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**Does Cultural Immersion Around the World Create Stronger Students?  
A Study of the Benefits of Studying Abroad on  
Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing.**

**by**

**Hanna Lynn Strombom**

**Advisor: Dr. Molly Rapert**

**An Honors Thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of  
Science in Business Administration in Finance.**

**Sam M. Walton College of Business  
University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas**

**May 13, 2023**

**“The University of Arkansas is determined to build a better world by providing transformational opportunities and skills, promoting an inclusive and diverse culture, nurturing creativity, and solving problems through research and discovery, all in service to Arkansas.”**

**University of Arkansas  
Mission Statement**

## Introduction

The rise of mental illnesses in the United States has become increasingly concerning for society. This can be attributed to the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, rise in social media popularity, or the current generation breaking down stigmas associated with mental health. Mental illnesses affect everyone, regardless of your age, gender, or social status. There are many different types of mental illnesses that include the broader categories of anxiety disorders, mood disorders, eating disorders, psychotic disorders, and personality disorders (Casarella). College-aged students are being affected by mental illnesses at alarming rates (Flatt). These students are the future of our country and workforce. Without healthy and strong adults, there will be trickling downfalls on communities and the country as a whole. Some negative consequences include higher rates of unemployment and poverty that will eventually affect the nation's economy.

Universities aim to provide its students a quality education, along with a diverse set of experiences that will allow the student to succeed in their future endeavors. One of these opportunities available to students is to study abroad. The study abroad experience allows students to be fully immersed in a different culture around the world while continuing to earn credits toward their degree. Beyond the course credits, the student will develop skills and characteristics beneficial to their personal and future professional lives. Students learn to adapt to the new environment, language, and cultural norms. This connects them to an everchanging world and how to navigate through it.

With that being said, students may face culture shock during study abroad. It can be tough on the student to adapt to this foreign way of living. It is important for the home university to provide the students with resources that allows the student to get the most out of the experience. In the end, they will gain meaningful connections and a more diverse viewpoint.

This research will investigate whether study abroad has a profound positive impact on students' mental health and wellbeing. There are four foundational areas that have formed my basis for my research exploration:

- What are the benefits of studying abroad for students personally and professionally?
- How do past students' view their study abroad experience? Have they gained greater knowledge about the world and themselves through their experience?
- What is the impact of study abroad on mental health and wellbeing?
- What are challenges students' have faced while studying abroad, and how did these events impact them?

My research methods include a literature review, pre-survey, and post-survey administered to study abroad students evaluating their mental health state at two periods in time. The survey instrument includes reliable and valid scales from the mental health and wellbeing literature. *This research was supported through funding provided by the University of Arkansas Honors College.*

**"Study abroad is a learning opportunity that enables students to develop critical skills needed to compete in today's global economy."**

**Senator Paul Simon  
Study Abroad Act**

## Literature Review

This literature review focuses on prior research encompassing the topics of mental health and wellbeing, study abroad, culture shock, and the benefits of studying abroad to the student.

### *Mental Health and Wellbeing*

Mental health concerns in America have continued to rise over recent years. It is suggested that nearly half of the adults in America will face a mental illness at some point in their life (Sickel). It is now being labelled a crisis as physicians, educators, and counselors work to better support their communities. This is a difficult topic to address because of the stigmas surrounding mental health, making people less forthcoming to discuss mental illnesses and personal struggles with others. The lack of people seeking mental health treatment increases the severity of mental illnesses in individuals.

There are a variety of mental illness categories including anxiety disorders, mood disorders, eating disorders, psychotic disorders, and personality disorders (Casarella). Mental illnesses do not discriminate when it comes to affecting people. It can affect anyone regardless of the person's age, gender, social status, or occupation. Some people who are believed to be the happiest are suffering in silence from a mental illness.

Treatment has been proven to be effective in helping people with mental illnesses and allow them to be functioning members of society. Unfortunately, many mental illnesses go untreated because of the stigmas associated with mental health. Stigmas create a barrier for people to be successful in their treatment plans, either through seeking treatment or maintaining participation in their treatment. Mental health stigmas come in three forms—social stigma, self-stigma, and health professional stigma (Ahmedani). Social stigma is a belief that is held by the majority of society, making people with mental illnesses seem inferior to the general population. Self-stigma is when a person internalizes stigmas processed by society. This has negative effects on the person's self-esteem, making them feel like they are in the wrong and an outsider compared to the rest of society. Health professional stigma is when people within the medical field act differently towards their patients with mental illnesses in comparison to their other patients. Mental illnesses are stigmatized more than if someone were to have a physical injury. This is because no one can visibly see that something is wrong in diagnostic tests. These create adverse impacts on a person already suffering from mental illness, alienating themselves even more to suffer alone.

The average age that mental illnesses tend to be revealed in is adolescents between eighteen and twenty-four years of age (Flatt). This happens to be the average age range most commonly found in students currently attending post-secondary education. There are believed to be numerous contributing factors as to why this age group is predominantly affected. Students are facing, more than ever before, pressures from their families, professors, and classmates to perform their best academically (Flatt). Top grades and hard work are perceived to be the only reasons for one to be successful in their future. This, in turn, has them applying more pressure on themselves.

Students are also facing pressures outside of the classroom to keep up with the many other demands that can be involved in college. An additional stressor that college-aged students face is the increasing costs to attend post-secondary education, making it harder for families to cover the entire cost of their education (Flatt). The student then has to take on more

responsibilities to cover the additional expenses of attending higher education. Attending college can be life-changing and daunting for some. This is often the first time that a student will move away from home and live on their own. It can be challenging for people to adjust to this new lifestyle without their family and friends close by for support, making them feel secluded.

The ongoing stress from the demands and the lack of resources and education on how to navigate their mental illnesses have negatively affected these students. Over the past sixty years, suicide rates for ages between eighteen and twenty-four have tripled, making it the second leading cause of death for people in this age group (Flatt).

In more recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the adverse impact on the mental health and wellbeing of people throughout the country. When the pandemic hit the United States and closed everything down, people were forced to be confined to their homes. People felt restricted from their normal lifestyles. As naturally social creatures, people were unable to maintain these human interactions with others through their work and school. Many people had to adapt to this new way of life and were not able to see an end to the pandemic to return to their previous life. During this time, students reported to have an increase in depression and anxiety regarding the pandemic because they had to pack up their routine college life and return home (Brazeau). The pandemic intensified the feelings of lack of control over their life. It was hard for students to focus on their studies in their family home due to the many distractions. Other stressors include losing jobs and loved ones becoming ill. There was an increase in unhealthy and sedentary lifestyles because people were coping with depression symptoms (Brazeau). As the pandemic concerns continue to linger, positive emotions and feelings continue to gradually decline in the population (Hossain).

Educational systems are one of the best resources for students to find help in combatting their mental illnesses. Educational programs can teach its students how to stay resilient and coping mechanisms to help maintain balance within their life. It is also one of the first points of contact to identify students struggling with their mental health through their interactions and schoolwork. Since classes switched to remote learning during the pandemic, the intimacy of relationships between students, professors, and support staff was lacking. Students no longer knew how to access their campus' mental health resources and therefore were not coping well (Hossain). It is now more important than ever, as students return back to in-person learning, for schools to support its students and teach them how to balance responsibilities and handle their stressors.

Sustainable mental health should be a priority in students because they are the future of the country's workforce. Mental illnesses affect students' performance throughout their education. They are more likely to receive worst grades, which can lead them to dropping out of their education (Eisenberg). This in turn has consequences on the employability of the student in the workforce. Mental illnesses will also lower workers' productivity levels in their profession. People suffering from mental illnesses are more likely to call out from work, approximately five percent more in comparison to those who state they have good mental health (Bubonya). There was a study done between 2001 and 2003 in the United States to quantify the economic impact mental illnesses have. During this time, mental illnesses were found to be associated with a \$193.2 billion loss annually (Bubonya). Not only are these people with mental illness less productive and motivated to work, but they also earn less while they are working, making people face severe economic burdens (Sickel). All efforts should be focused on younger generations to create strong leaders that are able to withstand hardships.

## *Study Abroad*

Many students look to further their education by attending post-secondary education, such as colleges and universities. Students narrow down their focus on a specific study and degree that spike their interests and career goals. The abundance and variety of opportunities throughout post-secondary education allows students to gain valuable experiences that cannot be learned through the traditional classroom setting. Post-secondary education in the United States encourages students to incorporate studying abroad in their degree plan. Some degree paths actually make it a requirement for students to study abroad to finish out their degree. Through studying abroad, students step out of their comfort zone to fully immerse themselves in a different cultural practice.

This global experience is important nowadays as the world is interconnected more than ever before (“Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act”). At some point in one’s life, a person will do business with or travel to a foreign country. Even in the United States, deemed the melting pot, a person will encounter someone with different cultural practices, norms, and ideologies. Studying abroad allows the student to become culturally aware early on and appreciate the diverse practices.

There are many different types of study abroad programs, varying in location, length, and living situations. Some program types are faculty-led, through a foreign university, or involve a homestay with a foreign family. This list is not inclusive of all study abroad programs. It is certain though that the student will meet and live amongst a group of people from diverse backgrounds with differing global perspectives. This makes students better global citizens that will carry over to their future personal and professional lives. Students also encounter personal growth and development of positive characteristics by learning to navigate through a new environment, language, and unfamiliar cultural norms. Students state after studying abroad that they are now “more confident and committed to a sensitive global point of view” (Bellamy). The diverse set of skills students acquire “distinguishes them as future world leaders” due to their experiences of navigating across different cultures (Curtis). These students are more likely to continue their studies back at the university and give back to their universities by helping with the retention rates and attracting other high-achieving prospect students (Curtis).

Federal and state governments have taken initiatives to encourage universities to promote study abroad to its students by passing acts. This helps our country remain competitive in the global economy by having its citizens “equipped with global skills and knowledge” (“Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act”). The Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act was passed in June 2019 by the U.S. House of Representatives (Stroud). The purpose of this act is to increase the number of students completing study abroad programs, expanding study abroad programs to different countries, and diversifying the student population that studies abroad. This will mandate universities to reach out to different student groups to meet diversity study abroad quotas for the university to access federal funding (Stroud). The four national goals this act sets forth are “(1) one million U.S. college students will study abroad annually for credit; (2) study abroad participants will more closely represent the demographics of the undergraduate population in terms of gender, ethnicity, students with disabilities, income level, and field of study; (3) a significantly greater proportion of study abroad will occur in nontraditional destinations outside Western Europe; (4) higher education institutions will make study abroad a critical component of a quality higher education” (“Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act”).

U.S. STUDY ABROAD CONTRIBUTES TO...

# Student Success

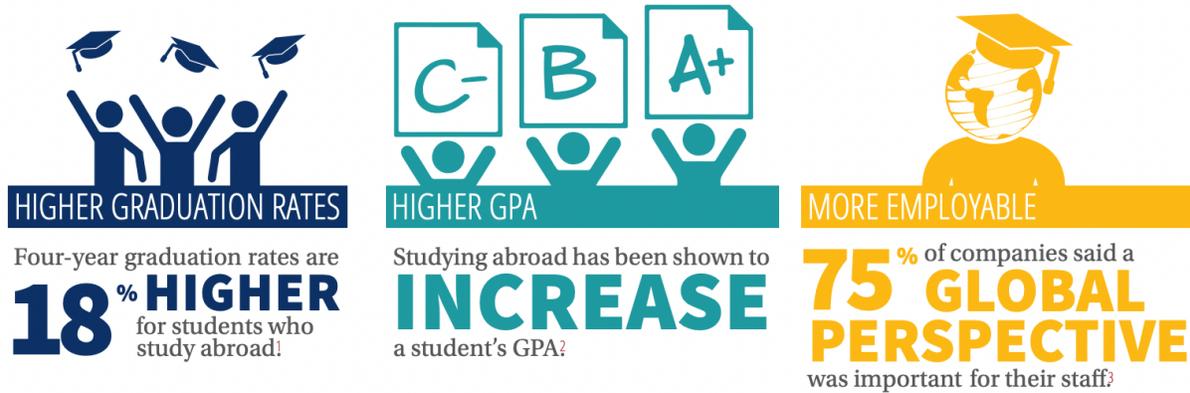


Figure 1A. Student Success from Study Abroad.

U.S. STUDY ABROAD CONTRIBUTES TO...

# The Nation



Figure 1B. Nations Benefit from Study Abroad.

The Paul Simon Study Abroad Act recognizes the benefits of study abroad to the individual student and the nation as a whole. *Shown in Figure 1A and 1B.* This is why the act is hoping for more Americans to study abroad for the betterment of society. Unfortunately, there are barriers for students to study abroad. One of those being the financial costs associated with study abroad programs. However, this is not the only disproportionate statistic towards the study abroad population. There are disparities among genders, race, and academic major. Males dominate the undergraduate population at universities, but less than half, 34.9%, of study abroad participants are males (Stroud). Minorities only represent 17.2% of United States students studying abroad (Stroud). The most common degrees to study abroad are business, social sciences and history, and education, respectively (Stroud). Other degree plans are unable to find programs that fit their course requirements. The act wants universities to turn around these imbalances in study abroad populations and make studying abroad achievable for all kinds of students.

Current trends show that about ten percent of college students' study abroad at some point during their college career, which is a dramatic increase over the past decade (Pederson). Unfortunately, due to the ongoing uncertainties regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, study abroad rates have been decreasing by more than fifty percent ("U.S. Study Abroad for Academic Credit Trends"). The majority of students that are currently studying abroad are skewed towards the wealthier students, who can afford the tuition, transportation, and any unforeseen costs. The benefits received from studying abroad, stated later in this section, outweigh the overall costs associated with studying abroad. Thus, universities across the United States should make these opportunities more financially accessible to all students (Bellamy).

Like many aspects of life, the COVID-19 pandemic has created additional obstacles for students trying to study abroad. Students have experienced an increase in stress navigating through the pandemic in a different country due to the travel risks and uncertainties related to their experience (Pedersen). Countries around the world are continuously evolving their restrictions and regulations with the ongoing COVID-19 progressions. There are more risks being taken while studying abroad to ensure the full experience. There are resources in place to ensure students are prepared for this everchanging environment, but there is an increased need for students to learn to be flexible, confident, and self-reliant. Studying abroad is a time for personal growth as students navigate a new setting and make connections with those around them.

### ***Culture Shock***

Studying abroad can be overwhelming to students who are not adequately prepared for this shift in lifestyles. Students may suffer from culture shock after being exposed to the foreign environment, food, language, and cultural practices (Hamboyan). Culture shock is defined as the "sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation" ("Culture shock.>"). Culture shock can negatively impact a person's mental health. Students may not be able to access the same level of social or mental health support while abroad.

The level of culture shock a student faces may range from moderate to severe dependent on several factors. First, it depends on the resemblance of the foreign country to the student's home country. This can vary from the progression of technological advancements, concept of time, definition of personal space, and dress codes in public. The more these aspects align to the student's home country, the easier it is for the student to feel at ease because it is what they are used to back at home. As there are more differences between the cultures, it is harder for the student to adjust and feel at home. An example of cultural differences that can impact a student's mental health is the foreign country's viewpoints on different genders and ethnicities. Some cultures do not highly regard women or foreign ethnicities, therefore if a student fits into one of these categories, they may have a negative experience with their interactions with the locals.

This can be detrimental and make students feel isolated because people do not feel the same support from their friends and family back at home. There are also different, and in some cases limited, mental health resources in foreign countries that are not always easily accessible to foreigners. To mitigate the effects of culture shock on those studying abroad, there are steps that can be taken before, during, and after their departure to a foreign country.

Prior to departure, study abroad programs can hold information sessions to familiarize students to the foreign countries cultural and social practices. Some universities may even

require students to be proficient in the country's native language (Hamboyan). This allows students to easily converse with the locals, breaking down another barrier. The University of Arkansas study abroad office recognizes the risks its students may face while studying abroad and tries to address these issues prior to departure. Study abroad faculty encourages students to meet with their physicians to ensure the student is physically and mentally capable to withstand any challenges they may face. In pre-departure orientation sessions, students are able to meet other students going on the same program. This is important to have a familiar support group while abroad, so that the student can relate to someone in a similar situation and feel comfortable confiding in them with their personal challenges (Hamboyan).

While the student is abroad, the University of Arkansas still makes its resources available to study abroad students. For example, the Pat Walker Health Clinic is still accessible to students through virtual appointments to address any mental health concerns ("Frequently Asked Questions"). This ensures that students are still able to seek support and advice even when they are around the world.

Students who are open-minded throughout their study abroad experience are better at adapting to the foreign environment, and thus face lower rates of culture shock. This is because of the self-determination theory of motivation. The self-determination theory states that people are more motivated to seek growth and change in their lives when they feel in control of their life (Cherry). People need to fulfill these three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and connection—in order to seek out challenging situations and overcome them (Cherry). This leads to greater wellbeing in self-determined individuals. Research shows that students with self-determined motivation to study abroad is correlated with better mental health and wellbeing and better at adjusting to the cultural difference (Yang). The types of students see the study abroad opportunity as a new learning experience to appreciate the different cultures around the world.

The negative feelings associated with culture shock should not deter someone from studying abroad. There are many short-term and long-term benefits to the student that outweighs any of the immediate troubles they experience in country.

### ***Benefits of Studying Abroad for Students***

Students who have studied abroad report short-term and long-term personal and professional growth that has lasting impacts long after their return. They will make meaningful connections with people around the world, and the experiences and personal growth will help students succeed, navigate, and remain calm throughout future challenges in their lives (Cisneros-Donahue).

The first benefit to students is that they are able to continue with their academic studies while getting a diversified experience found only outside of the United States. Although, the social benefits of studying abroad outweigh the academic benefits to develop the student holistically. Part of this experience is fostering connections with people from around the world, whether that is in their classes or out in the community. This expands the student's understanding and acceptance of people different from themselves. Students are constantly learning and can learn from other people's experiences and differing viewpoints. It is shown that people who have studied abroad are more likely to have a diverse group of friends, which carries over to their professionalism by acting with respect to people who are culturally diverse in the workplace (DeGraaf). Many students also choose to study the foreign language native to the country where they study. The best way for a student to practice this language is being thrown in with native

speakers and forced to converse with them. This language proficiency will allow them to use this skill in their future careers and make it easier for them to communicate with global companies on a professional level (DeGraaf).

Studying abroad also strengthens a person’s employability to future careers. “Employers seek candidates with a variety of attributes, including proficient communication, a solid work ethic, teamwork skills, initiative, problem-solving capabilities, interpersonal competence, flexibility/adaptability, and leadership capacity,” which many of these skills are gained while studying abroad (Turos). Especially since the economy is globally interrelated now, employers seek out candidates with different cultural encounters to ensure they show respect to international cultural values and traditions (Turos). Study abroad is not single-handedly the most important aspect to securing a job, but it is a great experience to reflect upon during interviews, especially if a person can tie their learnings through this experience to the company’s values (Turos). These students are also shown to have a higher average annual income than those that do not study abroad (Franklin). This salary gap is not necessarily tied strictly to the fact that a person studied abroad, but it does say something about the type of person that is attracted to studying abroad. Usually, these people seek out diversified experiences that allows them to navigate challenges in order to acquire new skills that will allow growth.

Many studies only focus on the short-term effects of study abroad by asking participants about their experience and what they learned shortly after their return from abroad. Not many studies address the long-term impacts. One such study focuses on the long-term impact of studying abroad on students’ professional careers. Results showed that about half of study abroad participants reported they have worked or volunteered in an international capacity, over half of participants were persuaded by their study abroad experience to choose the direction of their profession, and over three-fourths of respondents acquired skills during study abroad that impacted their careers (Franklin). Students value their study abroad experience and want to tie that aspect of their life into their professional careers through international and multicultural work. Overall, people attribute study abroad to their long-term success in their careers as shown by the responses below.

*Table 1. Summary of Professional Outcomes Influenced by Study Abroad (Franklin).*

My professional work involves...	Agree*	Disagree*
An international or multicultural dimension	73%	27%
Communication with international contacts	58%	42%
My study abroad experience...		
Has helped me to understand situations at work in a cultural context	71%	29%
Has increased my ability to problem-solve at work in a cultural context	69%	31%
Influenced my career choice	42%	58%
Has made me more competitive in the job market	73%	27%
Has played a role in my professional success	63%	37%
Makes a difference as I continue to develop professionally	69%	31%
Contributed to my sense of professional ethics	60%	40%
As a result of my study abroad experience...		
I gained knowledge that can be applied in my professional work	69%	31%
I gained skills that can be applied in my professional work	67%	33%
I gained a self-awareness that can be applied in my professional work	88%	12%

\*Survey responses “strongly agree” and “agree” have been combined under the heading “agree” and “strongly disagree” and “disagree” have been combined under the heading “disagree.”

Students reflect on their time abroad and say that many years later they still reminisce about their journey and think about how their character developed and their attitudes changed, all of which still impact them today. Students improve their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Students have to adapt their routines to the norms of the foreign country and conduct themselves respectfully in their host culture. They also have to practice valuable patience and flexibility skills because of the need to constantly adapt when scenarios did not go according to plan (Cisneros-Donahue). Other societies are much more relaxed in comparison to the American ways when it comes to scheduling and being punctual. The public transportation systems, more often than not, are not on time, and students are forced to navigate through delayed or cancelled transportation to ensure their arrival at their destination.

The more relaxed state of society in foreign countries can be beneficial to American students. It teaches the student to slow down and appreciate the current state they are in, instead of stressing about the unknowns in the future. The American society is used to fast-paced and structured lifestyles and view success in a monetary and materialistic way. While other societies tend to value meaningful relationships with their families, friends, and communities more than the typical American.

There are also many long-term benefits of studying abroad. Students attribute their resiliency shown throughout their lives to learning it from study abroad. These students are also shown to be more involved in their communities and help at philanthropic activities, in comparison to the students who stayed in the United States the entire time (DeGraaf). This could be due to the fact that communities around the world value their community members over their personal success. Helping others also tends to be a source of happiness and achievement as someone is able to connect with a purpose that is bigger than their self.

The academic and personal growth gained through studying abroad makes well-rounded individuals who are able to respectfully make connections in different cultures around the world (Cisneros-Donahue). This experience will be carried with the student many years into the future, where they can apply what they learned to many aspects of their lives.

**"Study abroad is most memorable if you go with the flow and take life's experiences as they present themselves."**

## Research Methodology

Research methods include a literature review of the current trends of mental health and wellbeing, studying abroad, culture shock, and the benefits of studying abroad to a student. Data was gathered through two surveys. A pre-survey was completed by students prior to their departure for study abroad, and a post-survey was completed at the conclusion of their study abroad program. The surveys were created through the Qualtrics program and gained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to implement.

While it would have been possible to assess mental health and wellbeing only at the end of the program, I felt it was important to specifically assess a difference through a longitudinal design and two administrations of the repeated-measures survey. The research design helps to see if studying abroad has an impact on the growth of the student. Both surveys were designed to mimic each other to allow for the comparison. The surveys include a combination of Likert scales, sliding scales, short-answers, multiple-choice, and demographic questions.

The first scale evaluates the impact of different aspects offered by the study abroad program on the students' personal and professional growth. *See Figure 2A in appendix.* The pre-survey asked the student about the perceived impact each program-specific aspect will have on themselves. The post-survey asked the student to assess the actual impact on themselves. The scales include five options with the two extremes being "very impactful" and "not very impactful". These surveys are based off the CIMBA study abroad program and its offerings. Some examples of program-specific aspects included on the surveys are planning for travel weekends, living on an enclosed campus with classmates, field trips taken with class to local companies, and day trips to nearby towns, to name a few. The purpose of this question is to assign a numerical value to the scale responses and observe if there is a change in average answers from the pre- to post-survey. This will identify the aspects of the program that are the most beneficial to the growth of the student.

The second scale is the Psychological Wellbeing Scale adopted from the literature. *See Figure 2B.* The Psychological Wellbeing Scale is either a 42-item or 18-item survey, but for the length of this survey and to keep respondents engaged, I chose the 18-item version. This survey is administered on a five-point scale with selections of "strongly disagree", "somewhat disagree", "neither disagree nor agree", "somewhat agree", and "strongly agree". This scale includes different scenarios intended for the respondents to apply to their life. These scenarios fit under the six broader categories of "autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance," all which measure wellbeing and happiness (Ryff). Again, the responses will be assigned a numerical value to evaluate the trend of responses due to studying abroad.

The third scale is the Hero Wellness Scale, which is also derived from the literature. *See Figure 2C.* The Hero Wellness Scale uses a sliding scale from one to ten. The following positive moods, happy, enthusiastic, resilient, and optimistic, are asked to the respondent if they have been felt in the last week. The last question using this scale asks the student to rate their mental wellness in the past week. The higher a person's score means the person has better wellness (World Health Organization). These scales will allow a direct comparison between variables to see if studying abroad impacts students' mental health and wellbeing.

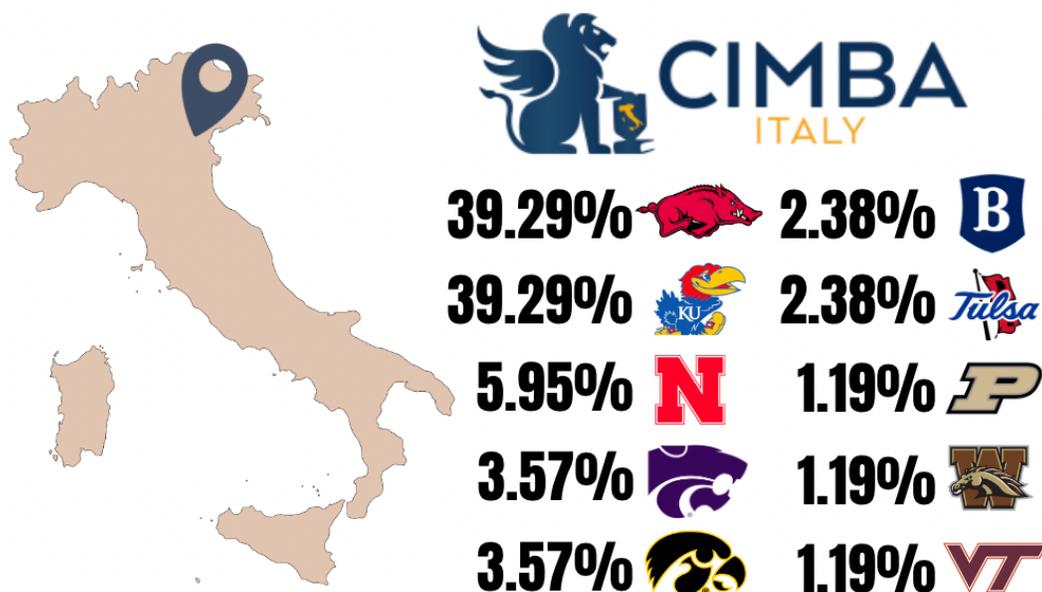
The final scale evaluates the overall study abroad experience incorporating all the aspects, such as friendships, travel, international setting, and coursework. *See Figure 2D.* The pre-survey asks the student to select the multiple-choice option based on how they think studying

abroad will impact them, while the post-survey asks the student to select the option stating their actual impact. The experience is classified into four distinctions, regular, memorable, meaningful, and transformative, with several explanations as to why they felt that selection. These experiences are numbered with regular experience labelled as one, memorable experience two through four, meaningful experience five through seven, and transformative experience eight through ten. This numerical value will allow me to calculate the average response and compare the pre- and post-data.

Other questions on the survey are open-ended. This allows a more holistic and qualitative viewpoint on the study abroad experience. The pre-survey asked students to explain their worries and excitement regarding studying abroad. While the post-survey asked students to identify a challenge they faced and how they overcame that challenge. Then, they are asked to provide one word describing an attribute they gained or enhanced due to this challenge. Students also provided another one-word answer that encapsulates their entire study abroad experience. *See Figures 2E-I.*

Both surveys were distributed to the students at the appropriate times by CIMBA study abroad professors—Swinder Janda (Kansas State University), Eric Olson (University of Tulsa), Kim Petrone (University of Arkansas), and Molly Rapert (University of Arkansas)—as part of their course requirements.

*Demographics:* The responses to the surveys totaled 104 students. Respondents all studied abroad through the CIMBA program in Paderno del Grappa, Italy in summer 2022. The students that participated in the surveys are undergraduate students from the University of Arkansas (39.29%), University of Kansas (39.29%), University of Nebraska (5.95%), Kansas State University (3.57%), University of Iowa (3.57%), Berry College (2.38%), University of Tulsa (2.38%), Purdue University (1.19%), Western Michigan University (1.19%), and Virginia Tech (1.19%). Of these students, 42.3% are males and 57.7% are females. The students encompass the following majors of business, political science, advertising and public relations, communications, journalism, nutrition and dietetics, apparel merchandising and product development, environmental studies, food science, graphic design, and psychology.



**"I am most nervous about the differences in culture. I am worried that I will accidentally do something that is culturally insensitive and offend someone."**

## Findings

The surveys were administered to 104 CIMBA study abroad students. The surveys focused on the study abroad impact to the students' personal and professional growth and the overall mental health and wellbeing impact. The pre-survey asked the students to answer about their current mental health state and feelings towards study abroad. The students were also asked about their perceived impact study abroad will have on them. The post-survey used a similar survey to the pre-survey. Students were asked about their current mental health state and the impact study abroad actually had on them. These responses were quantified and qualitatively investigated. The findings from the surveys are below.

### *What are the expectations of students for study abroad?*

Students were asked to openly respond to the questions asking what they are most nervous and excited for before embarking on their study abroad program. All of these students come from a variety of backgrounds, such as home university, hometown, academic majors, and prior travel experience that will impact their responses. A few selected responses to these questions are stated.

"I am scared that it will be hard to adjust to living out of the country without being able to speak the language."

"I am nervous about getting important items, such as my passport or phone, pickpocketed and for my safety."

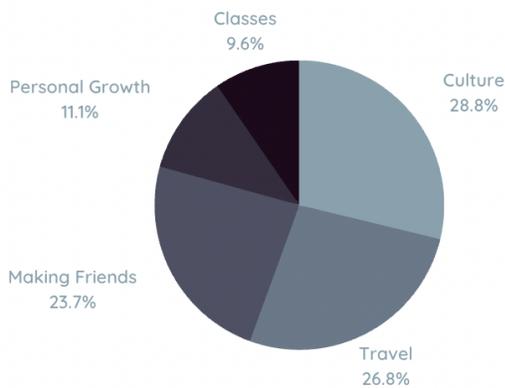
"I have not been this far away from my family or friends in my life and it makes me very nervous."

Students answered that they were nervous about many different aspects of the study abroad experience. The nervousness ranged in severity. Some people expressed they were more nervous than others who stated they were not nervous for their upcoming departure. Of the 89 people who answered this question showed concerns over the language barrier, cultural differences, traveling in foreign countries, safety, making friends, classes, support systems being far away, expenses, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their travels. Many people showed multiple concerns fitting under these categories. The most popular concerns amongst the students are traveling in foreign countries, with 41 people stating that in their responses, language barriers (22), and making friends (22). Many people said they were coming on this study abroad program alone and did not know anyone else. Not far behind in the concerns are about their classes (19), including the difficulty level and making it a priority amongst traveling, and cultural differences (18). Even though many people had concerns about studying abroad, they all provided an optimistic outlook on the things making them nervous. Many students want to take this experience to display personal growth by stepping out of their comfort zone and soak in all of the different experiences they were going to encounter.

"I am most excited to be fully immersed in a new country, learn as much as I can, and grow as a young adult."

"I am most excited about a new experience in a different part of the world with a different group of people than I am used to."

"I am most excited to meet new people and make long-lasting relationship."



Students were equally as excited, if not more, for the things that were making them nervous in their pre-survey responses. Of the 89 people who answered this question stated they were most excited to experience a new culture in 57 of their responses. Their definition of culture included interacting with the locals, trying new foods, practicing the language, and learning the history behind these cities. Another top response is being able to travel (53). Whether they were traveling within Italy or to other European countries, many people were excited to adventure to new places. People have felt an urge to travel recently

since restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic have been lifted. Many people said this will be the first time they are traveling by means of airplane since prior to the pandemic starting. Students are also very excited to meet new people and create friendships (47) with their peers in their classes and through travel weekends. Even though some students went on the study abroad program with other friends from their home university, they were looking forward to branching out and meeting people from their university and other universities. People still showed excitement for the personal growth (22) they were going to undergo due to the challenges they were going to encounter. Students even stated the difference in their classes (19) from the normal academic setting made them excited to learn. The classes through CIMBA were more hands-on. The students spend every day in the normal classroom setting, but they also take field trips weekly to nearby businesses and museums to see their learnings being implemented in the real-world.

*What are challenges students' face while studying abroad, and how did the student grow from these situations?*

There are too many differences between the foreign countries in study abroad and the student's home country for them to not encounter any challenges along the way. Students even face challenges when they are in a comfortable setting at home. It matters how the student responds to their challenges and what they learn from them that will help the student grow. The student can apply these characteristics to future challenges they may face. Below are student's responses in the post-survey to challenges they faced and attributes they gained from these challenges as they worked to solve them throughout study abroad.

"When the train strikes were happening and our train got cancelled. We were stranded in Bologna with hundreds of other travelers."

"Planning and adjusting for weekend travel while also studying and doing homework."

"I knew nobody coming into the program, and I had to push myself to find people I wanted to spend time with."

The overwhelming majority of students, over 50%, faced transportation challenges during their travels. This was the first time many students had to navigate a train system to get to their destination. Students ran into travel delays and cancellations. Students struggled with reading the signs in a different language to make sure they were getting on the correct train and going in the right direction. People also did not realize that there can be quick turnaround times between switching trains. On one of the travel weekends during the program a train strike in Italy occurred on the day all students were supposed to be returning to campus. This left many people stranded all around Italy, as there were no trains running that day. People also stated struggling with keeping a balance between their schoolwork while having to plan for travel weekends during the school week. Planning for weekends took a lot more research and effort, as many people have not traveled here before. They wanted to ensure they were finding a safe place that was affordable for a college student. The language barrier also proved to be an issue as there was miscommunications between groups of students and their accommodation hosts, leaving people with no place to stay during their travels. Many students kept a positive outlook during these challenges and noted the good, like making many new friends, to come out from a not-so-good situation.



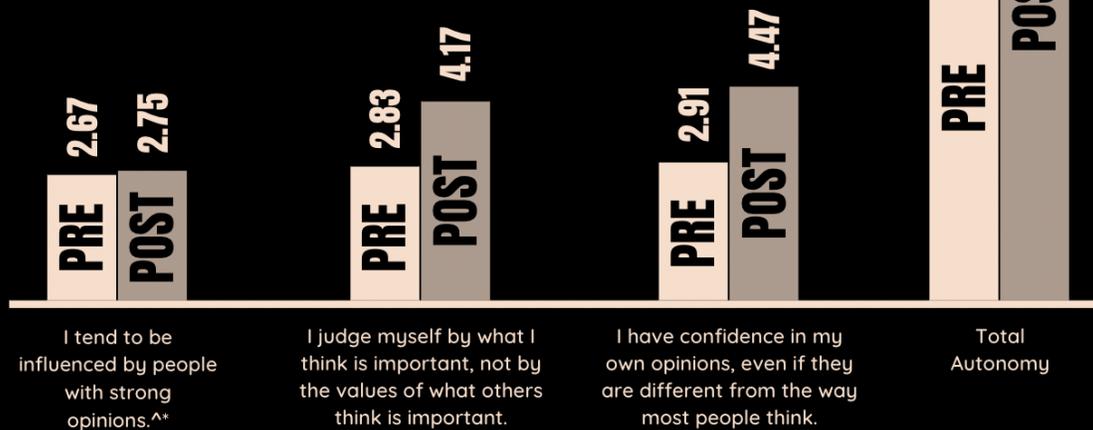
This shows a list of attributes students gained because of their challenges. 87 students responded to this open-response question, and the most popular trait was patience answered by 23 of the respondents. Many people learned to slow down during this time to think about all of their options to solve the issue at hand. They also became more aware that not everything is going to happen perfectly according to schedule and there will be hiccups to work around. It was nothing the students could have planned for, especially a train strike during their traveling day. Resilience was the second-most popular attribute with ten people responding that. Even though there were difficulties, students had to learn to bounce back from them quickly, so they do not ruin the rest of their experiences and memories. There were much more positives to come from studying abroad than to let a few challenging experiences make it a bad time. Multiple people also responded confidence. They explained that they became more confident in their abilities to travel alone, let alone in a foreign country. Students state they want to continue to use these skills in their future travel plans. They were able to problem-solve around their challenges and exhibit personal growth.

*How does study abroad impact students' mental health and wellbeing?*

Using the 18-item Psychological Wellbeing Scale derived from the literature, students were asked to evaluate each statement, apply it to themselves, and rank on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree on how much it fits their current state. Strongly disagree was given a score of one, and strongly agree was given a score of five. Students answered this scale on both the pre-survey and post-survey to measure their wellbeing and happiness before and after studying abroad. The 18-items fit under six categories: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. I conducted a reliability analysis of the Psychological Wellbeing Scale with Cronbach Alpha's as follows: Autonomy (0.89), Personal Growth (0.94), Purpose in Life (0.58), Self-Acceptance (0.91), Environmental Mastery (0.79), and Positive Relations with Others (0.53). Four of the six levels are above the minimum, 0.70, needed for reliable scales, and I will discuss the remaining two in the limitations. The findings from the 104 student responses received for each individual statement will be grouped by its overall category. I did a repeated-measures t-test to determine if there is a statistically significant difference in the pre-survey and post-survey responses. All pairs were examined at the  $p < 0.05$  level and fifteen of the eighteen pairs were found to have statistically significant differences.

# AUTONOMY

Self-governing and responsible control for one's life



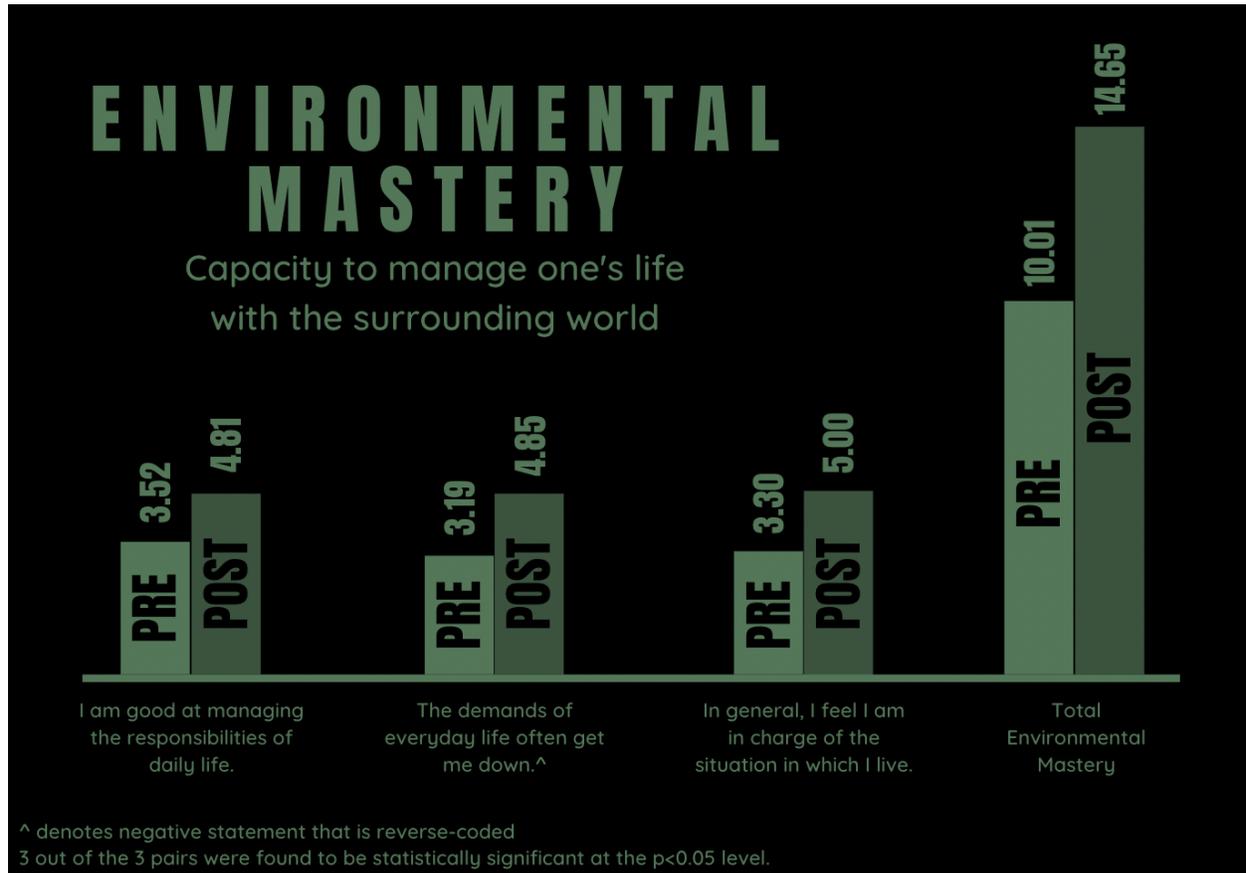
<sup>^</sup> denotes negative statement that is reverse-coded

\* denotes not statistically significant

2 out of the 3 pairs were found to be statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

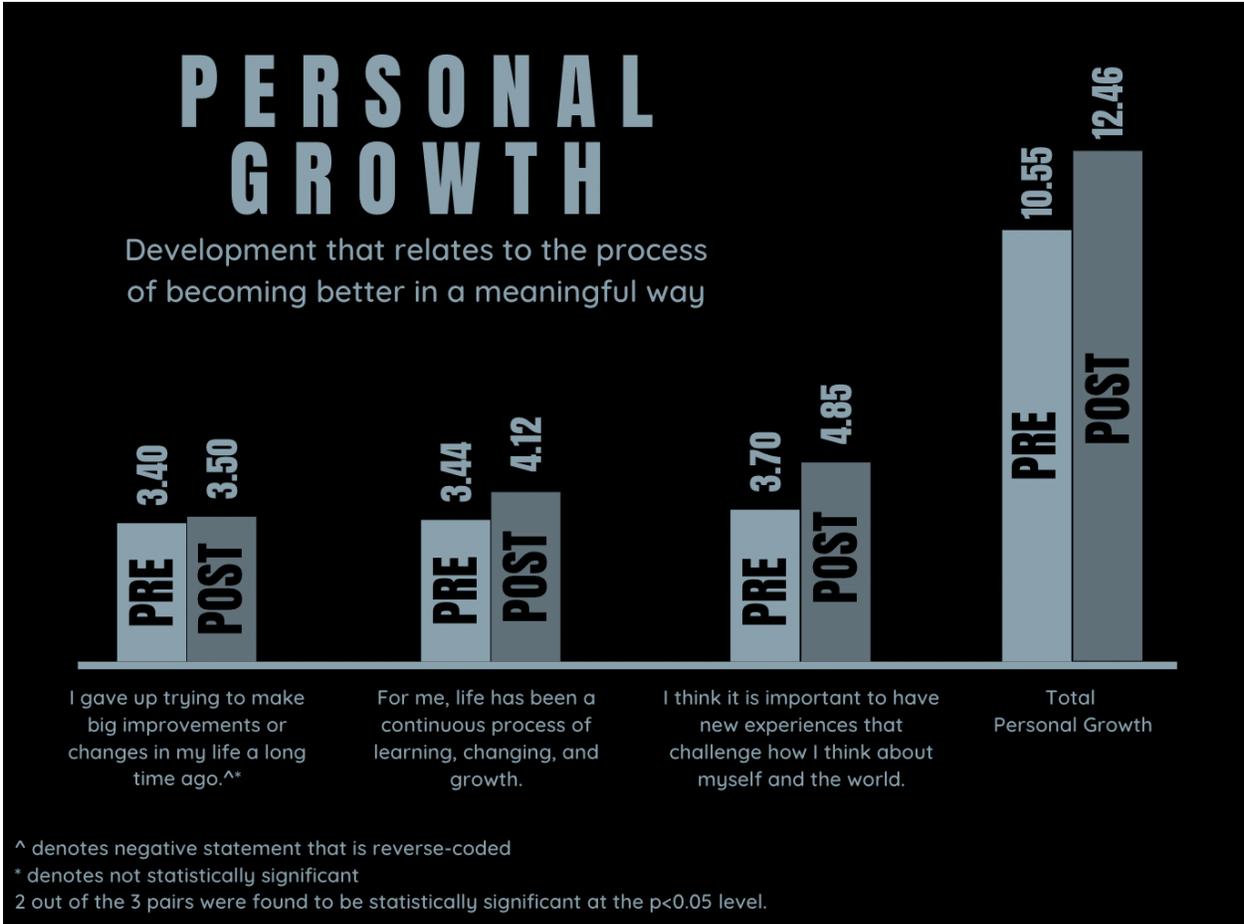
Autonomy means a person has control over their own life and do not base their decisions on other people. They are able to manage what goes on in their life and how they respond to situations. The first statement under the autonomy category is “I tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions.” This is a negative statement and was reverse coded for analysis. This means the higher scores correlate with a response of “strongly disagree”, and the lower scores correlate to “strongly agree”. The pre-survey average score is 2.67, whereas the post-survey average score is 2.75. The increase in score is minute and not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ), therefore this increase in score could be purely due to chance and not the study abroad effect. Students’ responses lean slightly to the agree side meaning they are kind of influenced by their peers. The second statement is “I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what other think is important.” There was a significant increase ( $p < 0.05$ ) in this response between the two surveys. The pre-survey average score of 2.83 leans toward the disagree side, while the post-survey average score of 4.17 is closer to strongly agree. The third statement, “I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are different from the way most people think,” had the biggest increase between the two surveys of all the statements among the autonomy category. This statement is also statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The pre-survey average score is 2.91, and the post-survey average answer is 4.47. Students become more confident in themselves due to their experiences during study abroad. They are not easily swayed by what other people around them are doing because they want to be able to soak in the experience, form their own

viewpoints, and make memories that satisfies them. Taking the three statements, total autonomy increases by almost three points throughout study abroad.



Environmental mastery is how someone controls all of the demands in a person's life and within the world. All three statements are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The first statement, "I am good at managing the responsibilities of daily life," showed an increase. In the pre-survey, the average score is 3.52 which is neutral and leans slightly to the agree side of the scale. The post-survey average is 4.81, which is very close to strongly agree. During study abroad, there were many things being thrown at the student, from their classes to traveling on weekends. Students had to quickly learn to be productive with their time to meet the course requirements, while also being able to explore what Italy has to offer each day. The second statement, "the demands of everyday life often get me down," is a negative statement and therefore reverse coded. The increase in score shows that people were neutral at an average score of 3.19 prior to studying abroad and disagreed more with the statement at a score of 4.85 after studying abroad. Students may have felt overwhelmed at times during study abroad because of the overstimulating environment. Study abroad teaches students to go with the flow to take in the foreign experience and not fret about the unknown. The third statement shows the most positive increase. "In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live," means that the student gets to make their own decisions throughout life and are able to seek out the opportunities they want. The pre-survey average is 3.30, and the post-survey average increases to 5.00, the highest score this item can receive. A 5.00 means people strongly agree with the statement. The students made their own choice to study abroad because they wanted to seek out a new opportunity that most people

do not get to enjoy. They also had lots of times throughout the program to make their own choices. They were able to choose where to travel on weekends, extracurricular activities to attend, and how to spend their free time. Total environmental mastery increased from 10.01 to 14.65.



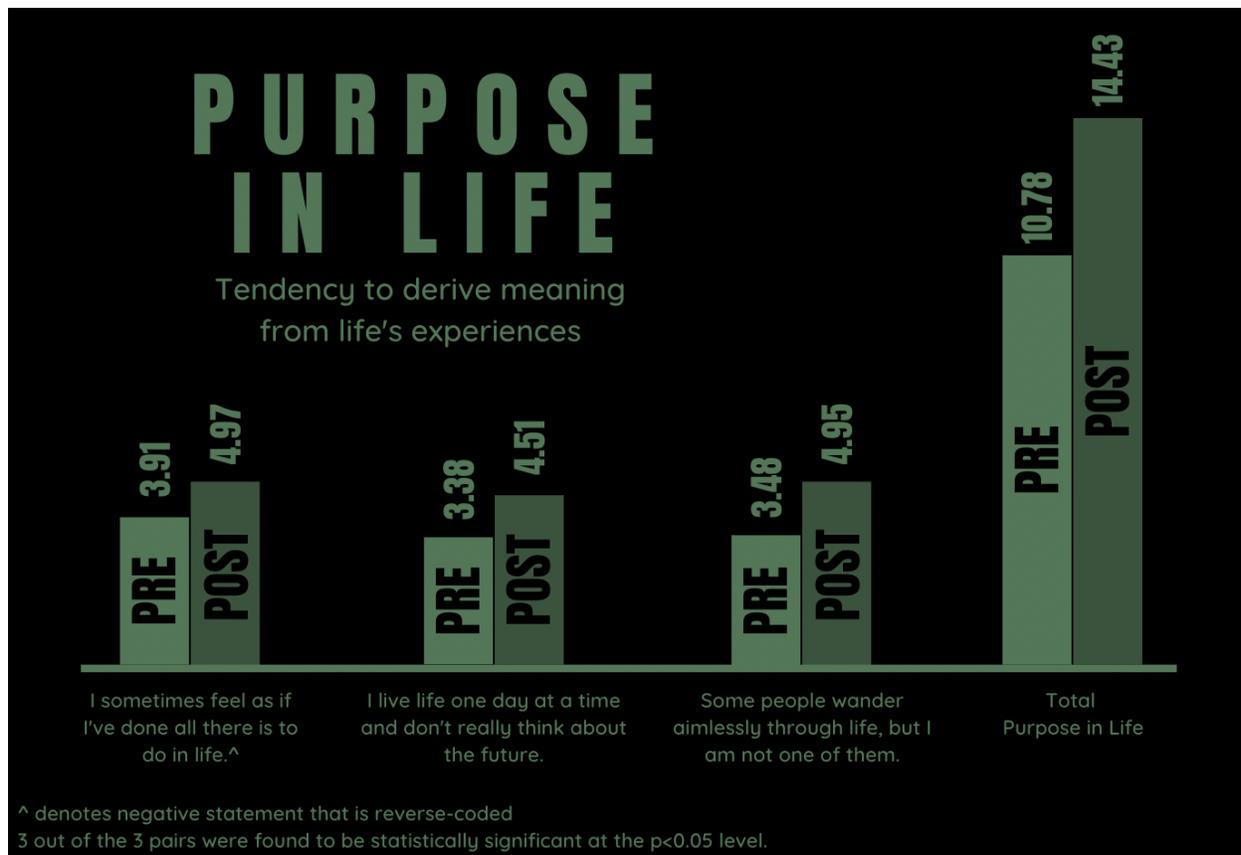
Personal growth occurs when people learn from their experiences and make positive adjustments to their life. This will lead them to happier lives as they find more meaning behind their actions and choices. There was not a statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ) increase in the first statement, “I gave up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago.” The statement is reverse coded. The slight increase goes from an average of 3.40 to 3.50. People are rather neutral on this statement, slightly leaning towards the disagree side. The growth a student undergoes during study abroad changes their outlook on society and self. Students realize they are capable of many things they used to doubt about themselves. This gives them the confidence to continue to change and get out of their comfort zone. The second statement says, “for me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth.” This statement showed an increase from 3.44 to 4.12. Students mostly agree with this because during this stage of their life, they are continuously trying to figure out who they are and the group of people they fit in with. Many interests of students change during time as they are finally on their own and not being influenced by family members. The third statement, “I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how I think about myself and the world,” encapsulates the meaning to

study abroad. This showed the most significant increase from an average score of 3.70 to 4.85. Studying abroad made people more strongly agree with this statement. Students are able to see a different culture and experience the way those people think and their values. This allows students to compare the way they live their life to others and focus on the aspects that make them happiest and thrive in the environment. The total personal growth was on average 10.55 and grew to an average of 12.46 after study abroad.



Positive relations with others benefit people’s mental health. Finding good relationships with other people means to find people who helps support, encourage, and grow each other, which provides security and meaning. These relationships need to be positive where you can feel trusted and respected when with the other person. The first statement, which is a negative statement, has a minor in increase and is not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). The average pre-survey answer is 3.84 for “maintaining close relationships has been difficult and frustrating for me.” This statement is reverse coded. The average post-survey response is 3.97. The students remain neutral to slightly disagree with the statement. Students confide in their classmates throughout study abroad because they are going through similar experiences in the new culture. Long-lasting friendships were made throughout study abroad, and these friendships still exist when students return back to their home campus. The second statement, “people would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others,” had more of an increase towards the strongly agree side. The pre-survey average score is 3.96, and the post-survey average score is 4.26. This is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). More extroverted people like to spend time with

other people, but it also matters if you are reciprocating the friendship and helping people in their times of need to make it a positive relationship. The biggest increase in averages scores was for the statement, “I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others.” This negative statement is reverse coded. The average scores increase from 3.98 to 4.33, which leans towards the strongly disagree side of the scale. Many people study abroad without having their closest friends go with them. They are forced to make friends with their peers in the study abroad program. These relationships are full of trust as they navigate through an unfamiliar setting together. Positive relations with others is the category with the lowest increase due to the cultural differences and being pushed out of their comfort zone to make friends within the program.



Purpose in life means that people have found meaning in the choices and things they do. This purpose gives them a greater sense of the “why” behind their actions and allows them to find what they are truly connected with. In this category, the smallest increase between the two surveys applied to the statement, “I sometimes feel as if I’ve done all there is to do in life.” This negative statement is reverse coded. The pre-survey average is 3.91, and the post-survey average is 4.97, which is nearly the strongly disagree response. Study abroad allows students to discover a completely different lifestyle and culture. Many students gain an adventurous spirit and seek out other opportunities that gives students even more purpose in their life. The second statement average response goes up from 3.38 to 4.51. The statement reads, “I live life one day at a time and don’t really think about the future.” This is a dramatic increase in response for a college student to undergo, many agreeing with the statement. Students frequently worry about their future and plans after graduation. Study abroad shows the person to slow down and soak in

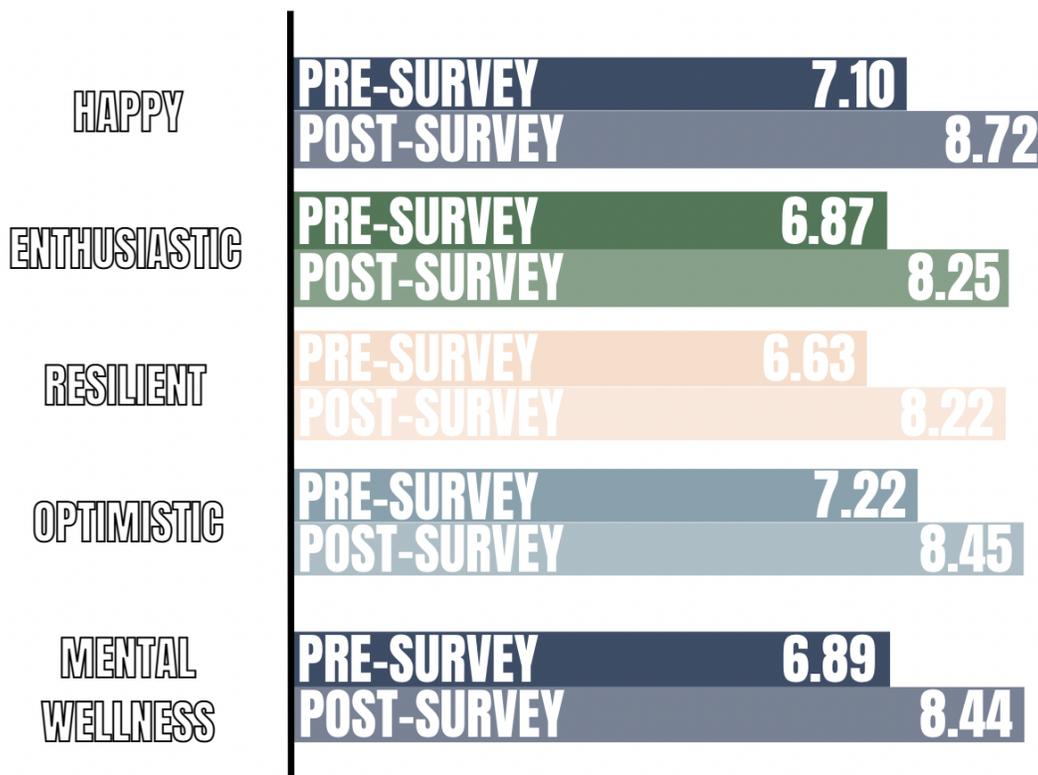
everything in the moment because no one has exact control over how their future is going to play out. The third statement, “some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them,” average scores show the drive and determination study abroad students have to go out of their comfort zone. The averages scores started off at 3.48 and increased to 4.95 after studying abroad. The students feel that they have purpose in their studies and to see a global perspective. They are trying to grow with the common goal to succeed in their careers and life after college. Purpose in life also showed an increase from 10.78 to 14.43. Study abroad allows students to explore different cultures and derive meaning from their interactions with others.



Self-acceptance shows that a person is at peace with who they are. They appreciate all of their characteristics and think they can add value to different situations. People who are self-accepting know they may have aspects in their life that they need to work on, but they are not going to let that bring their wellbeing down. The first statistically significant statement is “in many ways I feel disappointed about my achievements in life.” This negative statement is reverse coded and showed an increase between the two surveys. The pre-survey average is 3.53, and the post-survey average is 3.88. A lot of people that participate in study abroad are doing things they have never done in their life. This can range from traveling to a new country, traveling alone, or learning a new language. Everyone had different goals to for studying abroad. No matter how big or small the accomplishment was, every student gained something from the experience. The second statement is more positive, “when I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far.” This shows an increase from 3.69 to 4.10. This statement shows students are more confident and prouder of the experiences that have shaped

them. Reflecting on the past always shows someone that when they had doubts in their lives, it proved to turn out fine. The third statement, “I like most parts of my personality,” had the greatest increase under self-acceptance. The pre-survey was around neutral at 3.78, and the post-survey responses were almost “strongly agree” at a 4.34. This shows that students became comfortable with who they were. They were able to find connections with other people on the study abroad program because of similarities. Luckily, this study abroad group had a diverse population. Students did not have to change any aspects of themselves to fit in with their peers. Total self-acceptance had an increase over the study abroad program from an average of 11.00 to 12.32.

The next question on the pre-survey and post-survey is used to measure the positive emotions associated with mental health for a person before and after studying abroad. This scale is called the Hero Wellness Scale, used by the World Health Organization. The scale ranges from one to ten, with ten being the most feeling felt in the past seven days. The four positive emotions assessed are happy, enthusiastic, resilient, and optimistic. Then, the overall mental wellness in the past seven days of the person is asked. 104 students responded to the survey question, and the graph shows the findings between the two surveys.



On the sliding scale, the happy emotion averaged at 7.10 on the pre-survey. The post-survey showed an increase by 1.62 to an average of 8.72. Happiness was most strongly felt by the students. Reflecting back on all of the friendships and memories made, brings joy and happiness to everyone. Everyone overcame at least one of the things they were nervous about prior to coming to study abroad.

Enthusiasm showed a large increase from 6.63 to 8.22 also. In the beginning, enthusiasm lacked because of the nervousness towards the unknown of the program. After the program,

many people were enthusiastic that they got to partake in such a life-changing experience. There was so much excitement about all of the travels.

Resilience was a big characteristic that students had to follow. There were many challenges, from transportation to making friends, that students stated above. Students were resilient when overcoming these challenges by not giving up and bouncing back from the downs to keep enjoying the experience.

Students showed optimism throughout studying abroad. In the pre-survey, optimistic ranked at a 7.22. In the qualitative portion of the pre-survey, students looked forward to the experience and remained hopeful to overcome any of the things they said were making them nervous. The post-survey had an average response of 8.45. Students learned to stay positive and not to fret over things happening in the future. This will be a trait that will be taken with students in the future.

Overall, mental wellness made a drastic improvement due to studying abroad. This summer was a good reset for students to get out of their normal daily routines at their home university. This allowed students to feel as if they were accomplishing something new. Whatever the reason for why the student chose to study abroad, they were able to make life-long friends and memories.

*What impact does the overall study abroad experience have on the student?*

One of the survey questions focuses on the CIMBA program solely. The following aspects are all part of CIMBA: The courses and professors that you connect with; Living on an enclosed campus with your classmates; Planning for travel weekends; Experiencing travel weekends; New friends you make through your time in the program; The field trips you take with class to local companies; The day trips to nearby towns that the school provides; Being pushed out of your comfort zone; and Experiencing Italy in general. Therefore, not all study abroad programs will have these exact offerings to survey. Students answered this question on the pre-survey and post-survey, asking how much these aspects impact their personal and professional growth. The scale ranks from not very impactful, assigned score of one, to very impactful, having an assigned score of five.



We ate lots of Italian pizza and pasta.

### **Experiencing Italy in general.**

**PRE: 4.51**  
**POST: 4.76**



**The courses and professors that you connect with.**

**PRE: 4.47**  
**POST: 4.88**

Professor Molly Rapert taught my Global Consumer course.



**Living on an enclosed campus with your classmates.**

**PRE: 4.35**  
**POST: 4.89**

We lived in dorms on the Istituto Filippin campus in Paderno del Grappa, Italy.

**Planning for travel weekends.**

**PRE: 4.43**  
**POST: 4.80**



We planned a boat trip to swim off the island of Capri.

**Experiencing travel weekends.**

**PRE: 4.51**  
**POST: 4.91**



We traveled to Rome, Italy and toured the Vatican.



**New friends you make through your time in the program.**

**PRE: 4.51**  
**POST: 4.83**

We go to different universities and became lifelong friends.



**The day trips to nearby towns that the school provides.**

**PRE: 4.43**  
**POST: 5.00**

We went to Asolo and took a pizza making class.

**Being pushed out of your comfort zone.**

**PRE: 4.53**  
**POST: 4.78**



We traveled by train on our weekend trips.

**The field trips you take with class to local companies.**

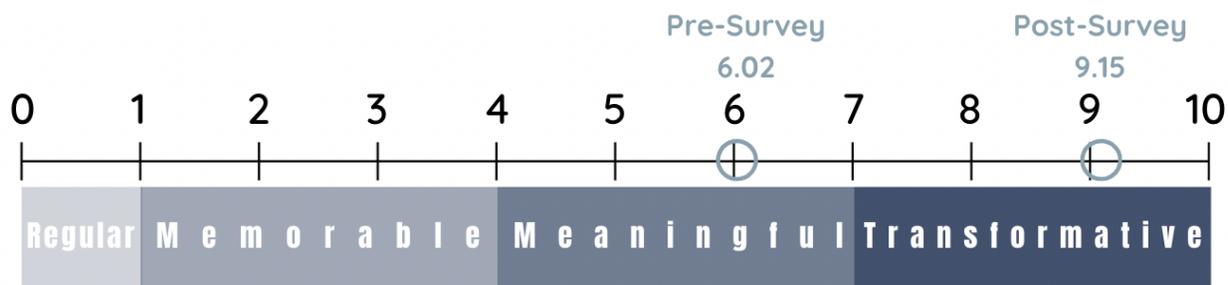
**PRE: 4.48**  
**POST: 4.79**



We visited La Ceramica VBC and got to see them create ceramic pieces.



ordinary in the student’s life. The memorable range falls from one to four and shows the student had a lasting impression on them because of the different experience. The meaningful range falls between four and seven and is defined by the student connecting and learning from the experience. The most extreme case is transformative, which is between seven and ten on the scale. Transformative means the student felt a change in themselves through their viewpoints, values, or behaviors.



The findings from this survey question show a statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) increase in response from the pre-survey to the post-survey. The pre-survey average response is 6.02 which corresponds to the response “It will be meaningful because it will lead to insights about people, relationships, or the understanding of others that may influence my self-awareness or promote personal growth.” This falls well within the meaningful range on the scale. The post-survey average response is 9.15. This corresponds to the response “It was transformative because it led to a change in perspective related to who I am or my identity, and I will make significant changes in my behavior.” This average falls towards the higher end of the transformative section on the scale. This shows a significant difference in the students’ perceived impact versus actual impact study abroad has on them. Students are led to creating a change in themselves because of their study abroad experience. They encountered situations that challenged them and personally grew through more social awareness. Students will carry this personal growth and apply it to more aspects of their life.

Overall, students reflected highly upon their study abroad experience. There were unexpected road blocks that came with such a new and unfamiliar situation. Students took these challenges with grace to ensure they made the most of their time abroad. It was a period of growth for students, as they felt a different level of independence and learned from community members about their culture and viewpoints. Study abroad showed positive increases in students mental health and wellbeing. These students return from their study abroad programs and are ready to carry their new skills with them while appreciating the relationships around them.

**"I am excited for the personal growth I will achieve through more independent and challenging experiences than I have had in my life thus far."**

## Limitations

There are some limitations associated with this study that may affect the conclusions to be drawn about the benefits of studying abroad on a student's mental health and wellbeing. Some of the limitations include society's stigmas regarding mental health, skewed sample surveyed, and other confounding variables that could affect the results.

As stated in the literature review, the stigma surrounding mental health topics could affect the way a person answered the questions on the survey. The respondent may not have been honest with their answers, making them answer that their mental health state is better than it actually is. Students may have had concerns that their responses could be traced back to them because they were asked to put their name on the survey. The student may not want people to know about their mental health and struggles in fear of it being addressed with them. They also do not want to face discrimination from their peers. This was asked though to match their pre-survey answers with their post-survey answers to compare the difference in responses over the course of studying abroad. One way this limitation could have been addressed in designing the survey is to assign each person a numerical value to match the data still, but not have their name to their responses.

The other limitation is that this survey was administered to a select group of study abroad students. Only students who studied abroad in summer 2022 at CIMBA were selected to respond to the surveys. This type of study abroad was a four-week program where students stayed on an enclosed campus in dorm-style living with other American students. It does not encompass all the other types of studying abroad. I attempted to offset this limitation by having respondents from four different courses to ensure a diverse group of students within the CIMBA study abroad program. Students may have different experiences depending on the offerings of their study abroad program. To address this limitation, the surveys should have been sent to a broader student population and those who have studied abroad through different programs and different lengths of time.

There are many confounding variables that may affect the way a student responds to the survey. College students have lots of other things going on in their life outside of their studies. These all could have an impact on their mental health. Suppose a student had something happen back at home, good or bad, this could affect their mental health even while studying abroad. These confounding variables do not allow us to draw the conclusion that study abroad is directly tied to students' mental health.

In the study, a reliability analysis showed weakness in two subscales of the Psychological Wellbeing Scale, Purpose in Life and Positive Relations with Others. Future research should revisit these subscales to improve the wording on the survey-items and increase reliability.

**"These travel challenges pushed me to grow in my communication and problem-solving skills. Although it was stressful and difficult, I am proud of myself for navigating these on my own."**

## Implications and Future Research

### *Personal Conclusion*

Since I also participated in the CIMBA summer 2022 study abroad program, I got to encounter many of the same experiences and feelings that other students have shared in the surveys. I had traveled out of the country before with my family, but there was always a sense of security because my parents were nearby at all times making the plans. Also, many of our vacations had revolved around the main cities doing touristy activities, where many of the locals spoke English. Studying abroad allowed me to develop a new sense of independence that I do not feel while I am just away at college.

The group I traveled with had to navigate the train system and find accommodations that were safe and affordable for us. It took a lot of research during the week to make sure that the weekends went smoothly. Although, not everything went exactly according to plan because we faced travel delays on our way back to school one weekend. To ensure our arrival back on campus that night, we had to research many possible solutions, and find out what worked best for the group. In the end, we went with a taxi because the trains had stopped running for the evening. Through this stressful situation, we tried to make the best of the situation by laughing it off with our friends. I learned that sometimes we have no control over our future. As a constant planner, I have become more relaxed and take situations day-by-day. Eventually everything will work out the way it is supposed to, and I should not stress about the constant unknowns, instead just soak in the current moment, and worry about the next steps when I am forced to make the next decision.

The cultural differences and language barriers created many obstacles but much to learn from. Since the CIMBA campus was located in the small town of Paderno del Grappa, Italy, some of the locals were not as fluent in English. I learned common phrases to communicate with them, but with the help of gestures and translating apps, we could understand each other. They really appreciated us trying to speak with them even if our Italian was not good. It was part of the showing respect towards them by making an effort to appreciate their communities. The biggest difference between home and Italy for me was the punctuality and slowness. I am used to being punctual for everything and moving with urgency throughout life. The culture of Italy is much more relaxed and appreciates meaningful relationships with others. Whether it was afternoon coffee breaks with friends to catch up or long dinners with extended family, the Italians valued these times and never made it seem like anything was more important in their life at that time. It showed me to cherish these times with my loved ones because they will always be there for you during the best and worst of times.

The memories I took back with me from study abroad are still frequently talked about. I made so many adjustments to my life and gained valuable skills that I will keep with me forever. I feel as if I can accomplish anything in my life with hard work. My mental health and wellbeing improved throughout studying abroad as I experienced the world. It was such a joyous time. I made so many close friends from different universities in a short four-week period. To this day, we visit each other on weekends at their schools and talk weekly. Studying abroad was definitely one of the highlights of my undergraduate time.

This honors thesis has benefitted me in many ways to make me the best applicant for medical school. I am grateful for the Honors College providing me with this opportunity to learn the entirety of the research methodology process, from conducting a literature review to

analyzing and drawing conclusions from my data I collected. For my upcoming gap year, I am applying to a medical research program that will further build on my research skills.

### *Implications and Future Research*

Through this research, study abroad experiences were shown to be related to increased mental health and wellbeing of students. Students reflected on their study abroad experience and shared how they grew due to getting outside of their comfort zone. It allowed them to develop skills that they will apply to their future. There were some challenges that students encountered, but they worked through them. The connections and understandings they made with people around the world are sure to leave a lasting impact on them. Studying abroad is a transformative experience. Students have adapted and learned to appreciate differing cultures.

Due to these conclusions, universities should promote study abroad to many different degrees, in hopes of getting more people to study abroad during their undergraduate studies. This would mean study abroad offices need to form more partnerships with foreign universities and programs to ensure all majors can get credit for their courses. Universities need to also make studying abroad accessible to all students through increased funding. The benefit that the student receives from studying abroad outweighs the costs to the university. These students are representatives of the university after graduation, and the global skills they possess will draw future employers towards them. Companies will make it a priority to focus on students from this university when hiring. Studying abroad makes well-rounded individuals who seek out challenges and adventurous opportunities.

This study conducted was a short-term study evaluating the impact of study abroad on mental health and wellbeing right after the program. The literature review is also limited to the short-term effects of study abroad. Therefore, there should be more research on the long-term benefits of studying abroad. Studies should be done years after a student has returned from their study abroad program. This can evaluate how the person has implemented aspects learned from study abroad into their daily life and professions.

**University of Arkansas  
Honors College Four Pillars**

**INCLUSION**

**CURIOSITY**

**INNOVATION**

**ACCOUNTABILITY**

**I have cherished the past four years as a honors student at the University of Arkansas. I appreciate the opportunities that the Honors College has provided me with to pursue these four pillars, including studying abroad and the findings in my thesis.**

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## Appendix

Survey items in the pre- and post-surveys.

Figure 2A. Study abroad program-specific aspects.

Q3 There are several aspects to the program at CIMBA. Please evaluate how impactful you are expecting each to be in terms of your personal or professional growth.

	not very impactful				very impactful
living on an enclosed campus with your classmates	<input type="radio"/>				
planning for travel weekends	<input type="radio"/>				
experiencing travel weekends	<input type="radio"/>				
new friends you make through your time in the program	<input type="radio"/>				
the courses and professors that you connect with	<input type="radio"/>				
the field trips you take with class to local companies	<input type="radio"/>				
the day trips to nearby towns that the school provides	<input type="radio"/>				
being pushed out of your comfort zone	<input type="radio"/>				
experiencing Italy in general	<input type="radio"/>				

Figure 2B. Psychological Wellbeing Scale (Ryff).

Q10 I have two last random sets of questions - I imagine it will seem weird to answer these items when you are completing a study abroad survey. I am working on a research project to see the impact of study abroad on a student's wellbeing. ALL responses will be kept confidential and will not be linked to your individual name. They will only be used in aggregate form to look for patterns. Thanks for sharing your insight! For each of the following statements, think about your life today and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree.

	strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	neither disagree <u>or</u> agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
I like most parts of my personality.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The demands of everyday life often get me down.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In many ways I feel disappointed about my achievements in life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintaining close relationships has been difficult and frustrating for me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I live life one day at a time and don't	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

really think about the future.

In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I love.

I am good at managing the responsibilities of daily life.

I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life.

For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth.

I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how I think about myself and the world.

People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others.

I gave up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago.

my life a long time ago.

I tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions.

I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others.

I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are different from the way most people think.

I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what others think is important.

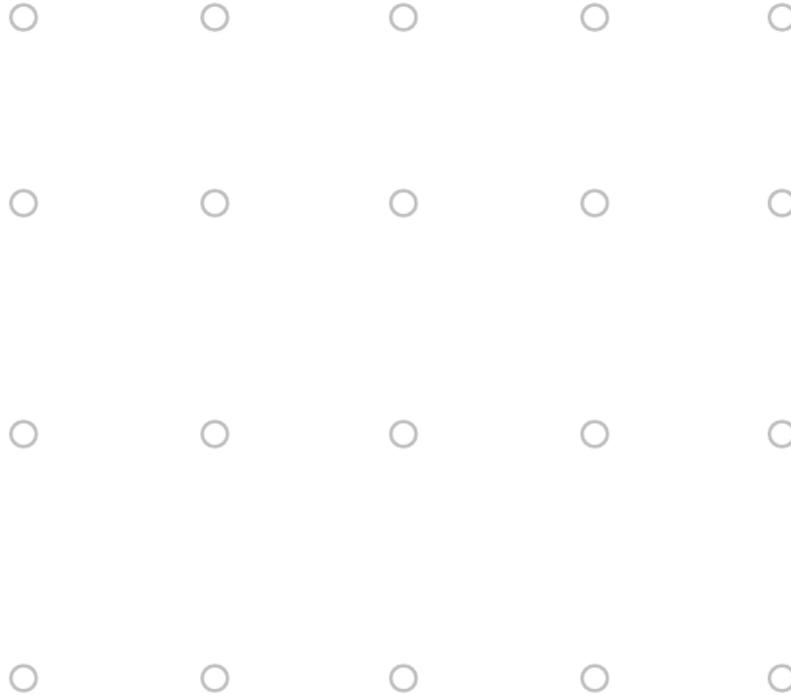


Figure 2C. Hero Wellness Scale (World Health Organization).

Q11 almost done...again these responses will not be reviewed individually and will not be linked to you as a respondent.

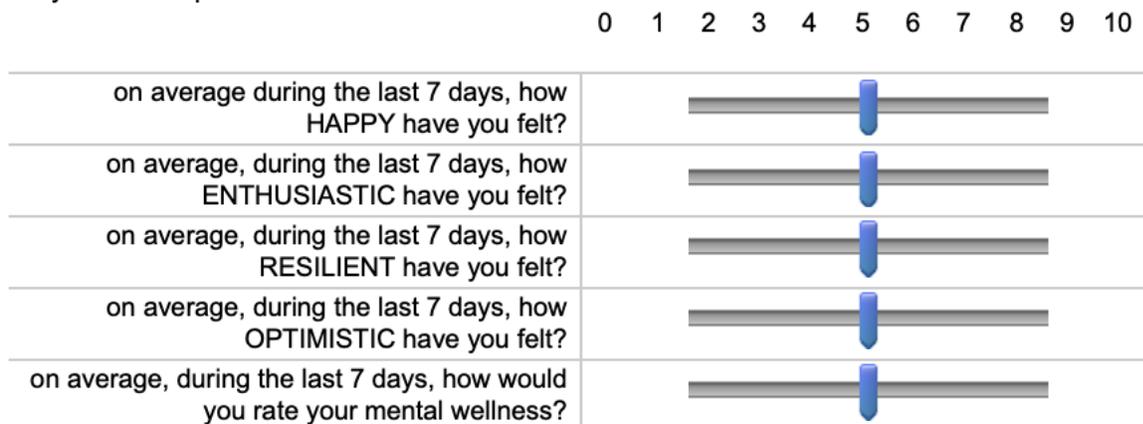


Figure 2D. Study abroad impact.

Q2 Let's start with your overall study abroad experience of CIMBA, thinking about all aspects such as friendships, travel, experiencing an international setting, classes, etc. With that overall CIMBA study abroad experience in mind, which one of the following statements best captures how you expect it to impact you (just select one)? I know it is a lot to read through, but I would appreciate you really giving thought to what you are expecting.

- 1 It will be regular, common, not necessarily memorable.
- 2 It will be memorable and will create an impression because it was a novel experience.
- 3 It will be memorable because it will create an impression or an appreciation for the value of the experience or place.
- 4 It will be memorable because it will create strong impressions or a connection that will become more personal or real for me.
- 5 It will be meaningful because it will lead to insights about new accomplishments, new skills or attributes that may influence my self-awareness or promote personal growth.
- 6 It will be meaningful because it will lead to insights about people, relationships, or the understanding of others that may influence my self-awareness or promote personal growth.
- 7 It will be meaningful because it will lead to insights about myself and my character that will influence my self-awareness or promote personal growth.
- 8 It will be transformative because it will lead to a change in perspective or attitude about who I am and to a desire to change my behavior.
- 9 It will be transformative because it will lead to a change in perspective related to who I am or my identity and I will make significant changes in my behavior.
- 10 It will be transformative because it will lead to a change in some aspect of who I am, my identity, or my core values and will result in lasting behavior changes.

Figure 2E. Pre-survey nervous open response.

Q4 Describe what you are most nervous about in terms of your upcoming study abroad ... perhaps 5+ sentences?

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*Figure 2F. Pre-survey excitement open response.*

Q5 Describe what you are most excited about in terms of your upcoming study abroad ... perhaps 5+ sentences?

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*Figure 2G. Post-survey challenge open response.*

In studying abroad, you are often pushed out of your comfort zone, facing some challenges that are different than what you are used to. Thinking back on the program, what is a challenging situation that you faced and how did you solve or push through the situation?

*Figure 2H. Post-survey characteristic open response.*

Thinking about that same scenario, what is ONE WORD that comes to mind in terms of an attribute that you gained or enhanced because of situations like that? For example, patience, resilience, grit, initiative...

*Figure 2I. Post-survey one word open response.*

When you think about your time at Cimba, what is ONE WORD that you think captures this experience?