the goal of increased intercultural awareness and sensitivity. Johns and Thompson (2010) for example, reported that both the learning acquired and the general exposure to another culture positively contributes to students' international understandings. Jackson and Nyoni, (2012) similarly noted SA experiences also may help students to reconsider their preconceived notions about their host countries as well as their unchallenged assumptions regarding America. Furthermore, a year studying abroad has been correlated with improvements in skills related to effective intercultural mediation (Alred & Byram, 2002).

The potential benefits of SA programs extend beyond acquainting students with another culture. They also have been shown positively to affect participants' traits in other cogent ways. When exploring the effects of a SA experience on pre-service teachers, Pence and Macgillivray (2006) found that both professional and personal changes resulted from the students' time spent abroad. Specifically, the researchers found

that the experience increased the students' self-confidence as well as their appreciation for diversity. Similarly, Langley and Breese (2005) found that the participating SA students' also experienced a significant increase in perceived independence.

Studies examining the effects that SA programs have on foreign language students show that the multicultural context allows for better grasps of the language's subtleties and inflections than does class-work in American classrooms alone (Taguchi, 2008). Additionally, extensive SA experience reduces working-memory errors made in translation (Tokowicz & Kroll, 2004). While these studies were conducted in longer-term SA experiences, other research showed benefits also can be reaped in shorter-term educational trips abroad. Particularly, Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, and Hubbard (2006) found that, in as little as four weeks, students substantially improved their abilities to adapt to other cultures. According to Mapp, McFaland, and Newell (2007), a three week SA experience improved students' perceptions regarding their own aptitudes for understanding different cultures. They also indicated greater desires to further visit other nations and cultures as well as potentially participate in extended SA experiences. Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) examined short-term SA programs, finding that they often facilitated the language acquisition process, comprehension speed, and overall language retention rates. Participation in the SA program also was said to impact students' worldviews. Lewis and Neisenbaum additionally noted that SA participation encouraged interdisciplinary study, as well as future involvements in more long-term SA experiences.

Less research has been reported regarding potential traits, predictors, and especially the motivations of students who choose to participate in SA programs. Foldstein and Kim (2005) identified various "predictors" of SA participation, finding that academic and career concerns factored into a students' enrollment in SA much less than did personal characteristics such as possessing a low sense of ethnocentrism and a low levels of comfort with intercultural communication. Kisantas (2004) reported that most SA students in his sample possessed one of three goals regarding their experience overseas in SA: sharpening their multicultural connectedness, enhancing the content of their education, and personal interactions with others. Building on this general concept, Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch (2007) found that the more students were motivated by self-determination, the better was their general well-being.

Building on the previous research of study abroad, in general, we decided to explore one particular type of study abroad student experience that has not previously been addressed in the research literature. It involved American students studying abroad at Oxford University in the United Kingdom. Since we did not have specific literature to guide our research, we decided to use a qualitative design, since Johnsen and Christensen (2010) indicate that this paradigm to be most apropos for studies that primarily are exploratory and seek to generate data that heuristically will be useful for further quantitative and survey research. As a point of entry into this general construct, we selected a group of American SA students who were clustered for a semester's SA experience at Oxford University. Since homogeneity of sample often helps best to derive clear themes in qualitative studies (Firmin, 2006), we believed that beginning with this

type of study would help provide important, foundational data up on which future SA researchers later could build towards a comprehensive understanding of American students' motivations for participating in SA. Particularly, future researchers can compare the present findings with other experiences of American SA students across a broad range of international universities, helping to provide a thorough understanding of the SA construct, developing external validity (Ali & Yusof, 2011; Mayring, 2007; Polit & Beck, 2011). As is true with all qualitative research, the present milieu makes our study context-specific (Salkind, 2011) although, with additional research, it can contribute to broader SA understandings.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Utilizing a purposeful sample (Suri, 2011) for the present study, we interviewed 23 American students who participated in a Hilary (Spring) semester study abroad program at the New College of Oxford University in the U.K. The sample included 11 males and 12 females, of which 16 were juniors, 4 sophomores, 2 seniors, and 1 was a recent post-graduate. Ages of the participants ranged from 20-24 years of age with 20 being American-Caucasian students and one student from each of the self-identifying backgrounds: Hispanic, French, and Korean. Although the students attended a variety of universities in the U.S., they were housed in similar quarters as part of an organized study abroad program. In order to maintain confidentiality of the participants, we deliberately are only sharing this demographic information. Obviously, the names used in the article for reading clarity are pseudonyms.

We encountered saturation (Silverman, 2011) as the interview data was collected. This provided some reasonable assurance that the sample sized used for the present study was adequate for the intended purposes. That is, when conducting around 15 or so interviews, we discovered that adding new members to the sample was not generating substantially novel information to the overall findings. Consequently, we deduce that had we been able to enlarge the sample—likely it would not have added significantly to the present study. Consistent with Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Neuman (2006), we believe that the sample size used in the present study was sufficient in order to draw apt conclusions in the present type of phenomenological research study.

### **Procedure**

Creswell (2012a) identifies numerous approaches to qualitative research inquiry. Among those, we selected the phenomenological paradigm for the present study—intending to better understand the worlds and percepts of the participants involved in the Oxford study abroad program. Particularly, we were interested in grasping the participants' ideology and constructs, hearing their stories about the Oxford experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The present researchers are well versed in the ongoing debate among qualitative researchers regarding the role of theory in qualitative methodology (Frost et al., 2010). Specifically, some (e.g., MacFarlane & O'Reilly-de Brun, 2012) advocate that theory should be embedded into the design and/or

interpretation of qualitative phenomenological and grounded theory protocol. A more traditional model, however, advocates that researchers should bracket theory, better enabling readers to interpret the research findings through their own theoretical lenses (Streubert, 2011). Our own longstanding perspective is of the a theoretical approach. Consequently, our lack of theory in here in the methods section and the discussion section of the present article is not an oversight. Rather, we are following one, legitimate and respected approach to qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2012a).

Following Alvesson (2011), semi-structured interviews (by format only) were conducted with the participants. As such, we did not conduct verbal surveys and we did not possess a list of specified questions which were posed to all participants. Rather, we asked the students inductively to describe their experiences to us from their perspectives. Because we worked with a sample of gifted college students who were relatively articular, this strategy was effective. This protocol allowed us to ensure that the general construct of motivation for participating in the Oxford program was met, while also allowing the participants to share rich details regarding their experiences and perspectives. The thick descriptions (Atkinson & Delamont, 2008) that we obtained helped both to provide depth-of-perspectives as well as reasonable breath of perceptions. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed later for analysis.

We analyzed the data utilizing open coding (Maxwell, 2012). This means we approached the transcripts inductively, rather than beginning with preconceived or predetermined categories (e.g., axial). We used a line-by-line analysis (Chenail, 2012a) protocol, whereby each of the transcripts was coded for reoccurring words, phrases, and concepts as they were transcribed. Sometimes codes were discarded as it became evident that insufficient data existed to justify their continued use. In other instances, we collapsed or combined codes where sufficient overlap warranted doing so *a priori* (Creswell, 2012b). This component of the data analysis, as well as the general process of deriving codes into themes, was aided through the use of NVIVO software, albeit following the admonitions of Lewins and Silver (2007) not to reduce the project to a mechanistic protocol. Rather, we ensured that our own intuition, judgments, and perceptions remained part of the process of garnering themes from the coded data. This was accomplished following Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2011) by strategies such as concept mapping, asking key questions, visually displaying the findings, and conducting organizational reviews. We remained actively engaged throughout the coding process using constant-comparison strategies (Berg, 2012), we continued the coding process to appraise the potential of new themes emerging as new participants were added to the data set.

The themes reported in the present study represent the consensus of all the participants in the study. That is, we only included a finding in the article if it was reflective of most participant interviews. Overall, the research bore results that described participants' motivations, personal and academic adjustments, and expectations and challenges relative to their study abroad experiences at Oxford. Due to space limitations, only the motivations—both positive (draws) and negative (drawbacks)—are discussed in the present article.

We were committed to ensuring the present research study possessed significant rigor in design and implementation—by recognized qualitative methodology standards (Sin, 2010; Tracy, 2010). Consequently internal validity for the present study was strengthened via a number of mechanisms. One was having meetings among various researchers in the present project (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The research study does not bear the imprint of one individual but, rather, multiple researchers who contributed, analyzed, and compared with one another perspectives, insights, and potential conclusions regarding the data. This in-depth discussion helped to assess potential alternative explanations for the findings and best assure that the results reported aptly represented the consensus of the participant interviews (Saukko, 2008).

Additionally, internal validity was enhanced by utilizing an experienced qualitative researcher who was independent from the data collection and analysis of the project (Creswell, 2010). He provided an autonomous check on the procedure and apt use of qualitative methodology in the research process. The individual also checked our research findings against the transcript data, providing assurance that each of the results was adequately grounded in and reflective of the words and overall perspectives of the participants. Another element of research design we implemented in order to enhance the study's internal validity was member checking (Mero-Jaffe, 2011) occurred by receiving input from the participants regarding the findings we are reporting in the present study. All were in substantial agreement that the findings adequately represented their intended sentiments during the interview process.

Generating a data trail (Rodgers, 2008) also enhanced the study's internal validity. This is a qualitative research technique whereby we tied each of the reported results in our study to specific quotations and citations from the participants' transcripts. Doing so affords three benefits: (a) Ensuring the reported findings are adequately supported by the participants' words; (b) Providing accountability against potential research fraud; (c) Assisting future researchers who wish to further investigate this topic by providing starting points and tracers as they generate their own transcript analyses of their respective samples.

And finally, using low inference descriptions (Chenail, 2012b) helped to strengthen the study's internal validity. This means that, when writing the present article, we use ample citations from the participants' interviews. This helps the reader to possess both the content of what was said during the interviews as well to capture the tone. Using low inference descriptors helps check that the results being related in a qualitative article are apt reflections of what the interviewees actually stated—and not preconceptions of the authors that they are superimposing on to the study's results.

## **Results**

Results from analyzing the students' transcripts showed four primary draws to participating in the Oxford University study abroad program and two perceived drawbacks. Positively, Oxford's first appealing dynamic related to the tutorial system and

students' expanded range of options for specialized topics as well as for in-depth study. Next, participants also highly valued Oxford's academic rigor, which accompanied the university's unique approach to education. Students hoped that Oxford's challenging standards resultantly would improve their future academic achievement. A third, key dynamic that appealed to our participants was Oxford's location in England. Students appreciated both the cultural and historical benefits they associated with studying in the U.K., additionally sharing hopes for further travel within Europe. Finally, students reported hopes that future benefits would result from their decisions to attend Oxford and perceived associations with Oxford's prestige. Specifically, students felt that having Oxford University on transcripts would aid future admittance into graduate schools. As participants weighed these benefits of studying at Oxford, they contrasted the positive dynamics with two major drawbacks: finances and missed US experiences. Nevertheless, our participants unanimously affirmed their respective decisions to study at Oxford and highly recommended the experience to future potential applicants.

### **Oxford's Draws**

**Tutorial System.** First, students described positive factors regarding Oxford's tutorial system that factored into their selection of the institution's study abroad program. Often, the tutorial system was contrasted with participants' home universities and classroom-style learning, as students emphasized the unique elements a tutorial system brought to their personal education. To further explain the concept, Julie summarized most students' experiences by describing the levels of personal interaction Oxford's tutorial system offered—especially in contrast to her home universities:

I think Oxford has a different view of academics and that led me to pick this program. Um, my understanding of Oxford was that it is much more personable, much more intensive, in the sense that you study your subject in a much more [in-depth] level, rather than just topical.

Because Oxford's approach to education is individual-centered and non-lecture style, our participants reported their need to "evolve" in their conceptualizations of higher education academics. For example, participants explained that, instead of being taught the information they were required to know, students were responsible to research and learn this information on their own. Matthew aptly explained the unique dynamics that accompany such self-driven education:

School wise, the tutors, instead of having a tutor lecture to me, being able to do one-on ones with a tutor was something that I had to go into a tutorial knowing the subject really well. Instead of going into class kind of knowing what's going on and expecting this big lecture to be thrown at you, you had to be ready to defend your ideas prior to hearing it from the tutors. That was a little unnerving and something to adjust to.

Moreover, students felt that Oxford's unique approach to academics positively challenged them, both personally and academically. Admitting that transitions were required in adjusting to Oxford's educational approach, our participants generally cast their tutorial experiences in positive lights. Kimberley, for example, aptly summarized most participants as she described personal outcomes of Oxford's unique educational approach:

For us, the educational system in a whole different way of doing things is really nice. Probably the primary benefit of Oxford, I thought, was the academic system. You get a lot more freedom. But you get a lot more responsibility, too! That's really nice to be able to handle so much responsibility and it makes me feel grown up (smiles).

Next, students shared that, although Oxford's tutorial system stood in sharp contrast with typical American college education, this style of learning was appealing. Participants further explained that education at Oxford was more than mastering sets of facts; it also involved learning *how* to learn. In describing typical tutorial experiences, Taylor summarized the contrasts that most participants indicated to exist between educational experiences at Oxford with the learning styles typically experienced at home universities:

A lot of [the academic adjustment] it was to learn how to handle differently, and to learn how to, well, there's a difference between learning how to confront something and learning how to learn something. So, Oxford gives you an opportunity, a broader opportunity, to learn certain things, while applying what you know and being able to change it [that knowledge].

Additionally, most participants shared that, on personal levels, they perceived the tutorial system aptly would cater to their individual, academic needs. Many students even described beliefs that the tutorial system was more conducive to their abilities to learn than were the academic environments of their home universities. Jonathan further explained the views of most participants by describing his perceptions of tutorials as positive alternatives to America's style of education, and the factor that this played in motivating him to select Oxford's study abroad program:

And so, I think I was really most interested in seeing how the tutorial system worked. Because, well, I was getting a little tired of classes, like my junior year, so more one-on-one experiences fit for how I like to study and like to approach my work.

Further, our participants explained that many of the tutorials they selected at Oxford were topics, which their home universities did not offer. This expanded range of options played a cogent role in motivating many of our participants. As Susan explained,

the opportunity to study at Oxford allowed students to delve into research and academic subjects at much deeper levels than typically was available to average, American undergraduate students. This phenomenon escalated the perceived value of Oxford's education in the eyes of our participants: "I knew the Oxford one [study abroad program] allowed for tailored tutorials, so I hoped to take a couple of [specific] tutorials and a couple of subjects you can't really get otherwise." Additionally, our participants seemingly understood the value of such specifically tailored methods of learning, emphasizing the positive impact these tutorial experiences had on their own abilities to learn. Amanda, for example, summarized most participants' experiences when describing the rich impact tutorial-related opportunities had on her overall education:

My major motivations for choosing Oxford were the tutorial system, because it's different from anything in America, and there were specific things that I wanted to study that the classes at my home university were more broad and I wanted to study them, like, specifically. And I was able to combine [particular] classes to have the emphasis I wanted, which was really interesting and really what I wanted to study, and I couldn't have done that back home.

**Academic Rigor.** In addition, our participants shared that Oxford's unique approach to education and as resultant reputation for rigorous academics appealed to most participants. As Alex explained, often the decision to study abroad was motivated by students' desires for academic challenge—and they perceived Oxford's distinctiveness would provide this desired stimulation:

The major pull specifically to Oxford, which was part of my pull to go study abroad at all was to study here. It was the academics, because I felt like I didn't have to be challenged at home at my university. Like, I could make it challenging, but it wasn't inherently challenging....Part of the pull of study abroad was to come study *here*.

Moreover, students who selected Oxford's study abroad program often shared their personal desires for academic growth to be motivating factors when selecting this program specifically. Further, these particular students were self-selected individuals who intentionally sought rigorous academics. Emily, for example, aptly summarized most participants' sentiments along this dimension as she described personal goals to embrace her full academic potential during her semester abroad:

Studying at Oxford, the tutorial system, I really wanted to do that. There are some things that I wanted to study and that I felt like I really wanted to understand before graduating. But I didn't really feel like I had the opportunity to put in a really heavy amount of studying [at home]. So, I had the opportunity to do [that] over here.

Participants further explained that, when deciding to study abroad, academics

were key elements that factored into their decisions to attend Oxford. For example, most participants hoped to improve their academic abilities through the rigor regarded at OU directly as a result of their semester abroad. As Lauren illustrated, most students perceived that attending Oxford both would help them improve their overall academic performance and better understand their particular field of study:

Um, I think the first one was just to increase my academic abilities, because I knew Oxford offers you that experience. So, I really wanted to grow in my discipline....and do things that I couldn't at my home university. So just really growing in those areas in ways that was unique to the school [and what] I was studying.

In sum, students understood that attending Oxford would impact them academically, and they embraced accompanying challenges wholeheartedly, hoping to develop scholastically throughout the process. Participants viewed unique dynamics of Oxford's education, such as the tutorial system, to be tools by which their own personal education would be shaped. As Bryan summarized his experiences abroad, he, like most participants, understood the distinct academic opportunities Oxford offered and hoping to capitalize on opportunities for academic stimulation and to broaden his academic horizons:

Um, I wanted to take advantage of every opportunity that I could, um, and not just, like, do the same things that I would do if I was at home. And also, do well in the tutorial system, because I've heard like Oxford is really hard. So, I wanted to do really well. And I think I have done that.

**International Experiences.** The third set of major, drawing factors that students related regarding Oxford's study abroad program included international experiences. Participants both were drawn to England's culture and to the ready access of traveling Europe. First, participants shared that engaging in international experiences was an important element among their personal study abroad objectives. Students repeatedly explained that England's culture was, in fact, distinctly different from that of the United States, and these differences emphasized the international aspect of their semester abroad. Rachel, for example, summarized many of our participants' perspectives as she described various differences between the culture of England and of the United States, emphasizing what she learned as a result of her multi-cultural experiences:

Just getting to *live* in another culture, which, I mean, my preconceptions of Britain was that it's not that much different, but once you live here, you realize everything is different. I mean, there are some similarities, but even the language, um, even though we [both] speak English, they're different, almost different dialects just with different sayings they have and just different ways of communicating different things. Different mannerisms, different cultural ways of interaction, which I think is important for people to learn that the way you've grown up and lived is not the way that, even people who speak your same

language and almost have the same culture as you, don't do it that way at all. So that's been probably one of the biggest lessons for me.

Students further emphasized the personal impacts they experienced as a result of living abroad. Particularly, they described these experiences to be “eye-opening” and to have significantly impacted personal views of other cultures and of their own, American culture. Chris, for example, explained the various, personal outcomes that most participants reported experiencing resulting from their decisions to study overseas:

So, definitely living in other cultures helps to, um, just realize different ways of thinking, different ways of doing things, which I think challenges the way that you've always done things. It challenges the ways that you've always thought, and then, I think, kind of the [differences] in there kind of brings out the best in you and just challenges you in ways you probably didn't think would have challenged you.

Overall, students felt that studying abroad in Britain particularly was important in broadening their horizons beyond that of just America's vantage point. Often, students hoped to experience first-hand various cultural dynamics that were unique to England and Europe, framing their own traditions and culture within the context of new experiences and exposure to foreign cultures. Dylan, like many of our participants, relayed the impact studying abroad had on his view of both foreign and American cultures, further describing his international experiences as “invaluable” because of their effects on him personally:

I think the experience of living in another culture is incredibly beneficial [when you are] from the United States. One thing I've seen in Europe is that people here can travel quite a bit because they live close to other countries and cultures. And just because the United States is situated geographically so that we don't have maybe access to those places, it's much harder for us to do that. And I think that as we become more globalized, I think we need to have an understanding of how the rest of the world works. And I think that really allows for self-reflection. And I think that visiting a different country, everything can change, and doing that has definitely not made me anti-American, it has made me appreciate America, but it helps me to understand what the world is like, too, and I think that's healthy.

In addition to our participants' desires to study abroad, students also shared their personal interests in British culture. Specifically, the opportunity to live in England while studying abroad was highly appealing to our participants. Kate summarized most students as she further explained her desire to learn experientially the intricacies of British culture and its differences from her own, American culture:

I just knew that I wanted to learn about English culture. I didn't know if it was

going to be similar or not to American culture, but I liked learning about the different customs and again, culture of other countries and places. I just wanted to grow as much as I could as a person [through this].

Having selected England as their “temporary home” for the semester, our participants understood that this decision would require personal adjustments as they acclimated to the foreign cultural dynamics. However, students described this process in a positive light and hoped that cultural adjustments would produce personal and intellectual growth. Steven, for example, shared:

If you’re from America and you put yourself in England, like you’re going to have to adjust somehow and you’re going to have to like assimilate yourself into like English culture and by doing that, you learn about other people and the way that other people are in other parts of the world, and I think the, I think that’s an important thing to do.

Students additionally shared that various, historic dynamics of England’s culture were appealing. First, students’ motivations to study at Oxford specifically were influenced by the reputations of noted and historic scholars, both alumni and professors of the university. Additionally, exposure to Oxford’s name, in association with historic and famous literature, further intrigued our participants. Emma, like most students, described her semester at Oxford as “surreal” because she associated the university with influential writers and famous works of literature:

I think I was motivated primarily by the opportunity to go to England, which had been in so many books I’d read. So many [famous] books I’d read came from Oxford....I mean, Oxford has a certain level of academic prestige...and the authors I really admire come from Oxford or talk about the school.

Moreover, students explained that the U.K.’s culture was saturated with historic elements. Often, participants shared with excitement the trivia they acquired regarding historical dynamics of English culture. Summarizing the motivations of most participants, Krista shared her desire to study abroad in such historically-rich contexts:

Probably because it was Europe, um, well, I know it’s England specifically, but I was really, I’ve always wanted to go to Europe. So, when so many other [historic] people have gone here and there’s so much history in this town. I like knowing that the street names have like, a story behind them.

Furthermore, participants shared that Oxford being within Great Britain as an English speaking country, was a drawing factor due to the language continuity. However, students’ desires to avoid language-related challenges seemingly did not derive from

indolence. On the contrary, participants shared that studying their subjects in English actually allowed for better understandings of learned material and to engage it at deeper levels than they could in a foreign language. As Stephanie explained, her personal academic goals motivated the selection of an English-speaking study abroad program and she hoped this decision would further her academic knowledge:

I chose Oxford mainly because of the tutorial system and the familiarity of the English language. I kind of wanted to go to a country that spoke Spanish because I'm like so-so in Spanish. But, I thought that it would be good academically to go to the place where I would at least be familiar with the language. That way I could dive into the culture and my studies and stuff like that, especially for like a first time being in a different situation. That's really helpful to know the language, and then later on, I can go live somewhere that speaks a different language for a little bit and focus on the language. This way I get to focus on things that are important now.

Another location-related factor that impacted our participants' decisions to study at Oxford was the university's physical location within Europe. Specifically, many students reported that, while studying in England the relative ease with which they were able to travel throughout Europe was highly appealing. Marcus, for example, described the sentiments of most students as he summarized his primary considerations regarding Oxford's study abroad program—which included traveling: “I was drawn to Oxford because of the academic rigor, the one-on-one tutorial system, and the fact that it's a nice launch pad for traveling to the rest of Europe.” Additionally, most students reported their semester at Oxford to be their primary exposure to European culture and their first opportunity to visit the Continent. Consequently, participants realized that their time of “living” in England was limited, and students shared desires to capitalize on their abilities to travel while in Europe. Julianna described Oxford's “strategic location” and her ability indirectly to accomplish personal goals of visiting Europe: “[I always wanted] to travel a lot. Like, I wanted to see different things...and I had never been to Europe, so I really, really wanted to come to England and have that chance to travel all over.” Further, our participants specifically seemed to value exposure to international experiences, which included traveling. Moreover, the particular students who selected Oxford's educational program also prized the exposure to Europe and opportunities to travel, considering this to be a value-added aspect of their four-year college experience. For example, Jessica shared sentiments similar to that of most participants when describing her excitement regarding the “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunities for travel throughout Europe, as well as the various ways traveling impacted her world-view:

The proximity of other countries to travel to, because, I don't know, I personally think that traveling is just like one of the best ways to, like, understand the world and understand other peoples' countries and cultures and that's, like, one of my favorite things to do. And so being over here, it's like, “Oh, I want to go to Scotland. Ok! I want to go to Paris. Ok!” and I can do that really easily.

Finally, participants shared that Oxford's study abroad program held significant appeal because it combined many of their personal goals for academics and life-experiences, which often pertained to travel. Attending Oxford was the means by which many students were able to pursue academic excellence while experiencing international cultures—a combination that participants described as “incredible,” and “once-in-a-lifetime.” For example, Ethan summarized most participants and their decisions to study abroad within the context of comparing his semester at Oxford with typical semesters back in America. He particularly emphasized the “experiences-of-a-lifetime” that he associated specifically with traveling during his semester at Oxford:

[At Oxford I liked] just the combination of the intense academics and, well, this was *the* place in the world that I wanted to travel to, [Europe,] and knowing that I could do that, and in place of a semester back at [my home university], it was just too good of an opportunity to pass up!

**Potential Future Benefits.** Finally, students explained that Oxford's prestige provided both short and long term benefits. First, Oxford's prestige was meaningful to students on personal levels. Often as participants spoke of their experiences at Oxford, they did so with a sense of accomplishment and pride in their personal and academic learning experiences abroad. As Logan further explained the sentiments of most participants, he emphasized the value of his experiences and the uniqueness of his opportunities relative to costs and personal benefits:

The extra cost was worth it for me, because, well, considering that, well, even [where I go to school,] it's a lot of money to pay to go to college because I can go to college for free other places. And so even just like going to college at [this private university], I was doing that for the experiences. And I would say that about Oxford, too. It's worth the amount of money, not just the educational level, but Oxford is considered pretty prestigious! So, like, the experience is worth it.

Further, students explained that this decision to attend Oxford for a semester would carry with them for the rest of their lives. Most participants felt that the name “Oxford University” carried a positive stigma with which they readily hoped to be associated. Elisabeth illustrated this dynamic when explaining the appeal of being able to “brag” to others about her undergraduate experiences at Oxford: “The school of Oxford was just really exciting. I think that, um, it will, it's just going to be a treasure to always be able to say that I've studied here!”

Additionally, students understood the practical benefits of attending Oxford in relation to their future academic aims. Most students interviewed described goals of attending graduate programs. Consequently, participants hoped that their decision to attend Oxford also would benefit them in the long-run of their ultimate educational objectives. Specifically, students valued their experiences at Oxford with future academic and vocational preparation in mind. Megan, for example, further articulated the future-

oriented mindset of most participants when the work load at Oxford seemed overwhelming at times:

It's all dependent on your attitude, like the experience that you can have...it's different than what you've had before. And it's not necessarily going to be fun or nice or exciting unless you make it fun and you make it exciting and you make it enjoyable and you see it as that. I could have seen the fact that I had to write thousands of words every week and that these papers are huge and a pain in the butt. But [instead] I saw it as an opportunity to write future research papers every week. And I learned a lot and got really in-depth into the things I was studying. So, it's all what you make of it. I'd say, do as many things as you can!

Students further described their hopes that experiences at Oxford significantly would improve their academic abilities, preparing them for graduate work. Moreover, on even more practical levels, students fully were aware that graduate program admittance was highly selective. Resultantly, students shared their hopes that having Oxford on their transcripts would aid these academic objectives for further education. Hannah specifically captured the sentiment of most participants as she summarized her future-related motivations for selecting Oxford as her study abroad destination: "One of the main reasons [for] coming here was just, I always wanted to come to Oxford and I really wanted a little more academic intensity before maybe applying to graduate school. So, I just wanted to have the fact that I went to Oxford on my resume."

Finally, students explained that, although they highly valued the international experiences that accompanied their study abroad experiences, the benefits that specifically pertained to Oxford often were equally motivating factors. For many participants, Oxford was a highly enjoyable means to achieving academic goals. Cara, for example, emphasized the potential long-term benefits that resulted from her decision to study at Oxford:

I think a big one was going to Oxford, and how it would help me in the future in applying to graduate school. Definitely in just the opportunities to just study outside of my home university and, um, being able to experience a different culture, and even just the whole Oxford system. So, for me, Oxford was more of an appeal than just study abroad [would have been].

### **Oxford's Drawback's**

**Added Cost.** As students compared the benefits of studying at Oxford with the drawbacks, one cogent factor that participants reported to be negative was the additional expense of living overseas. Students explained that from an economic standpoint, this generally was a terrible time to be in Europe since the exchange rate was unfavorable. Overall, students felt that spending the extra money was worth the benefits, but they readily complained of this perceived atrocity. Michael, for example, summarized most

participants' mind-sets regarding their adjustments to added expenses: "The pound and the dollar, that's been a hard transition. It's just best not to think about it, I guess. Everything [here] is almost double what it is back home!" As students described significant transitional issues, repeatedly the current dollar-rate was at the top of their list of difficult adjustments. Participants explained that college bills added up fast enough, but facing additional expenses, because of the poor dollar rate, was especially frustrating. John, for example, shared the financial frustrations of most participants when describing adjustments necessary for living in England:

Just the living accommodations, getting used to that, the weather, the people, um, getting used to spending a lot more for a lot less in terms of the exchange rate isn't so good right now. And the fact that for the same price, if it were in dollars, you're also getting less. So, I guess that's a big transition, like, how do you cut corners when just buying food?!

Students generally related explained personal desires to spend money wisely, but also felt that much of their annoyance arose from external financial dynamics, which were out of their control, such as the weak American dollar. Additionally, most participants admitted their underestimation of the exchange rate's negative effects. Students explained the difficulties of fully understanding the day-to-day financial implications, especially prior to departure. Allison illustrated this when summarizing her money-related frustrations and budget-related misconceptions:

I knew it [the dollar rate] was so bad, but actually having to live with that and have the stress of trying to stay in a budget when you're already participating in a, well, what was this program? Fourteen or seventeen thousand dollars. And then living expenses on top of that with the pound being so high and...out of respect for my parents, I haven't wanted to be irresponsible with money, and so, you know, food you have to think in the pound, you know, because you have to have food. But if you're going to buy anything shopping wise, drink related, um, you know, thinking about traveling, like you have, almost want to make yourself think in the dollar, um, so you don't spend the money [without] knowing that it's going to be double the cost. That's hard. I mean, I can't wait to go back into the U.S. where, when it say it's five dollars, it's really five dollars, not ten dollars. That was a shocker. I knew that, but it never really sunk in that it was going to be so bad.

Moreover, students explained that having such low dollar rates affected their extra-curricular engagements. Specifically, most participants shared personal expectations of traveling while at Oxford, but then admitted these desires were formed apart from financial practicality. Bethany, for example, explained that, although traveling around Europe from her temporary location in England was much less expensive than if she were in America, the added expenses of low dollar rates was one factor that caused her to think twice before traveling:

It's really hard. But, um, I guess, like, always I idealized it as like "Oh, we're going to have so much time to just explore and travel and, and like, we're going to embrace ourselves and the culture"...but we didn't have time to go explore or like, um, travel all these different places. And things are a lot more expensive than we would think, so like, that puts a limitation on it. And, um, yeah, I just like imagined, like, going off to a different country every weekend, you know, and like that wasn't a reality. But [Oxford] it was a really good experience like in and of itself.

Finally, participants emphasized the unexpected nature of these increased expenses, and admonished future exchange students to be prepared for these added costs. In retrospect, most students admit they would have saved more money for daily expenses had they realized the full effects of such severe, negative exchange rates. In sum, Travis, like most participants, urged future applicants to "save up more money than they would think for their time in Europe!"

**Missed Experiences.** The second set of negative dynamics that affected participants were the missed experiences back in the United States. That is, participants understood that everything in life is a trade-off, and they simply could not experience life at their home universities and life at Oxford simultaneously. Deciding to attend Oxford for a semester inevitably meant missing out on a semester of life back on one's American college campus. Aubrie shared the sentiments of most participants as she described the emotions that often accompanied her being away from friends and the university life back in America:

You hear about things that you miss, um, that's going on with them, or things that you wish you could be there for them. Um, and, I mean, you just kind of have to put it, I wouldn't say forget about it, but you just have to kind of put it out of your mind when you, like, go to work on stuff so you can get it done. But I mean, it's always there, it's always in the back of your mind. It's not that it doesn't affect it, but you just, like, can't let it, like you have to, um, know that you will see them again. It's only a semester.

Further, students shared that often the most difficult missed experiences with which to cope were ones that held emotional significance. Understandably, participants did wish they could have been in America for these life-events, but shared their lament without overall remorse for their decisions to study abroad. As Meredith recounted important, meaningful events she missed because of her decision to study at Oxford, she summarized the sentiments of most participants when describing their general outlook on studying abroad in terms of experiential cost:

Um, [I really missed] seeing friends and family. Like, I, I'm missing like a lot of

my, I'm in a wedding and I'm missing like a lot of the preparations for that, and like the wedding showers and bachelorette parties and stuff. And, um, yeah, just missing out on friends lives and birthdays with family.... And, yeah, just like friends at [my home university] and stuff. That's what I gave up, but I think it was all worth it.

Additionally, students explained the necessity of putting current American-based relationships "on hold." Participants explained that because of the distance, the deepening of most friendships and relationships during the separation was very difficult. Resultantly, students spoke in terms of "suspending" relationships for the semester, hoping that the lapse in time would not create relational distance. Abby carefully explained what many of our participants communicated, emphasizing her desire to continue these relationships once she returned to the states: "I really missed out on just the relationships that you don't get to invest in when you're here [at Oxford], because friendships at school continue without you. You can talk on Skype [online], but it's just not the same." For most participants, their decision to study abroad took into account various types of meaningful activities that would be missed as well as meaningful relationship dynamics that would not be experienced for a semester. Oftentimes, participants shared that being abroad one semester limited the opportunities available specifically for leadership positions on campus because of their half-year absence. In addition to limited campus involvement, participants hoped the separation would not also limit the relational depth of friendships. Further, students highly were concerned with the quality of their relationships and hoped that, upon their return, they would be able to "pick up where they left off" with most friends. Ryan illustrated this dynamic, describing the apprehensions he felt due to "paused" relationships and the meaningful experiences he was not a part of while abroad:

Just relationships with friends. I [almost] didn't want to study abroad first semester because I was afraid that those relationships might suffer, um, and it took a while to be like, "It will be ok when I come back." There would also probably be like just experiences that I'm involved in, so I'm on the debate team, so I've missed out on a semester with that. I also missed out on a leadership opportunity because I couldn't commit to it the whole year. So, there are some things in that area.

Finally, participants shared many valuable opportunities that were sacrificed in order to study abroad. Requirements for American students' admittance into Oxford were high grades and leadership involvement. In other words, these were not students who passively coasted through college—they were highly involved, leaders among their home university classmates. Consequently, had participants not studied abroad at Oxford, their semesters potentially would have been filled with alternative, valuable opportunities. While the details of each participant's stories vary, Andrew shared the sacrifices he made to study at Oxford and aptly summarized most participants' sentiments regarding the opportunities they forwent:

I gave up a pretty decent internship. I had a job offer on Capitol Hill for a congressman that, had I not come out here, he would have hired me on the spot. I had a pretty good job offer that I turned down. Hopefully I'll see what happens when I go home. That'd probably be the biggest thing I had to miss.

**Benefits Outweigh the Costs.** Overall, our students affirmed their decisions to study abroad, despite added financial costs and valued, missed experiences. In fact, participants shared self-perceptions of the unique position they were in as undergraduate, study abroad students studying at Oxford University. Brooke, for example, explained the sentiments of most participants by describing her time spent at Oxford in terms of value: "It's an experience that I won't ever get again, and it's an experience that most people don't get to have." Furthermore, students explained that their college years were opportune times in life for such international experiences. Students described ambitious dreams of travel and rich educational endeavors, reporting that a semester at Oxford was a practical step toward these goals. Kyle, for example, described his "take advantage of every opportunity" approach to studying abroad:

There's not been a lot, I would definitely, definitely say the pros outweigh the cons. I would recommend it to anybody. Yeah. I'd say the main benefit of coming over here is just, having it be like a once in a lifetime opportunity and even though it might cost a lot financially or, um, you'll have to give up some, like, activities and friends that you'll see more often and stuff, you have to realize that it's only for a certain amount of time and you may never have that chance again. Because as life goes on, things will get more complicated or you'll get more busy and then it'll just get pushed away. But if you take advantage of it, like, at this age in college, I think that's like the perfect time.

Students further compared the cost of studying abroad with the costs of *not* going to Oxford. In other words, participants expected that, had they not decided to study at Oxford, then for the rest of their lives they would regret the missed opportunities. Additionally, students justified substituting a semester in America with a semester abroad because of these live-with-no-regret perceptions. James aptly summarized most participants in this respect:

I think that, um, it's cost is more of, in a way, obviously financial. Like, being away from other people and stuff, I mean, that's bad, but that can be repaired. I mean, it's not like it's destroying any relationships with people, it's putting them kind of on hold. Whereas if you don't take the opportunity to study abroad, you miss out on a big chance. Because when you're out of college, do you really have the money to go, you know, travel around where you want to go? Like, you don't have it now either, but now you're definitely young enough to like go for it. (laughs) So, I think it's more a benefit and worth it.

In sum, students aptly seemed to have weighed both the draws and downsides of studying at Oxford. However, participants unanimously reported positive overall experiences and highly recommended their semester in England to others. David summarized the general sentiments of the study abroad students, as he described his outlook on the overall Oxford experience:

I would do it again in a heartbeat. For the cost, it is totally worth it. Just because I feel like at home universities you can get into a rut in the end of year time. So, just getting out of that and getting a fresh perspective on education, a fresh perspective on, also just who you are. Because it definitely challenges your own perceptions of yourself, your perceptions of your culture. Um, so I think those challenges and those experiences that you have studying abroad are something that stays with you for the rest of your life. And paying a couple thousand dollars more, I think it's definitely worth it.

### **Discussion**

Within our study, students shared that they were motivated to participate in the Oxford SA program for various reasons. The academic structure and rigor, the location within Europe, and potential future benefits for students were all specifically mentioned. However, as we listened to the students' comments, it appeared that two basic undertones surfaced regarding what drove these students to pursue studying abroad. Specifically, the American students studying at Oxford seemed to value particular ideals, such as learning, cultural awareness, and their future careers. In this context, they demonstrated an awareness of what most likely would challenge and enhance them towards those ideals. For these students, the Oxford SA program seemed to offer them opportunities and benefits they could not otherwise achieve.

During the interviews, our participants acknowledged one reason they pursued Oxford was to become more culturally aware. This finding is congruent with Johns and Thompson (2012) who addressed cultural diversity as an acute goal for most SA programs. Further, consistent with Gammonley, Rotabi, and Gamble (2007), it became clear that our participants were sensitive to having cultural awareness even before they ever left their home universities. These students recognized viewing the world from a distinctly American perspective. However, even though they expressed this awareness for cultural differences prior to their experience, students nonetheless voiced surprise at how much their typical American way of thinking was challenged. That is, the Oxford program challenged assumptions that students did not recognize they held until they lived outside their own home culture. This point suggests that optimal cultural awareness best is accomplished by personal, first-hand experiences outside their own milieu and this conclusion squares with previous research, showing that SA programs help to address unchallenged assumptions students may have regarding an American way of thinking (Johns & Thompson, 2010).

The students in our study not only desired to enhance themselves by increasing their cultural awareness, they also wanted to broaden their repertoire of cultural experience with others. Students chose the Oxford experience as it obviously involved living in England. While there, the students experienced firsthand English culture and customs. Also, many of the students chose England specifically because of its relative ease of access to the rest of Europe. The students desired to travel and expose themselves to a number of different European cultures. Experiencing different cultures seemed to be more than something students desired to know on an intellectual level. Rather, our participants discovered while living in England a new world of languages, foods, perspectives, customs, and the like—as they traveled among Europeans and engaged diversity at Oxford University.

We found that the students who participated in SA at Oxford demonstrated not only cultural awareness but also academic awareness. For example, students demonstrated a longing to experience the academic structure and rigor of the Oxford tutorial system. Throughout all the interviews, this was one of the most predominant themes. Being aware that they would not receive this style of learning and rigor at their home universities, the students found the Oxford challenge to be appealing. This rigor did not deter students from participating, but rather prompted them toward the program. From this, we observed that these students shared a passion for learning, and they sought optimal ways to enhance their collegiate learning. They desired to be stretched, not only in their knowledge base, but also in the ways of learning *how* to learn.

Many American students who might value the unique learning and rigor of the tutorial system may not be able to study abroad. Therefore, we suggest that American universities develop ways of reaching out to students such as these. Many universities offer independent study credits within different majors whereby faculty members sponsor students to study particular topics in depth. Universities could more widely promote these opportunities to their gifted students. Both independent research projects and learning tutorials likely would appeal to cross-sections of American students, similarly to how the Oxford experience appealed to students in our present example. Cultivating this protocol in honors classes, which often have smaller class sizes and more in depth topics, would be optimal milieu for implementing these valuable independent studies.

Our participants also were aware of the expected benefits, both immediate and in the future, from participating in the Oxford program. As students assumed an active role in broadening their academic learning styles, they became increasingly aware that more quality academic opportunities potentially would be open for them in the future. At their home universities, we speculate that these students might be more likely to participate in honors programs, become presidents of organizations, and actively engage in volunteer and internship experiences. The enriched life experiences they underwent at Oxford likely will positively impact these future academic activities in cogent ways. Further, the participants viewed their SA experience as a valuable future investment, vis-à-vis the prestige of having been connected to an Oxford college. In light of this, we suggest that colleges' Career Service offices (as well as other specific departments) should target

students in particular fields of study to participate in the Oxford program. For example, liberal arts majors such as English, philosophy and history could make particularly apt candidates for such an experience. Many students within these fields pursue future graduate work. Studying abroad at a university such as Oxford could provide, as our participants mentioned, excellent training for such future graduate study. They also can enhance future graduate school matriculation through having an Oxford tutor(s) whom they might use as a reference as well as interview better with graduate admissions committees via an increased cultural awareness regarding their respective fields of study. In sum, we suggest that promoting SA programs to students within the liberal arts and other programs where future graduate study is normal for advancement in the discipline might result in enhanced preparatory experiences for the American college student.

Our participants overwhelmingly voiced that studying at Oxford was a beneficial and valuable experience. They also were acutely aware of the experience's financial costs. Finances were the primary perceived drawback of the SA program. For example, our participants mentioned the shock of the weak dollar value while living in Oxford. More explicit and formal preparation of this reality, prior to arriving in Europe, would help to pre-empt some of the financial distress that the students in our study indicated experiencing. We suggest that universities should host briefing seminars before students commit to studying abroad. This pre-exposure would help them become more attuned to the financial implications of the Oxford experience, including issues pertaining to the negative exchange rate and financial aid available to students who study overseas. Also, we suggest that students who previously have participated in SA programs help to mentor future SA students through formal programs, as alumni, in order to provide valuable resources and answer questions from their first hand experiences.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

All good research identifies the limitations of a study and reports them (Price & Murnan, 2004). As previously mentioned, all qualitative research is context-dependent (Salkind, 2011). Consequently, external validity of the present research study is significantly influenced by the context of New College, within the greater context of Oxford University, since that is where each of the students in the present study obtained their British education. Given the OU educational model, the relative independence among the colleges could result in different experiences for American SA students who might study at different OU colleges—even though they also participated in an Oxford SA program.

Also noted, most of the participants in the present study were Caucasian. Future research should compare the present findings with a replicated study of American minority students who undergo SA experiences at Oxford. To date, our present study is the only one of which we are aware that addresses American students participating in SA at Oxford—so, certainly future exploration of this topic is worthy—from multiple sample groups.

We believe that the present study is an important data point towards better

understand the SA experience by students. The present study should be viewed in terms of heuristically prompting future, qualitative inquiries into SA experiences of American students to assess how their perceived draws and drawbacks relative to SA motivation. As future researchers connect the series of qualitative study dots, a more clear and holistic picture of SA eventually will appear. In the qualitative tradition of research, this ultimately is how external validity is established (Firmin, 2006) and we believe that the present study will make a significant contribution to that end.

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