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Assessing Student Learning Outcomes of Participating in Study Abroad Programs at ISU

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Introduction

- This study was funded by a small project grant provided by the Cross Endowed Chair for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University.
- This study evaluates the professional and personal learning outcomes of students participating in study abroad programs at Illinois State University.
- The project objectives were to
 - evaluate university students' learning outcomes resulting from living and studying in a unique educational setting
 - evaluate the impact of study abroad experiences on students' personal and professional development, including intercultural competence



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Literature Review

Carley, Stuart, & Dailey (2011):

The results showed that students gained in cultural competence but improvement in their business acumen was minimal.

Miller-Perrin & Thompson (2014):

While the benefits for language learning have been demonstrated, other benefits of study abroad remain understudied.

Kamdar & Lewis (2014):

The authors questions the role of study abroad in contributing to academic learning, arguing that current scholarship relies on self-reporting or is otherwise inadequate.

Savicki (2010):

Some shorter-term programs appear to achieve similar outcomes to longer-term programs, because the outcomes depend on both the quantity and quality of interactions on the ground.



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Literature Review

Olson & Lalley (2012):

According to their responses, students felt they had gained more cultural sensitivity, global awareness, greater self-confidence, and focus.

Strange & Gibson (2017):

The authors examine “holistic” outcomes of study abroad and argue that ultimately experiential learning leads to transformative learning.

Smith & Yang (2017):

Results showed students increased their knowledge in interpersonal accommodation, global interdependence knowledge, and cultural sensitivity.

Trower & Lehmann (2017):

Based on on survey data, students were either unaware or largely uninterested in the potential academic or career benefits of study abroad, but they viewed study abroad as a unique opportunity for personal growth.



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Theoretical Framework

Experiential Learning

Strange, H. & Gibson, H.J. (2017). “An investigation of experiential and transformative learning in study abroad programs.” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 29(1), 85-100.

The authors examine “holistic” outcomes of study abroad, “defined as outcomes which reflect the intellectual, social, and emotional growth of a student” (85). They operate under the premise that not all programs are created equal. They propose two possible theoretical frameworks to study the question. First, Transformative Learning Theory, “asserts that through reflection, active learning, and placing ourselves in uncomfortable situations, students are able to develop their understanding of the world of and of themselves, allowing a potential change to their perspectives and frames of reference” (86). The second, Experiential Learning, “is defined as the type of education whereby knowledge and meaning are contextualized in actual experiences, as often found in study abroad programs” (86).



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Theoretical Framework

“...experience as the source of learning and development”

- *“Learning is best conceived as a process and not in terms of outcomes”*
- *“Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience”*

Kolb, 1984



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Guiding Questions

- How do students perceive the academic learning outcomes of participating in a study abroad experience?
- How do students perceive their personal development as a result of participating in a study abroad experience?
- What will students take with them from a study abroad experience into their future studies or careers?



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Methodology

- The present study uses a case method approach. A case, as defined by Merriam (1998), is a “bounded system” and by Miles and Huberman (1994) as a “phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25).
- Case study research is appropriate in this instance as study abroad fits this definition of a bounded case in the sense that it represents the intersection of a particular time and space.



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Participants

- Undergraduate and graduate students from Illinois State University who had studied abroad in the last three years



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Majors Represented in Study Abroad Participants.

Mennonite School of Nursing (8)	College of Applied Science and Technology (8)	College of Fine Arts (11)	College of Business (21)	College of Education (27)	College Arts and Sciences (67)
Nursing	Recreation & Park Administration (3) Exercise Science (2) Agriculture (1) Fashion Design (1) Food, Nutrition, and Dietetics (1)	Art (5) Theatre (3) Arts Technology (2) Music (1)	International Business (6) Accounting (5) Management (4) Finance (3) Actuarial Sciences (1) Business Administration (1) Business Information Systems (1)	Elementary Education (13) Bilingual Elementary Education (5) Early Childhood Education (4) Middle Level Education (3) Special Education (2)	Communication Sciences and Disorders (10) English (9) Spanish (8) Communications Studies (7) History (7) Biological Sciences (5) Geography (4) Public Relations (4) Mass Media (3) Mathematics (3) Journalism (2) Psychology (2) Anthropology (1) Chemistry (1) French (1)

$N=158$



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Data Collection

Initial Survey

- *1500* students were sent the invitation to complete the survey
- *150* students responded
- Major
- When, where, and why participate in study abroad
- Perceived personal learning
- Influence on learning
- Connection to future career



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Data Collection

Focus Groups (5)

23 participants

19 female

4 male

- Reflect on your experiences
- Successes and challenges
- What did you learn you could only learn overseas
- How have you changed
- What was it like to return home and to return to campus



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Data Analysis

- To interpret the participants' experiences, the data coding procedures of constant comparative analysis were used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
- Throughout the analysis, the three-level coding process was used: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
- The researchers all participated individually and collectively in analyzing the qualitative data to provide some degree of inter-rater reliability



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Data Analysis

- The quantitative survey data were analyzed descriptively to demonstrate participants' perceived growth and development
- Qualitative survey data were analyzed using the same constant comparative analysis procedures as the focus groups



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Results

- Personal Development
- Reconstructing Cultural Mindset
- Interpersonal Dynamics
- Increased Communication Skills
- Tolerance for Ambiguity
- Forging New Relationships
- Academics and Learning
- Critical Analysis of One's Own Cultural Norms



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Personal Development

- Independence & Autonomy
- Confidence & Self-Efficacy
- Becoming More Adventurous

I wanted to grow and become more comfortable being uncomfortable in the unknown. More confident in my ability to go and do.

Confidence being alone, ability to stick up for myself and do what I want to rather than just go with the group, and an understanding that having different values is okay

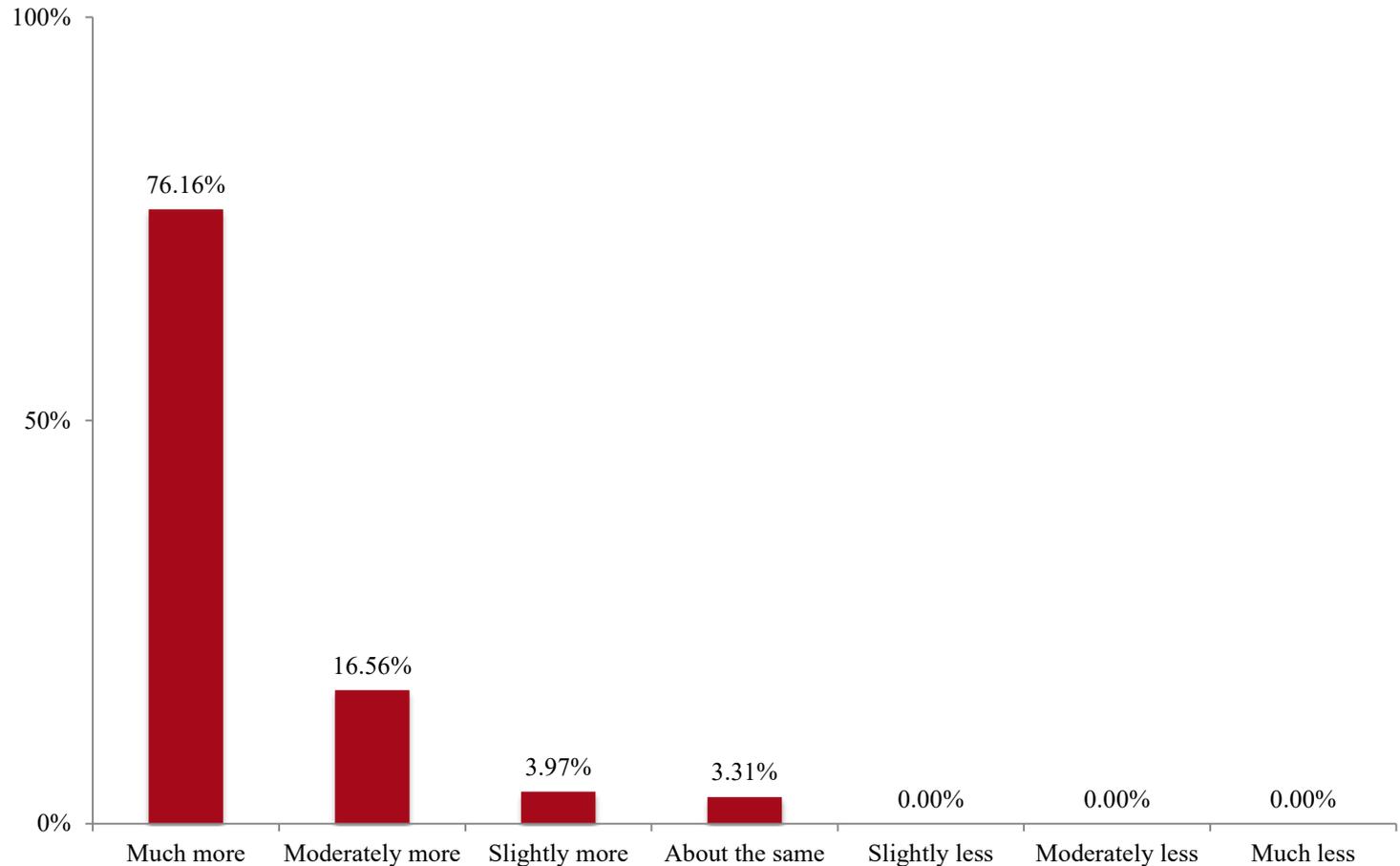


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How did your study abroad experience help you to develop: Independence?



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Reconstructing Cultural Mindset

- World is Bigger Than Self
- Recognizing and Negotiating Cultural Differences

Social norms are different in different cultures, immersing yourself into a different culture is the best way to learn a language, being in a different culture makes you respect others.

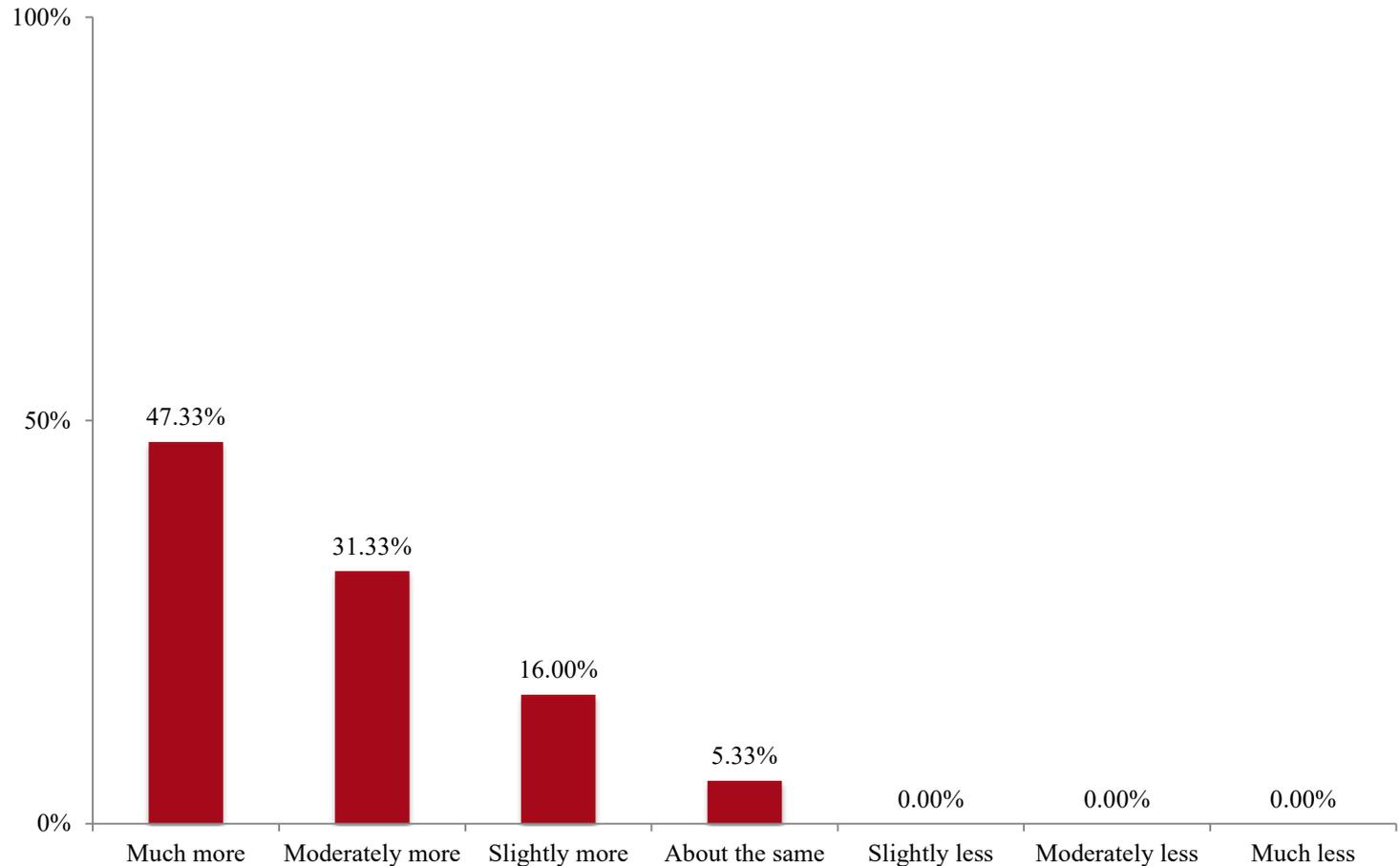


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How did your study abroad experience help you to develop: Negotiating cultural differences?



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Interpersonal Dynamics

- Being More Open Minded
 1. *Be open to new ideas and trying new things*
 2. *Try to make friends and connections*
 3. *Make the most of your experiences*
- Developing Empathy for Others
- Patience and Tolerance

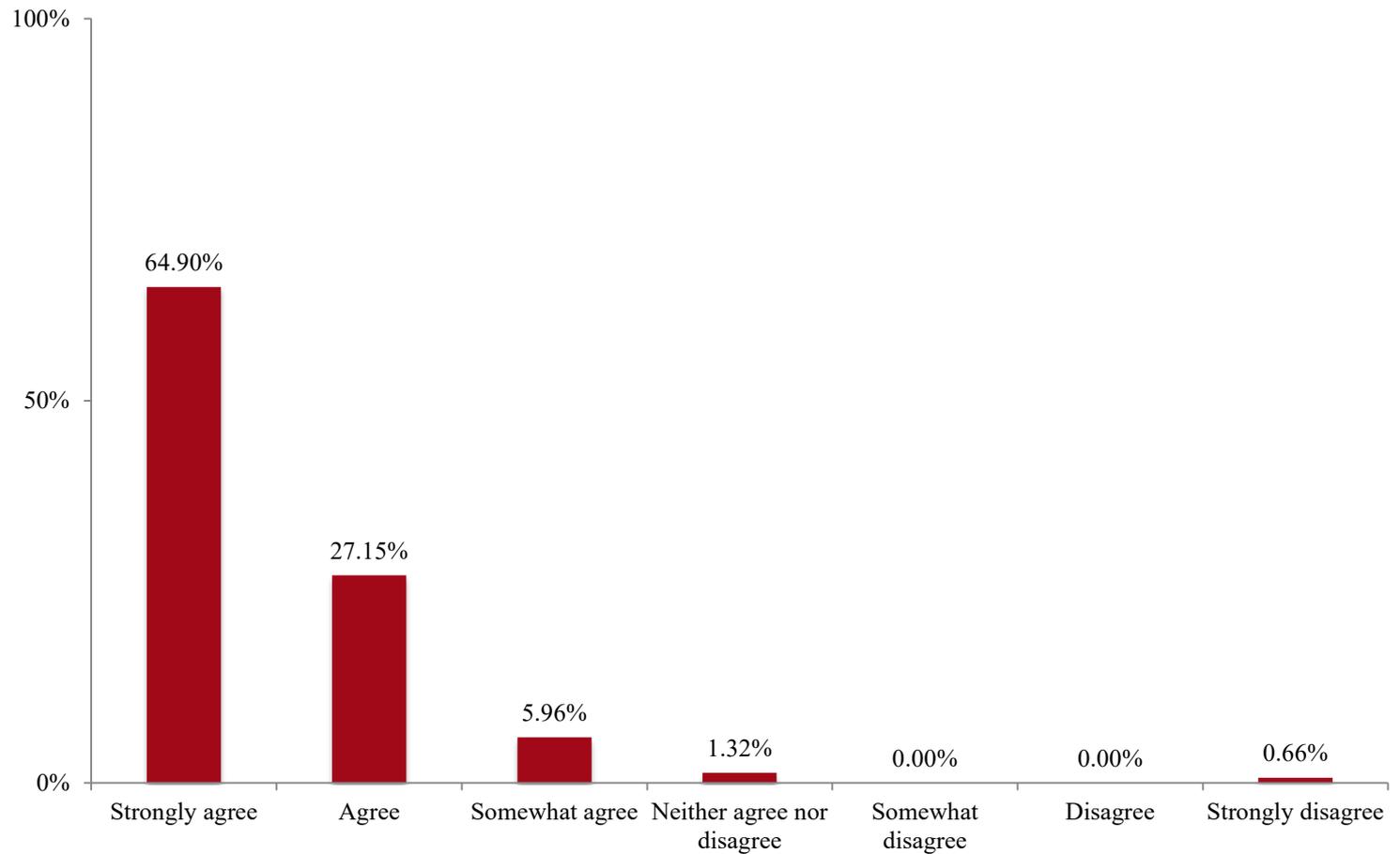


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I am comfortable interacting with people that have backgrounds different than mine.



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Increased Communication Skills

- *Developing Language Skills*
- *Negotiating Language Barriers*
- *Developing Capacity to Communicate*

How to communicate with a language barrier, how different techniques can be used in different places for the same purposes, and that no matter how much outside of your comfort zone you feel, you need to jump and experience everything you can.

I greatly improved my Spanish both academically and conversationally, I gained a new appreciation for other cultures, and I gained more confidence in myself and my abilities

Just communication is just easier. And you don't like, realize, like, how much you take it for granted until you can't talk to people.

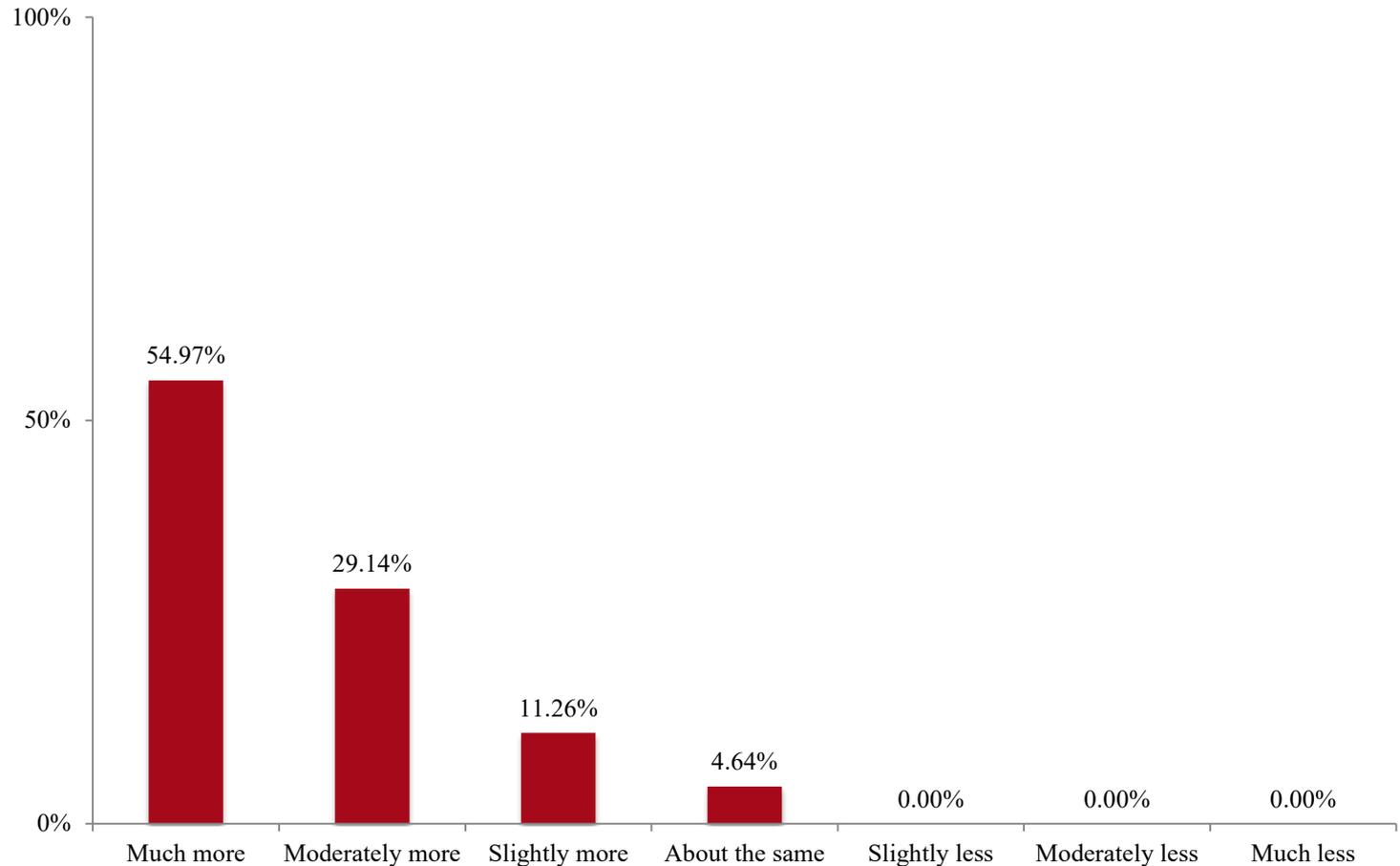


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How did your study abroad experience help you to develop: Intercultural communication?



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Tolerance for Ambiguity

- New Life Skills
- Problem-Solving Skills
- Persistence

I learned to try and understand before making judgments. I learned that even though students are from all over the world, they are still just high school students. And finally I learned that sometimes it's okay to feel uncomfortable at first because usually the experience you get out of it is well worth the discomfort.

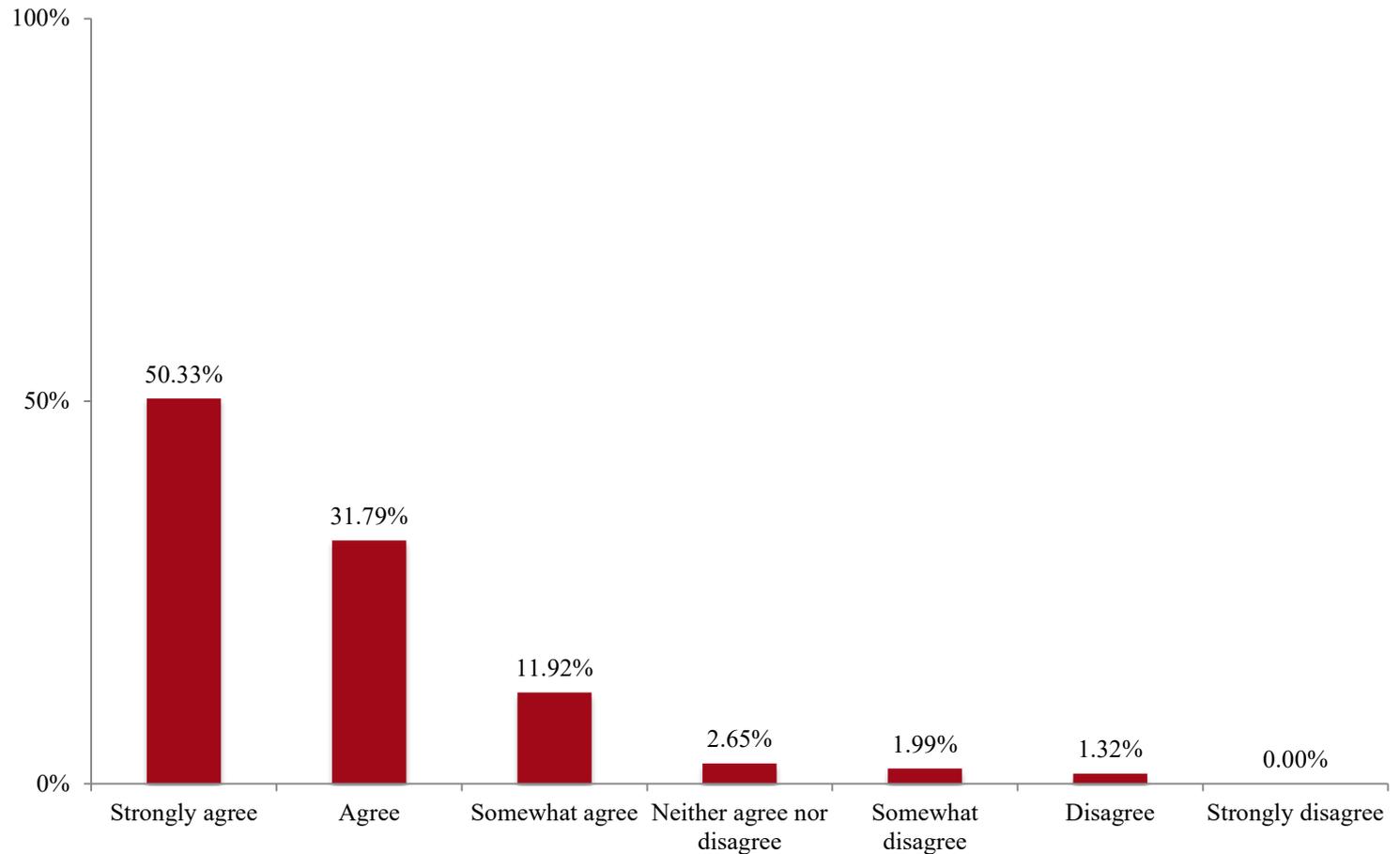


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I am confident in my ability to navigate a new place.



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Forging New Relationships

- Connecting with People
- Professional Connections

I got experience interview[ing] people from many different contexts on pressing issues, I made several new friends in Peru, and I got to practice speaking Spanish.

My friends give me crap all the time.

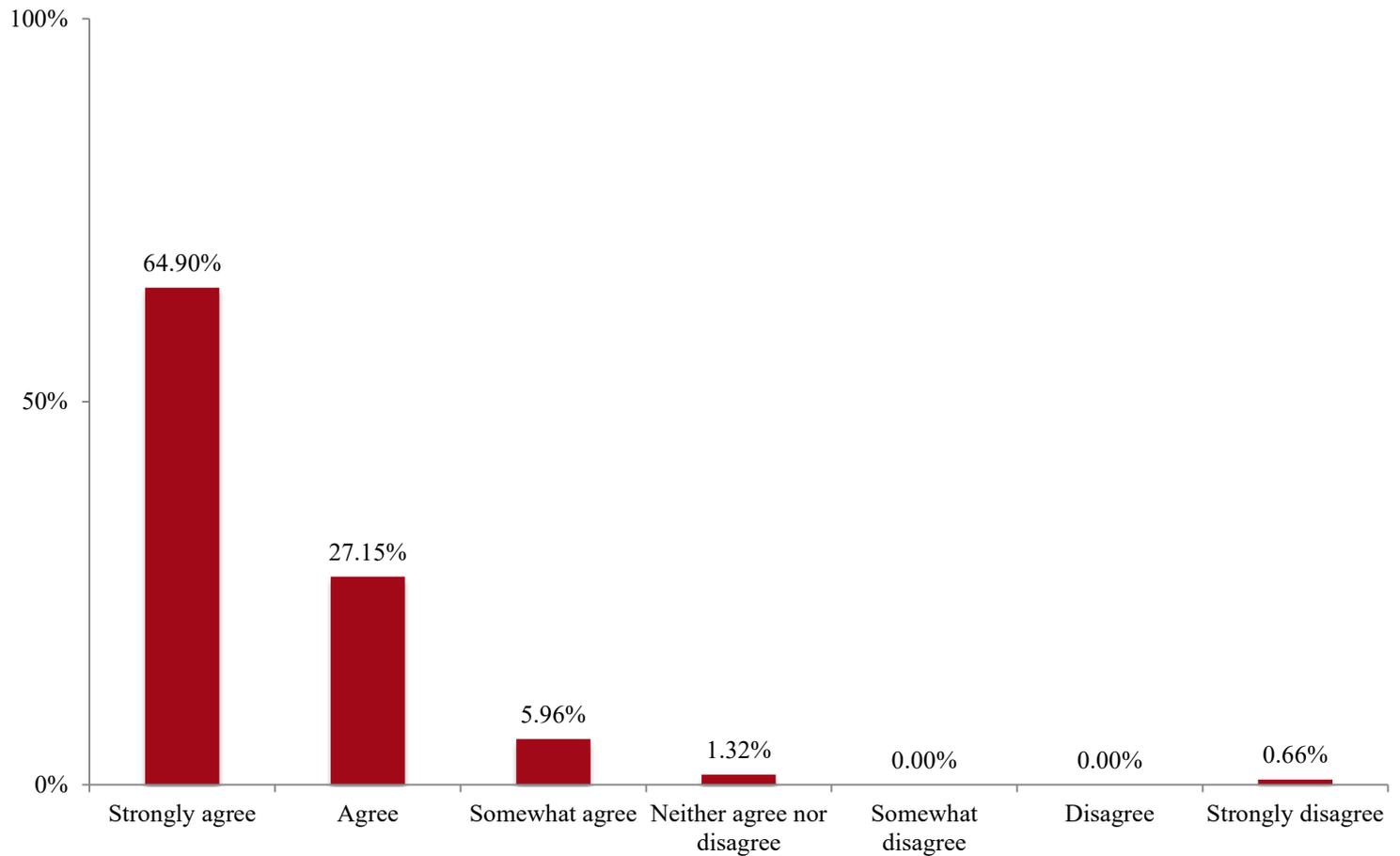


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Academics and Learning

- Comparing Academic Settings, Negotiating Academic Differences
- Learning When Back on Campus

I used to accept whatever viewpoint was presented to me, but now I do not take everything at face value. I feel more compelled to question lines of thinking and search for different perspectives.

It didn't really influence my learning. This was more of a cultural immersion trip that actually taking classes.

It didn't real effect my learning that much just because my major doesn't really have to do with different cultures.

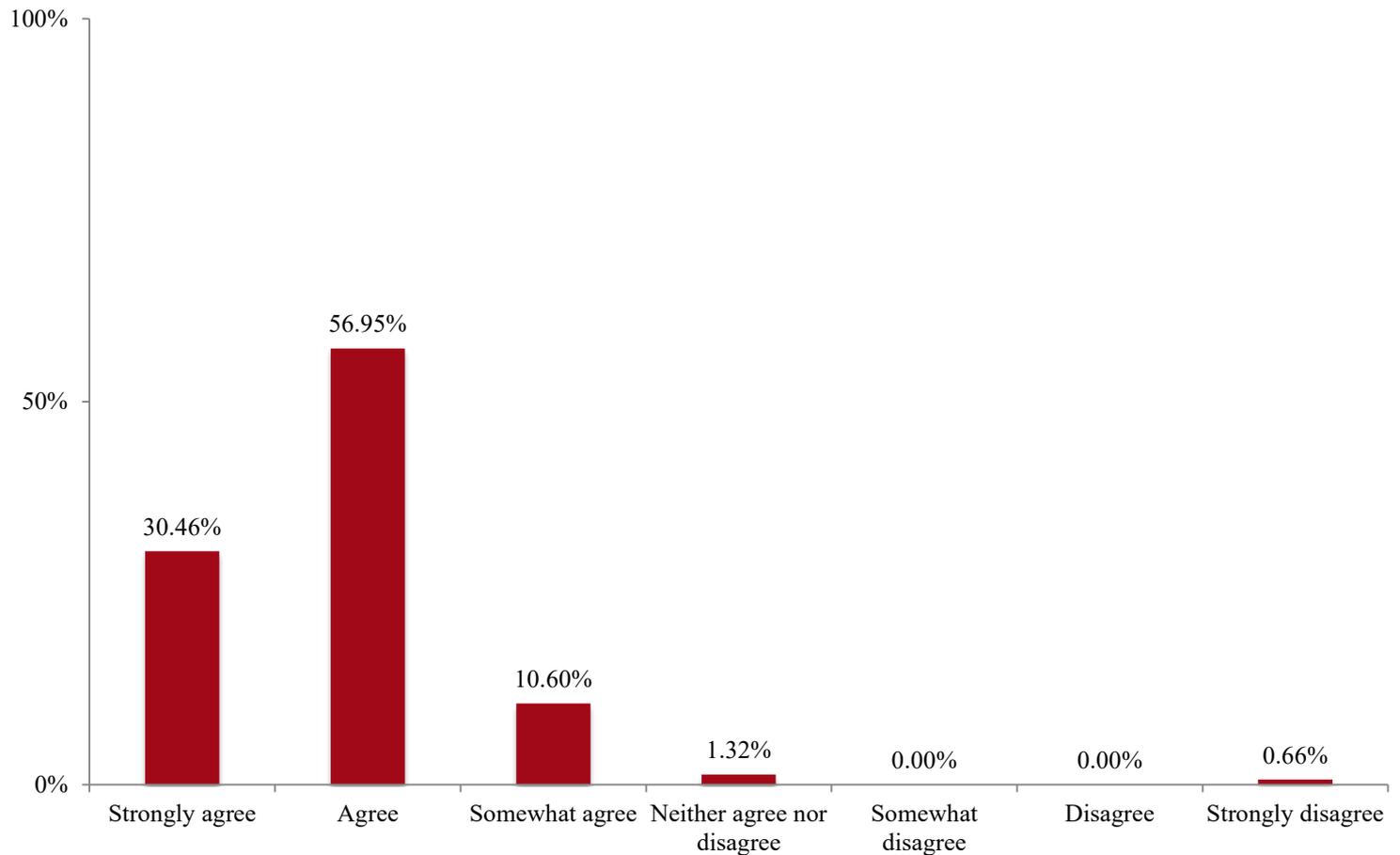


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I can apply information from one context to new, broader contexts.



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Analysis of Own Culture

- Identifying US Culture
- Reflecting on Differences and Similarities

... traveling made me realize my personal issues with the American public school system.

I feel more aware... Like, I kinda have a desire to know more than just American issues.

I prefer more structured time. 2. America is the most convenient place on earth. 3. I'll never take air conditioning for granted again.

I was more self-aware of all of the things that have been given to me because I am an American, I realized how different ways of life can be better ways of life, and I learned that in most countries they are bilingual but we are only monolingual in the US.

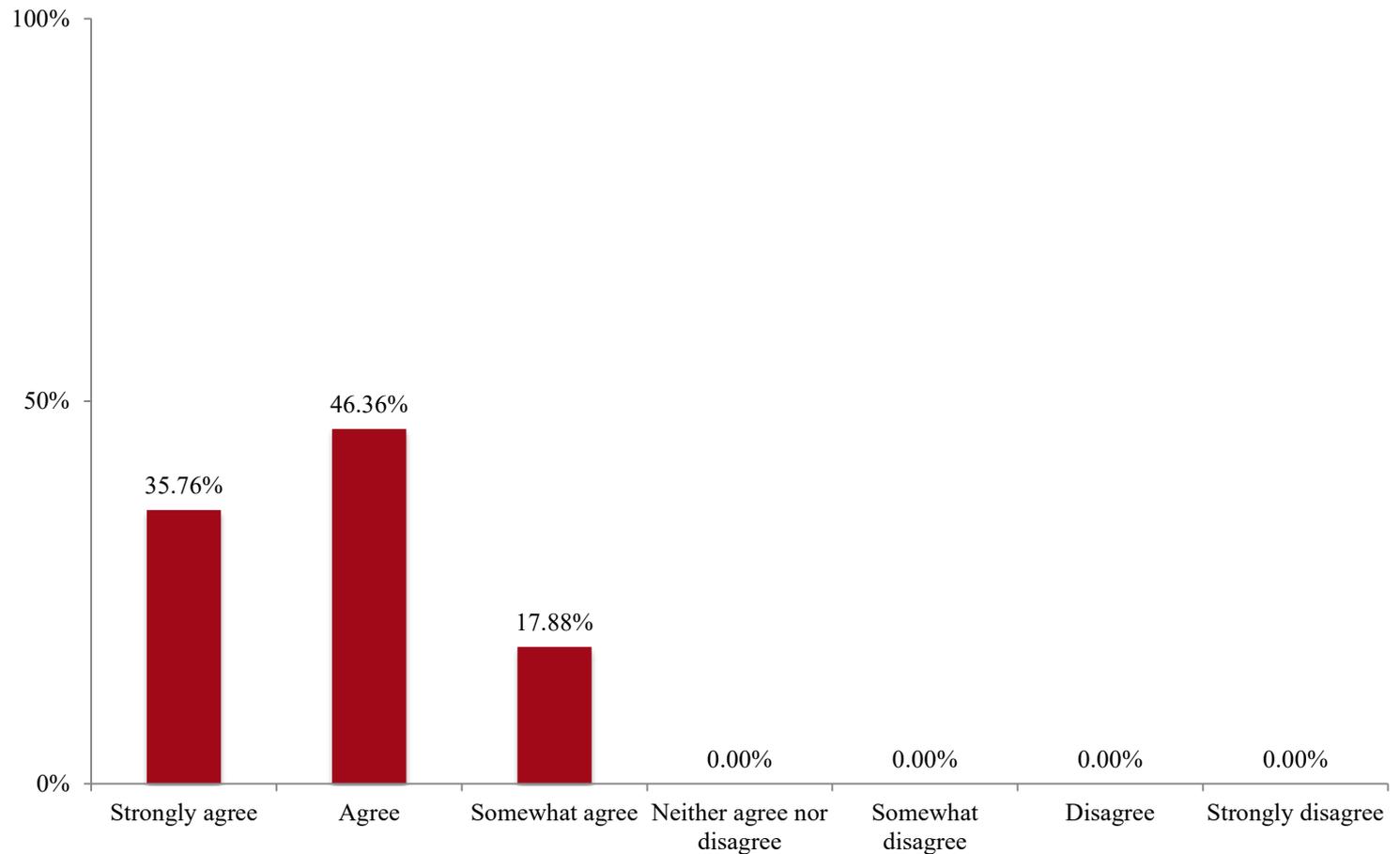


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I have a good understanding of my own culture.



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Implications

- We learned that while a small percentage of the students were able to discuss precisely the academic importance of their time abroad, the larger percentage appreciated the topics of their courses but reported on the benefits gained in intercultural competency, self-confidence, and overall personal growth.
- We learned that the student respondents were less focused on the academic learning outcomes than they were on personal growth.
- Since the students placed personal growth ahead of academic concerns while abroad, study abroad program development needs to recognize the important that students place on their personal development and create programs designed to foster personal as well as academic development.



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Implications

- While some students reported on professional experiences abroad (visiting classrooms, internships etc.), the majority of respondents were unaware of any potential relationship between their experiences abroad and their future careers; namely, they were unaware of how intercultural competency might increase their professional capital and marketability.
- Study abroad programs, therefore, should be designed to help students make those connections between their personal growth and the benefits to their future careers in non-academic terms.



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Limitations

- Relatively small n
- One campus environment
- Self-reporting data



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Conclusion

- Our results demonstrated that the majority of learning on a study abroad experience occurred in the realm of personal and emotional growth, including an increased capacity to communicate, to tolerate stress and ambiguities, and to develop a critical understanding of one's social and cultural location.
- In the vast majority of responses, academic outcomes were less valuable to the students than their personal development.
- We concluded that at Illinois State University study abroad programs need to develop curricula that foster personal development in addition to meeting academic goals. These programs should also guide students in understanding their personal growth. Finally, we as educators on study abroad programs need to help students make connections between their personal development and their academic and professional lives.



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Suggested Next Steps for Study Abroad Faculty Advisors

- Focus: Cultural Competency
 - Activity: Participating in culturally-specific events, requiring students to engaged with the particular community and culture.
 - Cooking classes with local chef.
 - Community events such as fairs, festivals, and public holiday celebrations.
 - Volunteering with local charities or community groups
- Focus: Building Self Efficacy
 - Activity: Journaling/Debriefing with Faculty Advisor
 - Reflections on experiences as a student abroad.
 - Reflections on visual culture/things encountered
 - Reflections on community events (as required above)
- Focus: Connecting Experience to Professional Goals
 - Activity: Engagement with professionals
 - Whether in the U.S. before departure or in country, create opportunities for students to engage with professionals in their fields.
 - Invite scholars/academics/professionals to speak to the students about their career paths and how international experiences assisted them.



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Questions

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