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A Qualitative Look at the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on American College Students Studying Abroad

Eric R. Pedersen¹, Reagan E. Fitzke¹, Kathryn E. Bouskill², and Angeles Sedano¹

Abstract

COVID-19 has impacted higher education greatly, with many colleges and universities being forced to quickly implement procedures for operation as closures and restrictions shifted many programs online. These abrupt changes amounted to uncertainty and challenges for students worldwide. Students who were studying abroad during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic faced unique challenges as programs shut down and many returned home from overseas. The current study investigated the impact of COVID-19 on U.S. study abroad students through a qualitative lens. Students reported unique stressors related to being abroad during the onset of the pandemic, such as missed experiences, financial loss, travel difficulties, and stressors related to academic programs. Additionally, many reported considerable and lasting impacts on emotional and behavioral health. This study provides preliminary evidence for the effects of COVID-19 on study abroad students and highlights the importance of addressing the needs of this population during and after the pandemic.

¹ KECK SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

² RAND CORPORATION, SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Corresponding author: Eric R. Pedersen, Eric.Pedersen@med.usc.edu

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on higher education. Many colleges and universities needed to close for in-person instruction and residential living, abruptly shifting to online learning when outbreaks began to occur and being forced to implement rapid changes in policies, requirements, and procedures for students and faculty (Crawford et al., 2020). On a global scale, this disruption has had substantial implications for the mental health of college students; for example, preliminary studies with Chinese college students concluded that a number of pandemic-related stressors may contribute to mental health problems, such as economic stressors, changes in daily life, academic disruptions, and being separated from loved ones (Cao et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). For U.S. college students, there is also emerging evidence of the negative impacts of COVID-19 on mental health. During the pandemic in the U.S., which formally began in early March 2020 when in reaction to the World Health Organization's declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic, the Trump administration's declared a national emergency in the U.S. (AJMC, 2020), students have experienced high levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Liu et al., 2020; Mehus et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020). These mental health symptoms have centered on COVID-19-related health fears for themselves and loved ones, isolation and loneliness, and distress tolerance, as well as academic-related factors such as uncertainty about the future of their education, concerns about falling behind in coursework, and struggles with remote learning (Kecojevic et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Perz, Lang, & Harrington, 2020; Son et al., 2020).

Although COVID-19 has impacted college students worldwide, it is also imperative to acknowledge that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted specific sub-groups within the broader college student population differently. Among American college students, most did not begin to feel the full effects of the pandemic until March or April of 2020, when institutions began implementing policies to protect students, staff, and faculty by limiting on-campus activities. However, students who were studying abroad in foreign countries at the time the pandemic hit may have faced challenges earlier on.

Study abroad students represent a large and diverse population. About 10% of U.S. college students study abroad, with nearly 350,000 U.S. students completing study abroad programs during the 2018/2019 academic year; an increase of 33% from just 10 years ago and a number that has more than doubled in the past 20 years (Institute of International Education, 2020). American students who study

abroad experience a host of benefits, ranging from increased global perspectives and cross-cultural awareness to preparation for international careers and academic success (Dwyer, 2004; Kauffmann & Kuh, 1984; Kitsantas, 2004; Mapp, 2012; Sutton, 2010), but they are also at-risk for homesickness and loneliness, issues with acculturation/culture shock, increases in drinking and substance use behaviors, and elevated levels of anxiety related to being abroad (Bathke & Kim, 2016; Firth et al., 2020; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Hunley, 2010; Pedersen et al., 2020; Ryan & Twibell, 2000).

Study abroad students' experiences with COVID-19 may accordingly be different to those of domestic U.S. students, as students traveling abroad may have had to deal with unique and additional stressors. Though student affairs personnel have speculated about the impact of COVID-19 on study abroad students (Padilla, 2020), no such published work has examined American study abroad students. Research from Chinese international students suggests that they have experienced mental health consequences to a great degree during the pandemic, indicating stressors specific to their situation, such as conflicting information about COVID-19, travel risks, and uncertainty surrounding living arrangements (Ma & Miller, 2020). These and other concerns may also have been critical for U.S. study abroad students as well, as they also experienced the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic while studying at various international institutions across the world that experienced policy changes and lockdowns prior to the U.S. Investigating the impact of COVID-19 on U.S. study abroad students is thus of interest, as this group may have experienced stressors with noteworthy implications for mental health in both the immediate and long term.

The Present Study

This study provides a preliminary qualitative look at the experiences of study abroad students from the U.S. during the onset of the pandemic and the months to follow to gain insight as to what challenges most impacted these students. Using data from an ongoing study in which 593 students from multiple U.S. institutions were abroad in 12 different countries when the pandemic broke, we report on the themes described by students and present interpretations and recommendations for how to address the mental health challenges facing this particular population.

Participants and Procedures

Participants were part of a larger two-cohort randomized controlled trial of a brief, online program aimed to prevent escalation of risky drinking and sexual violence incidents among students studying abroad (Pedersen et al., 2019). Eligibility criteria were (1) age between 18 and 25, (2) studying abroad in Australia, China, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico,

South Africa, Spain, or the United Kingdom, and (3) studying abroad between 4 and 21 weeks (approximately one month to one quarter/semester). Eligibility criteria were set to enroll students who studied in the 12 most popular study abroad locations and who represented the length of the majority of study abroad programs (Institute of International Education, 2020). The first cohort completed study abroad trips in the fall of 2019 and had completed all study procedures by the time the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. The second cohort, who completed study abroad trips during the winter/spring of 2020 were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and needed to end their trips earlier than planned. These students left for abroad trip in late December 2019 and early January 2020, just prior to the global outbreak of the virus. First it became apparent that students enrolled in the study who were in China would need to come home, as their programs abroad were getting cancelled. As the pandemic spread to Italy and programs were cancelled there, it became clear to the research team that the original aims of the study would need to be restructured. Given the unique opportunity to collect data on reactions to the pandemic among this unique group, this second cohort of participants were provided with questions about their experiences abroad. They are the focus of the present analyses. Findings on cohort 1 will be presented elsewhere.

The second cohort sample consisted of 673 participants who completed a baseline survey (Time 1) prior to departure abroad in December 2019/January 2020. As planned, all participants received a follow-up survey in January/February 2020 (Time 2), which was one month after their arrival date abroad. The survey asked participants about their experiences in the first month abroad. Five-hundred and ninety participants completed the first follow-up survey (87.7%). It was then planned that students would receive an additional survey during the week of their return home (about three to four months after baseline; around April/May 2020; Time 3) asking them to report on behaviors during the final month of their study abroad trip, followed by a survey one month after they had returned home (around June/July 2020; Time 4) and a final survey three months after they had returned home (around September/October 2020; Time 5). However, once the COVID-19 pandemic began affecting students' trip lengths, it became apparent that study procedures would need modification. Thus, we determined when students were leaving their abroad location and returning to the U.S. by emailing students and asking when their revised return date to the U.S. was and consulting with the individual institutions to learn about their procedures for returning students from abroad. Students were then sent the Time 3 survey early during the week of their revised return to the U.S. (around March 2020), of which 609 students (90.5%) completed it. One month after they had returned to the U.S. (around April 2020), participants received the Time 4 survey, which was completed 583 (86.6%) participants. Three months

after being home from abroad (around June 2020), participants received a final survey (Time 5), of which 602 (89.5%) completed it.

In total, 639 participants (94.9%) completed at least one follow-up survey after baseline, with 529 (78.6%) completing all four. For the purposes of the analyses herein, we retained participants who completed at least one of the follow-up time points that included the added items on reactions to COVID-19 (i.e., Time 3, Time 4, Time 5) and who responded to at least one of those free response added items about their experiences with COVID-19 abroad or upon return home to the U.S. Thus, the analytic sample contained 593 participants (87.9% of the baseline sample).

Measures

Participants completed baseline measures of age, gender, race/ethnicity, location of study abroad, and class year. Participants also indicated which home institution they attended in the U.S., which was categorized as large (over 5,000 undergraduate students) or small (under 5,000 undergraduate students) for descriptive purposes.

Participants were asked an open-ended question on each of the three surveys they completed once the pandemic hit. On their last survey abroad and on the first survey since returning to the U.S. (Time 3, Time 4), participants were asked broadly to “summarize in a couple of sentences how the coronavirus (COVID-19) has most affected your study abroad trip.” They were asked to focus on the aspects that had affected them the most. On the last survey since returning to the U.S. (Time 5), they were asked the same thing but were also asked to expand on how the coronavirus (COVID-19) has affected study abroad students in particular, surmising how their experienced compared to students who were campus in the U.S. during the initial weeks of the pandemic.

Analytical Plan

All free text responses were uploaded into Dedoose (Dedoose, 2020) along with their respective, aforementioned descriptive variables (e.g., gender, study abroad location). Prior to coding the participants’ responses, we created a codebook of hypothesized domains (e.g., experiences missed out on, mental health impacts, sources of stress) and provided definitions for each. Open-ended responses to the items across the three surveys were then entered into Dedoose, where two independent coders used the codebook and definitions to double code 10% of the 1,531 responses. These coders then revised the codebook based on these initial procedures and refined definitions of codes, added, and defined additional codes, and trained two additional coders to code the remainder of the responses using the revised codebook. The coding team met regularly to discuss

any responses that were unclear. We calculated interrater reliability after 20% of the responses were coded with a pooled Cohen's Kappa coefficient and Cohen's Kappa for each of the codes (McHugh, 2012). Coding procedures were discussed within team meetings and refined until the pooled Cohen's Kappa coefficient and Cohen's Kappa for each code was >0.80 , which demonstrates a high level of agreement (McHugh, 2012). Thematic analysis followed by taking note of specific patterns, phrases, and ideas that represented common and unique themes (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Key themes are presented below. Themes were similar across the three survey waves and are presented in aggregate form and not discriminated by wave.

Results

Sample Description

Table 1 contains the description of the sample. The sample was primarily composed of women (approximately 80%), with nearly three-quarters of participants studying abroad in three locations (Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom). More than half of the sample was white (67%), with roughly 13% Hispanic/Latinx and 10% Asian/Pacific Islander. Participants were abroad for an average of nine weeks until their programs abroad were cancelled, and they had to return to the U.S., where courses continued for students online.

TABLE 1. SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

	Study Abroad Students (<i>N</i> = 593)	
	N or Mean	SD
Age	20.16	0.88
Race/ethnicity		
White	399	67.3%
Hispanic/Latinx	79	13.3%
Asian / Pacific Islander	61	10.3%
Multi-racial	28	4.7%
Black / African American	26	4.4%
Gender		
Men	117	19.7%
Women	473	79.8%
Non-binary	3	0.5%
Class year		
Freshmen	11	1.9%
Sophomore	129	21.8%
Junior	388	65.5%

Senior	65	11.0%
Length of time abroad (weeks)	9.16	2.71
School size		
Less than 5,000 undergraduates	262	44.2%
5,000 or more undergraduates	331	55.8%
Location of study		
Australia	55	9.3%
China	13	2.2%
Costa Rica	3	0.5%
France	42	7.1%
Germany	8	1.3%
Ireland	22	3.7%
Italy	182	30.7%
Japan	4	0.7%
Mexico	1	0.2%
South Africa	11	1.9%
Spain	162	27.3%
United Kingdom ¹	90	15.2%

¹ United Kingdom included study locations in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland

Findings

Students described five key themes, with more details assumed under subthemes within each. In Table 2, we provide examples of each subtheme word-for-word as provided by the participants.

Key Theme 1: Being Abroad When the Pandemic Began

Students described perspectives related to the unique experience of being abroad when the pandemic began. These unique experiences were discussed by participants in areas of gaining perspectives on the virus due to living in a non-U.S. country during the outbreak, difficulty returning to the U.S. around the time the President declared COVID-19 a national emergency and banned return travel to the U.S. from Asia and Europe, feeling unsupported by their home and/or abroad institutions with respect to reimbursements for tuition and housing, returning to the U.S., and completing the semester, and perceived differences in hardships from college students that were on campus in the U.S.

Perspectives of COVID-19 abroad. Students discussed having a different perspective on COVID-19 by having lived through it earlier than those living in the U.S. Participants discussed differences between their host country's

response to COVID-19 compared to U.S., oftentimes reporting they felt safer abroad than when they returned home and that there were better restrictions abroad. They described feeling prepared to deal with the pandemic once they returned to the U.S. due to having experienced it abroad before others in the U.S. did; for example, students felt that students at their home school did not see the safety concerns the same way that students abroad did.

Difficulty getting back home to the U.S. Several students emphasized facing difficulty returning to the U.S. once travel bans were announced and went into effect both by the U.S. and by their host countries. They described trouble finding and purchasing flights back to the U.S., often due to limited availability and cancellations, as well as the very abrupt and brief timeframe they were given to leave their host countries. Many students were given just a few days' notice to pack up their belongings and find a way home.

Unsupportive institutions. The issue of returning back to the U.S. was also compounded by a lack of support from home or study abroad institutions. Participants described ways in which they felt their home and host institutions did not provide support or guidance during the pandemic. Students discussed feeling unsupported financially (e.g., not receiving any reimbursements or help with travel) and reported a lack of clear communication from the home institutions regarding whether or not they needed to return home and how they could continue their studies. Some students whose host institution cancelled their courses (rather than continue them online or offer credit for partial completion) described needing to enroll in courses back at the home institution several weeks late in order to avoid missing an entire semester/quarter.

Perceived differences from students who remained back in the U.S. Compared to students in the U.S. who were on campus when the pandemic began, students reported feeling "worse off," primarily due to the missed opportunities they had and the increased stress related to travel and ensuring they received credit for the semester/quarter.

Key Theme 2: Emotional and Behavioral Health Reactions

Students described negative emotions related to their experiences, including mental health difficulties resulting from such reactions.

Anxiety and fear/worry. Students described being scared or anxious during their experience and due to COVID-19-related health concerns. These worries were centered initially around difficulties returning to the U.S. and on contracting the virus abroad, with students also describing anxiety about whether grades/credits would transfer to their home institution, whether they would graduate on time or lose a semester/quarter worth of work, whether they

would be able to obtain employment or internships during college and after, and needing to find a place to live once back in U.S.

Sadness, depression, disappointment, and helplessness/hopelessness. Students discussed being down, heartbroken, sorrowful, and unhappy due to their experience abroad. Related to sadness but at a deeper level, students reported feeling dependent, powerless, and out of control during or due to their experience. Some described feeling pessimistic about the future, such as not being able to see an end to COVID-19 anywhere in sight. They also described disappointment related to the transition from in-person/experiential learning to online learning. Others reported feeling that their lives were “on pause” until the pandemic is over.

Sudden changes exacerbating anxiety or depression. Students discussed how underlying anxiety disorders (e.g., generalized anxiety, social anxiety) were exacerbated due to the stress of living through the pandemic abroad. They also referenced how progress made towards overcoming anxiety through the study abroad experience was negated due to the experience being cut short. Students also reported symptoms of depression that were either caused by their experience or exacerbated by their experience, such as reduced motivation, feeling hopeless, and a sense of futility.

Social isolation and loneliness. Students described feelings of isolation and loneliness and sadness about having to leave their abroad experience behind so quickly. Such experiences contributed to depression and sadness.

Confusion. Students indicated uncertainty and confusion that were primarily related to program cancellations and return to the U.S., as well as to confusion over future plans by their home institution to grant them credit for their time abroad or open up for in-person classes in the near future.

Anger. Students described being mad, frustrated, annoyed, and irritated due to their truncated study abroad experiences. They reported feeling angry that their experiences abroad were cut short, especially since several noted that study abroad was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that they had long awaited and planned. Several were angry that their home institutions did not offer more financial support and guidance. There was frustration reported regarding needing to quarantine themselves when they arrived back to the U.S.

Trauma. Participants reported on experience abroad and at home that were seen as traumatic with potential lasting effects. This primarily related to self-described emotional trauma experienced by being abroad when the pandemic broke and the need to scramble and return home as soon as possible without much time to plan.

Substance use. Students described changes in their substance use behaviors, ranging from reductions in use to increases in use. Reductions were attributed to living with parents and having limited freedom, while increases were attributed to coping with negative emotion and isolation.

Key Theme 3: Loss

The theme of loss was related to students' reports of missing out on their study abroad experiences due to their programs being cut short, relationships lost due to leaving abroad and impacts on social life due to social distancing, financial loss, and the impact of COVID-19 on losing future experiences such as employment and internships.

Abroad experiences missed or cut short. Students described missing out on experiences from study abroad that would have happened if COVID-19 did not occur. This often included missing out on a situational, immersive learning experience for language, culture, coursework abroad (e.g., missing out on learning Spanish while living in Spain). Students also described cancelled cultural and travel experiences that they would not have had the chance for back in the U.S. (e.g., visiting other European countries) and discussed that they would never have the opportunity to study abroad again. Some students mentioned missed opportunities for their families/friends to come and visit them while abroad as well.

Relationships/social life. This theme related to students leaving newly formed relationships behind abroad, including relationships with local people and host families, as well as with other American and international students. While some students described inability to make strong connections with others in such a short period of time, others described meaningful relationships that cut short right as they were burgeoning. They discussed that goodbyes with others were especially hard and that they were unable to say goodbye to some people since they moved out so quickly. Upon returning to the U.S., students discussed feeling disconnected from friends back in the U.S. This included friendships and romantic relationships, which were forced into "long distance" due to stay-at-home orders and study abroad student requirement to quarantine upon return home. They described feeling lonely and isolated, and in many instances, seeing no one else in-person except for their parents and siblings. In addition, they expressed how isolation and loneliness was even more pronounced for them upon return home because they could not see family/peers when they returned, after already being away from them for a lengthy abroad period already. Students described a feeling of homesickness while abroad, which is typical while abroad in the initial weeks but was never overcome as students had to leave early, and upon return was exacerbated by an inability to connect with friends from home.

Financial loss. Students described monetary concerns and loss of money for themselves or their family members. This may have been due to canceled trips or excursions abroad that were planned and prepaid, costs related to booking travel home, and nonrefunded school (e.g., tuition), abroad program, and housing costs. Some students described saving their money for years for the experience and not being able to recoup that loss.

Impact on future experiences. Students discussed missing out on future experiences such as summer internships and future employment. Some also expressed missing out on a graduation ceremony and “senior events,” as well as other trips and travel plans.

Key Theme 4: Stressful Reactions

Stressful reactions were related to school, managing new routines and life back home living with parents, initial shock resulting from needing to travel home so quickly, concerns about contracting COVID-19, and stress about being around family and friends that were at-risk for COVID-19. Students also described stress and difficulty finding a job currently (e.g., to pay bills), but also concerns about not finding a degree-related job and subsequent career implications.

School stressors. Students reported stress related to credits transferring or counting toward their home institution, GPA suffering due to taking classes pass/fail, concerns about whether they will graduate on time, and adjusting to online courses. Students were also stressed about returning to campus in the fall during an unstable time and, for those who were meant to graduate in 2021, whether or not they would be able to have a “normal” senior year and graduation ceremony.

Shock. Students expressed shock resulting from the sudden and unexpected events that occurred during their experience. This was primarily related to the need to end their programs abruptly and return home. They reported that quick decisions were being made by their home and host institutions and these sometimes changed from day-to-day. Students also expressed shock related to needing to adhere to a strict quarantine in the U.S. upon returning home.

Restructuring routine, living back home with family, and finding motivation. Students discussed stress related to not having good space to work or be alone, getting along with parents who were also very stressed, feeling like a high school kid under watch after having a lot of independence, and a general sense of being “stuck” with parents and not able to see anyone else. Students found it difficult to adapt to online classes and cited a lack of motivation to do well in “pass/fail” classes. For some who took online courses in their host

country from their homes in the U.S., they discussed difficulties attending live lectures that took place sometimes in the middle of the night due to time zone differences. They also described the monotony of being at home with little to do and expressed little interest in activities they used to enjoy. Students reported feeling tired all the time and difficulties with sleep schedules (e.g., sleeping too much, going to bed at 3 am and waking up after 12 noon), which overlapped often with the theme of sadness, depression, and helplessness/hopelessness described above.

Contracting COVID-19 and increased caution around public health behaviors. Students reported a general fear about contracting COVID-19; a fear of bringing it home from abroad and spreading it to family, friends, and their community. A handful of students reported contracting the virus and some who identified as Asian described discrimination or stigma from strangers during the initial weeks of the pandemic while still abroad.

Family/friends. In addition to expressing stress and concern over family members and friends contracting COVID-19, students indicated stress over loved ones' health, financial concerns, and other stressors related to COVID-19 (i.e., students were stressed because they saw their parents stressed). Students also described stress related to family/friends not taking the virus seriously and stress resulting from changes in relationships (e.g., fighting with parents more, breakups with significant others).

Key Theme 5: Positive Aspects

Though endorsed less frequently, students did discuss some positive aspects related to their experience with the COVID-19 pandemic abroad; mainly, they discussed gratitude, personal growth, intent to return abroad, and strengthened relationships with others.

Gratitude and gaining perspective. Students indicated not taking things for granted before and during the pandemic, recognizing what they have and their fortune in bad times (e.g., ability to be healthy and return home to a safe home environment), and being appreciative for the experiences they did have while abroad. Some described increased mindfulness (e.g., learning to "live in the moment") and more time for self-reflection.

Personal growth. Students discussed a sense of maturation due to their experience, including learning to be flexible, resourceful, and adaptable to new situations. There was also a sense of acceptance in students' responses, such as how living through difficult times makes one mentally stronger and better prepared for adversity. A handful of students reported taking on new hobbies and engaging in more self-care behaviors like exercise.

Intent to go back or travel later. Students reported intentions to return abroad either in the next semester/quarter that they were eligible or after graduation. Some mentioned plans to take a “gap year” after college to travel and revisit the places they were unable to fully explore while abroad. Other discussed gaining an appreciation for travel and a desire to continue visiting foreign countries in the future.

Receiving support. Though it was more often the case that students reported limited support from their institutions, some students described appreciation for their home institutions’ handling of the situation, including receiving refunds and assistance enrolling late into courses. Students described appreciation for the ability to work from home while in quarantine and reported that their professors were helpful during the transition to working online.

Strengthened relationships. Though most mention of relationships focused on how the pandemic negatively impacted them, students also reported that they experienced closeness with other study abroad due to the shared experience they had and appreciated being able to spend more time with their families at home.

TABLES 2: KEY THEMES AND EXAMPLES

Key Theme	Examples
Being Abroad When the Pandemic Began	
Perspectives of COVID-19 abroad	<p>I believe with me experiencing the impacts of COVID-19 first, I was able to predict how the effects the US was going to experience. I was able to take the precautions of handling this virus and get ahead of others, and warn other people to be prepared.</p> <p>I think many students abroad also are more aware of how awful of a job the U.S. is doing compared to many of the countries we were previously in. I even had a few friends stay abroad because they believed the country they were in was safer than the U.S., they were right.</p>
Difficulty getting back home to the U.S.	<p>I had to very quickly buy a plane ticket and pack up all my belongings. Many things I was unable to bring home and had to leave and will never see again because I did not have sufficient time to ship it back to the U.S. Everything was very rushed and frantic and stressful.</p> <p>I had to fly home directly after Trump announced travel bans for non-US citizens after Friday, March 13. Even though I am a U.S. citizen, flight prices were skyrocketing and I had to leave quickly without saying goodbye to my fellow students and professors.</p>
Unsupportive institutions	<p>Our home university was having day long meetings about what our future as abroad students would look like and they would not tell us any information at the end of the day. We were in the middle of our midterms, staying up until 2 in the morning because [the university] told us they would release information on our next steps, got nothing.</p>

	<p>I think this experience has shown my schools inability to serve and protect their students. I feel that my university is extremely greedy and does not care about students. They seem to care more about finances than students. If I had known this is how my college would treat me in a circumstance like this, I would not have chosen to attend this college.</p>
Perceived differences from students who remained in the U.S.	<p>Being in the hub of where corona virus started was actually really scary, corona virus to us abroad students made us have to evacuate with no notice and flee a continent. Whereas students in the US just had to stay home from spring break.</p> <p>I think that our experience was changed in a more drastic way since we were experiencing something completely unique that was a "once in a lifetime" opportunity, whereas for other college students it was just another semester at their home school. In the long term, study abroad kids had the opportunity to make new friends while abroad whereas those who studied at their home university already had their friends.</p>
Emotional and Behavioral Health Reactions	
Anxiety and fear/worry	<p>I am a rising senior and worried about my final year in college. We are planning to go back to the campus during the fall and I am both nervous about getting COVID-19 and bummed social life will likely be negatively impacted. Many of my friends and I are thinking about taking a gap year because of this. I hope my college doesn't go bankrupt.</p> <p>I am concerned about my family members getting sick because many of them are elderly and already sick with other diseases. I had to move elsewhere because my city became too unsafe to live in/my family was not comfortable living there anymore. I am nervous.</p>

Sadness, depression, disappointment, and helplessness/ hopelessness	<p>I've been very sad, being home with my parents with nowhere to escape has been emotionally disastrous. I've lost my internship, so I am constantly stressed about my future, I will be senior in college in the fall. I feel very lonely, and I feel like anything I do is pointless.</p> <p>It is basically just a huge bummer. It is still very hard to cope with the fact that it ended out of nowhere and I had to say goodbye to my best friends and didn't even get to say goodbye to some. I was planning on being there until June and was so happy with my life there. I wasn't ready to come home, and I was all of a sudden forced to. It is such a sad ending to the happiest time of my life. I feel like I was robbed of my time learning the language, time with my friends, time to travel.</p>
Sudden changes exacerbating anxiety or depression	<p>I personally made a lot of progress in tackling my social anxiety last year through getting a job and being more involved on campus. Now, I feel that those skills have deteriorated, and I am only comfortable communicating with a very limited number of people. Meeting new people and experiencing new social situations makes me incredibly anxious.</p> <p>We had to constantly be on alert for changing policies in both our host and home countries regarding international travel. Every day I would wake up nervous that that would be the day borders were shut down. It was also really difficult to process since it all happened so fast-- something I had waited years to do was cut short and was completely out of my control. How do you cope with that?</p>
Social isolation and loneliness	<p>The social isolation has caused feelings of depression and loneliness. The close contact with family has caused strain on the relationships as we are constantly next to each other.</p> <p>[I] have had to go a lot longer without reconnecting with friends and "normal" life - Missed out on a semester and now a summer of spending time together. When</p>

	homesick while abroad, it was reassuring to know that upon coming back, everyone would be there, and then that ended up not being the case, which at times felt very isolating.
Confusion	<p>We heard our home university was cancelling our program through a vague email sent to us late in the evening which led to quite a bit of confusion and stress.</p> <p>I am also very confused for the future, as to whether school will be online in the fall or not.</p>
Anger	<p>The coronavirus has made me very frustrated. I completely understand the restrictions put in place and respect them for the greater good, but I have never been one to thrive with online schooling and am frustrated daily.</p> <p>I think many students will feel as though their only chance of studying abroad was taken from them. I know I am still mad that the entire pandemic tore me from the life I was finally adapting to abroad.</p>
Trauma	<p>I think it was a bit of a traumatic experience. Whenever I think about living in a foreign country and being uncertain of the danger of my situation for weeks, and then having to come home, I felt like I shut down and went into survival mode. Afterwards, my whole time in France felt like a dream.</p> <p>I had to go home before I completed my internship. I was not ready to pack up and leave. It was abrupt and emotionally traumatizing to get a flight. My grandpa died of the coronavirus in the US so my life sucks right now.</p>
Substance use	I've just felt more anxious and depressed so it's led me to drinking and smoking more.

	I feel like I don't get enough social interaction or exercise. I feel lonely, stressed, and restless. I am worried about the future. I drink and smoke marijuana less because I am limited to doing this activity alone and in my house
Loss	
Abroad experiences missed or cut short	<p>I had to end my semester-long program two months earlier than planned. This really impacted my experience abroad because I did not have nearly enough time to complete everything I wanted to. I didn't have as much time mastering the language as I had wanted, and there were several cultural and travel opportunities that I missed out on.</p> <p>Coronavirus took this opportunity away from me so quickly, and I will never get it back. I am unsure if I will ever be able to afford to return to Europe in the future.</p>
Relationships/social life	<p>... Everyone thought they had to get back to the USA by Friday at midnight, and we found this out on Wednesday at 4 AM. For this reason I left the next day, and corona virus forced me to pack my entire life up in Spain and leave within 4 hours. I had to say goodbye to my host mom and couldn't see my host brothers. Corona not only cut my experience short but made the goodbye even more painful and difficult.</p> <p>The biggest long-term implication I see coming from being abroad to quarantine is the disconnect from some friends who I am close with but haven't been able to see. I have several friends who I haven't seen in 6-7 months because of being abroad and then quarantine.</p>
Financial loss	For me, when the coronavirus hit, I lost money from travel plans that got cancelled last minute. I was pretty upset about that for a while and having looked forward to those plans for so long and having saved up for it by myself, I was pretty devastated.

	<p>Financially, I invested a lot into my study abroad experience. so far, I have thankfully received some reimbursements, but it constitutes a very small fraction of what I had invested. Now that I'm back, I have to pay rent and groceries and utilities and other costs of living, that were supposed to be covered by the payments I made in order to study abroad. Because I have not been adequately reimbursed, I am essentially paying double.</p>
Impact on future experiences	<p>Like many other college students, I have lost my summer job due to colleges being closed for the foreseeable future. So much of the stress in the past couple weeks is centered around finding a job. It is very stressful to plan for the future when we don't even know what tomorrow will look like.</p> <p>I haven't been able to plan for the future, and I'm graduating in 8 weeks. I won't have a graduation ceremony. I feel like college ended without me being in the country. So I'm pretty sad about it.</p>
Stressful Reactions	
School stressors	<p>People at home got the opportunity to move online with ease while I had to figure out if I were to take a semester off or try to reintegrate myself at my university. Studying abroad students had a lot more decision making to do.</p> <p>I'm scared that my whole semester abroad will have been for nothing if I can't get the right amount of credits back, I will have to prolong my graduation.</p>
Shock	<p>It was weird because it all happened so quickly. There was a sense we might get sent home in the weeks before Trump's first address on the travel ban but it was a very distant feeling of worry, then all of a sudden, we had to flee home.</p> <p>It seemed like one day everything was going fine and then just the next evening I was trying desperately to find flights home before the Spanish government implemented a lockdown.</p>

Restructuring routine, living back home with family, and finding motivation	<p>I went from being the most independent I've been in my entire life to essentially being a high schooler again, which has felt strange.</p> <p>It has been hard to do simple tasks and I am left most days doing nothing besides mindless hobbies to pass the time. I am worried about the meaning of my schooling and if it even matters, or if I will even be able to finish & get a job.</p>
Contracting COVID-19 and increased caution around public health behaviors	<p>COVID-19 made me question if I should do things in Spain with large crowds (club, city center area, bars, using the metro/bus), feeling paranoid that I would get the virus and that I could bring it home with me also being paranoid that anyone sneezing has the virus.</p> <p>During the last month of my study abroad I rarely went out to social events or bars. I tried to take the metro as little as possible and stay away from crowded places.</p>
Family/friends	<p>I knew it would be bad here too, but none of my friends or family took it seriously. My mom was convinced it was not even as bad as the flu, and my friends were just terribly ill-informed and weren't even aware that it was spreading at all. I felt alone in my knowledge and scared that the idiotic American people would get screwed.</p> <p>I am worried about my ability to work and my parents' jobs.</p>
Positive Aspects	
Gratitude and gaining perspective	<p>It was extremely hard at first. but since, I've overcome the frustration and sad emotions (let myself process everything) and realized how fortunate I was to even go abroad and have been trying to focus on the positives. I reach out to friends and am honest when they ask me how I'm doing, I tell stories and look at pictures, and especially with the BLM movement I'm reminded that so many other things are more pressing and more important to address.</p>

	<p>It definitely made me a more adaptable and better person, putting my priorities into check and realizing what matters most in life (family, friendships, health. I am upset that my program was cancelled however I am fortunate enough to have gone for as long as I did and made it home safely and without infection.</p>
Personal growth	<p>I think my experiences while abroad in regard to COVID-19 made living in a different country more stressful and filled with more uncertainty. However, it forced me to mature a great deal in processing information, communicating with multiple groups of people, and taking protective measures to stay safe. I learned invaluable skills at the cost of exploration and engaging opportunities studying abroad usually offers students.</p> <p>I am a better problem solver and can handle stress a lot better due to my experience abroad. COVID-19 posed a number of challenges that forced me to adapt quickly and effectively.</p>
Intent to go back or travel later	<p>I think it has given me a new thirst for adventure. I was able to get a taste of travel and then having it taken away completely makes me want it even more. It also made me more thankful for getting to travel as much as I did right before things happened compared to other students who were not studying abroad.</p> <p>Other study abroad students and I have a stronger desire now to go back to where we studied on our own to travel or work to try to make up for those lost experiences.</p>
Receiving support	<p>I'm lucky that my abroad and home university are understanding of the situation, and I am able to complete my courses with my credits transferring as normal.</p> <p>My university helped to manually enroll us into classes and refunded the travel expenditures.</p>

Strengthened relationships	<p>It threw a wrench in all of my plans for the immediate future. An experience that I'd been thinking about for years got irreparably sidetracked. but I've gotten to spend more time with my family than I have in years since I've been quarantined at home, which I appreciate.</p> <p>The COVID-19 situation brought my study abroad group closer together, as we all went through the grief and sadness of having to leave Australia together as well as the worry we felt for our friends and family back home. We'll definitely remember this trip forever and probably talk and joke about it forever.</p>
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Note. Text from student responses are presented verbatim as typed into the survey.

Discussion

In this study, we presented an in-depth look at the unique impact of COVID-19 on American college students studying abroad. Through an examination of students' descriptions of the most impactful components of the pandemic on their study abroad experiences, we gleaned important information to help address the academic and mental health needs of these students moving forward after the pandemic. Study abroad students were abroad when the pandemic first hit on a global scale, and students described difficulties returning to the U.S., a process that was often marked by confusion, fear, and anxiety over whether they would be able to return home. Though this was a temporary period for students and all ultimately returned home to the U.S. safely, potentially lasting effects were described. Although many of the academic challenges were likely similar to those students back in the U.S. experienced (e.g., adjusting to online courses, financial implications, and restricting routines), study abroad students also described academic difficulties unique to their experiences. These included feeling unsupported and lacking guidance from their home and/or abroad institutions, difficulties attending online classes in overseas time zones, concerns about grades transferring or graduating on time, and enrollment mid-semester/quarter into ongoing classes on campus. Special accommodations may need to be made for students who were abroad on the onset of COVID-19 to ensure that their truncated abroad semester/quarter does not impede their ability to graduate on time or impact other academic goals.

For mental health challenges, students described worries about themselves or family/friends contracting COVID-19, stress; anger; and sadness related to lost experiences, and limited motivation, which are difficulties that were also faced by college students back in the U.S. when the pandemic broke (Liu et al., 2020; Mehus et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020). However, students described mental health difficulties unique to their experiences as study abroad participants. These included feelings of loss and sadness related to missing out on the experience, exacerbation of underlying mental health problems students hoped to overcome by the abroad experience, and traumatic reactions to the immediate need to return to the U.S. A unique experience of study abroad students was also the interrupted process of culture shock and reverse culture shock, which is a natural process marked by initial difficulties but ultimately resolutions over time during both the integration into the host country and back in the home country (Church, 1982; Oberg, 1960). Students' study abroad experiences were cut short during their initial weeks, which was likely a period of excitement and interest in the new environment, not yet marked by a sense of homesickness that resolved into a more integrative immersion into the new culture. For others, the need to return home may have come during that

homesickness period, which never had time to resolve abroad, and may ultimately manifest as feelings of anxiety or fear about future opportunities to go abroad.

Though increases in substance use has been an established challenge for students while abroad (Firth et al., 2020; Pedersen et al., 2020), most students did not discuss substance use concerns related to their experience abroad. One recent study reported that decreases in substance use among college students were more prevalent among those who moved back to live with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic than those who continued to live with peers, or had already lived with parents before (White, Stevens, Hayes, & Jackson, 2020). Many students in our sample reported moving back in with parents; thus, living situations may have contributed to the lack of endorsement of substance use among responses. Still, difficulties with mental health and related stressors may further lead to substance use problems. For instance, researchers have reported harmful alcohol and other drug use among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic relating to decreased social support, anxiety, and depression (Horigian, Schmidt, & Feaster, 2020; Lechner et al., 2020). While early cross-sectional studies have important implications for the well-being of college students in the context of COVID-19, studies assessing the mental health challenges for students over the course of the pandemics are needed. More specifically, studies are needed that examine study abroad students compared to students that remained in the U.S., to determine how the needs of such students are different.

Students discussed familial and relationship difficulties, which also likely affected students on campus similarly, such as complications of living with parents, loneliness about following at-home orders, and sadness about not being able to socialize with peers. Study abroad students described unique experiences, though, such as having to leave newly formed relationships with host families and local people behind when they left their host country, not knowing where they would be living upon return home, and needing to quarantine themselves away from their family and friends once returning the U.S. Loneliness among college students is already a public health problem and it is expected to get worse during and after the pandemic (Fegert et al., 2020; Gabbatt, 2020; Horigian et al., 2020). Preliminary research indicates that college students are a subgroup at particular risk of loneliness during the pandemic (Bu, Steptoe, & Fancourt, 2020), and students in other countries indeed have experienced substantial increases in social isolation (Hamza et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). As study abroad students indicated compounding effects of isolation due to COVID-19 and being away from family and friends in the months prior, additional attention on social support is warranted in addressing the mental health needs of this population during and after the pandemic.

There were positive aspects described by some students, although these themes were discussed infrequently. Such positive aspects unique to study abroad students included gratitude for the ability to study abroad even for a short period, a sense of resilience about overcoming adversities in the future, and appreciation for the relationships they had made abroad. Though most research to date reports a majority of college students experiencing negative impacts from COVID-19, there are a handful of studies that indicate some students experiencing positive outcomes, such as increased family support and lower stress levels related to fewer school responsibilities (Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020b). Students who have higher levels of optimism, gratitude, resilience, positive coping strategies, and social support may also experience fewer negative effects from COVID-19 (Biber et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2020). Counselors working with students could help them to process the negative aspects of their experiences while also helping students discover any positive growth factors that emerged during their experiences abroad and back in the U.S.

Though this study was unique to American college students abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic, findings have implications for future study abroad students. Much can be learned from students' reactions to COVID-19 that could be applied to other adverse events that could happen abroad, such as needing to return to one's home country quickly (e.g., perhaps due to a death in the family) or having to end study abroad programs early. Some students described limited support from their institutions, which would be essential during times of crises that may occur for future students. Moreover, sample participants discussed stress, anxiety, and depression, which are common reactions to stressful life experiences among college students and can have long-term impacts (Pedrelli et al., 2015). Preparing to address the mental health needs of college students returning from abroad experiences is important; perhaps more so after adverse events occur that leave students feeling lonely and in need of additional supports. Financial policies that address students' needs may also need to be considered by institutions should programs need to be ended early.

Results also emphasize the importance of study abroad experiences in students' lives, with many participants endorsing feeling as if their online courses were not able to sufficiently capture the full learning experience that staying abroad would have provided, in terms of culture, language, and personal growth. As COVID-19 slows down and abroad programs resume, it is important for institutions to consider the educational needs and desires of students in developing and changing programs in a post-COVID era. For instance, there is consideration of implementing online or domestic study-away programs post-COVID (Liu & Shirley, 2021; Whalen, 2020). Though these types of programs may still provide enriching innovative experiences, especially for students who cannot study abroad, there are certain cultural experiences

students find valuable about studying abroad that may not be replicable in such a format. While some sites may see a return of in-person abroad programs soon, there is also uncertainty of the future of international travel as COVID-19 continues to persist globally with new variants. Some locations of interest may remain inaccessible for the foreseeable future, and other countries may still have to implement periodic shutdowns. Thus, similar situations could very well arise for abroad students in the coming years, so universities should be prepared to support students financially and educationally in the event that a similar evacuation is needed.

Limitations

Although we were able to capture students' reactions to the pandemic among a large sample while they were still abroad and afterwards, we did not assess challenges for students on the pre-abroad survey, which would have provided a baseline for pre-pandemic concerns facing students. Given the rapid and unprecedented emergence of the global pandemic, the COVID-19 items were added to the survey in reaction to the pandemic's outbreak abroad in the first few months on 2020, and thus we did not fully employ robust qualitative methods we may have used if this had been the original focus of the study. Now that researchers have had time to develop a deeper understanding of the pandemic, more "gold standard" qualitative methods should be used to learn more about how study abroad students have been impacted by the pandemic in the long-term. We also did not have the opportunity to follow-up with students with a qualitative interview, which would have given us more in-depth content but not necessarily any new themes given that we identified commonalities across such a diverse and large sample. It is possible that the students who experienced greater difficulties abroad during the pandemic were the ones who were struggling already, perhaps in terms of transferring credits or adapting to life abroad. Moreover, we can surmise from the students' responses that some themes were clearly unique to this group because they were outside the U.S. when the pandemic hit. However, some challenges reported by our sample were likely experienced as well by students back on campus when the pandemic hit. Unclear, though, is to what degree these similar challenges (e.g., fears of contracting COVID-19, family and social relationship difficulties) were experienced by both groups. That is, studies will be needed that compare COVID-19-related challenges among both study abroad and non-study abroad students to better understand the unique challenges to these groups.

Lastly, our study utilized a sample with a majority of young white female participants, which limited our ability to assess for differences among demographic groups. Other studies have pointed to the disparities that have arisen for students of color and students from lower income households, which include delays in educational attainment and negative impacts on health and

welfare (Aucejo et al., 2020; Lederer et al., 2021; Trammell et al., 2021). It is thus of importance for school and program coordinators to take diversity, equity, and inclusion into account as students recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including for students who were or are planning to study abroad, as some groups may have faced more longer-term consequences from COVID-19. Many students in our sample reported feeling unsupported by their institutions, so deliberately providing more support moving forward, especially for underrepresented students, is imperative as institutional programs transition out of COVID-19.

Conclusion

Study abroad students are a subgroup of the college student population that may be at risk for academic and mental health challenges due to their unique experiences abroad during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Student affairs personnel, college administrators, and counseling center staff should prepare to address these difficulties among returning study abroad students as they return to campus. For academic difficulties, this can include policy changes and special accommodations to help students stay on track to graduate. Given that abroad experiences were cut short, students may seek resources to study abroad in the future once it is safe to travel internationally. Study abroad staff may want to encourage short-term summer study abroad or post-graduate opportunities if available. For mental health, this can include increasing access to mental health resources and counseling options through telehealth currently, and then ensuring adequate access and availability of counselors for students once they return to campus. Promotion and outreach will also be necessary as college students in general can be difficult to engage in counseling despite a high need (Eisenberg et al., 2011; Pedrelli et al., 2015), and a need that will likely grow in the post-pandemic period.

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Author Biographies

Eric R. Pedersen. Dr. Pedersen is an associate professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences in the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California. He is the director of the Prevention, Early Intervention, and Addiction Recovery Research Lab (the PEARL).

Reagan E. Fitzke. Ms. Fitzke is the lab manager of the Prevention, Early Intervention, and Addiction Recovery Research Lab in the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California.

Kathryn E. Bouskill. Dr. Bouskill is an adjunct social scientist at the RAND Corporation and a professor at the Pardee RAND Graduate School.

Angeles Sedano. Ms. Sedano is a research coordinator in the Prevention, Early Intervention, and Addiction Recovery Research Lab in the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California.