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# Study Abroad and Student Decision Making in Times of COVID: A Mixed Methods Study

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## Abstract

The impacts of Covid-19 on Study abroad (SA) are deep and widespread and potentially affect the factors that guide US undergraduate students' choices as they relate to SA. To investigate them, the present study relies on the MSA (Motivation to SA questionnaire: Anderson & Lawton, 2015) and adds two new groups of factors: language learning and health. To observe changes in the relative weight of factors before and during the pandemic, responses to two different versions of the MSA from 83 students who had participated in SA prior to the pandemic were compared. Results from statistical analyses show stability in the ranking of importance of factors pre- and during pandemic, except for health-related factors, which come second after world enlightenment. In addition, interviews show that while students view *immersive* SA as a significant experience for its contribution to their personal and intellectual development, they do not consider virtual SA a real SA experience.

## Abstract in Spanish

Los impactos del Covid-19 en los programas de estudio en el extranjero son amplios y profundos y potencialmente afectan los factores que guían la decisión de los estudiantes de grado en EE.UU. a la hora de estudiar en otro país. Para

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poder investigarlo, el presente estudio utiliza el MSA (el cuestionario *Motivation to Study Abroad*: Anderson & Lawton, 2015) y añade dos nuevos grupos de factores: aprendizaje de lenguas y salud. Para observar cambios en la importancia relativa de los factores antes y durante la pandemia, se han comparado las respuestas a dos diferentes versiones del MSA de 83 estudiantes que estudiaron en el extranjero antes de la pandemia. Los resultados de los análisis estadísticos muestran estabilidad en el orden de importancia de los factores antes y durante la pandemia, con la excepción de los factores relacionados con la salud, que se encuentran en segundo lugar después de los factores relacionados con la formación global. Además, las entrevistas sugieren que mientras que los estudiantes consideran la inmersión en el extranjero como una experiencia importante para su desarrollo personal e intelectual, no consideran los programas virtuales como una experiencia real de aprendizaje en el extranjero.

### **Keywords:**

Pandemic, Study abroad, Factors in decision-making, Virtual, Immersive

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## **Introduction**

With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, study abroad (SA) programs were disrupted or cancelled worldwide, including 93% of SA for the summer of 2020 (IIE, 2020). Beyond the immediate impact, the global crisis has had other longer lasting consequences (Dietrich, 2020; Mercado, 2020) which could potentially alter the factors that influence participation, with students prioritizing health and personal safety over SA experiences (Fischer, 2021a; Mok, Xiong, Ke & Cheung, 2020). Early on, the number of students participating in SA after the pandemic was expected to significantly decrease worldwide (Bilecen, 2020; Dennis, 2020; Mok et al., 2020), with some researchers expecting to see a complete removal of SA as part of the academic experience (Fischer, 2021a; Helms, 2020; Leask & Green, 2020; Mercado, 2020), although the advent of vaccines may change students' plans in a positive manner for SA (Gidick, 2021). We agree with Dietrich (2020) and Doscher's<sup>1</sup> view (cited in Fischer, 2021b) that we should use this time to better understand and improve SA practices, which

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Doscher is the director of global-learning initiatives at Florida International University.

will provide critical information and guidance to university administrators, policy makers, SA educators, and researchers alike.

## Literature Review

Scholars agree that the topic has received little attention and that more research is needed, especially given the disruption created by the Covid-19 pandemic in life in general and academic matters in particular (e.g., Anderson et al., 2015; Anderson & Lawton, 2015; Eder et al., 2010; Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Li et al., 2013; Oliveira & Soares, 2016; Salisbury et al., 2009; Stroud, 2010). The literature has identified a set of important factors students consider when deciding to (not) participate in SA. There are those related to education: program quality (e.g., Austin & Shen, 2016; Chao et al., 2017), university prestige (e.g., Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018; Eder et al., 2010), improvement of L2 skills (e.g., Allen, 2010; Goldstein & Kim, 2006) and professional development or intellectual growth (e.g., Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Oliveira & Soares, 2016). Additionally, there are factors related to interest in international, cultural and social experiences, including travel/adventure or tourist attractions (e.g., DeKeyser, 2014; de Jong et al., 2010; Nyaupane et al., 2011), experiencing other societies and cultures (e.g., Allen, 2010; Stroud, 2010), and personal growth (e.g., Anderson et al., 2015; Oliveira & Soares, 2016). Lastly, finances (e.g., de Jong et al., 2010; Oliveira & Soares, 2016), personality (e.g., Albert & Csizér, Forthcoming; Li et al., 2013; Ożańska-Ponikwia & Carlet, 2021), parental support (e.g., Austin & Shen, 2016), and ease of visa process (e.g., Eder et al., 2010) also play a role.

A major question yet to be answered is whether the number and weight of factors have changed in the wake of the global crisis. Amoah and Mok's (2020) and Pedersen et al. (2021) have revealed that students who were abroad when Covid-19 was declared a pandemic felt at risk, stressed, lonely; they missed experiences and worried about their families, and experienced the disruption of their academic progress. Recently found concerns may affect future SA programs as students focus on health and costs, with studies citing accessibility to healthcare and financial security as a major apprehension (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Bilecen, 2020; Flaherty & Nasir, 2020; Mercado, 2020; Mok, 2020). Furthermore, given the high rates of infection, US students may face additional challenges including host countries not accepting US students or US institutions moving programs away from countries most affected by the pandemic (Fischer, 2021a, 2021b).

For all involved in the SA community, it is critical to explore the decision-making process students are going through to better understand the future of SA programs. This is especially pertinent for academic advisors and program administrators who need to anticipate students' intentions while addressing their needs and concerns to ensure future interest in SA experiences (Austin & Shen, 2016; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Li et al., 2013; Oliveira & Soares, 2016; Stroud, 2010). The pandemic's impact on student participation rates is uncertain, however, students are reportedly still interested in participating in SA (Fischer, 2021a, 2021b; Mercado, 2020; QS, 2020) even though a significant decrease in numbers is expected (Dennis, 2020; Mok et al., 2020). Some universities have implemented alternatives such as virtual SA to continue to engage students in the experiences not permitted by the global shut down (Fischer, 2020, 2021a). An argument has been made that SA no longer forms a central part of the college experience due to economic reasons<sup>2</sup>; additionally, students may prefer to spend a year on their home campus after more than a year of remote learning (Fischer, 2021a, 2021b)<sup>3</sup>. An important factor to note is the necessity to focus on the most vulnerable students who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The ongoing financial crisis and instability stemming from the economic shut down has perpetuated the educational disparity for underrepresented students on college campuses. With only one out of three SA students identifying as part of a racial or ethnic minority (cf. Fischer, 2021a), we know that the effects of the crisis will be compounded for those minority students who may consider enriching their education by studying abroad (Bilecen, 2020; Fischer, 2021b).

In response to Dietrich's (2020) call to seize the moment to reshape and make SA more accessible, this project investigates quantitative changes in students' decision-making process prior to and during the pandemic with special attention to health factors, and qualitative views on SA, including virtual SA.

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<sup>2</sup> "A survey by the American College Health Association and the Healthy Minds Network found that two-thirds of college students reported that their financial situation had become more stressful since the coronavirus outbreak began" (Fischer, 2021b, p. 24).

<sup>3</sup> Another alternative to traditional SA programs might be domestic SA programs or study-away programs (Fischer, 2021b).

## Methodology

The results reported in this paper are part of a larger ongoing study; here we focus on the subset of students who had participated in SA *prior to the onset* of the pandemic. A total of 108 students were recruited between March and April of 2021 through emails to faculty in foreign language departments, global education offices, as well as Facebook posts. After eliminating the handful of international students and students at public universities that had completed the survey, the final sample includes 83 participants (see Table 1).

The mixed methods design combines survey and interview data. The survey relies on the Motivation to Study Abroad (MSA) questionnaire (Anderson & Lawton, 2015), designed to elicit the main factors guiding US undergraduate students as they consider participating in SA. This instrument has several strengths: “[it] has face validity, has high statistical reliability, meets accepted criteria for reliability, and can be administered easily” (Anderson & Lawton, 2015, p. 61). The MSA consists of 23 diverse items that participants are asked to grade on a 5-point Likert-scale. The development of language skills is thought to be significant when deciding to participate in SA (e.g., Allen, 2010; Austin & Shen, 2016; Eder et al., 2010; Goldstein & Kim, 2006), and although well-argued counterevidence exists (e.g., DeKeyser, 2014; Shively, 2018), we added four additional language skill items (Appendix 1) not included in the original MSA. Finally, 7 items related to Covid-19 (Amoah & Mok, 2020; Flaherty & Nasir, 2020) (Appendix 2) were also randomly introduced in the MSA. A pre- and during-Covid versions of the MSA were created and administered through Qualtrics.

To evaluate potentially significant changes between pre- and post-pandemic factors, and following Anderson & Lawton (2015), the study compared responses to career development, entertainment, language skills, health, personal growth, and world enlightenment questions. Participants were asked to complete a background questionnaire, based on de Jong et al. (2010), with new questions that elicited information on their linguistic, social and economic background.

To qualitatively explore their views on SA, including virtual SA, 17 participants from the initial sample took part in a 15-minute online interview with one of the researchers. Happy Scribe generated the transcripts which were later reviewed and coded in NVivo in preparation for a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**TABLE 1. PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC**

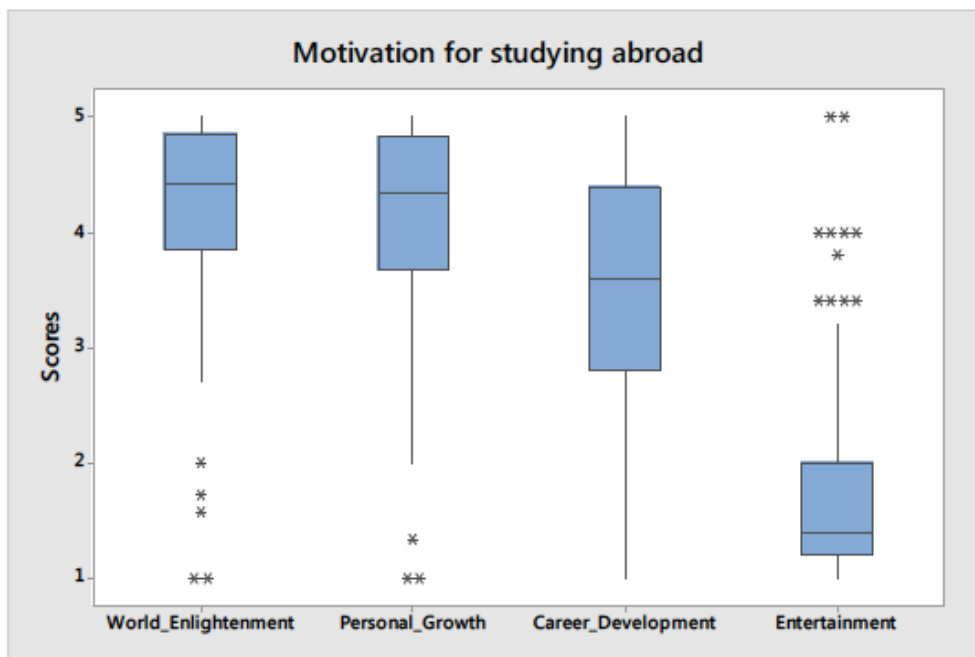
| Gender    |        | Race                     |        | L1                |        | SA place      |        | SA second language |        | Federal Pell Grant |        | Parents' SES <sup>4</sup> |        |
|-----------|--------|--------------------------|--------|-------------------|--------|---------------|--------|--------------------|--------|--------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|
| Feminine  | 72.28% | Asian                    | 10.84% | English           | 87.95% | Africa        | 5.88%  | Yes                | 61.79% | Yes                | 14.45% | High                      | 85.54% |
| Masculine | 28.89% | Black – African American | 7.22%  | Other             | 2.4%   | Asia          | 7.05%  | No                 | 35.95% | No                 | 85.54% | Middle                    | 12.04% |
| Nonbinary | 4.81%  | Hispanic - Latino        | 2.4%   | Native bilinguals | 9.63%  | Europe        | 60%    | NA                 | 2.24%  |                    |        | Low                       | 2.4%   |
|           |        | White                    | 71.08% |                   |        | Latin America | 21.17% |                    |        |                    |        |                           |        |
|           |        | More than one            | 8.43%  |                   |        | Oceania       | 5.88%  |                    |        |                    |        |                           |        |
| Total     | 100%   | Total                    | 100%   | Total             | 100%   | Total         | 100%   | Total              | 100%   | Total              | 100%   | Total                     | 100%   |

<sup>4</sup> We relied on data on a combination of parents' education and profession as indicators of SES.

## Results and Discussion

The first goal of this project was to capture potential quantitative changes in students' SA decision-making processes prior to and during the pandemic, with special attention to Health Factors. To contextualize our study, Figure 1 summarizes the results from the MSA in the 2015 study (Anderson et al., 2015), and Figure 2 summarizes our results from the same MSA questionnaire completed by students who had participated in SA programs prior to the onset of the pandemic, and who were asked to reflect on their decision-making process. Despite differences in the nature of the samples and a 6 years lapse, no significant changes in the weight of the factors guiding students' choices are observed.

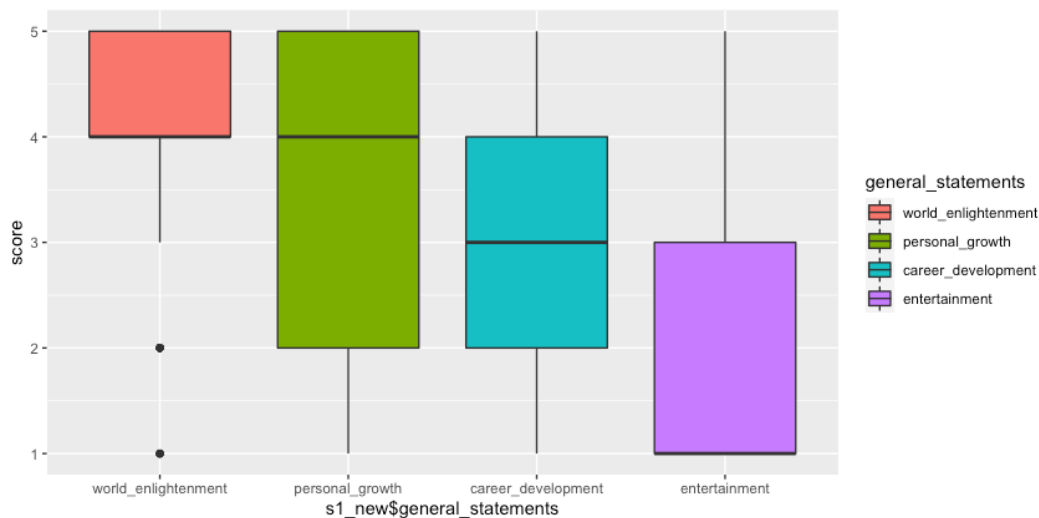
**FIGURE 1. MEAN SCORES FOR THE FOUR FACTORS IDENTIFIED BY THE MSA (ANDERSON ET AL., 2015).**



The second goal was to investigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' SA decision-making processes, which led to the addition of Health to the four factors already in the MSA. Following Allen (2010), Austin and Shen (2016), Eder et al. (2010), and Goldstein and Kim (2006) we also added Language Skills. Our sample of students, all of whom had participated in a SA program, considered the factors guiding their potential participation in their responses to

the new version of the MSA. The boxplots below (Figure 3 and Figure 4) summarize the means. The mean scores in Figure 4 indicate that World Enlightenment, Health, and Personal Growth are the three factors with the highest means, with World Enlightenment as the most important factor (World Enlightenment mean = 4.068, SD = 0.763,  $N= 83$ ; Health mean = 4.045, SD = 0.815,  $N= 83$ ; Personal Growth mean = 3.617, SD = 0.798,  $N= 83$ ). In contrast with what some scholars had anticipated (e.g., Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Bilecen, 2020; Flaherty & Nasir, 2020; Mercado, 2020; Mok, 2020), our results indicate that Health factors, while important, come second after World Enlightenment. However, a second position is still revealing, especially in contrast with pre-pandemic results, as none of the participants mentioned health related factors in their responses to an open-ended question at the onset of the study. Overall, and perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, the relative weight of the factors affecting students' decisions to participate in SA has not changed as a result of the pandemic; i.e., the order of factors pre- and during pandemic is the same as in Anderson et al. (2015). At a time when all aspects of life have been brutally impacted by a once-in-a-century health crisis, students who have experienced SA continue to rank World Enlightenment as the number one factor guiding their decision to SA, and Entertainment last.

**FIGURE 2. MEAN SCORES FOR THE FOUR FACTORS IDENTIFIED BY THE MSA IN THE PRESENT STUDY.**

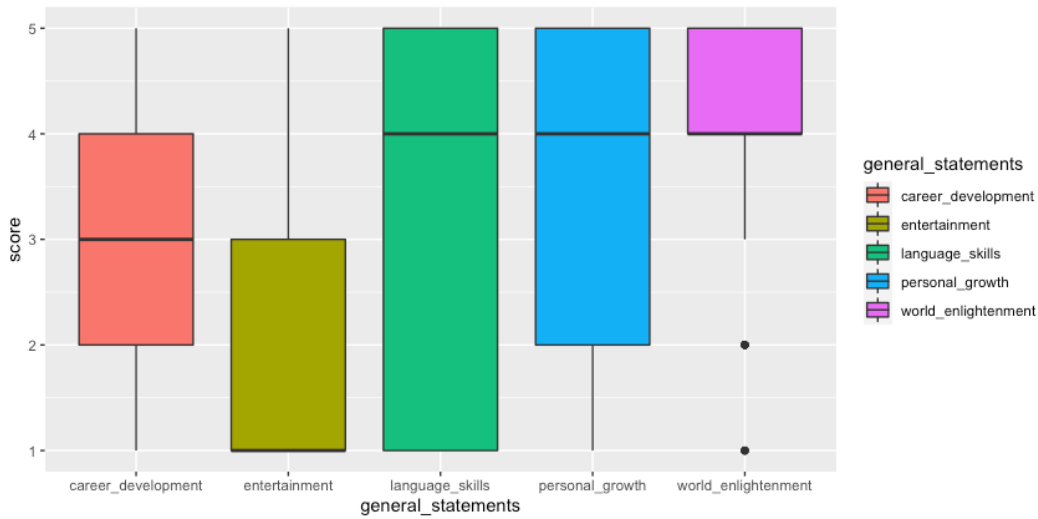


In support of previous research that defends L2 development as an important factor in students' decision to study abroad (e.g., Allen, 2010; Austin & Shen, 2016; Eder et al., 2010; Goldstein & Kim, 2006), our results show that the

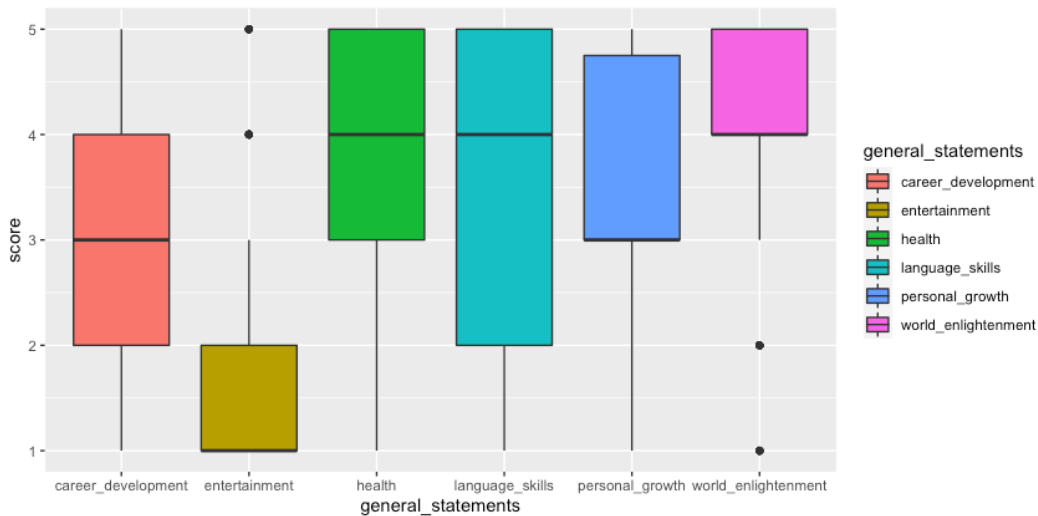


development of Language Skills is a key component of SA and is appropriate to include it in the list of potential factors. This is specially the case for our sample, with an important number of participants who had joined a SA program precisely with the goal of developing an L2, as shown in Table 1. Albert & Csizér (forthcoming) shows there is a shared belief among students that immersion is the best manner in which to develop L2 skills.

**FIGURE 3. BOXPLOTS FOR FACTORS GUIDING PARTICIPATION IN SA PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC**



**FIGURE 4. BOXPLOTS FOR FACTORS GUIDING PARTICIPATION IN SA DURING THE PANDEMIC**



We proceeded to statistically compare responses to the two versions of the MSA questionnaire, designed to elicit the relative weight of the factors guiding the students' decision-making process on SA –decisions made prior to and during the pandemic.

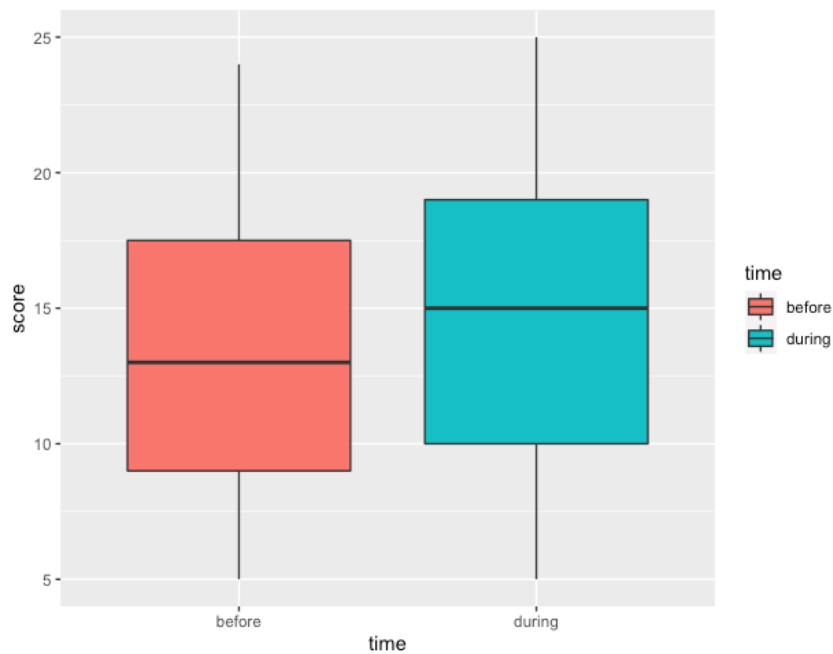
**TABLE 2. PAIRED T-TEST: FACTORS PRIOR TO AND DURING THE PANDEMIC**

|                                  | <i>t</i> | df | <i>p</i> | 95% CI        | Effect size |
|----------------------------------|----------|----|----------|---------------|-------------|
| Career Development Pre - During  | 2.44     | 82 | 0.016    | 0.195, 1.924  | 0.192       |
| Entertainment Pre - During       | -1.831   | 82 | 0.07     | -1.558, 0.064 | 0.179       |
| Lg skills Pre - During           | 1.434    | 82 | 0.155    | -0.167, 1.035 | 0.068       |
| Personal growth Pre - During     | 1.715    | 82 | 0.09     | -0.144, 1.951 | 0.182       |
| World enlightenment Pre - During | -1.751   | 82 | 0.083    | -1.415, 0.09  | 0.13        |

With the exception of Career Development, the *t*-tests comparing responses prior to and during the pandemic to each of the four factors from the MSA plus Language Skills show no significant differences. Table 2 summarizes the outcomes of the paired *t*-tests. Cohen's *d* indicates a very small effect<sup>5</sup> size ( $d = 0.192^6$ ), but it is nevertheless interesting to note the statistically significant increase in the consideration of Career Development as a factor during the pandemic (pre-pandemic mean = 13.445, SD = 5.039,  $N = 83$ ; @pandemic mean = 14.506, SD = 5.939,  $N = 83$ ) illustrated in Figure 5. The 95% CI for the difference between before and during the pandemic indicated a statistical difference [0.195, 1.924] since it does not cross zero.

<sup>5</sup> We follow Oswald & Plonsky's (2010) to interpret Cohen's *d* values.

<sup>6</sup> We relied on the average of the two SD values as standardizer to calculate Cohen's *d*.

**FIGURE 5. BOXPLOTS FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT FACTORS**

A possible explanation for this difference may lie in that the majority of participants were seniors who felt the anxiety of the spring semester job hunting. Additionally, the economic instability that followed the health crisis may have contributed to an increase in students' awareness of the affordances that SA provides in a tough job market.

A third and final goal of this project was to capture qualitative views of SA, with a focus on immersive and virtual SA experiences. Three codes emerged for the thematic analysis of the interviews: benefits of immersive SA, virtual SA, and virtual SA as an alternative. Reflecting on the formative and academic contributions of their own SA experience, participants' comments underscored the high level of impact of the SA experience on their personal growth, independence, and worldview, for example: *I gained a lot of ability to solve problems on my own or I developed a lot of my perspectives on like social and also global justice. Academically, improvement of language skills I think [I] really furthered my language skills and my confidence in language skills was the most repeated theme.*

Unanimously, participants did not view virtual SA as SA, as they expressed in the following *don't think that's a study abroad without going to a place, and it would be essentially the same as like the university education that*

*I'm doing now, but maybe in a different language.* Although a minority expressed some positive feelings towards it, perhaps due to its novelty, *I think that would be cool*, most students rejected the idea of participating in a virtual SA for *the whole point of a SA experience [being] immersion*. Indeed, participants do not consider virtual SA or even in country SA as an acceptable alternative to in person SA in a foreign country: *you can't study abroad at home, or I can see how it would expand my college experience, but I don't think I would consider it studying abroad necessarily*. Interestingly, though, there were also participants who expressed a positive opinion once a clear separation is established between SA and the experience of completing *online* coursework at a host institution. For instance: *I think that it could be a good idea. I don't think it should be called that*.

## Conclusion

The present study investigated potential changes to the factors that influence students in their decision to participate in SA programs as a result of the pandemic looking at responses from students who had participated in SA programs prior to the health crisis. Participants responded to the MSA questionnaire (Anderson & Lawton, 2015) on the factors they considered in their decision process pre-pandemic as well as the potential process they would follow if SA programs were to reopen. With the exception of career development, which has grown in importance, neither time alone—the 6 years between Anderson & Lawton's (2015) study and ours—nor the pandemic have significantly altered the weight of the *original* factors identified by Anderson and Lawton (2015) and Anderson et al. (2015). However, Covid-19 has made students much more aware of the importance of health-related factors, which are now a top consideration in guiding SA decisions, second only to world enlightenment. Students continue to value SA as a formative experience that contributes to their personal and academic development, but not all SA experiences are equally valued: only an in-person, immersive experience abroad fits the definition of SA. Students do, however, appreciate the newly discovered contributions that virtual academic exchanges and collaborations add to the academic experience. All in all, then, we have good news to report to those interested in a healthy future for SA.

We conducted the study fully online during the third wave of US infections. Collecting data during the pandemic when our campus and many

others were closed was a rather frustrating task. We worked hard to facilitate the dissemination of the survey and found support among our colleagues, but our own students, their students too, could not spend ten extra minutes in front of the screen. We plan to continue this line of research and increase the number of participants so that we can conduct more robust statistical analyses, and to include students who have not yet participated in SA. In addition, since the majority of our participants are white and female (similar to the majority of SA participants, Fischer, 2021b), we plan to focus our attention on underrepresented students, including ethnic and racial minorities, first generation college students and Pell grant recipients.

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## Appendix 1: Language Related Factors

- (i) Improve my writing skills in the target language.
- (ii) Improve my speaking skills in the target language.
- (iii) Improve my listening comprehension in the target language.
- (iv) Improve my reading skills in the target language.

## Appendix 2: Covid-19 Related Factors

- (i) Covid-specific health protocols in place at the host institution/program site.
- (ii) Infecting others/getting infected with Covid-19 while in transit.
- (iii) Host country's quality of healthcare.
- (iv) Risk of becoming ill while abroad with Covid-19.
- (v) Being vaccinated before the program.
- (vi) Health insurance coverage.
- (vii) Full refund if I cancel or program is cancelled for health reasons.

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