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# The Power of Listening: Host Community Members' Perspectives of a Field Research Education Abroad Program in Costa Rica

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## Abstract

Despite the growing body of literature investigating education abroad programs, there remains very limited empirical research examining the perspectives of local community members who interact with visiting students. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the varying perspectives of residents within a community in Costa Rica that interact with undergraduate students from a US-based field research program. Utilizing a theoretical framework of critical theory, researchers examined the perspectives of community members with varying degrees of power. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 32 local community members, direct observations, and document analysis. Findings from this study include community members' perceptions of opportunities and challenges of interactions with visiting students, community members' valuing interactions and relationships with students, and the challenge of the locus of control related to community interactions being held by a study abroad organization. This research illuminates ways to incorporate community perspectives into the design, implementation, and evaluation of education abroad programs.

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## Abstract in Spanish

A pesar del crecimiento en la literatura de los programas de investigación en el extranjero, la investigación empírica que examina las perspectivas de los miembros de la comunidad local que tienen interacción con los estudiantes extranjeros sigue siendo muy limitada. El propósito de este caso de estudio cualitativo es explorar las diversas perspectivas de los residentes de una comunidad en Costa Rica que interactúan con los estudiantes del programa de investigación de campo. Utilizando como marco teórico la teoría crítica, los investigadores examinaron las perspectivas de diversos miembros de la comunidad, todos según sus diversos grados de poder dentro de la misma. Los datos se recolectaron a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas a 32 miembros de la comunidad local, observaciones directas y análisis de documentos. Los hallazgos de este estudio incluyen las percepciones de los miembros de la comunidad sobre las oportunidades y los desafíos de las interacciones con los estudiantes visitantes, la valoración de las interacciones y relaciones de los miembros de la comunidad con los estudiantes, y el desafío del grupo de estudio relacionado con las interacciones comunitarias que tienen con una organización de estudios extranjera. Esta investigación ilumina las formas de incorporar las perspectivas de la comunidad en el diseño, la implementación y la evaluación de los programas de educación en el extranjero.

### Keywords:

Community perspectives, community-engaged education abroad, Costa Rica, field research, qualitative research

## Introduction

“How do community members view education abroad students’ presence in their community?” This is a simple question; however, despite the growing body of literature surrounding education abroad, there remains a dearth of empirical research exploring this crucial topic (Larsen, 2016). Do community members view the presence of visiting students as an enriching international partnership? Or a neo-colonialistic burden? Or something else? The unfortunate reality is that scholars and practitioners very often do not know the answer because they are not asking the question and listening to local community members. While the field of education abroad has growing emphasis on empirical assessment and evaluation, the evaluation of community outcomes often excludes local community members’ perspectives. A common scenario involves outsiders (often study abroad organizations) determining the objectives for community engagement. This is a deeply problematic paradigm

as it excludes the voices of community members from sharing their perspectives on what the objectives should be in first place. The risk exists that programs can set objectives for community engagement that are in fact not a priority for local community members. This concern increases in importance with the rise of numbers of students studying around the globe.

The number of students studying abroad has increased dramatically in the past decade. During the 2018-19 academic year (the academic year prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic which greatly disrupted global travel), 347,099 students from the United States studied around the globe for academic credit (Institute of International Education, 2020). That is compared to 191,321 students who studied abroad a decade earlier during the 2003-2004 academic year – an increase of over 50 percent. Through this increase in student mobility comes the opportunity for international collaboration and enhanced intercultural understanding for students (Hartman, 2014; Kiely, 2004). However, it can also be a setting where power dynamics and stereotypes can be reinforced, and people in a local community can be overlooked, ignored, or patronized (Escobar, 1995; Ogden, 2007; Perold et al., 2012; Prins & Webster, 2010). The opportunity for cultural misunderstanding is even greater when there is increased economic and cultural distance between visiting students and host community (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 2000; Hofstede, 1990, 2001) such as when students from universities in the Global North travel to regions in the Global South. To better understand the perspectives of community members who interact with visiting education abroad students, this study utilized an inductive research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) consisting of a qualitative case study to examine the answers to the research questions.

## Literature Review

The field of education abroad has been consistently growing among post-secondary university students globally (Institute of International Education, 2020; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). While the COVID-19 global pandemic brought a swift disruption to international travel in 2020 and 2021, prior to that there was an increase in the numbers of post-secondary students traveling internationally (Institute of International Education, 2020; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). In 2017 over 5 million students traveled internationally for post-secondary or university education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). Among universities in the United States, 347,099 students

studied around the globe for academic credit during the 2018-19 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2020). These numbers are not exhaustive as not all universities track or report their numbers. As the number of students studying around the globe increases, so too does the importance of engaging in the best practice of understanding the opportunities and challenges facing community members that interact with visiting students. This is true anywhere in the globe, but especially in the regions with greater cultural distance such as when (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 2000; Hofstede, 2001).

### Community Perspectives and Education Abroad

Nearly all education abroad programs involve some sort of interactions with local people – either directly or indirectly. As the numbers of students who study in different regions around the globe increase, it follows that so too does the number of host community members who interact directly or indirectly with visiting students. While numerous researchers have reported on the importance of understanding community perspectives of education abroad programs (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Caldwell & Purtzer, 2015; Curtin et al., 2015; Gelmon et al., 2009; Riner, 2011; Visovsky et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2011) very few empirical studies exist exploring the perceptions of community members who host education abroad programs (Larsen, 2016; Reynolds, 2014). Community interaction can happen in a variety of contexts, but especially when students exit the walls of a traditional classroom and engage in field study. The Forum on Education Abroad (n.d.) defines a “Field Study Program” as “A study abroad program type whose pedagogy revolves around experiential study outside the classroom setting. Examples include field research programs, internship programs, service-learning programs, archaeological field schools, and field biology programs.”

Unfortunately, well intentioned universities have a history of misunderstanding the needs of people, both locally and globally (Mathews, 2009). Mathews (2009) refers to the phenomenon of universities working to engage in communities but misunderstanding the priorities of the community as “ships passing in the night” (p. 11). While his critique and analysis relate to domestic higher education engagement, the risk of institutions and communities remains – and is perhaps more profound – in international contexts. He argues that outside experts must listen to local community members and recognize their local expertise if reciprocal benefits for community members and universities are to emerge. Scholars argue that it is

essential to hear and listen to the perspectives of local community members to fully understand the specific dynamics and needs of a community (Camacho, 2004; d'Arlach et al., 2009).

The power dynamics of university-community relationships are reflected in the remarks of a community organization hosting a domestic service learning partnership:

I think that sometimes, too, there are some professors that don't really understand it very well. They don't really understand the needs of the community, and they think, "I'll just make this requirement for twenty-five hours of direct service," without understanding how challenging that is for different agencies—that this doesn't work, it's not a good fit (Tryon et al., 2009).

It is important to acknowledge the power held by both university program coordinators and university students engaged in the education abroad program. An education abroad program that seeks to effectively engage with community members will recognize the power dynamics and work to effectively share or level the balances of power as much as possible by listening to perspectives that are often not heard and allowing community members to influence the structure of such programs to promote more meaningful benefits for university participants and community members. The Fair Trade Learning Framework advocates for reciprocal benefits for students and community members through engaging with community members in all parts of the program: "Community engagement, learning, program design, and budgeting should all include significant community direction, feedback, and opportunities for iterative improvements" (Hartman et al., 2014, p. 114). There are many practical ways, both formal and informal to put this into practice. One method of eliciting community members' insights in field-based education abroad programs is through Community Based Research (CBR) (Williamson et al., 2020). CBR is defined as a:

... form of community engagement in which community-identified needs for knowledge and information are addressed through partnerships often involving students, faculty, and community organizations or groups. This work grows out of models for popular education, participatory action research and related educational pedagogies, such

as from the work of Paolo Freire, Kurt Lewin, and others (Bonner Foundation, 2016).

It is a collaborative process between outside researchers (either professors or students) and local community partners (perhaps researchers themselves, professors, or one of many other members of the community) throughout the entire project. Incorporating community members' insights into planning, design, and evaluation will yield programs with greater benefits to community members.

The much-needed study of the perspectives of host community members is just beginning. Several key strengths and weaknesses have been identified from prior studies. The first is the strength of students incorporating new ideas into an organization and can see situations with a fresh perspective (Perold et al., 2012). Second is the often-enhanced perception of a community or organization when they are receiving international, likely wealthy, students into their community (Lough & Matthew, 2013; Perold et al., 2012) as well as a sense of pride within the community itself (Lough & Matthew, 2013; Reynolds, 2014). Host organizations also felt that students and international volunteers would continue to advocate on their behalf when they return to their home countries (Perold et al., 2012) or maintain a greater sense of consciousness related to the community (Reynolds, 2014). Other perceived benefits included community capacity building, transfer of skills, additional resources and finances being injected into the local community, enhanced intercultural understanding on the part of community members, and enhanced innovation within the community (Lough & Matthew, 2013; Toms Smedley, 2016). Scholars also highlight the importance of long standing, trust-filled relationships between community members, visiting students, and education abroad organizations (Doughty, 2020, Author, Year). Additionally, Reynolds (2014) addressed the need to involve community members in all stages of program conceptions, implementation, and evaluation.

## Theoretical Framework

This study explores the perspective of community members who often do not have the ability to share their perspective in the partnership with visiting university students. Critical Theory serves as a relevant theoretical perspective through which to conduct this study. The central questions of Critical Theory are: who has power, who does not, and why (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). This

theoretical paradigm explores a broad range of perspectives (such as feminism, cultural materialism, post-colonialism, postmodernism, and race) and ultimately addresses issues of power, domination, and oppression. Critical Theory draws its roots from several places including Marx (1844) and Foucault (1975, 1977, 1978). Additionally, Paulo Freire (1972) is credited with bringing critical theory to the field of education. While there are many different interpretations of critical theory, Kincheloe and McLaren (2003) highlight seven generally accepted principles and commonalities of critical theory including: “(1) All thought is fundamentally mediated by socially and historically constituted power relations;... (5) Certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable;... (7) Mainstream research practices are generally, although often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression” (p. 280-281). While Critical Theory may be used in many different contexts, these seven principles remain consistent in its application. Critical Theory serves as a useful theoretical lens through which to examine the relationships within an education abroad program as it provides a voice to community members whose perspectives are often not seen or heard.

The theoretical framework of critical theory provides a foundation through which to understand the dynamics of education abroad partnership, and more specifically, field study research program partnership. These frameworks are applied to examine the perspectives of community members interacting with students participating in these programs. The examination of these theories presents the following research questions:

1. What are community members’ perceptions of the impacts, opportunities, and challenges of field study education abroad programs?
2. How do members of a community navigate participation in a field study education abroad partnership?
3. How do community members’ power and position in the community impact participation and perceptions of field study education abroad programs?

These research questions drive this research study.

## Methodology

### Research Design and Data Collection

This research study consisted of a qualitative case study exploring community members' perspectives of student involvement in their community from a field research program in Costa Rica. A qualitative study allows for a depth of understanding the meaning and processes of the experiences of the research participants (Babbie, 2012; Bernard, 2011; Creswell, 2013). The disadvantage of a qualitative study is that it is not possible to generalize from the findings to other similar situations; however, the depth of inquiry is expected to yield added insight that will be useful to develop assertions that may be relevant to other programs and community-university relationships. As such, a case study is especially useful in exploring a real-world situation where it is essential to understand various aspects of the context to gain a richer understanding of the case (Yin, 2014).

The unit of analysis utilized for this study is individual community members who interact directly or indirectly with field study education abroad programs. This study examines the concept of community not as one homogenous group, but as a series of individuals who interact (Wilkinson, 1991). Costa Rica was selected as a site due to its location in the Global South (The World Bank, 2021) and its popularity among the top ten education abroad locations for undergraduate students from U.S. universities (Institute of International Education, 2020). Data collection took place during two visits to Costa Rica, the first in August 2017 and the second in June-July 2018. Semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher in Spanish, direct observations, and document analysis were all used as data collection methods.

### Population and Sample

This study utilized a non-probability chain referral sample (also known as snowball sample) and a purposive (or judgment) sample (Bernard, 2011). The goal of this study was to gain deep insights into community members' perspectives, not to generalize to a larger population, so it was not necessary to utilize a probability sampling method. Informed by the theoretical framework of critical theory, one of the research questions explored community members' power and position within the community. As such it was important to identify a diverse cross section of community members who interact with visiting



students. The following table identifies the roles of community members who participated in this study.

Community Member	Research participants	Gender	Relationship to The Center
Staff member at the Center	6	4 females, 2 males	Cooks, Custodial staff, Grounds maintenance, security
Neighboring community residents	11	7 females, 4 males	Neighbors near The Center, taxi drivers, small business owners near The Center
Outreach participants	9	4 females, 5 males	Staff at nursing homes and other community organizations, teachers at schools
Research partners	6	0 females, 6 males	Professors at partner universities, farmers, directors of research at national parks

**TABLE (1):** OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Speaking to a diverse range of community residents allowed researchers to understand a broad range of perspectives on the interactions community members have with visiting students.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

This study involves a qualitative analysis of various community members who host an education abroad program in Costa Rica. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed and then reviewed for data analysis. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Spanish, transcribed by a third-party transcription service, and then translated into English by a third-party translation service. Following transcription, the interviews were uploaded into MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software. A thorough review of the Spanish and English transcripts and data was conducted utilizing MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software to review the findings from the interviews, direct observations, and document analysis.

Researchers analyzed the data utilizing First and Second Cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009). First Cycle coding allows the researcher to provide a preliminary examination of the data identifying key concepts and ideas. Descriptive Coding, Initial Coding, and In Vivo Coding were all used for First Cycle coding. Second Cycle coding involves a second examination of the data

and First Cycle codes (Saldaña, 2009). There were also Third and Fourth Cycle codes. In this study, researchers conducted Second Cycle coding utilizing Pattern Coding. Pattern Codes are “explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis.” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). Pattern Coding is a means of organizing First Cycle codes into groups of smaller subsets and themes. Themes were identified from the data collected.

### Establishing Data Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the credibility of the data gathered, it is essential that the researcher devote oneself to a “rigorous methodological path” (Yin, 2014, p. 3) connecting the research questions to the theoretical framework, research methods, and data analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four key components of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility addresses the rigor of the research design and the accurate reflection of the reality of the research. To maximize the credibility of the design of this study researchers utilized triangulation of the data and member checking. Transferability addresses the degree to which the results may be generalized to other contexts. While this study makes no claims of generalizability, the use of rich, thick descriptions provides context for readers to understand where and how this study is situated to understand the context. To maximize the dependability of this study, researchers utilized an audit trail and peer review. Finally, confirmability was sought through triangulation, member checking, and audit trails.

## Findings

### Description of Site

Situated at the end of a long road on the outskirts of Paciencia, Costa Rica<sup>1</sup>, The Center for Environmental Research (called “The Center” in this paper) is one of several study centers run and operated by the U.S.-based Field Research International. Specializing in field-based research for undergraduate students, the Paciencia site focuses on environmental and socially sustainable development.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all locations, people, and organizations have been changed to protect the privacy of all research participants.

As a town, Paciencia shares a split identity of being close to the capital city of San Jose and yet being far removed and away from the busyness of the big city. Paciencia has a population of nearly 30,000 and is about a one-hour drive from San Jose within Costa Rica's central valley. It has a downtown with a park and church at its center, as is the case of most Central American towns and cities, but is also surrounded by hills, forests, and farms.



**FIGURE (1):** PHOTO OF A LOCAL FARMER WALKING CATTLE THROUGH THE CENTRAL COMMERCIAL AREA OF PACIENCIA, COSTA RICA. WHILE NOT A REGULAR SIGHT, IT IS NOT UNCOMMON TO SEE THIS COLLISION OF CITY AND FARM IN TOWN

The location of the study center within Paciencia paints an intriguing picture of the interactions between the study center and the surrounding community. Leaving from the center of Paciencia, it is a 10-minute drive down a single road until one reaches the gates of The Center. The road often plays host to cars traveling back and forth or for people walking to enjoy fresh air or to travel into town. While The Center is within the city limits of Paciencia, its location at the end of the road means it is removed from everyday life in town. While houses with community residents line the road winding towards The Center, The Center acts more like a gated community or an enclosed academic enclave than an active member of the community. Multiple community

residents commented that they only know when classes are in session when they see students going for a run along the road.

The academic programs of the Field Research International are all based in The Center. The Center contains a wealth of resources with a residence hall, classroom space, dining area, apartments for faculty and visitors, a soccer field, swimming pool, organic farm, and more. The students live, eat, take classes, and play at the center for either a semester or a month-long summer program. Students can leave the Center during the day when they have free time; however, they must return by a designated curfew. The curfew illustrates the tension the administration of The Center faces trying to promote the safety and security of the students but implementing something that may be seen by community members as potentially limiting opportunities for interactions later in the evening. Frequently, when students leave The Center, they either go for a run, a short walk to buy ice cream from a local vendor, or are meeting a taxi to drive them downtown.



**FIGURE (2):** PHOTO OF THE LONG ROAD LEADING TO THE CENTER. UPON CLOSER EXAMINATION, THERE ARE WALKWAYS AND GATES LEADING UP TO HOUSES THAT ARE SET BACK FROM THE STREET

## Community Interactions

Interaction with community members is a part of the three-fold mission of The Center: research, experiential learning, and community outreach (The Center, 2017). The Center has highlighted long-term goals such as:

Ensure that CSDS maintains its role as an active member of the community of Barrio El Carmen and Paciencia... Increase the connection with local and international institutions (universities, NGOs, communities)... and maintain strong relationships with National Parks, NGOs and local communities (The Center, 2017).

While community outreach is one of the three strategic goals of the institution, the goals for community outreach are not developed with significant consultation from community members. Students interact with local Costa Rican community members through four main areas: the staff working at the Center, the neighbors in the vicinity surrounding the Center, people connected to organizations where there are planned community outreaches, and people connected to organizations where there are planned research activities.

From cooks and groundskeepers to security and administrative support, there are several local community members who work at The Center. When the students are staying at The Center, they have daily interactions with staff. Some of these interactions involve working alongside community members as they conduct various chores, such as working on the small farm alongside a property manager or preparing a meal alongside the cooks. There are also more distant interactions between students and the staff at the Center where community members see the students and say “hola,” but neighbors commented they rarely have more meaningful interactions beyond basic greetings. Several staff members commented that the Spanish-English language barrier was a challenge and limited their interactions with the students. Though the staff and students often eat meals together at The Center, researchers observed that both groups were often sitting at their own tables in the dining room.

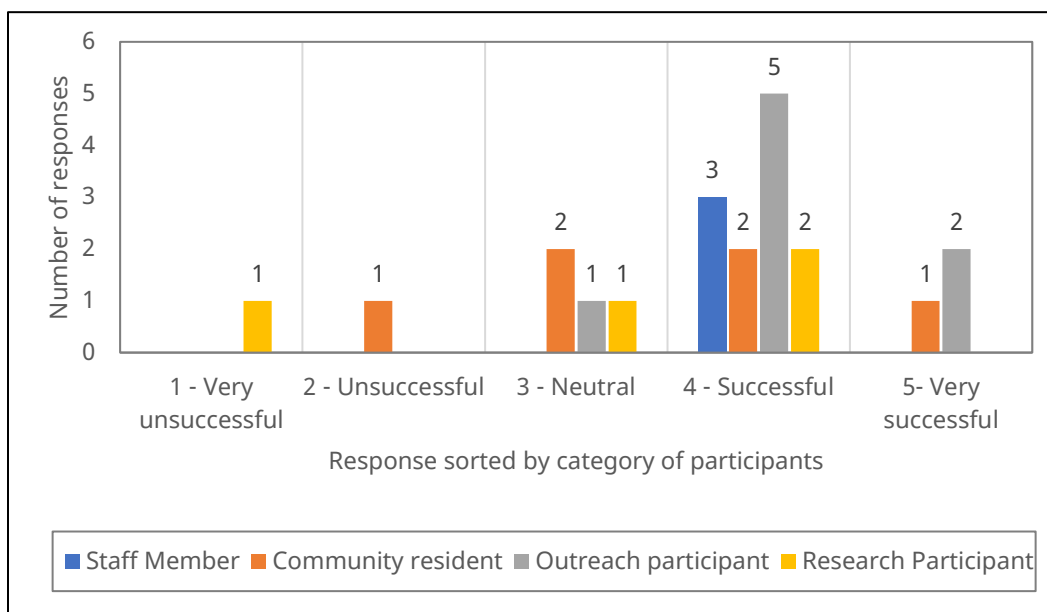
When students leave the gates of The Center, they can interact with community members who live and work in the surrounding neighborhoods. The road leading to the center of town is lined with houses where families and individuals of all ages and life stages live. Many people in the community can be found walking up and down the main road as they enjoy a cooler morning or travel to work. Some community members can also be found sitting on their porches visiting with each other or with kids playing near the street. There are also a few shops along the road where students can buy basic items or ice cream. Taxi drivers also have interactions with students as they take rides from the Center into town and on other excursions.

Another means of interaction with community members comes in the form of monthly, planned community outreaches. During these times, students participate in activities with community members, ranging from schoolteachers and students to members of community organizations. These outreaches are planned by the staff of the Center and include practicing English with local English language learners, planting trees to help promote the health of a local aquifer, and participating in activities with children at a local school.

Finally, students interact with community members who host excursions to several research sites throughout the country. Over the course of the academic term, students take part in field research projects directed and organized by the faculty of The Center. Students participate in ecological, biological, or social research that consists of visiting a location ranging from a day to more than a week, depending on the distance and needs of the research project. The research sites range from coffee farms to national parks to beach communities, which host many tourists. While students may conduct research counting insects in a square meter or explore the impacts of climate change on coffee plants, they have a variety of interactions with farmers, staff at national parks, and community members who live in these towns.

Throughout this study, researchers had the opportunity to interview community residents (in addition to many informal conversations) at all points of this continuum, each with varying amounts of interactions with students. The variety of community participants with various roles and positions of power within the local community is essentially based upon the theoretical framework of this study, which seeks to understand the perspectives of a variety of community members with various levels of power and influence over this program. Speaking to a diverse range of community residents allowed the researchers to understand diverse ranges of perspectives on the interactions community members have with visiting students.

In general, the overall perceptions of the community members we spoke with were favorable of the partnership. We asked many community members the question: "How successful is this relationship?" This sometimes sparked other conversations and a numerical response was not provided. Of the numerical responses provided, this is the way they presented:



**FIGURE (4):** RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "HOW SUCCESSFUL IS THIS RELATIONSHIP?"

In general, most people viewed the relationship as successful. It is important to note, however, that these data are not generalizable to a larger population and only reflective of the participants with whom researchers spoke. Through interviews, direct observation, document analysis, and subsequent qualitative data analysis, we identified numerous themes to illuminate the significance of this quantitative data.

### Summary of Themes Interactions

Through an examination of semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and participant observation, numerous themes emerged. The themes identified are: 1) Economic contributions, 2) Social and cultural benefits, 3) Professional assistance, 4) A cold relationship, 5) Rigid schedule, and 6) Locus of control held by The Center. All these themes, or variations of them, were previously identified in the scholarly literature in some fashion:

#### Theme 1: Economic Contribution

The first benefit to having students present in the community identified by community members was that of economic contributions. Numerous community members identified the creation of jobs and support of local businesses as a major benefit to having students involved in the community. While the number of people who work at the Center is limited, the benefit of

employment was meaningful to multiple employees who work there. In response to the question asking how they benefit personally, Valentina who works at the Center responded: “Because we have work... Yes, we have jobs thanks to them.”

When asked who benefits the most from this interaction – college students, community members, the staff of the organization, or someone else – David, a neighbor who lives near The Center stated: “I would say the community because there are several [people] who work there, and they benefit from the students... the taxis benefit... The bars benefit a lot; there are students who drink a lot.”

When asked what he would change with having students present in the community, Sebastián, a taxi driver in town said:

... I would change, maybe bringing more students. It's very important because the more students, the more work the town has, and then they have more benefits. With them because although they are in the university, they always come to town. To consume, to buy, so the benefit is for everyone—public transport, commerce. Yes, the more students the better it is for the town.

For Sebastián, the economic benefits extended to himself directly and others in the community indirectly.

Toms (2016) identified economic contributions as a benefit to community engaged education abroad programs in Costa Rica. The economic benefits of that study specifically focused on payments made to families to host visiting students as opposed to the creation of jobs or financial injections into the broader community. This finding highlights the differing nature of community interactions with various structures of education abroad programs where students in this study live at the Center as opposed to staying with host families.

## Theme 2: Social and Cultural Benefits

Another benefit identified by community members is the cultural and social exchange between community members and visiting students. This finding aligns with studies conducted by other scholars (Powell & Bratović, 2006; Reynolds & Gasparini, 2016; Sherraden et al., 2013). Isabel is a neighbor who lives near the Center and hosts visiting students from the Center with her family for one day a semester. Other neighbors said they had this opportunity in the



past and missed having this opportunity for an exchange of relationships and ideas. The Center made changes to their homestay arrangements several years prior due to concerns about the safety of students due to an incident with a host family. Isabel stated that she saw the benefits of this cultural and social exchange working in both directions. She stated that she valued students' involvement in the community: "Because you learn, being with a student means learning things, customs, traditions. Likewise, I can teach them. We are two people from very different countries." For her, learning from each other was a mutual benefit for both students and herself.

We asked Isaac and María José who work with a community association, how they personally benefit from having students present in the community. María José responded: "Well, personally in the sense of the cultural exchange, a chat, a space, and a friendship as well." She commented that she valued interacting with different students over the holidays where she could host them for a day. Isaac shared the same sentiment: "Yes, more than anything else, it's the cultural exchange."

For them, the direct benefits were cultural and social. These benefits are more intangible but perhaps more evident for those who have meaningful interactions with visiting students. This theme reflects the relational orientation of the culture (Hofstede, 2003) and the importance of meaningful relationships held by community members.

### Theme 3: Professional Assistance

A third benefit that emerged from an analysis of data from this study came in the form of assisting community members in their work or professional benefits. Whether conducting research that allowed community members to advocate for saving the destruction of the forest near their homes, providing enhanced English language practice to students, or conducting ecological research in a national park, all were seen as valuable contributions by community members.

One way the visiting students at The Center helped benefit the community neighbors was in providing data and information to maintain the forest in the surrounding area and the natural beauty of the community. Don David has lived in the community his whole life. He commented on the benefits to the community of students' research:

... This Center has carried out very valuable studies here in this community. I remember one that was done by a girl who came here to do a study on birds, and we have a study of the birds of this community thanks to that... and valuable research on snakes and bats and other things, and they have presented them here.

He and Maria went on to discuss a situation where the local government wanted to create a new road that would have negative environmental consequences as well as bring additional traffic into the community. The Center conducted an environmental assessment of the impacts of building a new road and presented it to the local government. By being able to support the community with data and leverage their academic experiences, the Center assisted the community members in stopping the installation of a road that would have destroyed large parts of the forest and jungle surrounding the community. Similar benefits such as enhanced functioning of projects, individualized attention to clients, and free labor were all identified by scholars in domestic service learning programs (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Schmidt & Robby, 2002; Vernon & Ward, 1999) and international programs (Edwards et al., 2015; Irie et al., 2010; Reynolds, 2014).

#### Theme 4: A Cold Relationship

While there were definite benefits observed by community members, challenges were also found. Community members were quick to point out the lack of problems; however, many felt challenges existed and that the relationship between visiting students and local community members could be improved. The most common challenge observed was the desire for more opportunity for contact with students – both in terms of quantity and quality of interactions.

Luciana lives in the neighborhood surrounding the Center and felt the interactions with students were either limited or non-existent.

... [It is] you over there and me over here. There is not a ‘Hello’ or a ‘How are you?’ ‘Do you live around here?’ So, I do not learn anything from them, and they don’t learn anything from me. There is no relationship between us.

Several people commented that they felt the relationship was “cold” and they desired a deeper level of relationship. In a meeting with three individuals

from an organization focused on environmental sustainability, they all commented they wanted more interaction with students, not just simply the act of working on a project of planting trees one time.

José: I feel [the relationship] is very cold, I mean, I would like to change it personally; we do an activity and then it's over, and bye.

Ana Esther: Give it like a follow-up.

José: Follow up, but how? Provide a social follow-up, I mean, invite them to come one day to share the experience and have a coffee with them, or a soda, you see? I said that, to have them more...

Daniel: Give them a follow-up and let's say, those who have planted, and also follow them up, visit the... not only just plant it but in the rest of the year, give it two or three visits.

Ana Esther: I really see it as that, that the trees grow and in two months they come to see the trees.

José: ...Then the more successful [partnership] would be for students to participate more, more constantly.]

This finding aligns with Reynolds' (2014) finding that community participants suggested that visiting students saw their community as more of a laboratory for conducting work rather than a partnership. This perception of an uneven partnership or an absent partnership may result in less meaningful or robust collaborations with community members feeling unheard or less valued. Many community members indicated that they valued the relationship with visiting college students, perhaps even over specific projects conducted in the community. The desire for a stronger relationship reflects a stronger relational orientation found in Costa Rican culture compared to a stronger task-orientation found in the United States (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 2000; Hofstede, 1990, 2003).

### Theme 5: Rigid Schedule

Another theme that emerged is that of the full schedule that students maintain. This is very much related to the theme of locus of control; however, there were repeated, specific comments about the full schedule that students keep that limited community members' interactions with students. One

neighbor near the Center, Maria, saw the challenges of the schedule firsthand. She spoke about her thoughts on the challenges of the schedule:

Barrio El Carmen needs more from The Center, but the students come here to study, and they have a schedule. So, it's very difficult during the day to do activities and form a relationship out in the community, because they have the other obligations... But yes, it's very difficult to have activities with the communities because of the schedule that they have here because they eat breakfast and are in class until 12, then lunch and classes until 5:30 and then dinner is at night... So, it's complicated, I think that the schedule could be structured a bit better to include some free time and I also think that it is cultural.

The challenge of the strict schedule raises awareness of the tension that it is hard to be "all things to all people." When asked about the schedule, the director of The Center wrote in an e-mail:

About the schedule... yes, it is very structured. The reason is that we need to include all classes and activities there to comply with the contact hours we have for all the FRI courses. Also, professors need specific times for classes, field experiments, and field trips. We also schedule activities with the community. Some of these activities involve communities outside Barrio El Carmen and Paciencia. These things our immediate neighbors don't see... we could do more and find better, more efficient ways to communicate. Also, students need time to plan their activities, self-regulate their functioning (addressing internal issues regarding community living, etc.). Funny thing is that everyone wants time and then complains that the schedule is crazy. However, it is very hard to put together.

FRI has worked hard to balance the demands of building academically rigorous programs. However, from the perspective of many community members, that strict schedule may be keeping students from having meaningful interactions with members of the community. This finding matches the findings of Reynolds (2014) and highlights the challenges of being limited in time and resources and not being able to accommodate all desires of all people. The above comment also points to the idea of different cultural priorities between the students and community members (Hofstede, 2003) with students and the program structured on the task of conducting research with community

members desiring more of a relationship with students. This also is addressed in the Fair Trade Learning framework which advocates for (among many other areas) sensitivity in the areas of timing, duration, and repetition for the community partners (Hartman et al., 2014). The question at hand is how an education abroad program can offer reciprocal benefits to both students and community members. From the perspective of community members, local residents are missing out on what they perceive as valuable interactions with visiting students and desire more.

### Theme 6: Locus of Control Held by the Center

Another theme that emerged was who held the power or maintained the locus of control in interactions between community members and visiting students. This theme addresses research question two (how community members navigate relationships) and research question three (how positionality in the community impacts relationships). Regardless of the power or position held by community members – whether professors, directors of organizations, or local residents – community members felt they could not change the nature of interactions with students. Scholars have identified similar challenges for community organizations in domestic university partnerships such as the time needed to host students, extra demands of communication, or preparing students to participate in community engaged programs (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Irie et al., 2010; Stoecker et al., 2009; Vernon & Ward, 1999). In interactions with the students of the Center, community members generally perceived the schedule was established by the Center and could not be changed. Alejandro, who teaches English to Costa Rican students said:

It's like I wish we had more mornings or afternoons in which you know... [the director] can say, "take Wednesday morning and go, guys, and play soccer with them, or let's invite the Tico [Costa Rican] students to go and plant some trees with us."... So, in this way we can, let's say, guarantee that more real-life contexts can take place [in interactions between Costa Rican students and visiting US students].

This thought was reflective of many other comments of community members, which supported the community residents' feelings that the leadership of The Center held the locus of control. Regardless of the power community members held, most felt as though they could not make changes to the ways they interacted with students. Individuals from each of the levels of

interactions with students – staff members, local neighbors, outreach participants, and research participants – felt they were limited in their abilities to change the way they interacted with the visiting students. Some community residents did not see this limited ability to make changes as a problem and instead was just the nature of interactions with visiting students. Addressing research question three regarding how community members' position and status impact their participation and perceptions of field study education abroad programs, staff members and those with less power in the relationship tended to be more accepting of the inability to make changes to the relationship, while research partners and outreach partners were more likely to express discontent with their inability to change the interactions with visiting students.

In this study, there were many people with powerful roles within their local community who wished they had a closer relationship with the university students and The Center. Don Marcos is a leading administrator of a university where The Center has a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Despite his position of power, he views the relationship as neutral.

This is what is happening at this time, there is no communication, there is nothing in common, there are no activities that we have coordinated. It's not bad, it's nothing more... that's the reality. But the solution is very simple: let's bring what you have to both, and do something in common. But if one person wants to do something and the other is not interested... On our part we are open, and we have said that we are open for the research, and they are invited.

Though he has much power with his role, he held a similar opinion to others with a less formal role or less power to influence the relationship with The Center. He valued the work of The Center but desired a closer relationship with The Center and the visiting students with more reciprocal benefits.

## Discussion

Throughout this study, an overarching theme of inclusion and relationships emerged. In exploring the themes which emerged through data analysis, there are several key concepts to address in this discussion directly related to relationships, power, the structure of programs, community resources, and finally, individual personalities.

## The Power of Listening

The very act of listening to community members is a powerful activity, but also connotes a degree of power in roles between a listener and those talking. One central question to this study is the role that power plays in influencing the perspectives of community members.

Critical theory emphasizes the significance of interrogating power imbalances, such as those between study abroad programs, student participants, and local community members, and within the community itself. Findings indicate community power plays a small role in shaping community perspectives, but in the end, the power of local residents is overshadowed by the greater influence of US-based education abroad programs, who ultimately choose what impacts the community. One way many education abroad programs have attempted to thwart power dynamics is through formal agreements with host community institutions such as a Memorandum of Understandings (MOU) which are seen as a best practice for university and community partnerships. However, in this case, Don Marcos, an administrator at a local university with a signed MOU with The Center felt that he did not have the power to influence how and when students from The Center worked with his students. Don Marcos' concerns align with the literature from some scholars about the power dynamics held by outside universities that enter into local communities without really listening to local community members (Mathews, 2009; Ogden, 2007; Stoecker, 2016; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008). As a result, these programs could reinforce power structures and produce programs with one-sided benefits. In this program structure, local partners are less of a partner and more of a transactional element that fulfills the US study abroad program's goals. Partnerships that are unbalanced risk being unsustainable when one partner does not feel valued or heard. Organizations that wish to foster partnerships with long-term benefits must recognize their power and recognize who has the ability to make changes and determine the terms of the partnership.

Community members expressed a strong desire for meaningful relationships repeatedly during the study. In the study, community members with a sense of being heard generally agreed that programs were valuable. The feeling of being heard were ultimately fostered by the role of the Center and its ability to foster relationships between the community and the outside guests (study abroad participants). The Center sits in a unique position balancing the goals of the community, academics, and the safety of visiting students. Since

community partnerships are a priority in the program's strategic plan, it is important to ask what priority the program assigns to community engagement. In order to make sure this is a priority, they should find out what their community partners actually want and need. After listening to these needs, the program should be designed and evaluated accordingly. By listening to community members, they might discover opportunities for synergy, such as restoring soccer matches with neighbors to promote cultural and social exchanges with reciprocal benefits for visiting students and local residents.

In closing, it is important to note that while examining this study's findings, individuals' personalities played a key role in shaping community perceptions. Larsen (2016) and McGehee and Andereck (2009) identify that people within a community may have quite different perspectives on interactions between community members and outsiders. Thus, this study aimed to highlight the importance of positionality, as well as to engage the perspectives of members of the community with varying interactions with visiting university students. Rather than simply focusing on broad theories and trends, it is important to understand that individual members of a community also bring their own feelings, perceptions, cultures, and values to a situation, which are part of the larger system. These complex and diverse factors inevitably impact an individual's perception of the nuances, norms, and beliefs about the project. Despite the fact that broader theories address variations in perceptions, human beings are complex creatures who sometimes act in ways that seem beyond understanding.

## Relationships

The value of balanced relationships emerged as a central value throughout this study. The importance of relationships was seen through local community residents who saw the value of cultural exchanges, outreach partners who felt the relationship was valued but "cold," and research partners who saw meaning in the work students were doing but wished they had more ability to make changes in the partnership. This aligns with the findings of other scholars who advocate for the incorporation of community voice and direction (Hartman et al., 2014; Reynolds, 2014) and enhanced relationships with communities (Doughty, 2020). Similarly, Morton and Bergbauer (2015) argue for the merits of strengthened relationships both between communities and universities and within communities themselves.



The desire for an enhanced relationship between students and community members presents a common challenge between the programs: who is included and who is left out? Most community members saw the value of having university students present in the community but also desired a stronger relationship with The Center and the visiting university students. Due to the limits of geography and finite resources, no program can be all things to all people. The leadership of a program can, however, have an awareness of who in the community is included and who is not. The findings of this study indicate that both sites would benefit from more participatory community involvement. Several community members commented on the importance of a reciprocal relationship with an exchange of ideas, thoughts, and perspectives, not just a top-down approach. When asked to define the ideal relationship, Don David said:

For me, a successful relationship would be a relationship where there is that exchange, that exchange of opinions, ideas, suggestions because they have very good ideas and very good suggestions that would be invaluable to contribute there to the conservation of Barrio El Carmen, community development or the association of the environment... If that relationship [an exchange of opinions, ideas, and suggestions] is achieved, I would say it would be quite successful.

This desire for an exchange was reflected by other community members and highlights the importance of recognizing local knowledge (Fisher, 2000). As described earlier, local knowledge is understood as the knowledge held by local people about a setting or context. Local knowledge includes “empirical knowledge of specific characteristics, circumstances, events, and relationships, as well as the normative understandings of their meaning... it owes its status... to casual empiricism, thoughtful reflection, and common sense” (Fischer, 2000, p. 146). Promoting a reciprocal relationship with mutual understanding and an exchange of ideas would lend itself to greater inclusion of local knowledge and enhance relationships with community members.

The desire for a more significant relationship was seen in the interactions of the research conducted by students. Mateo, who oversees research at a national park where visiting students conduct studies also emphasized the desire for an exchange of ideas and relationships that promotes reciprocity. He repeatedly commented that he would prefer that students come to his national park to conduct research once a month over the course of the

year rather than just once over the summer. Not only was the schedule limited, but also the nature of the research questions. He stated:

Well, we [at the park] make decisions more than anything based on the research that the park has as a priority...General research is often established by the [researchers from The Center] who already came with some analysis of what they want to investigate... I think that if there were more students during the year, as I said before, and we could do [research] monthly, then we would establish a project in which we could implement a lot of the vision of the park, but without that, that follow-up, that research, if not a whole project, we cannot, like, plan many things.

Mateo felt that he was not able to influence the research questions determined by the visiting students. This sentiment highlights the common tension of competing priorities between local communities and universities (Mathews, 2009). In this regard, Mateo expressed a desire for more participatory research between The Center and the national park. As a research-based program, the Center could work to promote a reciprocal relationship through the means of Community-Based Research (CBR). CBR has gained popularity as a means of promoting positive community engagement by university partners (Stoecker, 2003). It shows promise as engaging community partners in all stages of the development process. On a practical level, this approach expands to include the following components:

Community-based research (CBR) involves collaborative work between researchers (typically, faculty and students) and community members (typically nonprofit staff or clients) in the design and implementation of projects designed to address community-identified needs or wants. The output (products) of such collaboration may include research papers but can also take other forms (i.e., issue briefs, needs assessments, environmental surveys, etc.) (Bonner Foundation, 2016).

CBR recognizes the value of multiple sources of knowledge and advocates for the use of various methods of investigation and sharing the knowledge identified (Jason & Glenwick, 2016; Munck et al., 2014). In this model of research and scholarship centered around the community, university participants and community members work together to identify research topics, develop the research designs and plans, collect data or information, write up the

findings, work with relevant parties to disseminate knowledge and publish findings, and finally plan appropriate responses or next steps. This approach is a very different methodology for research where the park and faculty and students of The Center could establish research questions together and collaborate on research together on an agreed upon schedule. There would be challenges that arise with this model in the scheduling of activities of students and that this model simply takes more time and planning. That said, CBR could still provide many benefits such as more investment from community members, stronger partnerships, and more meaningful learning for visiting students.

### Recommendations for Practice

In order to address the disconnect between community members and the Center, five recommendations for practice emerge from the findings and the theoretical literature to enhance reciprocal benefits for local community members and visiting students.

#### Program Design

In order to further incorporate community members' perspectives on an ongoing basis, the Center could implement a community advisory board to discuss questions, concerns, and suggestions community members may have related to interactions with visiting students. Additionally, in light of community members' desire for greater reciprocal relationships, the Center could work to incorporate Community Based Research (CBR) practices so visiting students could address research questions identified by researchers in national parks and even neighboring community members since many people feel excluded from that process. Additionally, the students are working on significant research projects that might be of great interest to local community members. There is a greater desire for more outreach to community members in sharing research and conducting relevant presentations.

To highlight the greater desire for community relationships, an enhanced cultural orientation could highlight the importance of relationships in Costa Rica before students depart for Costa Rica and again when they arrive in the country. The Center currently holds an orientation in place, but it would be worthwhile to emphasize the value of establishing relationships and encouraging them to talk to neighbors (while also addressing relevant concerns of safety and security). As a result of strategies developed by the Center, relationships between the local community and outside visitors might improve.

Orientation events that invite community members to the Center, for instance, might help foster relationships between residents and students when new students arrive in the community. Additionally, it would be important to facilitate discussions on cultural differences between task-orientation vs. people-orientation and to explain the desire of community members and organizations to have more social interactions.

### Program Implementation

In order to address community members' desires for more interactions and relationship building, visiting U.S. students could participate in community outreaches with local students learning English in order to provide more opportunities to interact with local residents. This was a suggestion made by a local English teacher and would allow for more opportunity to develop relationships, for both local and foreign students to work to develop their English and Spanish respectively and to collaborate on an outlined project. The English teacher suggested that this would provide the opportunity for language learning and promoting cultural understanding while also learning about the environment and participating in a service project. Additionally, rather than having a larger group of approximately 20 students visiting one outreach location only one time for the semester, it could be possible to break students into smaller groups (perhaps 3-4 students) and have them visit the same location multiple times over a semester. This would allow for students to develop relationships with the staff of the organization with repeat visits each month. The smaller number of students would also allow for organization members and students to develop greater relationships, something desired by community members.

### Evaluation

Finally, ongoing evaluation of community members and visiting university students will allow for continued assessment of the benefits and challenges of such a program. This could be in the form of a formal survey or informal check-in conversation that happen periodically throughout the program for both program participants and the community. By providing multiple avenues for community members to share their perspectives, The Center is able to listen and adjust the ways in which students are involved in the community. While the power to adjust student interactions still remains with The Center as the program provider, they could adjust some of their power by

allowing input from community members in order to promote even greater benefits to community members.

### Limitations and Future Research

This study explores international partnerships through the means of undergraduate education abroad field-based research. In this study, the two main variables are the research participants (community members) and the one conducting the research. As a non-probability sample was utilized, the findings are not generalizable to other partnerships (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). While there may be lessons learned that apply to these alternate contexts, this is not a specific focus of this study. The perspectives of the community members of each of these research sites are unique to those specific sites. That said, the assertions made in this study may be useful to similar programs taking place in vastly different locations. Additionally, while the perspectives held by residents may be different in each location, the responses received may differ based upon who is asking the questions. While we do believe those participating in the study provided quite candid responses, it is important to recognize that the researchers are seen as foreigners, and as such are outside of the community. Someone who is seen as an insider within the community might receive different responses.

The empirical research exploring community perspectives of education abroad programs is just beginning. Up to this point, the few contributions to the field are largely drawn from qualitative case studies. There is a need for greater quantitative examination of the value and impacts seen by community residents, which might be generalizable to a specific region or community. Quantitative work would allow for an alternative means of an analysis of such programs and provide diversified insights of a broader scope that would be useful to both scholars and practitioners. With that in mind, there is still much need for expanded qualitative analysis in different sites around the world with differing cultural contexts. Also, further comparative research addressing the different types of programs and the nature of their interactions between visiting students and local communities is needed to determine how perspectives differ with varying structures of programs.

Researchers also found that individual community members' outlooks on life, whether optimistic or pessimistic and their own economic stability might influence their perspective on many topics including how they view interactions

with visiting university students. Further research could draw from behavioral psychology and behavioral economics, which examines individuals' outlooks on life, their own financial standing, and their status in the community that might influence their perspectives on visiting education abroad students. All of these are needed contributions to bring the rarely heard voice of community members to the forefront.

## Conclusion

This study identifies the importance of listening to community members who are directly and indirectly in contact with visiting university students. Through a qualitative case study involving semi-structured interviews and direct observation, many findings emerged. While this case study is not generalizable to a broader population, there are assertions that may be made from this study. One central theme includes the importance of meaningful relationships where both sides are heard and with reciprocal benefits for both community members and visiting university students. Program administrators and faculty ought to recognize the power they hold to make decisions that may impact the lives of local community residents in small or big ways. In listening to the desires of local community members, program administrators begin to balance the scales of power between insiders and outsiders. There are many priorities to pursue over the course of a field-based education abroad program and no academic program can do everything. However, universities and organizations desiring to conduct programs with meaningful and sustainable impacts on the community must incorporate community members' perspectives in the phases of a program: the design, development, implementation, and assessment.

This study identified the importance of recognizing that community members may have different priorities for a program beyond those determined by a university or organization. Whether working with domestic or international programs, stepping outside of the academic sphere will allow program administrators to develop more robust partnerships and design programs with greater social, economic, and ecological sustainability for community members. Without engaging in listening and acting on what they hear, program administrators, faculty, and students are at risk of implementing programs that, in fact, do not benefit the lives of community members or may create unanticipated challenges. Listening to the perspectives of local

community residents, developing relationships with reciprocal benefits, and identifying community members' priorities are significant for field-based education abroad programs but also other global exchanges such as international development projects and faith-based missions. As seen in this study, outsiders can recognize the power they may hold in impacting the lives of others and seek to use it responsibly in ways most meaningful to local people. Engaging in effective listening will not only provide more sustainable relationships between programs and community members but also yield more significant learning for students who are able to learn in a setting more responsive to the needs of others around them.

The work of listening to community members and seeking to understand their perspectives in empirical research is just beginning. More research on this topic is needed, but also the daily, informal practice of purposefully listening to the perspectives of members of a host community that interact both directly and indirectly with an education abroad program. It is through purposeful listening to community residents that better education abroad programs can be built upon stronger, more agile relationships with greater reciprocal benefits for local community residents and visiting students alike.

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