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Social Capital Development in Community College Alumni Who Studied Abroad

Heidi Fischer¹, Rosalind Latiner Raby²

Abstract

This qualitative study explores how US community college students who studied abroad use their existing social capital to enhance their engagement with other students and host country residents. The study also shows that students who studied abroad develop new social capitals for bridging and bonding with others. Data collection consisted of two rounds of in-depth interviews with 27 alumni students as well as a survey on participant background. Findings show that students use their social capital to enhance their relationships with other students and host country individuals. These positive relationships, in turn, enrich and build new social capitals that remained with the students after studying abroad. Skills such as open-mindedness, cross-cultural communication, and consideration provide the social capital that helped student make lasting connections and friendships abroad and when they returned home.

Abstract in German

Diese qualitative Studie untersucht, wie US-amerikanische Community-College-Studenten, die im Ausland studiert haben, ihr vorhandenes soziales Kapital nutzen, um ihr Engagement mit anderen Studierenden und Bewohnern des Gastlandes zu verbessern. Die Studie zeigt auch, dass Studierende, die im Ausland studiert haben, neues soziales Kapital entwickeln, um Brücken zu schlagen und Kontakte zu anderen zu knüpfen. Die Datenerhebung umfasste zwei Runden ausführlicher Interviews mit 27 Alumni-Studenten sowie eine

¹ OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY, NORFOLK, VA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

² CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE, LOS ANGELES, CA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Corresponding author: Heidi Fischer, heidiclaire@gmail.com

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Umfrage zum Hintergrund der Teilnehmer. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Studierende ihr soziales Kapital nutzen, um ihre Beziehungen zu anderen Studierenden und Personen im Gastland zu verbessern. Diese positiven Beziehungen wiederum bereichern und bauen neues Sozialkapital auf, das den Studierenden nach ihrem Auslandsstudium erhalten bleibt. Fähigkeiten wie Aufgeschlossenheit, interkulturelle Kommunikation und Rücksichtnahme stellen das soziale Kapital dar, das den Studierenden dabei half, dauerhafte Kontakte und Freundschaften im Ausland und nach ihrer Rückkehr in die Heimat zu knüpfen.

Keywords:

Agency, community college alumni, narrative inquiry, social capital

Introduction

In the field of education abroad, social capital can have a positive effect on a person's interactions within social groups. Social capital, defined as shared resources – links, values, and common understandings – used in a network of social relationships that enable trust and strong social and working relations, is a valuable tool that facilitates effectiveness in life and at work (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Glass & Gesing, 2018, Hanifan, 1916; Keeley, 2007). Social capital can facilitate transfer to university (Amani & Kim, 2017) and can enhance employability (Fakunle, 2021). The concept of social capital also relates to the learning of intercultural and benevolent attitudes of social groups while in an educational setting. While social capital is a contested term that is often applied in the negative, as something that Whiteness facilitates and something that low-income and communities of color need to acquire, it can be utilized in the positive as a way to honor those skills and capabilities that everyone already possesses. In this way, research shows how students use their agency to gain a greater sense of self and empathy while traversing their time abroad (Fischer, 2021; Malerich, 2020; Wick et al., 2019; Wood & Raby, 2023).

In this context, studying abroad helps students recognize new and enhance existing social capital. The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore the outcomes related to social capital development gained by U.S. community college alumni who studied abroad. This article adds to the literature on social capital and mobility abroad by using an anti-deficit lens to detail the experiences of community college students and shows long-lasting impact from their experiences abroad.

More than 40 percent of U.S. undergraduate students (or about 12 million students) are enrolled at community colleges (AACC, 2023). Research on community college students is important because more US students attend community colleges than any other type of higher educational institution, with 41% of undergraduate enrollment being at community colleges (Community College Research Center, 2023). Community colleges not only make higher education available to a large number of people, but they also prepare globally competent graduates for a diverse workforce (AACC, 2023; Zhang, 2011). Community colleges are leaders in sending students from diverse backgrounds abroad (Malveaux & Raby, 2019). The majority of these students are different from those who attend universities due to their age, life-experiences, fields of study, and ties to their local communities, which makes them important participants for inclusion in studies on education abroad outcomes (AACC, 2023; Raby, 2019). This study is important because additional research will capture the voices of community college students and will add variability and depth to discussions on education abroad.

Despite the importance of this population, there are relatively few studies that take a comprehensive approach to explore the outcomes of community college alumni who studied abroad. Similarly, the voices of community college alumni are not as frequently represented in the academic literature. As is the case for many university education abroad alumni, however, the experience can be transformative (Hunter, 2008) and merits exploration. What community college alumni say they learned abroad that is still relevant to them today remains largely unexplored.

Literature Review

This literature review examines the nuances of community college education abroad, intercultural identity development, and social capital.

Community College Education Abroad

The community college literature on education abroad spans the gamut of outcomes, including academic achievement, student development, intercultural or identity development, and cultural knowledge, among others (Barone, 2021; Fischer, 2022; Wood, 2023). Each of these dissertation studies used mixed-methods research to examine community colleges students in different parts of the country. A pioneer quantitative multivariate regression analysis study (Raby et al., 2014) compared the persistence of study abroad

participants ($n = 14,216$) and students who did not study abroad ($n = 474,802$) over a six-year period. Findings showed significant impact from studying abroad on academic achievement with positive impact on early, midstream, and terminal outcomes, such as retention and transfer to university. Another quantitative study (Drexler & Campbell, 2011) showed that studying abroad can lead to developmental changes in academic, athletic, and interpersonal competence. These studies support the idea that community college students do benefit from studying abroad. The current study identifies those traits that lead to success and build social capital.

Intercultural Development

The literature on community college education abroad also explores students' intercultural development, which is the process of developing one's ability to understand, appreciate, and effectively navigate cultural differences and similarities when engaging with cultures different from one's own (Bennett, 2014). Research on intercultural development has been contested as it can be influenced by cultural biases, power dynamics, and social norms, thereby privileging students from the United States or students who identify as white (Fischer, 2021). Intercultural development is a focus of quantitative and qualitative studies on community college education abroad outcomes.

Paras et al. (2019) assessed intercultural development of students studying abroad on short-term programs. In this study, two community college participants experienced an increase in intercultural development as measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), while five others experienced no change (Paras et al., 2019). Emert and Pearson (2007) use IDI-based program evaluations to assess intercultural development from 88 mid-western community college students studying in a Costa Rica program and 43 students in England. Wood (2019) details the development of an assessment rubric to measure intercultural development based on the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) in a case study of one mid-Western community college. This rubric identifies three learning outcomes for participants and for the faculty leaders based on written reflections on certain prompts. Results in this study show overall participant growth when comparing pre- and post-program scores. In this study, the greatest growth was measured for participants on career-focused education abroad programs (Wood, 2019). Finally, a survey and interviews with community college students from the

Atlantic states studying abroad show that intercultural development remains beyond enrollment at the community college (Fischer, 2021).

Identity Development

In the context of education abroad, identity development refers to the process of exploring and developing one's sense of self and cultural identity through the experience of studying in another country (Jackson, 2015). The learning experience can challenge students' understanding of themselves and their own culture, thereby developing a greater sense of independence, self-confidence, and resilience. Students may also develop a more nuanced understanding of their own cultural identity, by analyzing their own cultural values and beliefs with those of the host culture (Jackson, 2015; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Vande Berg et al, 2009).

While university-focused research concludes that research on student identity development is under-studied (Tulloch, 2018), community college research has long explored this aspect of identity development in end of program evaluations, and in qualitative studies using survey, focus group, and interview methods. Program reports and dissertations both captured student experiences and described profound learning that occurred in program participants (Arden-Ogle, 2007; Drexler, 2006; Franco, 1992; Oberstein-Delvalle, 1999; Raby, 1990, 1996). Newer research finds that learning begins prior to the abroad experience as students navigate counseling, financial aid, and other college support services (Raby et al., 2021). Robertson and Blasi's (2017) interviews detail an example of self-change as a result of experiences related to global learning. Finally, Brenner's (2016) case study shows transformative learning in which students experience meaningful relationships with other students in the program and together gained curiosity about other cultures.

Additional qualitative research on identity development focuses on community college students of color who studied abroad. Studies examine outcomes related to identity development for African-American women (Willis, 2012; 2016), for African-American men (Bush & Bush, 2021; Zamani, 2015), for Latinx students (Raby et al., 2016), for MIS students (Barone, 2021) and for rural and career-technical students (Wood & Raby, 2022).

Interviews with alumni are important because they show lasting changes of identity development over time. Wood and Raby (2022) showed similarity in responses from 63 students in how identity development supported

their employability. Fischer's (2021) interviews showed transformative learning as a result of building meaningful relationships with other students. Raby and colleagues (2021) found similarities in students' comments about recognitions of their personal strengths and socio-cultural changes in their relationship with others (Raby et al., 2021). Finally, Willis's (2012, 2016) interviews of Black community college women showed microaggressions experienced by each and how the intersections of students' cultural capital and experiences abroad resulted in a shift in worldview. Participants shared enhanced relationships with their peers, as well as a new sense of patience, empathy, and humility, regardless of program duration or location (Willis, 2012, 2016).

Social Capital in Mobility Programs

Much of the research on the augmentation of social capital and the acquisition of critical skills is found in research on degree-seeking international students, often referred to as international students. Qualitative research in this space demonstrates outcomes based on the composition and strength of social networks (Glass & Gesing, 2018) and between home and host students (Rienties et al., 2015; Rienties & Nolan, 2014) and as a key resource for employability (Singh et al., 2023). Research on the augmentation of social capital for community college study abroad students confirms growth in agency, identity development, and self-reflection.

Wood and Raby (2022) detail how community college education abroad students reflect on their changed ability to respect and communicate with diverse others. Other qualitative studies document via interviews and case studies ethnic and racial identity development, values clarification, intercultural proficiency, balancing autonomy with interdependence, academic outcomes, and career implications as a result of studying abroad (Barone, 2021; Brenner, 2016; Bush & Bush, 2021; Rhodes et al., 2016; Willis 2016). Researchers also found growth in agency related to social networks, in which students gain a greater sense of self, intercultural awareness, empathy, and patience through navigating their time abroad (Raby et al., 2021; Willis, 2012, 2016; Wood & Raby, 2022). Finally, Amani and Kim's (2017) interviews affirm that social capital from participation in education abroad facilitates transfer to university and employability (Barone, 2021; Zamani et al., 2016). In all, personal, academic, and vocational gains are documented (Fischer, 2021; Raby et al., 2014; Wood & Raby, 2022). Study abroad participants often discover traits within themselves that empower them to identify and use social capital for self-benefit.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of social capital as a valuable tool to be effective in life and at work was first introduced about a century ago. Hanifan (1916) defined social capital as the “tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of a people: namely, goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit” (p. 130). In the early 2000s, the OECD added to this definition, saying social capital consisted of “the links, shared values and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and so work together” (Keeley, 2007, p. 102). In other words, social capital is the resource used in a network of social relationships that vary in composition, density, size, and strength (Glass & Gesing, 2018). Social capital also refers to a person’s social relations. For Bourdieu, social capital is a network of actual or potential resources that can be legitimized by membership in a family, group, or class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Such membership provides an individual with access to social networks, information, and knowledge that may not be readily accessible to the broader public (Legusov et al., 2021).

Social capital can also be gained through connections between groups of people (Lin, 2002). Such flows or resource exchanges create ties among group members that build solidarity and trust that denotes synergistic relationships that create something greater than the sum of each group member’s parts (Coleman, 1990). These relationships underpin a social structure mutually reinforced by group members (Lin, 2002). Reimer et al. (2008) emphasize the close association between the assets of social capital and their creation, which leads to a lack of distinction between the networks and institutions of social capital and its flow (social participation and collective action) (Reimer et al., 2008). However, this flow is not always equitable when the dominant norms and values of society are defined as essential for others to learn (Fakulne, 2021; Raby & Valeau, 2023).

Properties of Social Capital

Social capital applies to communities in both the relational and geographic sense and is, therefore, an ecological phenomenon which transcends any one individual (Lochner et al., 1999). It represents resources available through social relationships (Coleman, 1990; Lin, 2002) and has an intangible, nonexchangeable value (Coleman, 1990). Social capital enables information

flow, influences decision-making individuals, provides group members and groups with social credentials, and reinforces the group and its members through emotional support (Lin, 2002). Social capital is described by trust, mutual understanding, shared values, and networks (Coleman, 1990; Goodwin, 2003; Makridis & Wu, 2021; Putnam, 1995; Reimer et al., 2008).

Bonding and Bridging Capital

Social capital has two dimensions based on the players involved in the relationships. Bonding social capital consists of interactions within groups who share similar identities (e.g., nationality, race, religion) or who have a place-based collective identity (Flora et al., 2018; Weaver, 2018). In the case of education abroad, an example of this type of capital may be a cohort of students from the same community college studying abroad on the same programs. In communities with strong bonding capital, most group members are able to identify who belongs or does not belong to their group. Bonding capital can be developed through community events, such as excursions in the host country (Weaver, 2018).

Bridging social capital consists of interactions between social groups with differing identities (e.g., cultural background, language) (Flora et al., 2018; Weaver, 2018). In the case of education abroad, such interactions can be horizontal, between students from the host and home country; or vertical, between people or groups of people who are in different levels of the community hierarchy (e.g., students and local teachers) (Weaver, 2018). Communities with strong bridging capital can generate new ideas, whereas groups with weak bridging capital may have predominantly vertical relationships with far less trust and communication (Flora et al., 2018).

Bonding and bridging connections can occur simultaneously. For example, a faculty-led study abroad program may bring together people with a shared identity (e.g., all are a part of the same community college) but ideally also creates bridges between people with different individual identity (e.g., nationality or language) (Weaver, 2018). Further, bonding and bridging capital can reinforce each other. Individualism and community disorganization dominate when both are weak and effective community action can occur when both are strong (Flora et al., 2018).

The social capital theoretical framework guided our work by providing a structure for the research process, informing research questions, and guiding

data interpretation. The properties and assumptions surrounding social capital, including the concept of bridging and bonding capital, provided a lens through which to view the data. The theoretical framework also helped us to be grounded in existing theory and research, thereby ensuring the study's relevance and contribution to the literature.

Methods

This narrative inquiry is part of a larger study on education abroad post-program outcomes. The study was grounded in a social-constructivist research paradigm. Social constructivist theory acknowledges that the participants may perceive different realities. In other words, truth is not objective, but rather is multiple and varies from person to person (Guba, 1990). In the context of this study, while all participants studied abroad on a program administered by a US community college, their varied backgrounds, life experiences, and underlying assumptions influence the construction of outcomes gained from studying abroad. In social constructivism, the researchers act as the instrument to discover the multiple realities of the participants (Guba, 1990)

We used two research questions to frame this research: What outcomes result from education abroad, particularly regarding social capital development? Which of these outcomes are a result of existing knowledge versus new knowledge gained abroad? These research questions were constructed after a survey of academic literature on various education abroad outcomes. They were also informed by the social capital theoretical lens.

Participants

Participants for the present study were alumni of four community colleges who graduated between 2016 and 2020. International education staff at three of the colleges invited all students who had studied abroad between fall 2015 and fall 2019 to participate in the study. The invitation email was sent to an estimated 800 alumni in aggregate. This recruitment period resulted in 25 participants. To achieve more ethnic diversity in the participant sample, we then invited additional participants from a fourth community college known to have a large number of students of color who study abroad (Institute for International Education, 2020). This invitation, sent to approximately 200 students, resulted in two additional participants, both identifying as students of color.

The 27 participants represent a variety of education abroad programs, fields of study, destinations, and demographics, first-generation status, and Pell eligibility. All participants studied abroad between fall 2015 and fall 2019 and all participated in credit-bearing education abroad programs. The participants in this study studied abroad between the ages of 17 and 74. Nine of them were teenagers during their term abroad and another nine were considered adult students (i.e., over the age of 24). Participants' education abroad programs ranged in duration from one week to three months in countries in Western Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America. Participants pursued majors in education, humanities, STEM, and social sciences. Two of the participants were community members. Community members who are not enrolled in the community college as students are allowed to enroll in the study abroad program and often take it as non-credit. Students enrolled in the community college study abroad on a for-credit basis. One participant was a dual-enrolled high school student at the time of studying abroad. Participants represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including African American, Latinx, and White.

The study was granted exempt status by the institution's institutional review board. Further, participants gave electronic consent and committed to participating in two 45 to 60-minute individual interviews with two to four weeks between each interview. Of the participants, 25 completed two interviews and two additional participants completed one interview each. All completed interviews were retained in the data, but only participants who completed both interviews were asked the questions designed for the second interview protocol. Participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout. Interested participants completed a screening survey to provide background information about their pathways after the community college, demographics, and their education abroad program.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was two rounds of individual semi-structured interviews conducted by the study's first author. Round 1 interviews lasted between 30 and 93 minutes and an average of 59 minutes. Round 2 interviews were conducted two to four weeks later and lasted between 19 and 71 minutes for an average of 40 minutes. We chose to interview twice to allow for a more prolonged engagement with the participants, which is recommended for narrative inquiry (Hays & Singh, 2012). Interviewing participants twice also allowed us to analyze the data in stages, and the analysis

from the first round informed the interview protocols for the second round of interviews. The time between interviews was purposeful to allow for preliminary analysis and reflection on the part of the researchers. The secondary method of data collection was the screening survey that provided background information on each participant and was used for data triangulation.

Participant interviews were conducted via videoconferencing. Interviews were video recorded with the participants' permission. The interview protocols were informed by the academic literature on education abroad outcomes and the social capital theoretical framework. Questions aimed to draw out responses regarding the outcomes studying abroad may have had on the participants' lives after attending the community college (see Appendix for core questions from both interview protocols). All participants were asked the core questions, which were supplemented by follow-up questions and probes to clarify information and to solicit additional detail. The larger study's protocols also included questions regarding student learning outcomes, which are excluded from the appendix as they are not directly applicable to social capital.

Data Analysis

Coding

Qualitative data analysis began with transcribing each interview verbatim. We then read each first round transcript several times before coding each transcript twice in an iterative manner. The first round of coding was deductive, informed by this study's theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, we coded inductively, identifying patterns and themes beyond those of our theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The results of the coding process of the first round of interview informed the interview protocol for the second round of interviews. Questions for the second set of interviews were tailored to each participant based on their responses in the first interview, and the themes of outcomes identified from the analysis of the first round of interviews. This allowed us to clarify meaning that may have been left unclear, as well as explore whether outcomes reported by some students were also valid for other participants. Throughout the coding process, we engaged in several peer-debriefing sessions, which contributed to interrater reliability (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Through reflection and

analysis of the parent codes in the study's codebook, this article focuses on two broad themes to support our RQs: Bridging capital: New understanding of the host culture and Bonding capital: Building peer-to-peer relationships. Theming involved careful reflection on the meaning of the participants' words, as well as the outcomes related to social capital they discussed (Saldaña, 2016). For each theme, we selected the participants' quotes that best supported the theme, acknowledging that some participants' experiences would have fit in both themes (Creswell, 2013).

Restorying into Story Fragments

During the final process of analysis, we restoried the data collected from the participants into individual story fragments (Clandinin, 2013), a cohesive narrative for each alumnus (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Story fragments, as used by Clandinin (2013), are excerpts of a participants' lived experiences. Using story fragments, we highlight the diversity of experiences of participants. This is also a way to honor the voices of diverse participants. The process of restorying starts with developing an outline of the story fragments. To place each participant's experience in context, we crafted each story fragment to begin with a brief description of their lives prior to studying abroad. This section includes their academic journeys, familial considerations, prior travel abroad, and demographic characteristics that may have shaped the participants' experiences abroad. The middle section of each story fragment focuses on salient aspects of the participants' education abroad programs that may have influenced their enhancement of social capital. Each fragment concludes with the participants' trajectories upon return from studying abroad. These concluding phrases include references to participants' educational and professional journeys, and lasting program outcomes for each alumnus. The process of crafting each story fragment was defined by reading small sections of a participant's transcripts, followed by thoughtful contemplation, and repeating this process by further reading and re-reading and contemplating the data. During this process, we searched through transcripts for quotes that related to the research questions, reflected on how best to highlight relevant details in the narrative, and identified contextual details that shaped each participant's lived experience. Each fragment was crafted to provide a cohesive, chronological, and compact but comprehensive glimpse in each participant's education abroad outcomes.

Trustworthiness

We worked collaboratively with the participants to member-check the meaning and veracity behind the analysis and representation of their words. All participants received a draft of the findings section via email, encouraging them to review the analysis of their stories. Participants were encouraged to check the draft section for accuracy of representation, interpretation of their direct quotes, as well as identifiability. In general, feedback on earlier drafts of the findings section were positive and participants expressed gratitude for the ability to relive and to share their experiences abroad.

Researcher Reflexivity Statements

This study's first author began her higher education journey as an international student at a US community college. Her professional experience includes more than a decade of working in education abroad in the university setting. This study's second author worked and researched the field of community college international education for 38 years. For both, intercultural learning and social capital through the lens of equity are foundational topics of their work. Both authors' perspectives extend to the questions asked, the theories used, analyses conducted, and the way the findings are framed in that equity and open access are central to their professional and researcher positions.

Findings

The participants in this study discussed a complex variety of traits that contributed toward and reinforced social capital leading to a positive change regarding their interactions within social groups. Participants provided examples of how studying abroad can enhance sojourners' social capital in both bridging and bonding ways. As examples of a bonding capital, participants reported making lasting connections and friendships abroad by developing skills and attitudes such as open-mindedness and consideration. Studying abroad also had a bridging effect on participants' social capital by encouraging them to step out of their introverted comfort zones and become open to speaking more freely to members of the host culture. These skills had great benefits for the participants' personal, academic, and professional lives after studying abroad.

Bonding Capital: Building Peer-to-Peer Relationships

Participants discussed a complex variety of behavioral and affective traits that can contribute toward social capital, such as empathy, compassion,

non-judgment, and open-mindedness. The following story fragments reflect the experiences of three young men who studied abroad between the ages of 19 and 24. All three of the participants had previously traveled abroad. Two studied computer or technology-related majors and the third majored in a social science. Two of the participants studied abroad for one semester and the other participated in a short-term program of four weeks.

Story Fragment: Patrick

Patrick took history courses at his community college. He had grown up in an upper middle-class family and his only international travel prior to studying abroad was to a resort in Mexico. Patrick was an admitted introvert and was challenged by connecting to peers on his community college commuter campus. He selected the homestay option during his semester-long education abroad program in London, UK, where he spent the fall 2016 semester.

During his semester abroad, Patrick was one of approximately 140 students from four community colleges. He took courses with professors from those four institutions and an additional course from a British professor. Patrick had a supportive and friendly host family who was both helpful and at the same time hands-off with him. He participated in almost all excursions that were arranged by his program provider and enjoyed independent travels as well. Along with a friend he met on the program, Patrick traveled to Portsmouth to visit the HMS Victory, a warship from Napoleonic times. Throughout his semester in London, he also witnessed a fair amount of interpersonal drama among the other students in the program.

Despite being introverted, Patrick developed a friend group that he is still connected to four years post-program. The group gets together a few times each year and has an active group text. He also learned to be more outgoing and talkative due to his program, particularly with new acquaintances. Further, he grew in his open-mindedness to cultural differences and learned to consider both sides of a story. Two years after his semester abroad, Patrick graduated with a bachelor's in history, and he currently works in the hospitality industry.

Story Fragment: Daniel

Daniel was an undecided student in the transfer program at his community college. In 2015, he had the opportunity to travel to France and the UK for two weeks with his family. Two years later, the family had a difficult year with wildfires and his grandmother's house burning down. These events

resulted in a challenging time for his family. To get a break from all these stresses, Daniel talked to his family about studying abroad and they were supportive. Daniel participated in a three-month long program in London, UK, in Fall 2018.

During his semester in London, Daniel roomed in an apartment with two of the other students on his program, one of whom was a previous classmate of his. Daniel learned to explore the metropolis using public transportation; he found London easy to get around. He traveled with his roommates to the UK coast, Germany, and generally explored his host city, though he did not experience much meaningful interaction with Londoners. He also stepped out of his comfort zone and connected with many of the other students on the program, despite the challenge this presented to an introverted student such as Daniel. Program participants were more diverse than the student body on his community college campus or his hometown.

After four years at the community college, Daniel transferred to university. He has chosen a major but is yet unsure if it is the right fit for him. He is considering the possibility of studying abroad a second time during his undergraduate career.

Story Fragment: Luis

Luis is a Mexican immigrant who was born in the United States, spent his childhood in Mexico, and moved to the US with his family at age eight. Outside of travel to Mexico, Luis had not previously traveled abroad. At the community college, Luis studied computer information systems while working various jobs. He was a first-generation college student and received a Pell Grant during his time in higher education. At age 24, Luis participated in a month-long business education abroad program in Liège, Belgium. The program also conducted excursions to four neighboring countries.

During his program in Liège, Luis studied international business and intercultural communications, while living in an apartment with other program participants. With class time and scheduled excursions there was limited time for independent explorations, but thanks to his prior experiences of making friends across cultures, Luis did manage to befriend a Belgian local who served as a peer mentor for his program. He fondly recalls exploring Paris with other students on the program, meeting a store clerk who had a wall calendar from his US state, and getting lost on the metro during an unscheduled afternoon. Luis

was able to apply existing cross-cultural communication skills during this adventure to help the group return to their accommodations.

After graduating from his community college, Luis transferred to university and earned a bachelor's in computer information systems. He is currently employed as a project manager. Luis still thinks of Liège as another home. He has continued to travel internationally, including a vacation in Spain and a work trip to Belarus, and he has plans to continue traveling. He has been able to leverage his international experiences from his time in Belgium in the workplace when interacting with international coworkers.

Summary of Story Fragments

The preceding story fragments provide examples of how studying abroad can enhance participants' social capital, both in direct and indirect ways. Directly, all the students in these examples reported having made friends abroad who they were still in contact with. Daniel shared, "I'm still friends with all the ones that I made friends with there. Luckily, a lot of them were actually from my college, so they live nearby, and we still hang out a lot." The same is true in Patrick's case, even four years after studying abroad. He explained,

I made a group of friends in London and we still talk and we still hang out to this day, even though it's been four years. [...] Last time we hang out was probably about a maybe a month ago. [...] We still talk to each other all the time. We have a group chat that's still very active. It's been four years, but we're still pretty good friends.

Daniel also described having made connections and experiencing close friendships with peers he met abroad.

Participants also shared that they gained common topics to talk about that other people can relate to, conversation starters that connect strangers. In the case of Luis, this happened several times since his program abroad five years prior. He shared,

I've had some conversations with some people that I would have probably never had. They're like, oh, I was in Paris, or I was in the Netherlands. Or one of my coworkers, he was like, Oh, I went to Belgium and I did this and then I'm like, oh, I also did the same. So, if anything, it's a conversation starter.

Luis also reflected that studying abroad provided him with the ability to be considerate with those around him. He encountered several occasions in his workplace in which this sensitivity served him well, saying, "just taking

consideration when dealing with people. Just keeping in mind that not everybody interprets what you say the same way and just having that present might tell you how to start the conversation.” Similarly, Patrick described open-mindedness to cultural differences as a major take-away from his program in London, stating, “I think one of the main things was to just be open to the differences of people and the differences of culture was probably the biggest thing.”

Indirectly, study participants also shared that they learned to step out of their introverted comfort zones to connect with others. Patrick describes this as “learning how to be more outgoing, more social.” He elaborated, saying, “Being more talkative and outgoing, especially with strangers. I’d say that’s probably the biggest thing [...]. Being more outgoing, being willing to talk to people about anything, especially things that I’m not super, super, super comfortable talking about.” Daniel’s semester abroad had a similar impact on him as Patrick’s did,

I guess it has kind of gotten me to open up a little bit more to people that I don't necessarily know. Once I got back from there, I was, even for classes I'd be a little bit more open to talking to people, more getting to know other people that I don't know, instead of just doing my own thing [...] Just putting myself out there a little bit more.

These three participants described skills and attitudes that may have a positive effect on their interactions within social groups. They reported making lasting connections and friendships abroad and they also showed that they developed skills and attitudes such as open-mindedness and consideration. Finally, studying abroad encouraged them to step out of their introverted comfort zones and to be open to talking more freely to peers around them

Bridging Capital: New Understanding of the Host Culture

As detailed in the story fragments below, several of the participants shared experiences that led to a deeper cognitive understanding of and attitude toward their host culture specifically and empathy toward people more generally. These three participants were young women who studied abroad in Italy, Ireland, and Spain.

Story Fragment: Christine

Christine studied abroad in Rome, Italy, for three months during the Spring 2019 semester. She was 19 years old during her semester in Rome, which was her first sojourn outside the United States. Christine studied Italian language and general education courses in Italy, which transferred toward her

bachelor's degree in early childhood studies. While abroad, Christine came to think of Rome as her home even though she found Italian culture to be different from her home culture.

Christine experienced Italian culture first-hand through daily navigating the city on public transportation. One day, while riding a crowded tram through Rome, Christine witnessed a little boy getting ill. She expected the other passengers to react with disgust and to get off at the next stop. Instead, they offered napkins to the boy's mother to help clean him and comforted the crying child. Christine watched with interest when at the next stop the mom and boy exited the tram and an occupied taxi pulled over to offer the family wipes. This moment made a vast impression on Christine who was impressed by the Italians' apparent prioritizing of family and community.

Christine also gained a closer look at Italian culture by befriending a local young man who later became her boyfriend. She had the opportunity to celebrate the Easter holiday with his family and on occasion enjoyed homecooked meals with them. Conversations around the dinner table affirmed Christine's perceptions of Italians after the incident on the tram. She learned that Italians close their shops in the afternoons to balance work and life, take time to rest, and spend time with their families. These and other experiences helped Christine gain an understanding of people different from her identity as a US citizen.

Story Fragment: Erin

In the summer of 2017, Erin participated in a month-long faculty-led study abroad program to Athlone, Ireland. Erin chose Ireland as the location for her education abroad program in part because her maternal great grandparents were Irish immigrants to the United States and the program was a way for to connect with her heritage. During her time in Ireland, Erin lived in apartments with other students on the program, and she continued working part-time with her job in the United States to help fund the experience.

Toward the end of her education abroad program, Erin's apartment in Athlone was broken into and her laptop, passport, and wallet were stolen. She was forced to cancel her credit cards and borrow money from fellow students. Near midnight on the day before Erin was scheduled to depart for Amsterdam, two Irish police officers in plain clothes came to the apartment to return some of her belongings. The officers even offered to search for a missing item at the

police station and return it to her that night. The incident was emotional for Erin, but it also gave her a glimpse at the kindness of some of the Irish people. Erin explored historical sights and learned about ancient religions, but her interactions with the Irish people supported by aspects of her program led to insights related to the goodness of people in her host culture.

Upon return from Ireland, Erin completed her associate's and a certificate at the community college and then transferred to university. Inspired in part by her studies in Ireland, Erin chose to pursue dual bachelor's degrees in environmental design and social sustainability. While at university, Erin participated in a second summer education abroad program in 2018, this time studying global health and sustainability in Australia.

Story Fragment: Lila

At her community college, Lila pursued an associate in natural sciences while working part-time. Prior to studying abroad, Lila's life was at a standstill; she was unhappy with her circumstances and bored with living in her hometown. She was looking for a change and hoped to find it in Spain. At age 20, she applied to study abroad "on a whim" and spent Fall 2017 studying Spanish life and culture, conservation biology, art History, and philosophy in Barcelona, Spain. Previously, Lila had only traveled internationally on vacations to Canada and Mexico.

A few weeks into the fall 2017 semester, Lila's roommate in Barcelona unexpectedly passed away. On the evening of her roommate's passing, a Spanish family who lived in the same apartment building invited Lila and her other flat mates into their apartment and provided them with treats and snacks. Lila learned that in Spanish culture, it is uncommon to open one's home to strangers, but as the family explained, they had seen on US television shows that Americans show hospitality in times of crisis. The actions of this Spanish family changed Lila's outlook on Spanish people, who had until that point generally treated her coldly. Lila dealt with the grief of losing a roommate as best she could, but she ultimately experienced depression as a result of the loss that extended beyond her time in Spain. Yet, she persevered and finished her semester abroad. She fondly recalls experiencing the sunset over the beach in Barcelona with her friends on most nights, watching the planes fly into Barcelona International Airport. These evenings were calming to Lila in their reliable recurrence.

Her time in Spain inspired Lila's passion for traveling and learning more about different cultures. She felt at home in Spain, and this sense of belonging causes her to want to return to Spain in the future, as well as to travel to other continents. Lila transferred to a university immediately upon her return from Spain. Studying abroad in Spain has taught her to enjoy trying new things and following news events from a global perspective.

Summary of Story Fragments

The women in these three story fragments experienced a shift in their knowledge or perspective of their host culture, particularly developing empathy toward members of the host culture. Erin shared that she's "far more culturally aware now and understanding that every culture and every individual has some value, valuable knowledge that you're oblivious to." As a result of her education abroad experience, Erin gained an appreciation of other cultures and diversity. Lila's narrative added an example of a changed understanding of the host culture. She stated that her interactions with the Spanish family on the evening of her roommate's passing,

changed my whole outlook [...] on Spanish people because I know everyone who I've met, they were kind of cold and turned off. And I think it was because we were American that they had these ideas about us. But when it really came down to it, people were willing to invite us into our home - strangers. Who barely spoke the same languages and they were willing to try to comfort us in this time.

All three participants also emphasized their newfound recognition that there are different ways to do things than may be commonplace in the United States. Affirming this cultural relativism, Christine shared that after studying abroad she "really does feel like [she] gained the sense of what humanity is, rather than just being an American." Lila explained that she was able to leave the US "bubble" and "see that [her] culture isn't the only culture and there's so much more to life than what you know."

Discussion

Findings in this study provide examples of social capital-related outcomes common across the larger group of participants. Findings also expand upon recent work that explores the concept of community college participants who use reflection to identify self-growth, acquisition of new skills, and usage of social capital while studying abroad. Participants in this study leveraged existing abilities and experiences to enhance their social capital during their

time abroad, but they also developed new skills and networks in both bridging and bonding ways.

In answer to RQ1: “What outcomes result from education abroad, particularly regarding social capital development?”, this article shows how social capital is developed and utilized. For instance, participants gained skills and attitudes such as open-mindedness and consideration that enhanced their interactions within social groups, thus making lasting connections and friendships abroad. Our research supports the idea that students who study abroad make long-term gains in building new social networks such as friendships and intimate relationships. This finding is common in community college research and shows that program design can emphasize collaboration and self-reflection (Brenner, 2016; Bush & Bush, 2021; Willis, 2016). Equally important is that outcomes within the realm of social capital remain with the student even years upon graduation or transfer to university.

In response to RQ2: “Which outcomes are a result of existing knowledge versus new knowledge gained abroad?”, the respondents in this study show that some community college students use existing cross-cultural communication skills to aid in enhancing their social networks while abroad. Community college education abroad participants are diverse and can leverage their experiences interacting with diverse others to enhance their existing social capital when studying abroad. Other participants explained how they used their agency to contribute to social capital development, such as empathy, common values, and common experiences through their own agency (Raby et al., 2021; Willis, 2012; Wood & Raby, 2022). For example, a participant who identified as Mexican American leveraged her experience growing up in the United States by finding commonalities between her Mexican heritage and the Italian culture on her education abroad program. She shared, “but going over there, I realized I was very strong and very independent more than I even thought I was [...] I definitely learned that I was braver than I thought.” In fact, we observed that participants of color frequently reported employing agency during their sojourns abroad that stemmed from challenging experiences they had overcome while living in the United States.

In some situations, students developed their agency in opposition to microaggressions as outlined in the Willis (2016) study. Two students described that feeling like outsiders in their host country and experiencing anti-American

sentiments or standing out as a person of color gave them an opportunity to learn “to be comfortable with the uncomfortable.” One participant explained gaining a new outlook on the world as a result, saying,

You get a new perspective. You get more understanding about the world around you. More cultural awareness. You are put in a situation where it's not your norm. You're a foreigner. You're an immigrant in a different country. So, you also have that new perspective.

Despite the challenges these participants experienced abroad, they felt the desire for further international travel.

In terms of life-long learning, some participants solidified or changed their choice of an undergraduate major or elected to study abroad a second time while at university. Other participants shared that they currently use knowledge gained by studying abroad in the workplace after graduating from the community college. For example, participants share examples of interacting with international coworkers and build rapport with new colleagues through shared international experiences. Here again, community college alumni used these resources in the workplace and in their personal lives, even years beyond their enrollment at the community college.

Finally, in answer to both RQ1 and RQ2, the findings provide examples of outcomes common in the education abroad literature. When the findings are applied to a social capital theoretical lens, examples of bonding and bridging capital are evident. Both bonding capital (between members of similar identities) and bridging capital (between members of different identities) may be enhanced by community college students who study abroad (Flora et al., 2018; Weaver, 2018). In our study, participants were all community college students studying abroad with a group of other community college students, but their shared identities with other program participants may not have extended beyond this. For instance, participants had different national and ethnic identities, represented different age groups (from minors to retirees), and often attended different community colleges within the same district or region. This diversity of participants is common for community college education abroad programs (Raby, 2023). Community college students possess existing assets that support further enhancement of their sense of self, patience, and autonomy (Fischer, 2021).

For bridging capital, study participants demonstrate that they are able to enhance their intercultural proficiency in ways that allow them to join or leverage social capital networks of the host culture. This affirms similar findings of prior researchers, who describe development of intercultural proficiency through collaboration (Emert & Pearson, 2007) or for certain groups of community college students (Wood, 2019). Study participants also emphasize that social capital from studying abroad aided in their transition to university and the workforce (Amani & Kim, 2017; Barone, 2021; Zamani et al., 2016). In turn, this supports prior work that documents personal, academic, and vocational gains for community college students (Legusov et al., 2021; Raby et al., 2014; Wood & Raby, 2022).

Conclusion

Our research has implications for higher education leaders and policymakers, both at community colleges. The lasting outcomes of education abroad as suggested by Paige et al. (2009) for universities and, in our study, for community college leaders, support expansion of education abroad. Our findings underline that studying abroad supplements students' social capital assets, which are an important part of learning as it transforms a student's sense of self, contributes to academic, transfer, and workforce outcomes, and meets the learning mission of the community college.

This research reiterates the importance of physical international mobility. Study participants experienced outcomes that are less likely to be duplicated by on-campus internationalization education or diversity activities, although they may happen through other campus activities (e.g., athletics, performance arts). Study participants developed their social capital by engaging in-person with host culture individuals and navigating cultural differences and microaggressions. Students experienced personal growth and self-discovery over the duration of their term abroad because they left familiar surroundings and were exposed to intercultural learning opportunities outside their comfort zones.

Finally, this article advances critiques of Bourdieuan social capital development, that perpetuates inequities of students of color and lower incomes, by showing how this population can thrive in contexts of adversity because of studying abroad. Within studying abroad, community college students identify and honor skills and capabilities that they already possess. They also gain new

social capital as a result of their experiences abroad. Further, social capital gains last beyond the specific class or classes taken abroad and even lasts beyond enrollment at the community college itself and can influence current and future work relationships and professionalization. Finally, existing agency can facilitate new acquisition of bonding and bridging capitals that support social networks to gain friendships and relationships that can lead to an arrange of possibilities professionally and personally. Most importantly, the research shows that education abroad contributes to the mission of community colleges, that of student learning which influences future decisions in terms of work, relationships, and satisfaction with choices made.

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Author Biography

Heidi Fischer, PhD, is a higher education researcher and scholar with over a decade of experience working in education abroad, student exchange, and international partnership development. Her research focuses on community college internationalization, education abroad outcomes, and virtual international education. She previously served as chair of NAFSA Region VIII and has presented her work at regional and national conferences.

Rosalind Latiner Raby, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer at California State University, Northridge in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department of the College of Education. She is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*. Dr. Raby is Director of California Colleges for International Education, a non-profit consortium of California community colleges. Since 1984, Dr. Raby has worked with and studied community college internationalization. Dr. Raby is highly published in over 50 academic journals and has published 15 books.

Appendix

Core Questions for Interview 1

- What are some of the things you learned through studying abroad, particularly outside the classroom?
- How do you think you were able to learn these things?
- How do you apply this knowledge in your current university/job/life?
- What changes do you perceive in yourself in terms of cultural awareness or global citizenship after having studied abroad? Have others noticed a change in you?
- How do you think this change occurred? (or, if no change, Why do you feel no change occurred?)
- How has this increased cultural awareness remained relevant for you today? (if applicable)
- What things that you learned abroad influenced your life after the community college (university major, further language study/travel, job responsibilities).
- Describe the sense of belonging/connection you may feel to your host country.

Core Questions for Interview 2

- What values (if any) have you adopted from your host culture?
- How has studying abroad shaped your sense of personal identity?
- What impact has study abroad made on your personal, professional, and/or academic lives.
- How has studying abroad perhaps opened up doors for you once you returned? What connections has it made for you?
- How have you used your experience to your advantage (in the workforce or your personal life)?
- Describe a pivotal moment of learning for you during your time abroad. What were the things that impacted you the most?