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Leading Abroad: A Pathway to Growth for Professional Staff

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Abstract

The professional development of professional staff through leading education abroad programs has received limited attention in existing literature, which primarily focuses on faculty experiences. This study aims to address this gap by examining the perspectives of professional staff who lead such programs, highlighting their critical role in advancing an institution's educational mission. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of interviews with professional staff members engaged in study abroad program leadership, the findings highlight how these roles foster professional development, leadership skills, and career development for professional staff.

Keywords

Study abroad, leadership, professional staff

1. Introduction

Institutions have increasingly developed international programs for students with faculty playing a central role in leading these experiences. Faculty-led programs provide students with the opportunity to study abroad under the direct guidance of a faculty member from their home institution, fostering an environment of academic continuity and peer engagement (Fisher et al., 2022; Goode, 2015; Kramer, 2015). These programs are typically shorter in duration - lasting up to eight weeks - and often take place during the summer,

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the most popular time for study abroad participation (Institute of International Education, 2023).

As leaders of faculty-led programs, faculty members serve not only as educators but also as mentors, facilitators, and logistical coordinators. These programs are developed through close collaboration between education abroad professionals and faculty leaders, ensuring that academic rigor is maintained while integrating experiential learning components. Faculty-led programs are typically designed around the faculty member's subject matter expertise and tailored to meet students' specific academic needs, providing an opportunity for active, hands-on learning in an immersive international setting (Kramer, 2015).

Beyond traditional classroom instruction, faculty-led programs incorporate cultural and professional development activities, including site visits to historical landmarks, research institutions, and industry partners relevant to the course material. This structured yet immersive approach allows students to engage directly with faculty in ways that extend beyond traditional academic settings. Thus, faculty-led programs remain a critical avenue for international education, positioning faculty as key figures in shaping students' global competencies and professional growth (Fisher et al., 2022; Goode, 2015; Spenader & Retka, 2015).

Despite being traditionally led by teaching faculty, faculty-led study abroad programs can also be led by professional staff. In the study abroad model that centers professional staff as program leaders, the professional development of those professional staff is less understood. Feldman Barr (2013) posits that "extrapolating from the research on students, one can hypothesize that faculty members also grow both personally and professionally from their abroad experiences" (p. 137). As the professional and personal growth of professional staff has not been widely studied in the literature on study abroad engagement, faculty-led programs provide an excellent model to study what is possible for professional staff development in education abroad.

This study addressed this gap by examining the perspectives of professional staff who lead study abroad programs and was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does leading a study abroad program influence professional staff members' perceptions of professional development?

2. What leadership skills are developed through leading study abroad programs?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Faculty engagement and professional development in study abroad

Understanding faculty and professional staff engagement with study abroad and resulting outcomes is critical to exploring how the transformational aspects of leadership in a study abroad context influence professional growth and leadership development. Faculty engagement with study abroad is not well defined in comparison to student engagement (Leask et. al, 2021). Furthermore, non-faculty professional staff members' engagement with leading study abroad programs is an additional gap in the research.

Several studies have explored faculty motivations for engaging in study abroad programs (Knight et. al, 2018; Leask et. al, 2021; Rampold, et. al, 2018). Knight et. al, (2018) used expectancy value theory to interpret faculty's decision to engage in leading a study abroad experience and found that faculty were most concerned with the utility and cost value of participation. Faculty were concerned with what they needed to give up engaging in leading a study abroad experience (cost value) and the perceived current or future usefulness of engaging in leading a study abroad experience (utility value). Rampold et. al, (2018) examined agriculture faculty involvement in study abroad, including factors that influence involvement such as institutional, professional, and personal factors. A key finding of the study was the need for better communication about study abroad from the administrative, department, and collegial levels regarding the priority placed on increasing student participation. The study advocated that "future efforts should be directed toward faculty professional development and training relevant to study abroad" (Rampold et. al, 2018, p. 249).

Leask et. al, (2021) focused on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of faculty engagement with study abroad, noting that faculty play a significant role in students' participation in study abroad, making sense of their learning abroad and integrating their experience abroad into their curriculum at home. They posit that "while ways to capture and evaluate the transformative power of education abroad for students are often discussed, in comparison little

consideration has been given to the transformative potential of education abroad programmes for faculty" (Leask et. al, 2021, p. 193). Furthermore, Leask et. al, (2021) describe the importance of professional staff, faculty, professional developers, and learning designers in ensuring education abroad experiences are integrated into students' home curriculum.

Related to faculty engagement in study abroad is examining how leading international experiences influences faculty professional development. Hamza (2010) studied the transformative learning of female educators teaching abroad in relation to higher education professional development. Findings are applicable for faculty leading study abroad programs, as the study posits that educators engage in professional development in many ways that lead to transformative learning. Findings included changes in faculty personal and professional attitudes and a broadening of faculty's global perspectives (Hamza, 2010). As a result, "Academics who have international experiences can be a helpful source in providing valuable comparative perspectives for the educational policy makers on how higher education institutions integrate global education into their curriculum and programs" (Hamza, 2010, p. 67).

Similarly, Liu (2019) explored the impact of an education abroad opportunity for international education professionals that included exposure to a different national context and education system. Findings showed the most important impact of the faculty study abroad experience was participants' deeper understanding of their own work at home, including raised awareness of the historical development of higher education, contextual awareness of international education policy frameworks, and cross-cultural awareness of student development in their home country (Liu, 2019). Liu (2019) posited that "observed differences built in deep historical, contextual, and cultural understanding can serve as a good foundation for innovation in future practices" (p. 317).

Niehaus et. al, (2018) explored cultural mentoring in practice during short-term study abroad courses, including how frequently faculty engaged in cultural mentoring and which demographic and background variables may predict which faculty engage in cultural mentoring. Since intercultural competence is an increasingly valued skill in today's global society, cultural mentoring "stands as the vehicle by which students are able to find meaning in their study abroad experiences and transfer the competencies gained from the

experience into their interactions with others" (Niehaus et. al, 2018, p. 79). The study suggested that cultural mentoring by faculty occurred in four ways: expectation setting, explaining host culture, exploring self in culture, and facilitating connections. Faculty race, rank, and gender were all significant demographic predictors of at least one type of cultural mentoring, suggesting an opportunity for further exploration and engagement of faculty with international experiences and cultural mentoring (Niehaus et. al, 2018). Niehaus et. al, (2018) concluded that

> faculty members who teach short-term study abroad courses are well-positioned to serve as cultural mentors for students due to the intense nature of these courses and the high levels of faculty-student interactions that can take place during the time abroad (p. 80).

Complementing this mentoring framework, Anderson, Lorenz, and White (2016) examined faculty facilitation of intra-group dynamics across 12 short-term study abroad programs and found that only one program intentionally incorporated structured attention to group processes. In that program, the instructor facilitated critical incident discussions and created reflective spaces that students identified as essential for establishing psychological safety and meaningful debriefing. The authors found that frequent and spontaneous facilitation - including guided reflection, dialogue, and interventions - significantly supported students' intercultural development. In some cases, faculty intentionally paused academic content delivery to allow students to process intercultural tensions and group conflicts, underscoring the developmental importance of facilitation within the learning environment. Together, these studies position faculty not only as cultural mentors but also as facilitators of group meaning-making and intercultural processing.

Despite faculty being well positioned to serve as cultural mentors and gain valuable professional development experience, little research has explored career and professional development for non-faculty professional staff leading study abroad programs.

2.2. Involving professional staff in study abroad

Alongside faculty, academic and student affairs professional staff perform valuable functions that aid an institution in fulfilling its teaching and learning mission. In response to calls for accountability and to recognize the contributions of student affairs professionals to student learning, the American

College Personnel Association (ACPA; 1996) identified the role of student affairs in education and advocated for both faculty and professional staff to create college environments that motivate students to pursue educationally purposeful activities, in and outside of the classroom.

ACPA (1996) identified characteristics of learning-oriented student affairs divisions as "complement[ing] the institution's mission, with the enhancement of student learning and personal development being the primary goal of student affairs programs and services" (p. 2). Similarly, academic advising is a function that is aligned with an institution's educational mission. Academic advisors serve as cultural navigators, aiding students in connecting with the academic culture of their institution (Darling, 2015). Furthermore, "An academic advisor approaches the curriculum in a holistic manner, exploring how the various pieces can fit together in ways that support both the goals of the curriculum and the goals for the students" (Darling, 2015, p. 94). An institution's mission, goals, curriculum, and co-curriculum guide the student learning outcomes of academic advising (White & Schulenberg, 2012). Through advising appointments, students engage in reflective conversations about academic goals, growth opportunities, and provide insight into how both the student and institution are achieving their mutual goals. Academic advisors aid students in developing understandings about their educational experience and skills to inform future decisions (White & Schulenberg, 2012). As such, academic and student affairs professional staff are well situated to contribute to education abroad.

Few studies have explored the career and leadership potential of professional staff who lead study abroad programs. In a concept paper, Feldman Barr (2013) outlined a recommendation for including student affairs professionals in study abroad experiences. According to Feldman Barr (2013),

> Trained in a vast array of issues, student affairs professionals often hold advanced degrees in higher education, counseling psychology, and the like in order to manage the emotional, social, and personal issues that students deal with in their day-to-day lives on campus (p. 139).

Feldman Barr (2013) identifies the Dean of Students role within study abroad programs, which includes managing the non-academic lives of students abroad. Faculty leading programs must manage multiple dimensions of the program, including logistics, intercultural management, academic management, and the

Dean of Students role. Research on resident directors similarly demonstrates the multifaceted leadership responsibilities inherent in education abroad roles, including oversight of academic delivery, student services, and risk management (Robinson et al., 2025).

A case study that allowed faculty and student affairs professional staff to collaborate in leading a study abroad program revealed the benefits of including student affairs professional staff on the program. These benefits included management of the Dean of Students role while abroad, mitigation of risk, increased preparation of students for their experience, development of group cohesion, and contributions to the learning environment (Feldman Barr, 2013). Furthermore,

> Including a student affairs professional in the staffing model not only addresses these responsibilities [of the Dean of Students dimension of studying abroad] and the faculty concerns about their own abilities to manage them, but also provides additional needed support for students (Feldman Barr, 2013, p. 139-140).

As both student and academic affairs professional staff affirm student learning and professional development, it stands to reason they are well suited to lead study abroad programs.

2.3. Theoretical framework - Career and leadership theories

Career and leadership development theories provide a framework from which to examine the professional development of professional staff leading a study abroad program. Super's (1980) life-span, life-space theory of career development provides insight into how an individual chooses and moves through an occupational career, while also considering environmental factors and various personal roles. Adaptive leadership theory details an approach to leadership where leaders encourage others to explore and change their values while they learn new ways to grow and meet challenges (Northouse, 2018).

When considered together, life-span, life-space career theory and adaptive leadership theory provide a comprehensive lens for examining how leading study abroad programs influence both the leadership capacity and professional development of education abroad personnel. Leadership learning in this context often emerges through experiential practice, where collective leadership, real-time problem solving, and field-based decision-making shape professional growth and identity formation (Beal, 2024). As professional staff

navigate unfamiliar cultural environments, manage student needs, and respond to emergent challenges, they engage in adaptive work that simultaneously informs their career trajectories and leadership development.

Developmental career approaches consider that career choice is a dynamic developmental process (Patton & McMahon, 2014). According to Super (1980), "A career is defined as the combination and sequence of roles played by a person during the course of a lifetime" (p. 282). As an evolving process, individuals make career decisions over time, across their life-span. Super's (1980) life-span, life-space theory explains the process of career development throughout life (the life-span) within the context of an individual's life and the various roles they play (the life-space). As people are constantly growing and changing across their life-span, the concept of self is important to Super's theory. Self-concept is developed and implemented over the course of a career, with satisfaction derived when an occupation matches an individual's image of themselves. Individuals learn through interaction with their environment and through social or experiential learning (Patton & McMahon, 2014). As such, "The decision points of a life career reflect encounters with a variety of personal and situational determinants" (Super, 1980, p. 295). Super's life-span, life-space theory can aid in exploring how international experiences contribute to the career trajectory of professional staff, how they perceive new opportunities, make career-related decisions, and navigate their professional paths within or outside academia.

Combined with career development theory, leadership theory can aid in further understanding how leading a study abroad program influences professional staff's career and professional development. Adaptive leadership focuses on adaptations required of people in response to changing environments, with adaptive leaders preparing and encouraging people to manage change (Heifetz et al., 2009, Northouse, 2018). With its follower-centered focus on how people change and adjust to new circumstances, adaptive leadership is a process approach to leadership where leaders and followers mutually affect each other and can occur at a 1:1 or organizational level.

Adaptive leaders aim to engage individuals in adaptive work by motivating, organizing, orienting, and focusing the attention of others in exploring and changing values, essential elements of leading a study abroad program, where program leaders often must inspire, motivate, and guide

students in a new and challenging environment (Northouse, 2018). Adaptive leaders center the adaptations required of individuals in response to their changing environments and support them during these changes. The adaptive leadership approach can aid in exploring how professional staff perceive their roles as leaders in the study abroad setting and how these experiences contribute to their professional development. Combining career and leadership development frameworks allows for the examination of both the immediate leadership skills developed and the long-term impact of leading a study abroad program on career development. Specifically, how the transformational aspects of leadership in a study abroad context enhance career development opportunities and influence the professional identities of professional staff.

3. Methodology

In this study, we used a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with professional staff who have led education abroad programs at the University of Florida. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, capturing their personal narratives and uncovering the complexities and nuances of their interactions during and after the programs. Interview questions were specifically designed to explore participants' lived experiences and to examine their personal and professional growth.

3.1.Data collection

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection began. We sent recruitment emails to professional staff at the University of Florida who had led various types of education abroad programs, including study, internship, service learning, and research abroad experiences. Five professional staff members participated in the study, with their profiles summarized in Table 1.

TABLE (1)
PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS FOR THE STUDY

Participant pseudonym	Professional role	Years of experience leading international programs	Does current role include international education responsibilities

Casey	Associate director of experiential learning program	6	Yes
Geoff	Director of online advising services	22	No
Jackson	Assistant director for first-year advising	4	No
Mason	Director of career development and global engagement	8	Yes
Maggie	Pre-health coordinator	1	No

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 50 minutes. Interviews were structured around a series of guiding questions that aimed to explore participants' lived experiences. We organized the interview protocol into categories such as roles and responsibilities, leadership development, application of leadership skills, career impact, and preparation for future challenges. We concluded each interview with an open-ended question to allow participants to share additional insights.

We began the semi-structured interviews with background questions, such as “Describe your current role at the university” and “Describe the study abroad program(s) you have led,” to establish the context of each participant’s involvement. We then asked probing questions to gather more detail about the type of program, its duration, and the student population. Questions that inquired about the type of program, length, number of times led, and student population helped us clarify the scope of each participant’s leadership role.

Next, we asked about roles and responsibilities, using questions such as “What are your responsibilities as program leader?” to understand the specific tasks and challenges each participant encountered. To examine leadership development, we asked, “What leadership skills have you developed through leading study abroad programs?” allowing participants to reflect on their evolving competencies.

We also explored how participants applied these leadership skills in other areas of their careers. For instance, we asked, “How have you used the

leadership skills developed in your role as an academic professional?" We included questions about preparation for future challenges, such as, "How do you think leading study abroad programs have prepared you for future challenges?" to explore long-term benefits and growth. Finally, we offered participants the chance to share additional thoughts with the question, "Is there anything else about leading a study abroad program that I have not asked that you would like to share?" These questions enabled us to capture a comprehensive understanding of each participant's experiences, leadership development, and the broader professional impact of leading study abroad programs.

3.2. Data analysis

We followed a structured qualitative approach grounded in thematic analysis to analyze the data as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). After each interview, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the integrity of participants' responses. To enhance trustworthiness, we independently reviewed the transcripts before beginning the coding process.

In the initial phase, we conducted open coding. Each researcher read through the transcripts individually and identified meaningful segments of data related to the research questions. We used these open codes to capture participants' descriptions of their experiences, reflections on leadership, and perceived professional impacts. This stage allowed emergent concepts to surface without being limited by pre-established categories.

Next, we moved to focused coding and grouped similar or recurring open codes into broader conceptual categories, which helped reduce data complexity and identify patterns across participants. We used techniques recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) to organize the codes into matrices and display formats to support data visualization and cross-case comparison.

In the final phase, we organized the focused codes into overarching themes that directly addressed our research questions. We developed these themes iteratively and refined them through collaborative discussions to ensure consistency and coherence. When we encountered discrepancies in interpretation, we resolved them through dialogue and by revisiting the raw data, which strengthened the reliability of our analysis.

3.3. Positionality

As researchers examining the professional development of professional staff through leading education abroad programs, our positionalities are deeply influenced by our professional roles as non-tenure-track faculty members who work closely with professional staff. These roles afford us a unique perspective on the intersection of academic and administrative functions, allowing us to understand the contributions, challenges, and opportunities that professional staff experience in higher education.

Both authors have extensive experience collaborating with professional staff on international programming and leading education abroad programs. This collaboration has provided insight into the often-overlooked professional development opportunities available to professional staff who assume leadership roles in education abroad programs. Through our work, we have seen how these roles require navigating complex responsibilities, including mentoring students, managing cultural dynamics, and overseeing logistical aspects of international education.

Our non-tenure-track positions also place us in close alignment with the lived realities of professional staff. Like them, we balance multiple responsibilities and frequently serve as intermediaries between faculty, students, and institutional administration. This shared experience fosters empathy and a nuanced understanding of the professional trajectories and developmental pathways of professional staff who lead education abroad programs.

At the same time, we recognize the need for neutrality in our research. While our proximity to professional staff provides valuable contextual understanding, it also requires us to remain vigilant about potential biases, such as an inclination to highlight positive outcomes. To mitigate these risks, we are committed to maintaining an open, unbiased perspective throughout the research process, allowing the authentic experiences of education abroad leaders to guide our findings.

Our professional and personal experiences enhance our understanding of the research context while driving a commitment to rigor, transparency, and meaningful contributions to the scholarship and practice of international education. This dual perspective enables us to explore the professional

development of professional staff with depth and authenticity, while remaining critically reflective about our roles as researchers and practitioners.

4. Findings

The findings of this study are organized according to the research questions, which revealed distinct yet interrelated themes regarding the professional growth of professional staff who lead study abroad programs. As summarized in Table 2, participants described experiences that contributed to the evolution of their professional identity (RQ1) and the development of adaptive leadership skills (RQ2). Within each theme, specific subthemes emerged that illustrate the multifaceted nature of professional staff development in international education contexts. These include the integration of teaching and advising practices, growth in confidence through leadership challenges, and the cultivation of global awareness; adaptive strategies for navigating ambiguity and crisis; and the formation of networks and evolving professional worldviews.

TABLE (2)
SUMMARY OF THEMES AND SUBTHEMES BY RESEARCH QUESTION

Research Question	Theme	Subthemes
RQ1	Evolving Professional Identity	Teaching and advising as integrated practice Confidence through leadership challenges Global awareness
RQ2	Development of Adaptive Leadership Skills	Adaptability in navigating ambiguity and crisis Developing others through empowerment and delegation Accountability and emotional regulation

4.1. (RQ1) How does leading a study abroad program influence professional staff members' perceptions of professional development?

Research Question 1 explored how leading a study abroad program influences professional staff members' perceptions of their professional development. Rather than centering traditional professional advancement pathways such as promotions or formal training, findings revealed that the act of planning, managing, and leading a study abroad program served as a transformative developmental experience that reshaped how participants understood themselves as higher education professionals.

Participants consistently described an evolving professional identity emerging through their leadership abroad. Leading a program deepened their sense of themselves as educators, advisors, and globally engaged practitioners. The experience strengthened their teaching and advising practices, increased self-confidence, and fostered intercultural competence, ultimately broadening how they viewed their roles within the university.

A central dimension of this identity shift was the integration of teaching and advising. Participants described study abroad leadership as a context in which the philosophy of "advising as teaching" became fully realized. The immersive structure of short-term programs created dynamic, student-centered environments where professional staff could facilitate learning in ways not typically possible in campus settings. Geoff reflected, "It's the whole advising is teaching philosophy. And if you believe that, then why wouldn't an advisor be able to lead a program like this?" Jackson similarly noted, "As an advisor, we see advising as teaching, and this is one of the best ways for you to practice teaching because you're working in smaller groups, you're getting to hone your skills."

This integrated practice was further reinforced through deeper relational engagement with students. The extended time spent together abroad allowed professional staff to move beyond transactional advising interactions and develop more holistic understandings of students' identities, aspirations, and concerns. As Casey explained, "It helped me be a better advisor…you get to know them more as people rather than just a student in your office for 15 minutes." These relational insights enriched their advising work upon returning to campus, allowing them to better support students' academic and personal decision-making.

Leadership abroad also fostered significant gains in professional confidence. Participants frequently characterized program direction as one of the most challenging experiences of their careers, yet simultaneously one of the most developmental. Maggie described the experience as "arguably the hardest thing I've ever done…emotionally and psychologically," yet emphasized that it built unexpected confidence and personal growth. Casey echoed this sentiment, noting that leading abroad strengthened her confidence in teaching in-person courses — an area where she previously felt less assured.

Confidence development extended beyond instruction to include leadership and program management. Participants described learning to delegate, manage teams, and coordinate complex logistics in unfamiliar environments. Jackson reflected that directing a program reshaped his understanding of leadership, particularly in learning how to rely on collaborative team structures. Skills developed abroad translated directly into their on-campus work, reinforcing study abroad leadership as a high-impact professional development experience.

In addition to pedagogical and leadership growth, participants incorporated global awareness into their professional identities. Navigating unfamiliar cultural contexts prompted reflection, humility, and intercultural learning. Mason shared, "It's absolutely changed my life...it's helped me with intercultural learning. Every time I lead a program, I learn more and realize there's so much that I don't know." Casey described learning to "bridge cultures and readjust expectations," particularly when working with international partners and colleagues. Maggie connected this growth to enhanced empathy toward students, noting that the experience helped her better understand the student perspective abroad.

Participants also emphasized the professional value of industry site visits and engagement with global employers. Observing workforce expectations and labor market dynamics in international contexts strengthened their ability to advise students on career pathways. As Casey explained, "Listening to what employers are looking for has been valuable for advising students."

Ultimately, participants framed their development not merely as the acquisition of discrete skills, but as a redefinition of their professional purpose. Study abroad leadership reshaped how they conceptualized their work as educators committed to expanding students' worldviews. Jackson captured this

transformation, stating, “It’s not about perfection...it's about introducing students to new ways of understanding the world. That relates directly to advising, because what we’re helping students do is engage with learning and figure out how their skills and backgrounds can be expanded through exploring other avenues.”

Together, these findings suggest that leading study abroad programs functions as a transformative professional development experience for higher education staff, fostering integrated educator identities, leadership confidence, and globally informed advising practice.

4.2. (RQ2) What leadership skills are developed through leading study abroad programs?

Research Question 2 examined the specific leadership skills that higher education professional staff gain through the experience of directing study abroad programs, specifically focusing on identifying how such roles foster leadership development in areas like adaptability, decision-making, crisis management, team development, and emotional intelligence. Findings indicated that program leadership catalyzed the growth of adaptive leadership competencies, especially in the areas of adaptability, developing others, and accountability. Participants described how high-stakes, often unpredictable international contexts required them to think strategically, manage crises, empower others, and maintain emotional regulation – all of which reshaped their professional confidence and leadership approach.

Study abroad settings often disrupted routine decision-making structures, compelling participants to think independently and problem-solve in real time. Mason reflected on the necessity of adapting to high-stakes contexts, stating, “There isn't a clear roadmap... you kind of have to figure it out in the moment... that's probably the most important leadership skill that I've built – understanding how to navigate ambiguous environments and minimize risk.” Casey echoed this sentiment when recounting a political disturbance during a program excursion: “Managing unexpected situations...is something that is always going to come up at some point when you're studying abroad.”

Participants also described the emotional labor of guiding students through uncertainty. Jackson noted that directing a study abroad program involved being “a camp counselor, an advisor, a person who's responding to

emergencies," describing the role as "a 24/7 job." Maggie added that she developed "patience and the ability to maintain composure even when overstimulated," emphasizing emotional resilience as essential for leadership abroad. Participants learned to adapt to ambiguous situations and lead students through unforeseen challenges.

Leadership development also emerged through the process of cultivating student independence and team cohesion. Participants reported learning to empower students, delegate responsibilities, and foster collaborative environments. Maggie illustrated this by resisting the urge to micromanage: "Just letting them kind of figure it out, even if it was painful to watch…they can be transformed by what they're doing because they're not just following." Geoff described this as a shift in mindset: "We don't have to be the experts...Sometimes it's more impactful for us to have a group of peers come in and teach those lessons." This participatory leadership style allowed students to emerge as leaders themselves, reinforcing the educator's role as a facilitator rather than sole authority.

Part of developing as adaptive leaders required participants to practice their leadership skills in managing and collaborating with other staff and institutional teams. Jackson highlighted the importance of vision-driven delegation: "I don't have to be in control of everything, but instead provide vision for each area and encourage that vision...that has been something I do daily." Casey shared how her supervisory responsibilities abroad sharpened her broader leadership skills: "Now I have more responsibility in other areas...keeping my supervisory skills sharp has been useful."

Participants described accountability as a defining feature of their leadership growth, rooted in the realization that they bore ultimate responsibility for students' safety and program integrity. Mason shared a pivotal experience navigating a housing dispute: "Even though there may be other stakeholders...I really need to take great care to go through every piece of contractual language myself...at the end of the day, I'm going to be the one accountable." This experience reframed his approach to decision-making and personal ownership of outcomes. Similarly, Geoff spoke about the importance of "modeling good behavior, respect for the host country and the people, [and] knowing how to conduct yourselves in different situations." For Geoff, being

accountable to the program and participating students meant being a positive influence for students through his actions and modeling respect.

In tandem with accountability, participants emphasized the importance of emotional regulation. Jackson explained that study abroad helped him "stay calm in situations that are difficult," while Casey described "balancing composure while ensuring student safety during emergencies." Maggie underscored this transformation in interpersonal dynamics: "To be assertive about my own stance on something is sometimes uncomfortable...but I definitely feel more confident and more bold."

Participants reported becoming more composed, assertive, and principled in their leadership style. Development of leadership skills, including strategic thinking, crisis management, and emotional regulation, provided opportunities to show increased leadership capacity. Findings suggest that leading study abroad programs developed transferable skills and allowed for application of those skills in varied contexts, including upon return to the home institution.

5. Discussion

The findings from this study on leading study abroad programs align closely with key themes in the literature regarding professional development, leadership competencies, and career advancement in higher education (ACPA, 1996; Beal, 2024; Feldman Barr, 2013; Knight et. al, 2018; Liu, 2019). Participants' experiences reveal how leading study abroad programs contributed to the development of both personal and professional growth, particularly in fostering adaptive leadership skills, and enhancing global awareness. These findings align with existing literature that underscores the transformative potential of study abroad leadership roles.

A key finding of this study was how leading a study abroad program reshaped participants' professional identities. This is consistent with the literature that suggests study abroad leadership provides a unique platform for professional staff to deepen their understanding of their roles as educators and advisors. Participants reported a deeper engagement with students' personal and academic growth, embodying the advising as teaching philosophy (Darling, 2015; White & Schulenberg, 2012). The immersive nature of study abroad

facilitated this integration, allowing faculty to support students' learning in diverse and dynamic contexts.

Participants in the study reflected on how leading these programs enhanced their sense of identity as educators, emphasizing the integration of teaching and advising. As Geoff and Jackson pointed out, the immersive nature of study abroad allowed them to apply and refine their teaching skills in dynamic, real-world settings. This is aligned with research that suggests leading study abroad programs can strengthen faculty and professional staff roles as educators and advisors by enhancing their ability to engage with students on a deeper level (Anderson, Lorentz, White, 2016; Feldman Barr, 2013).

Similar to faculty engagement in study abroad programs, the involvement of professional staff in study abroad programs prompted reflection on their professional identities. Multiple participants reported a newfound sense of purpose and a broader understanding of their roles within the University of Florida. This process aligns with Super's (1980) life-span, life-space approach to career development, which posits that career growth is a continuous process influenced by various life roles and experiences, as evidenced by Jackson's acknowledgement that a good leader does not "have to be in control of everything, but instead provide vision for each area and encourage that vision."

Another significant finding of this study is the development of adaptive leadership skills, particularly in the areas of adaptability and emotional regulation. Participants emphasized how the unpredictable and high-stakes nature of study abroad programs required them to become more flexible and adaptable in navigating challenges. Mason's reflection on the lack of a clear roadmap for managing unexpected crises underscores a key aspect of adaptive leadership, emphasizing a need for leaders to assess and respond to ambiguous situations (Heifetz et al., 2009). This is consistent with findings by Heifetz and Linsky (2002), who argue that adaptive leaders must be skilled in navigating ambiguity and guiding others through periods of uncertainty. Furthermore, the participants' reflections align with leadership literature emphasizing self-awareness and emotional management as core to effective leadership, particularly in cross-cultural and high-pressure environments (Goleman et al., 2002).

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study offers valuable insights into the roles of professional staff in leading study abroad programs; however, several limitations must be acknowledged.

6.1. Sample size and institutional context

The findings are based on a small sample size from a single institution, which restricts the generalizability of the results to broader contexts. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, while qualitative research with limited samples can provide in-depth understanding, it may not capture the diversity of experiences across different institutional settings. Future research should consider larger, multi-institutional studies to enhance the applicability of findings.

The sample was also limited in its diversity: the five participants were not purposefully varied by demographic characteristics such as gender, race and ethnicity, or career stage, and all were drawn from a single institutional context. As a result, the findings may not capture how professional development through study abroad leadership is experienced by a more demographically diverse population of professional staff.

6.2. Institutional culture and support structures

Conducting the study within a single institution limits the ability to account for varying institutional cultures, policies, and support structures that can significantly impact professional staff involvement in study abroad programs. As highlighted by the American Council on Education (n.d.), institutional commitment and infrastructure play crucial roles in the success of internationalization initiatives. Therefore, future research should explore multiple institutional contexts to identify common challenges and best practices across different settings.

6.3. Future Research Directions

Within the broader theme of transferable skills, a subtheme of career shifts and advancements being influenced by leading study abroad programs developed. Participants discussed transferable skills gained by leading a study abroad program and how those skills influenced their career development. Noting his career progression was directly related to his exposure to leadership skills gained while leading study abroad programs, Mason stated, “It led directly

to my current role and helped me gain trust and respect within the college." Similarly, Casey noted, "It completely changed the trajectory [of my career]. I wouldn't have been qualified nor confident in getting the position as Global Engagement Coordinator or Lecturer…without having done that program." Leading a study abroad program provided participants exposure to leadership skills and experiences, impacted their career planning and long-term vision, as well as enabled them to connect with others. Future research should explore the outcomes of leading a study abroad program on career shifts and advancement for professional staff.

Future research should also investigate strategies to encourage professional staff's participation in education abroad leadership roles, addressing potential challenges, and proposing actionable solutions. This includes examining institutional support mechanisms, professional development opportunities, and recognition systems that can motivate faculty and professional staff to engage in study abroad programs. By emphasizing the significance of these programs for professional staff, research can underscore their value in connecting students with transformative global learning opportunities and fostering institutional success. Additionally, exploring the experiences of diverse faculty and professional staff populations in international settings can provide insights into creating inclusive and supportive environments for all academic personnel involved in education abroad initiatives. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of professional staff's participation in study abroad on career progression and institutional engagement, as well as the experiences of diverse populations in international settings. As noted by the American Council on Education (n.d.), "Faculty and staff mobility is recognized as an asset…On-campus professional development is expected, encouraged, and rewarded" (para. 11).

7. Conclusion

Leading study abroad programs is a multifaceted responsibility that extends far beyond the perception of international travel as leisure. Professional staff undertaking these roles are engaged in complex tasks, including risk management, emergency response, budgeting, and providing continuous support to students throughout their international experience. As outlined in the Forum on Education Abroad Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad (2023), faculty and professional staff leading these programs

must be prepared to handle logistical challenges and respond effectively to crises, necessitating comprehensive institutional support.

This research study is a first step toward better understanding the engagement of professional staff in leading study abroad programs. As the model becomes more common, future research will continue to develop and inform best practices for implementation. While this study is based on the experiences of five professional staff, it is evident that leading study abroad programs profoundly influenced their professional development and enhanced their cultural competence, pedagogical approaches, and leadership skills. These international engagements have not only enriched their teaching practices but have also contributed to their institutions' broader goals of comprehensive internationalization.

However, to sustain and amplify these benefits, it is imperative that institutions recognize and support professional staff involvement in study abroad initiatives. This support could include structured professional development opportunities, formal recognition of international program leadership in promotion processes, and collaborative partnerships with student affairs offices to ensure holistic student support. By investing in and valuing professional staff's contributions to global education, institutions can foster a more inclusive and globally competent academic community.

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