



Select Student Veterans' Perceptions of Study Abroad Opportunities and Experiences: A Case Study

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of select student veterans on study abroad opportunities and experiences. How have student veterans navigated the path to study abroad and made meaning of their study abroad experiences? Findings indicate that student veterans were keenly aware of issues around their preparedness for study abroad, adjustment, identity as a student veteran, and support from their institution. Results from this case study may help inform study abroad professionals and higher education administrators on how to best work with student veterans interested in study abroad.

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In an increasingly globally connected world, many scholars and higher education administrators now regard study abroad as a key tool in allowing college students to build intercultural competency, strengthen their foreign language skills, and increase their employability (Gerhards & Hans, 2013; Parey and Waldinger, 2010; Petzold & Moog, 2017; Van Mol, 2014). According to the *Open Doors Report* of the Institute of International Education (IIE; 2019), 341,751 US students studied abroad during academic year 2017/18, an increase of 2.7% over the previous year.

An estimated 62% of US higher education institutions currently provide programs and services designed to serve active-duty military service members and/or student veterans (McBain et al., 2012). With such a large number of veterans enrolling in higher education, colleges and universities have sought to become more “veteran friendly” by improving academic resources, financial aid, and support services, such as study abroad, to meet their needs (Taylor et al., 2016). When students participate in globally orientated educational experiences, including study abroad, which is a goal for many US institutions, these institutions prepare their graduates to enter the workforce with increased cultural awareness and respect for diversity (Engberg, 2013; Hovland, 2014; Tarrant, 2010; Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2018).

As a growing number of military service veterans are enrolling in college and university programs, US institutions are seeing a new form of diversity in higher education (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). With the Post-9/11 GI Bill designed to provide equity and access to higher education for more than 2 million veterans who have served since September 11, 2001, this diversity is welcomed across the colleges and universities. The Post-9/11 GI Bill is designed to cover tuition and fees for eligible veterans enrolled public undergraduate higher education programs (O’Herrin, 2011). This program, in turn, can be a great gateway for student veterans to study abroad. Currently, there are over 800,000 student veterans in institutions of higher education in the United States and this number is expected to exceed a million in the next 10 years (Kappell et al., 2017; Lipka, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). By definition, veterans are nontraditional students. They are typically in their mid-20s or older and many are classified as transfer students because they earned a number of college credits during their service, which can include American Council on Education credit recommendations (O’Herrin, 2011). Although some veterans regard college programs as a steppingstone to enhance their employment prospects after their service, others often seek out the traditional campus experience (O’Herrin, 2011). So why not study abroad? A better question may be what types of study abroad experiences can serve veterans in their pursuit of a holistic college experience (Coker et al., 2018)?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As part of this qualitative research project, we explored the study abroad experiences of four student veterans. Extensive research has been done on the topic of study abroad as well as on student veterans. However, the cross section of study abroad and student veterans research is fairly unexplored.

WHAT IS STUDY ABROAD?

Study abroad has been a part of American universities since 1881 when Indiana University first funded their summer educational tours. By the 1930s almost all American universities on the East Coast offered some form of study abroad to their undergraduate students (Hoffa, 2007). Today, higher education institutions are investing considerable resources to develop and promote study abroad to their students in hopes that the experience will increase students’ intercultural competency, general academic outcomes, and career opportunities (Twombly et al., 2012).

The designation of High-Impact Practice (HIP) has been given to study abroad due to its positive associations with student retention and learning. HIPs include learning communities, courses that feature a community-based project (i.e., service-learning), faculty-guided research projects, internships, study abroad, and culminating senior experiences (senior project or thesis, capstone course, portfolio, etc.), among other initiatives. Many education professionals recommend that students take part in at least two HIPs, which can have life changing effects, during their undergraduate studies (Kuh, 2008; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007).

The benefits of study abroad, like some other HIPs, are multifold and include increased self-confidence, maturity, enhanced interest in academic study, understanding of one’s own culture, intercultural communication skills, awareness of cultural and international issues, second language gains, understanding of oneself, open and global mindedness, and career engagement (Costello, 2015; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Rhodes et al., 2012; Twombly et al., 2012). Study abroad should be incorporated in the broader educational goals of the institution to ensure increased learning and not be seen as an activity independent of academic pursuits (Twombly et al., 2012). Student veterans are among the fastest growing groups of university students participating in HIPs, including study abroad, yet they face unique challenges and opportunities compared to their nonveteran peers (Kappell, 2017).

WHO ARE STUDENT VETERANS?

When referring to student veterans, it should be noted that the term includes, “current or former members of

the active duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 17). Around 900,000 student veterans attend higher education yearly thanks to VA education benefits (US Department of Veteran Affairs, 2019a). Higher education institutions have devoted resources to improve support for this student population. Becoming veteran-friendly means improving academic resources, financial aid, and support services. Around 62% of 4-year US higher education institutions provide services and programs specifically designed for active service members and veterans (McBain et al., 2012). Far fewer institutions, however, provide dedicated support for student veterans engaging in HIPs like study abroad (Kappell, 2017).

Student veterans are as diverse as many other student subpopulations on US university campuses and considerations should be given to different needs when developing support services and policies (Cole, & Kim, 2013; Vacchi, 2012). Not only are there cultural, demographic, and experiential differences, there are also differences in how the veteran status was obtained (e.g., active-duty military versus National Guard member; Cole, & Kim, 2013). When looking at the demographic of student veterans, many tend to be older, have families, work full-time or part-time, and may have service-related disabilities (Cate et al., 2017). Student veterans are also racially and ethnically diverse, have a larger male population, and are more likely to be a first-generation student compared to the average student (Cole & Kim, 2013).

High levels of student engagement and integration are connected with high success rates in college, yet student veterans are often left out of student engagement discussions (Kappell, 2017; Kuh et al., 2011). Student veterans are more likely to participate in activities with a clear connection to academic progress and are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities and experiential learning opportunities such as study abroad and internships (Cole & Kim, 2013). Kapell (2017) pointed out that when student veterans rank their priorities related to academic achievement, student engagement, and other off-campus duties, such as childcare and family interaction, student engagement understandably comes in as a distant third priority. Some scholars argue, however, that student engagement is intertwined with academic achievement and is a critical part of the university experience (Ku et al., 2011). Indeed, engagement can prove to be the key to college success, yet understanding student veterans’ transition from military life is step one.

For many student veterans, this move between military and higher education can be difficult (Cole & Kim, 2013; Naphan & Elliot, 2015; O’Herrin, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). The

military’s emphasis on task cohesion serves student veterans well in the classroom as it encourages engagement and teamwork. However, the transition between the military’s strict structure with commanding officers giving orders and higher education’s free environment leave many student veterans frustrated and confused about what is expected from them (Cole & Kim, 2013). Student veterans feel proud of the high levels of responsibilities the military awarded them during their service, which can cause demoralization and a sense of starting over when higher education is unable to award credits for skills learned (Cole & Kim, 2013). Student veterans with combat experience often find the transition harder compared to those who served in support positions due to the extreme nature of their tasks and the disconnect between learned responses and civilian life (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). Lastly, the strong social cohesion in combat units can cause student veterans to feel isolated and disconnected from their peers compared to those who served in support positions (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). While student veterans can encounter difficulties adjusting to college campus, they are persistent and have high graduation rates and often higher GPAs than the average student (Cate et al., 2017). In short, their varied experiences, exceptional maturity, and academic excellence make student veterans ideal study abroad participants.

University administrators and study abroad advisors should strive to understand one of the largest components of the student veteran experience—the GI Bill. The US Department of Veteran Affairs currently oversees six different education benefit programs, which provide veterans, active service members, reservists, and some family members of veterans with resources to supplement educational opportunities missed because of their military service. During FY2018, the six programs had a total of 893,725 beneficiaries and awarded over \$11 billion in payments. The Post-9/11 GI Bill program consisted of nearly 80% of the beneficiaries (US Department of Veteran Affairs, 2019a).

In 2008, the Post-9/11 GI Bill was signed into law and added significant benefits for veterans who served on active duty after September 11, 2001 (O’Herrin, 2011). Benefits include full tuition and fees at public, in-state institutions, a monthly housing stipend, and a books and supplies stipend for up to 36 months of full-time education. For student veterans attending private or out-of-state institutions, there are restrictions to the tuition benefits (US Department of Veteran Affairs, 2019b). These restrictions mean that veterans are more likely to attend public institutions (McBain et al., 2012). The Post-9/11 GI Bill policies are complex and institutions are devoting significant resources to ensure compliance and certification

of benefits for students. For some institutions, this means resources taken away from providing support services for veterans (Taylor et al., 2016). Often misunderstood within the university setting, the Post-9/11 GI Bill actually provides student veterans with several options to participate in study abroad.

HOW ARE STUDENT VETERANS STUDYING ABROAD?

Kappell (2017) identified three themes behind how student veterans decide to participate in a HIP (such as study abroad): mission-orientation, competing priorities, and marketing to student veterans. The GI Bill offers educational benefits for a limited time and is only available for courses specifically needed in the degree plan of the veteran. The goal to graduate within the restrictions of the GI Bill impacts decisions about what activities a student veteran participates in (Kappell, 2017). Often, student veterans have family and work obligations outside of school that prevent them from participating in HIPs. For student veterans to participate in HIPs, it's also important for the marketing to be directed towards them directly and to show career relevance (Kappell, 2017).

Most student veterans who study abroad do so by using their GI Bill benefits (West, 2016). These benefits, however, may only be used towards certain study abroad programs and expenses; for example, the GI Bill cannot be used to pay for airfare or a for third-party study abroad provider. Due to this, it is very important for study abroad offices to connect with their campus' veterans resource office and establish open dialogues to ensure a student's eligibility for a particular study abroad program (West, 2016). Since not all expenses associated with study abroad are covered by the GI Bill, study abroad offices should break down the costs and help student veterans create clear budgets to fully understand the expenses outside of the GI Bill coverage (West, 2016).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature on both study abroad and student veterans is extensive, but the literature on veterans participating in study abroad programs and benefits they receive from such programs is scarce. With more emphasis being placed on study abroad programs by higher education institutions, it is essential that student veterans can be a part of this growing population of students. To explore the dynamics and experiences of student veterans who have studied abroad, we adopted the framework of Social Identity Theory. As Tajfel and Turner's (2004) Social Identity Theory explains, an important part of an individual's self-concept originates within the groups in which that individual belongs. Given the importance of the experiences of both

study abroad participants and student veterans, it was important in our research to let our veterans discover their "self" by discovering who they were as a veteran within a study abroad group context. As the student veterans spent time recalling their study abroad program, they would hopefully realize they were creating a new self, one where they were able to relate to others that were not necessarily student veterans.

PURPOSE OF STUDY AND EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Despite the continued interest in the fields of student veterans and study abroad, few researchers have explored the pathways to and experiences of study abroad among student veterans. This study aims to do that by taking a social constructionist approach to interviewing student veterans who have participated in at least one study abroad program after their completion of military service. The ultimate goal of this study is to provide insight on how study abroad professionals and higher education administrators can make study abroad an appealing choice for student veterans, assist with smoothing the pathway to study abroad, create more resources for the student veterans, and ensure that student veterans have a meaningful study abroad experience.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To serve as a guiding force in this project and act as inspiration for our interview protocol, we identified the following research questions:

1. For what reasons, if any, were student veterans attracted to the idea of study abroad and a specific study abroad opportunity? In what ways, if any, did their military background and/or prior experience overseas influence their decision?
2. How did student veterans applying for study abroad navigate the application procedures? What were their experiences in seeking course approval, funding approval and disbursement, and program acceptance?
3. During their time participating in a study abroad program, how did student veterans perceive their academic and cultural experiences in the host country? How did their military background and/or prior experience overseas inform and influence their experience as a study abroad student?

METHOD

The exploration of a single or multiple cases by means of data collection can be described as a case study (Yin,

2003). This qualitative case study served to complement efforts by the university's study abroad office to identify the unique needs of their students and better serve its diverse student population, including student veterans. Because of the nature of this case study, we were required to secure the approval of the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of our participants. Using a collaborative interview approach, we explored the ways in which the students viewed their study abroad opportunities and made sense of their study abroad experiences. The interviews were semi-structured (Janesick, 2010) to allow for additional probing questions, which contributed significantly to the findings.

The collaborative approach was essential as we drew upon our own experiences to help the students feel at ease and tell their stories. From the beginning of the project, we were acutely aware of our own researcher positionality and strived to keep this positionality at the forefront throughout the interview process. As researchers, we have a combined total of more than 20 years of experience in the fields of study abroad and international education, along with personal experience studying abroad in five countries. That said, none of us are veterans, though we each have personal connections to the military, such as family members who are veterans or who are active military. We communicated this positionality with the students to foster the needed collaboration.

PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

This collective case study (Stake, 2005) featured four student veterans who all completed at least one study abroad program at their current university. At the selected university, study abroad is optional and approximately 200 students, or 1% of the student population, study abroad each year. The university supports three types of programs: (a) Reciprocal exchange programs with partner universities, (b) semester and short-term programs through affiliated partners, and (c) short-term, faculty-led programs. We requested a list of all students who had studied abroad in the previous 5 years and who were classified as student veterans, and the total number of students in this list was 24. Prior to conducting interviews, we believed that all potential participants from this list, if selected, could have added value and provided depth to the case study. Students were recruited to the study through email communication.

Convenience sampling was used in this study because all interview participants were available to be interviewed (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). We sent the email invitation to all 24 possible participants, and because we did not have any exclusion criteria, we interviewed all four students that responded to the invitation. We assigned the students the following pseudonyms to ensure privacy and

protect their identities: (a) Kyle, (b) Jonathan, (c) Jesse, and (d) Ethan. For the purpose of this study, we have elected to include each participant's deployment location, but for confidentiality purposes, have only identified their study abroad destination in general, regional language. From this point forward, we will refer to students by their assigned pseudonyms.

University Setting

Kyle, Jonathan, Jesse, and Ethan attended the same university, a medium-sized public university with a student population of approximately 20,000, situated in a rural area of the southern US (US News & World Report, 2018). Despite the university's rural location, it was in close proximity to a large metropolitan area, from which the majority of students hailed. The university was a doctoral-granting institution and offered a number of programs online, but most students were enrolled in face-to-face classes at the undergraduate level (US News & World Report, 2018). One unique feature of the university was a dedicated office for student veterans, garnering the university attention as a "veteran-friendly" institution.

Kyle

At the time of our interview, Kyle was a third-year student majoring in a business-related field and an Army veteran who served in Iraq. Although all four of our interviewees could be classified as nontraditional students, Kyle was significantly older than the other three students and took pride in his identity as a parent. He also differed from the other three interviewees because he had more than 10 years of civilian work experience between his military service and decision to pursue his bachelor's degree. Kyle participated in a faculty-led summer program to an Asian country.

Jonathan

Like Kyle, Jonathan was a nontraditional student and parent. When we interviewed him, Jonathan was a recent graduate of the university, having just earned his bachelor's degree in a criminal justice field. At the time of the interview, he was applying for graduate programs. Jonathan was an Army veteran who had deployed multiple times to Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, and South Korea. He took part in a faculty-led summer program to a European country.

Jesse

At the time of our interview, Jesse was a recent graduate of the university, having been awarded his bachelor's degree in a social sciences field. He was a nontraditional student in his late twenties and an Army veteran who served in

Afghanistan. Jesse participated in a study abroad summer program through an affiliated partner to a European country.

Ethan

Jesse and Ethan were close friends and like Jesse, Ethan was a nontraditional student in his late twenties. At the time of interview, Ethan was in his final semester of an undergraduate program in a business discipline. He was also an Army veteran who had been deployed to Afghanistan. By most universities’ standards, Ethan was a very unique study abroad student in that he had participated in more than five separate study abroad programs during his tenure at the university. Specifically, he participated in reciprocal exchange, affiliated partner, and faculty-led programs to Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Oceania. Having such varied experience made Ethan’s contributions particularly important in this project.

INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES

In designing and carrying out the interview protocol for this study, we as researchers identified ourselves as major instruments in the study. As a guiding framework for our interview protocol, we utilized a romantic conception of interviews (Roulston, 2010). As individuals who had participated in study abroad and worked in the field of study abroad, we sought to make the students comfortable during the interview process by relating to them and fostering open dialogue. In our recruitment email, we clearly outlined the nature of our project, along with our own personal motivations for engaging in such research. During the interviews, there were numerous instances of each researcher sharing personal education, travel, and study abroad experiences to build a relationship with the students.

To begin our data collection process, we designed an informal, semi-structured interview consisting of eight open-ended questions and a variety of follow-up questions. The questions were purposively open-ended to encourage the students to elaborate on their experiences and provide as much detail as possible. Featured in **Table 1** are the questions used in our interviews with Kyle, Jonathan, Jesse, and Ethan.

In the week following the completion of the interviews, the researchers engaged in a series of informal debriefing interviews (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008) to further reflect on their actions and own researcher positionality in the student interviews. These debriefing interviews were critical in allowing the researcher to consider how their own perceptions may have had an impact on the students’ responses (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008). The debriefing interviews consisted of basic, descriptive questions and each lasted less than 10 minutes. Included among the debriefing questions were a selection from a comprehensive list outlined by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008) designed to limit and acknowledge potential researcher bias.

The full timeline of the project, from the initial IRB application to participant recruitment and interviewing to the write-up of the results was approximately 4 months. Because our study used human subjects (our participants), IRB approval was required, the approval of which took around four weeks. After IRB approval was secured, we embarked on the recruitment phase of the data collection process, sending an email and invitation to participate in the study to all eligible students. After recruiting four participants, we scheduled the interviews and began data collection. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in a small office setting on the university’s campus. After the interviews were conducted, we transcribed the data utilizing a secure, online transcription service, the transcripts from

NUMBER	QUESTION
1	“Tell me a little bit about your decision to study abroad. Have you traveled abroad in the past? Have you ever been deployed overseas? What sparked your interest in study abroad?”
2	“When you first started thinking about study abroad, did you have any particular program or location in mind? If so, why was that program or location of interest to you? If not, how did you end up deciding on a program or location?”
3	“When you were preparing to study abroad, what hurdles, if any, did you have?”
4	“Did you use any veteran benefits, financial aid, or scholarships to pay in part for your study abroad experience?”
5	“Tell me about some of your favorite memories from your study abroad experience.”
6	“Tell me about a few challenges you had during your study abroad experience.”
7	“Do you feel that your identity as a student veteran influenced your experience? Why or why not?”
8	“What advice do you have for other student veterans considering study abroad?”

Table 1 Eight Semi-Structured Questions Used During Student Veteran Interviews.

Note: Questions were semi-structured (Janesick, 2010) and open-ended to encourage collaborative dialogue.

which were manually checked for accuracy to assure that the content reflected the students’ interview responses. Using QDA Miner Version 5.0.23 (Provalis Research, 2016), we assigned codes and identified themes within the data.

ANALYSIS

Data were coded into meaningful themes using constant comparison analysis (Glaser, 1965). The data coding steps used in this constant comparison analysis were as follows: (a) *open coding* (i.e., examining the data and putting it into categories), and (b) *axial coding* (i.e., recoding the categories into themes by reexamining them; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because the aim of this project was not to create a new theory, *selective coding* (i.e., examining the relationships between categories to create a theory) was not utilized (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Constat (1992) argued that the categories created using constant comparison analysis were of the utmost importance and should include acknowledgement of origination (Who has the authority to create the categories?), verification (What is used to justify the creation of the categories?), and nomination (What is the source of each category?). In addition, Constat (1992) explained that categories can arise from a wide variety of sources, including interview or focus groups, the literature review, and examinations of the data. The constant comparison analysis in this study stemmed from the four interview with student veterans and the subsequent examination and interpretation of the data therein. QDA Miner Version 5.0.23 was utilized in completing this constant comparison analysis (Provalis Research, 2016).

RESULTS

A constant comparison analysis of the transcripts of the interviews with Kyle, Jonathan, Jesse, and Ethan, totaled 26,261 words and revealed 43 codes. We sorted the codes to establish six primary categories including: (a) logistical issues, (b) pre-departure, (c) experience in-country, (d) identity, (e) independence, and (f) support. Using the grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we repeatedly reviewed and analyzed each transcript to identify analysis concepts. Through this repeated review, or constant comparison of the data, we reorganized the codes and witnessed the emergence of the aforementioned categories. After further analyzing the six categories, we identified four main themes: (a) preparedness, (b) adjustment, (c) identity as a student veteran, and (d) institutional support. Delineated in **Table 2** are the codes and categories which influenced the four themes.

PREPAREDNESS

Each of the student veterans spent time discussing their motivations for study abroad, their program and

CATEGORY	CODES
logistical issues	flights
logistical issues	program payments
logistical issues	paperwork
logistical issues	Veterans Affairs benefits
logistical issues	packing
logistical issues	housing
logistical issues	understanding the process
pre-departure	study abroad interest- internal/external
pre-departure	study abroad motivations
pre-departure	destination choice
pre-departure	type of program
pre-departure	major
pre-departure	familiarity with destination
pre-departure	language study
pre-departure	pre-departure orientation
pre-departure	overall preparedness
experience in-country	language difficulties
experience in-country	local customs
experience in-country	local history and politics
experience in-country	activities
experience in-country	public transportation
experience in-country	cultural immersion
experience in-country	friendship and meeting new people
experience in-country	interacting with other veterans
experience in-country	stereotypes of Americans
experience in-country	political views
experience in-country	differences in the educational style
identity	veteran identity
identity	age
identity	maturity
identity	life experience
identity	work experience
identity	identity as a spouse or parent
identity	psychological growth
independence	deployment
independence	travel style- military/student
independence	solo travel
independence	leadership in a group
independence	structure
support	veteran’s office
support	study abroad office
support	faculty support
support	family support

Table 2 Constant Comparison Analysis Categories and Codes.

Note: Codes within the table were produced within QDA Miner Version 5.0.23 (Provalis Research, 2016), and categories were established *a posteriori* and composed and designated during the investigative analysis of the transcript by the researchers.

destination selection, and their overall preparedness pre-departure. We were particularly interested in why the student veteran chose to study abroad, why they selected a specific program or country, and how they navigated study abroad advising, paperwork, and pre-departure activities. For Kyle, Jonathan, and Jesse, all of whom participated in short-term summer programs, interest in study abroad was sparked by a professor. These professors also influenced their destination selection. Kyle, who went on a faculty-led program to an Asian country, noted, “I had taken [professor]. I took his class and he’s an outstanding professor. He knew a lot and I was excited to take more of his classes. That was the main reason I went [on the study abroad program].” When asked about his interest in the destination country, he quipped, “[Asian country]’s a big deal, right?” Kyle expounded:

[Asian country]’s a big deal economically ... and politically as well. They’re kind of our economic rivals, political rivals, and military rivals. It’s good to go there and understand and see things from inside than it is ... to watch things on TV. You don’t get the full story from that.

Jesse, who studied abroad on an affiliated partner program to a European country, also cited professor influence in his decision to study abroad. In particular, he discussed an international language professor who encouraged him to participate in a study abroad program. He noted, “[Professor] ... was really big on pushing to get as many of us [students] over there to really experience [European country]’s culture and identity.” Likewise, Jonathan, who participated in a criminal justice faculty-led program to another European country, commented on his professor’s background and expertise in the country as a motivating factor. He remarked:

I didn’t think about studying abroad until this criminal justice study abroad [program] came up, the one to [European country] ... it was like you get to go and see how another government conducts their security procedures with their police and everything.

For Ethan, his decision to study abroad was influenced in part by his deployment to Afghanistan. He stated:

Being in Afghanistan ... I really liked the mountains and hiking and outdoor stuff, but I wasn’t able to hike as much in the way that I enjoy. [Afghanistan] had lots of mountains and open areas and fields and everything to see in the morning when I’d be

out there. See a normal day or life out there. I really enjoyed seeing a different culture like that.

All four of the student veterans had been deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, or South Korea and cited their deployment as impactful in some way in their decision to study abroad. Interesting, too, was the very limited travel experience the students had before their deployment. Despite this lack of prior travel experience, the students identified a keen curiosity in travel.

For each of the students, preparedness before departure emerged as an important theme. Each student discussed the need to prioritize paperwork, which included transfer course equivalency, financial aid, and veterans benefits forms, among other documents. Although the students were inconvenienced by the paperwork, they took it in stride. Ethan stated:

Residency documents, visa documents ... that was probably the biggest hurdle for me [before departing on a study abroad program] because I just hate paperwork. I’m so used to it at this point after being in the military, but it doesn’t mean that I like it.

Relatedly, Kyle acknowledged that he struggled with understanding his veterans benefits and the study abroad program fee payment schedule. He commented, “Yeah, the [missed] payments [were a problem]. Part of that was the VA’s (Department of Veterans Affairs) fault.” As a parent, Kyle also discussed his family considerations as an important part not only of his decision to study abroad, but also in preparing to study abroad. He added:

It was just making time for it [study abroad] because I’m married and I have a kid. So I mean, it was handled, but my wife had to make a sacrifice on her time [sic] and then there was the fact that we had to pay for a babysitter ... it was a hurdle.

Important parts of preparing for study abroad, the topics of independent travel and booking flights, emerged in our interviews with Ethan and Jonathan. Ethan noted that traveling independently was a strange experience after having spent a number of years in the military. He said, “Pressing the button to buy the plane ticket to go by yourself is probably the biggest acceptance that you are going by yourself.” Jonathan, whose program also allowed students to travel independently to the study abroad site, expressed dismay at the difference between independent and military travel. He noted:

The flight to [European country] ... that threw me for a loop because I was so used to the Army saying,

like, “Alright guys. This is when all you guys are moving. This is when all you guys are doing this and this.” [On the contrary], everyone [the other study abroad students] were saying “Oh, I want to leave a couple of days early to go sightsee.” In the Army, it was pretty much, “You’re going this way.”

He continued:

That was the weird thing for me ... some of the students were like, “I’m taking this flight. What flight are you all taking?” For me, I’m like, “Why aren’t we all on the same flight?” [After a while], I was like, “Okay, this makes sense.” At first I was like, “What do you mean we are all having different flights?” It was just something different to me.

All four students admitted that the feeling of independence was somehow unsettling at first, but quickly became second nature. Taking a paternal role, Jonathan even helped some of the other students in his program navigate their travel to the study abroad site. He stated, “We had one girl in our class that had never even ridden on an airplane. I wanted to help her.”

ADJUSTMENT

As was mentioned previously, all four student veterans were considered nontraditional students, with the youngest of the veterans being in his late twenties. As such, it was not surprising that for some of the students, being an older student colored their experience as much, if not more than, their veteran identity. Ethan, the student who had participated in several study abroad programs, remarked that being an older student influenced his housing preferences. He stated, “I’ve stayed in a variety of places at this point. Hostels are great, but I’m kind of old enough that I like my own space.” Jonathan echoed this sentiment in his interactions with officials at study abroad site visits. He offered, “Me being a little older and a little more outgoing [compared to the other students], I could sometimes talk to the local police chief ... and feel like I have a connection with them.”

Jonathan also indicated that he and another nontraditional student occasionally felt a responsibility to assist the professor when she was leading students on site visits or field trips. Interestingly, he even referred to the younger students in the program as “kids.” He explained:

I think it probably paid off a lot for [Professor] that ... we [Jonathan and the other nontraditional student] kept accountability [*sic*] for all the kids there at all times. I was usually at the back of the pack for a

reason, even if she [Professor] didn’t realize it. That way I knew that all the students should be in front of me, while she [Professor] was usually walking in the front. I guess age and experience plays into that.

Kyle also noted that he found himself naturally playing the role of the professor’s assistant. On discussing class outings, he remarked, “I guess at the beginning, I kind of helped herd them [the other students] along ... because there’s always one straggler ... and if the professor didn’t notice, I just kept my eye on them.” Yet Kyle admitted that he really enjoyed the autonomy of traveling as a study abroad student. He commented:

The field trips stand out, but what really stands out was just being released on my own. I liked the freedom that I had. I liked that I was treated as an adult, that we were all treated as adults. What I remember the most ... is just going out on my own, finding restaurants that I liked. There was a local student that I got to know... and he took me to restaurants and showed me around.

Jesse echoed Jonathan’s comments about autonomy, also greatly enjoying the newfound independence he experienced on his program. He recounted:

Well, I think with deployment, there was no personal autonomy, right? There was no chance for me to wander off and talk to somebody or discover something. It was all very constrained, very organized, and rigid. Whereas with [European country], it was just “Okay, I’m in [European country], I’ve got to be at school by 9 a.m., and then we’re out at 2 p.m. Everything else is just whatever we want to do.

One unique element of Jesse’s interview was that he chose to spend some time (unprompted) discussing his experience as a study abroad student versus as a soldier from a political perspective, which he characterized as important to his in-country adjustment. He mentioned that in classroom spaces with some local students, the students would ask probing questions about the US government or president, or reiterate American stereotypes. He added:

That [the program] was also right after Trump got into office. So there was a lot of negativity in the classroom until they [the local students] got to know us, I guess. It was just very blatant. What they knew about America was largely based on the presidential election at the time, especially the younger people in [European country].

Jesse continued with this piercing observation of travel as a student and as a soldier:

It's a much different set of circumstances when you're traveling as part of colonial oppression versus trying to bridge a gap between two nations. Because I know with [European country] there was a real heavy emphasis on "You're a guest here, we want you here, we want to talk to you and learn from you," and vice versa. In Afghanistan, I mean, obviously, it wasn't that same kind of environment.

IDENTITY AS A STUDENT VETERAN

Although some other factors, like the students' ages, majors, or type of study abroad program they participated in, undoubtedly affected their experiences, for each of the students, their identity as a student veteran also played an important role. As part of our interview protocol for this study, we purposefully asked the student veterans about their deployment experiences so they had an opportunity to use their deployment experience as a framework through which to reflect on their study abroad experience. In our interview, Ethan noted that his experience as a veteran garnered him a level of maturity above that of his peers. He commented, "Yeah, I definitely didn't party like some of my counterparts. But the maturity level ... I'm not saying that some of the students aren't mature, but life experience is a little different." He added that being more mature and experienced had its advantages during the study abroad program, particularly in dealing with the increased level of independence. He remarked, "Veterans who've deployed before know the issues with being away, but this is a whole different experience. Nobody gets to tell you what to do."

As both a veteran and an older nontraditional student, Jonathan felt that his peers often looked up to and relied on him on his study abroad program. Having been deployed multiple times, he noted that he was always prepared. He stated:

I guess packing and traveling and the logistics of it ... the military paid off. Sometimes people would complain that they didn't have something ... like a Band-Aid or something like that. I was like, "I have one," and they were like, "Thanks for the Band-Aid, dad."

Jonathan clearly took pride in this role-model and helper status, meanwhile Jesse suggested that having another veteran on the program helped him process the experience. He said:

There was another veteran who was there. He and I hung out and I think everyone knew to a certain extent that we were veterans, but neither one of us are really the flashy "Thank me for my service" types.

In this comment, Jesse notes that while it was beneficial to have another veteran in his program, and that most other students in the program knew they were veterans, their veteran identity was not something out on display for the wider public.

Both Jesse and Ethan also spoke at length in their interviews about the ways in which their study abroad experiences helped them make sense of their past deployments and military lives, even providing a therapeutic-like effect. Jesse recounted:

I think it [study abroad] gave me a sense of confidence that I wouldn't have had otherwise to travel in a foreign country and know how to interact with people on a certain level. But I also think it brought along certain challenges. I don't know. When I get taken out of my comfort zone, especially in the case where I'm travelling abroad, sometimes it brings back real bad memories and bad habits from when I was in the military.

He continued:

It's hard to describe. It's more of a psychological feeling. You tend to put your guard up when you're in an unknown place, and a lot of times it's hard to bring that down enough to enjoy yourself and to really take in what you should be experiencing, I guess, or what you should be taking away from the [study abroad] experience.

Indeed, this necessity to confront the unknown and view the world through a different lens, however trying that may be, was a theme that came up repeatedly in our interviews. Yet most of the students suggested that study abroad was a chance for them to explore themselves and cope with previous experiences. Ethan added, "I haven't had as rough of a time as some of my veteran buddies, but this [study abroad] has helped me psychologically. I wouldn't say grow, but just get past things."

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

As researchers, we did not ask explicitly about institutional support in any of our interview questions, yet it was a topic that came up several times during our interviews. Preparing to study abroad and participating in a program are complex

ordeals that affect various people in a student's life, from their professors to advisors to family. As such, it's no surprise that the students cited institutional support from several sources as critical. Specifically, the students discussed institutional support from the university's veterans services office, the study abroad office, and individual faculty members.

As was mentioned previously, the university in which the student veterans were enrolled had a dedicated veterans services office and was well-known throughout the region to be a "veteran-friendly" school. What's even more unique about the veterans services office was that it had an on-site VA counselor to advise students and act as a liaison among the agency, the students, and the university. Kyle remarked that the VA counselor helped him navigate through using his VA benefits for study abroad, while Jesse added that the counselor helped him with the necessary VA paperwork. Ethan, the student who had participated in several different study abroad programs, commented that he had gotten to know the VA counselor well. He said:

The vocational rehab counselor [VA counselor] ... she was amazing. Her and [study abroad coordinator] probably had enough of me. She helped me out probably the most with getting the VA stuff handled because she knew what [benefits] I was entitled to ... and the valid reason to use them, valid place to use them, and valid timeframe to use them. So she did a lot of the legwork to help me use my benefits.

In addressing the support provided by the VA counselor, Kyle added that although he knew that the VA would pay for his regular, on-campus classes, he wasn't sure if they would pay for study abroad. He noted, "It [study abroad] seems like a special thing. It's not just regular classes, so I'm glad that the VA pays for it."

Jesse also utilized support offered through the veterans services center, but he noted that he spent most of his time seeking advice and help from the study abroad coordinator. He offered, "The [study abroad] office was great in helping everyone get prepared and get all the paperwork set aside. It was all really easy." Jonathan and Ethan both suggested ways for the study abroad office and faculty members to better serve student veterans. Jonathan said that when he began his study abroad journey, he felt somewhat confused about what paperwork was required and the timeline during which he was supposed to have tasks completed. He mentioned:

I think having a little bit more of a systematic approach to it [the study abroad process] might be more appealing I guess for veterans. That way, they

know there is a checklist, there is something they're supposed to be following rather than just, like, "See you there!"

This preferred more structural approach was brought up by several of the students as they discussed their struggles in transitioning from a highly structured, military environment to a semi-structured, more independent study abroad environment. When discussing support from the study abroad office, Ethan added that a focus on faculty-led programs could be good for student veterans new to the idea of study abroad. He recommended:

I would do a faculty-led program first mostly because it's shorter, so they [student veterans] get a feel for it. It's all organized so all they have to do is, like, maybe buy the flight. Everything else is included in the price.

He continued, adding that the faculty support behind faculty-led programs could be a great aide for student veterans interested in study abroad. He remarked, "With the faculty-led [programs], the professor helps with everything while you're there."

DISCUSSION

The number of veterans enrolled in college or university programs in the US now totals more than 800,000 (Vacchi, 2012), while the number of general students participating in study abroad programs is nearly 350,000 (IIE, 2019), yet these two groups of students seldom overlap. As such, there has been very limited literature centered around the intersection of study abroad and the student veteran experience. Some researchers suggest that student veteran success, like that of the general student population, can be finely intertwined with student engagement (Cole & Kim, 2013). Indeed, they report that student veterans are more likely to be academically successful when they are engaged in extracurricular activities and experiential learning opportunities, yet as veterans who are also typically nontraditional students, they may find difficulty adapting to campus culture and finding the time to be an active participant in the campus community (Cole & Kim, 2013; Naphan & Elliot, 2015). Kappell (2017), however, notes that student veterans can benefit from a wide variety of HIP opportunities afforded to them, including study abroad, which may be financed in part through the use of the GI Bill (West, 2016).

Despite increased opportunities for all students, including student veterans, to study abroad, outreach

efforts rarely target student veterans and as such, being a first-hand witness to the experiences of four student veterans who studied abroad was a rewarding experience. In their interviews, the student veteran participants discussed topics ranging from study abroad destination selection to preparing for and financing their program to their experience while overseas. An analysis of the transcripts revealed the emergence of four main themes throughout the interviews: Preparedness, adjustment, identity as a student veteran, and institutional support. It was evident that each student's nontraditional status played an important role in their experience, yet also did their identity as a veteran.

On the theme of preparedness, most of the students identified a key professor as a major influencer in their decision to study abroad and their subsequent preparation for departure. This note can be particularly important for institutions that support faculty-led study abroad programs in encouraging their faculty leaders to recruit and assist student veterans. Regarding adjustment, the students spoke on their experiences transitioning from a traveling soldier to a traveling student, both in the logistical differences featured therein and in the ways in which locals viewed and interacted with them. Discussing their student veteran identity, several students remarked that their experience in the military made them a more mature study abroad student. Others commented that study abroad served as both a psychological challenge and a therapeutic act in coping with deployment memories. Lastly, all of the students acknowledged a number of ways in which institutions could better support veterans who are interested in studying abroad. Namely, they suggested increased collaboration between the study abroad office and veteran student center, along with more information about financing study abroad programs and a more structured approach to program applications, payments, and deadlines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Faculty

Three of the student veterans interviewed in this study participated in faculty-led programs and the fourth in a program recommended by a faculty member. The importance of the faculty, both as the motivator to apply and the supporter on site, was evident. Faculty should be aware of the influence they have not only on student veterans, but also on all students in their classroom as it pertains to study abroad. Because it is organized by the university, a faculty-led program can more closely resemble the structure student veterans are used to for travel. Course approvals are not necessary and only a few logistical matters need to be handled by the student.

For faculty leading programs with student veteran participants, it's important to consider the role their background plays in the group dynamic. The student veteran may be older and have more travel experience than other students. As such, younger students may look up to this person and seek their guidance. Whether intentional or not, based on our interviews, the veteran often served as support to the faculty member and took on the responsibility of looking after the other students.

For Study Abroad and Veterans Resource Offices

According to West (2016), it's key for the study abroad office to connect with the veterans resource office on campus to better understand how the GI Bill can be used when it comes to study abroad. Because the GI Bill cannot be used towards the cost of airfare or for third-party study abroad provider program fees, it's useful to break down the costs and help student veterans create clear budgets to fully understand the expenses outside of the GI Bill coverage. Relevant information about financing study abroad programs and a more structured approach to program applications, payments, and deadlines would be essential to getting more student veterans abroad. The veterans resource office will also need to work hand-in-hand with the study abroad office to assist in building attractive, affordable, short-term programs for veterans who wish to study abroad. Lastly, both offices should strive to provide programming to promote study abroad opportunities to student veterans across campus.

For Higher Education Administrators

Study abroad is playing an increasingly important role in shaping the next generation of college students (Gerhards & Hans, 2013; Van Mol, 2014). It is the duty of college administrators to realize the importance of including veterans into the conversation regarding study abroad and allowing them the opportunity and resources to participate in such an important HIP. Developing a communication plan to promote study abroad opportunities to student veterans is essential. Institutions can also prioritize the creation of returnee programming, so that student veterans who return from study abroad programs can have a space to deconstruct their experiences. It is important for our student veterans to know that the administration values them and their educational experience, both on campus and abroad.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

This project serves to add important literature to the field of study abroad and student veteran services, yet it is not without limitations. First, this study included

only four participants at one university. Each participant fit into a similar demographic category—namely, they were all male, white, nontraditional (in their late twenties to late thirties), and had all served in the Army. Future research could (and should) include not only a larger sample size, but also a wider sample of the diverse veteran community, including, but not limited to, veterans of all genders, ages, races and ethnicities, and service branches. Second, this particular study focused on student veterans' experiences recounted 6 months to 2 years after their return from their study abroad program. Future research could focus on veterans at each stage of the study abroad process. Lastly, this study was designed as a qualitative inquiry into the minds of the student veterans, and as a result, produced fascinating and humbling results. Future researchers should employ a quantitative approach and inquire into the effect of study abroad experience on student veterans' persistence, GPA, graduation rates, employability, or even mental health.

When we originally conceived of this study, we imagined how it could benefit study abroad professionals and higher education administrators, particularly those who are new to working with the student veteran community. What we found reinforced, that we, as study abroad professionals, already knew from anecdotal experience is that student veterans want to study abroad. In fact, they are so eager to experience the world in a different light than how they experienced it as a soldier. Some of our biggest takeaways and recommendations for higher education professionals are simply to work collaboratively with other offices across campus, including the veteran student center and financial aid, among others, and to make the study abroad process as clear, transparent, and structured as possible. As we thank our student veterans for their service, let's also support them in this next stage of their life.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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