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# Stamp of Approval: The Influence of Parents in the Decision to Study Abroad

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STAMP OF APPROVAL: THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS IN THE DECISION TO STUDY

ABROAD

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PIM 74

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of  
International Education at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

May 2016

Adviser: David Shallenberger, Academic Dean for the International Honors Program

STAMP OF APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

Through financial and emotional support, parents are primary stakeholders in the study abroad process and can either encourage or discourage their student to study abroad during their college experience. This paper seeks to identify the roles of today's parent in their student's study abroad experiences and to what extent parents influence their children's decisions surrounding their decision to study abroad. Qualitative surveys and interviews were conducted with eight study abroad alumni and their parent of choice during this exploratory study. Questions asked and results provided include patterns of communication at home versus abroad, feelings surrounding the support of parents during the study abroad process, and the direct impact of parent influence on the decision to study abroad. Conclusions show that parental support of the general concept of study abroad was an influencer in the decision to study abroad. However, almost all students indicate that they discovered, researched, and chose their specific study abroad program with very little or no assistance from their parent. In most cases students sought their parent's stamp of approval on their study abroad decision, but not their permission.

## **Introduction**

Parents are an extremely important stakeholder in the study abroad experience of their student, but there lacks significant research in the international education community about the impact of parents as an influencer in student decision making. Often as both the primary financial and emotional support for their student, parents have substantial influence in their student's decision making process during their college search, but less is known about their influence in their student's decision to study abroad. Parental support can be an incredibly positive form of encouragement, or a discouraging barrier for others. At a time in their life when students are taking a step to become more independent by studying abroad, how important are their parents in the decision to study abroad and the impact of their experience while away?

I first became interested in this topic while reflecting on the frequency that I speak to parents of college-aged study abroad students over the phone or via email in my daily work as a College Relations Manager at IES Abroad, a not-for-profit study abroad provider. Most of these communications come from parents whose students have already decided on a study abroad program, but some also come from parents who have prospective students exploring their options and enlisting their parents to help with the information gathering process. My interactions with parents vary greatly, but most pertain to specific billing or cost information, health and safety related concerns, or general program information. I would like to gain a better understanding of the realities of relationships between parents and their student during the study abroad process and ultimately gain a deeper sense of understanding and empathy for this important relationship, hoping to find results that may lead to more knowledge about the way that study abroad administrators can better market to and advise parents of study abroad students.

While some limited studies have been done on the influence of parents in their student's study abroad decisions, there are not extensive reports on this relationship and more research is necessary for a better understanding of this influence. There remains a gap in current literature about the effects that parents have on students specifically when they study abroad, although there are current studies on parent's involvement within higher education more broadly. The question that can be asked, and which I am asking here, is: *what are the roles of today's parent in their student's study abroad experience and to what extent do parents influence their children's decision to study abroad?*

### **Literature Review**

The parent's role in study abroad is a growing topic in the field of international education, and while there are some studies (mostly unpublished graduate work) examining this relationship, there is still a lack of comprehensive research on the impact of parents on their student's study abroad decisions. There is a significant amount of literature about the current role of parents surrounding college students in higher education, specifically about helicopter parents, but most lack specificity about how these parents relate to study abroad.

### **Generational Lens**

One of the ways to identify support for study abroad between parents and students is to look at the relationship through a generational lens. According to Pew Research Center (2015), "an individual's age is one of the most common predictors of differences in attitudes and behaviors. Age denotes two important characteristics about an individual: their place in the life cycle – whether a young adult, middle-aged parent or retiree – and their membership in a cohort

of individuals who were born at a similar time.” Used as a tool for research, age can be used to “understand how different formative experiences interact with the life-cycle and aging process to shape people’s view of the world” (Pew Research Center, 2015). Howe and Strauss are the foremost researchers in generational theory, and are credited for coining the term “Millennial.” Their theory examines the “nuances of environmental, technological, development and other circumstantial influences that shape a generation....[and] shed light on how the college climate has changed to foster parental involvement” (Parcells, 2010, p. 18). A note on generational studies: these broad overviews of generational characteristics certainly do not apply to all people, but can give cultural indicators as to how the framework of one’s environment contributes to generational attitudes and decision making. People in each generation vary in how they prefer to be generationally classified. Most people (79%) who fall within the age range of Baby Boomers do consider themselves Baby Boomers, while only 58% of Gen X self-identify as their generation, and just 40% of Millennials do (Pew Research Center, 2015). Millennials are especially resistant to being labeled “Millennials” because of negative stereotypes associated with the phrase (Pew Research Center, 2015). An interesting finding about generational research also reveals how each generation may not be as stratified as generally believed. When asked the question, “What makes your generation unique?,” between 5-13% of all generations (Silent, Boomers, Gen X, and Millennial) answered “[we are] smarter” (Pew Research Center, 2010). So at least to some extent, generations share the characteristics of thinking their own generation has qualities that make them better than other generations.

Current college-aged students are usually 18-22 years old, and are in the Millennial (also sometimes referred to as Gen Y) generation. This generation was born after 1980, with no consensus of a defined end date and currently make up about 30% of the adult population.

Perhaps some of the rise in study abroad participation as a whole can be attributed in part to the characteristics of this generation. Pope, Sánchez, Lehnert and Schmid address that issue in their article, “Why Do Gen Y Students Study Abroad?,” arguing that “people who are part of Gen Y have a... desire for firsthand experiences that shakes up their routine, engages their senses, and stimulates personal growth.” (Pope, Sánchez, Lehnert & Schmid, 2014). Johnson (2006) also states that Gen Y’ers have a “worldview that informs their education, careers, choices and lifestyles” (p.4-8) and that they value and seek out opportunities for individual growth and development- like study abroad. Millennials are also the most diverse adult generation: 57% are non-Hispanic whites, 21% are Hispanic, 13% are black and 6% are Asian (Pew Research Center, 2015). In contrast, each other generation is less diverse- with non-Hispanic whites making up 61% of Generation X and 72% of Baby Boomers (Pew Research Center 2015). Millennials have grown up with technology as an understood part of their lives, so they expect changes and evolution as part of their technological use. They also use it to connect with the world at large from a young age in a way that hasn’t happened in previous generations, so could be more open to global connectedness as an inherent part of life rather than an experience or product that has to be specifically sought out (Pew Research Center, 2015). Essentially, this generation of college students express qualities as an age cohort that most align with the goals of study abroad.

These are the student’s generational markers, but what about their parents? Most parents of college students are either Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), making up 30% of the adult population, or part of Generation X (born 1965-1980), which make up 27% of the adult population (Pew Research Center, 2015). These generations also have distinct qualities that have been shaped by influencing life events, which can manifest in their parenting style. This can also impact the way in which they interact with important decisions in their student’s lives.

Baby boomers, also known as the “me” generation, were influenced by the protests and human rights movement of the sixties and seventies including Watergate and the Vietnam War. As they became adults, they were concerned with building a solid and dependable career. They are generally more drawn to money, title, and recognition as an indicator of success (Faust, McGuinn and Hansen 2015).

Generation X was shaped by their own set of global events, including the stock market crash, recession, and Watergate and generally are much less trusting of the government. Many of the values that Gen X'ers have in regards to their quality of life, value of paid time off and the flexibility of their working schedule, are also shared by their children, the Millennials. These parents are often stereotyped for their over-involvement in their student's lives, and are sometimes referred to as “helicopter parents,” a term first defined in 1969, which gained notoriety in the late 90s but which has become extremely well known as a cultural phenomenon today. Frequent communication between Gen-X parents and their students is expected, but when students study abroad, this expectation may or may not shift, which is one of the motivators for conducting this study (Faust, McGuinn and Hansen 2015).

### **FERPA Law**

A complicating factor in the decision to include parents in the predeparture process is FERPA laws. As defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2016):

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) is a Federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education. Generally, schools must have written permission from the parent or eligible student in order to release any information from a student's education record.

However, there are sometimes misunderstandings about what FERPA actually entails, and the type of information that can and should be shared about a student's personal information in the

context of study abroad. There are several exemptions to the FERPA law, so that information can be released without student consent, one of which is “school officials with legitimate educational interest” (Department of Education, 2016). Joe Brockington, associate provost for international programs at Kalamazoo College, was quoted in an article by Hulstrand (2013) stating, “A common scenario is that a study abroad office requests student conduct information from the dean of students office, and is told that the information is private and will not be shared. The study abroad office may not know that FERPA does not apply to this situation under the educational need to know clause” (p. 46). Hulstrand (2013) goes on to state “In fact, it is important that this kind of sharing be done so that institutions can ensure that they do not unknowingly send students abroad who are likely to cause problems for the program, the faculty and students on the program, and ultimately for the institution” (p. 46) However, some of the information parents want to know the most, like the admission status or course enrollment of their student, is protected under FERPA and cannot be shared unless the student has given consent.

### **Student-Parent Communication**

One interesting study conducted by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reveals the frequency of student/parent contact while in college and how that may affect student success. NSSE is an especially good indicator of student growth because it surveys both first year and senior students with the same set of questions. Although it targets all students, and not just those who have studied abroad, it is interesting to see the changes in their communication habits with their parents from the period before they presumably studied abroad (first year) to after (senior year).

NSSE reports, “Seven of ten students communicated ‘very often’ with at least one parent or guardian during the academic year.” Communicating through some form of “electronic media” was more common than a face-to-face interaction, and the “most popular member of the support network was the student’s mother, followed by father and siblings” (NSSE, 2007, p. 25). 86% of both first years and seniors students reported having frequent (which means they indicated the options ‘often’ or ‘very often’ on the survey) electronic contact with their mother. 71% of first-years and 73% of seniors reported frequent electronic contact with their father. NSSE indicates that the content of the conversation changes slightly depending on which parent they are speaking to. “Students were most likely to talk with their mother about personal issues, academic performance and family matters, while academic performance was the most common discussion topic with fathers (NSSE, 2007, p. 24).” Although they are having frequent contact-how could that potentially impact study abroad? NSSE also asked how often students frequently (again, replied ‘often’ or ‘very often’ on the survey) followed the advice of a family member and 77% of first-year students reported that they frequently followed the advice of their mother, while 71% followed the advice of their father. Senior students had slightly lower results, with 73% stating they frequently followed the advice of their mother, and 69% frequently following the advice of their father (NSSE, 2007, p. 25).

Hofer and Moore (2010) also present an interesting perspective into the communication habits of college students with their parents in their book, *The iConnected Parent: Staying Connected to Your College Kids (and beyond) While Letting Them Grow Up*. Their survey found that college students have, on average, between 13-14 points of contact (phone call, email, text, etc.) with their parent in one week and these interactions are equally initiated by both parties (Hofer and Moore, 2010, p. 22). When asked to reflect on their communication habits, about

75% of students were content with the frequency that they communicated with their parents. Of those who were not content, most wanted more contact with their parents. On the other side, the majority (70%) of parents were also mostly content with the frequency of communication (Hofer and Moore, 2010, p. 24). Another study confirms that the vast majority of students want and ask for their parent's help in academic and personal matters and are the ones to make contact first (Kennedy, 2009).

### **Self-authorship Theory**

An interesting lens to view this level of communication and influence through is the student development theory of self-authorship as it relates to a student's decision to study abroad. Baxter Magdola created the theory of self-authorship out of her research on the epistemological development of one hundred college students from Miami University. She defines self-authorship as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (Evans, et. al, 2010, p.183).

Study abroad could fall during any of the four phases of the path to self-authorship. During Phase 1, *Following Formulas*, students are doing what they think they ought to, and "allow others to define who they are" (p. 185). If parents have unmovable expectations that their student should study abroad, the student's actions could fulfill the parent's expectation during this phase. While studying abroad may be a catalyst for self-authorship during another phase, if a student was only going abroad because that was what their parent wanted them to do, it could stagnate their personal growth. Evans, et. al. (2009) state, "Unfortunately, college environments often do not create the conditions necessary for self-authorship to develop and many students struggle with the challenges they face" (p. 184). I argue that studying abroad helps to speed along the

process of self-authorship by presenting students with the “conditions necessary” to handle situations they may not have on a home campus. Anecdotal evidence suggest that students who study abroad are more mature and self-aware than their peers who have not, and that study abroad serves as an incubator for maturing experiences, where students have to navigate a new environment and are presented with different types of challenges than those they would face on their home campus.

If students have reached Phase 2, *Crossroads* or Phase 3, *Becoming the Author of One’s Life*, they may see study abroad as an opportunity to make their own decision that is outside of the norm of expectation. They may choose to study abroad because they’ve witnessed their peers having transformative experiences abroad and want that for themselves. Phase 4, *Internal Foundation*, is rarely reached before a student graduates from college but in this context may be achieved after a study abroad experience. The three major questions that Baxter Magdola proposes during the time of values exploration on the path to self-authorship are all questions that students may find themselves addressing during time abroad, “How do I know?” “Who am I?” and “How do I want to construct relationships with others?” (Evans, et. al, 2010, p. 183-184).

### **General Support for Study Abroad**

There is evidence that the American population as whole values study abroad and international education as a means for their children to live in a more global society. One study from NAFSA (2006), *Americans Call for Leadership on International Education*, presents “stalwart support...for international education initiative to strengthen our ability to prosper in a global context” (NAFSA, p. 1). This study examines perceptions on global interconnectedness, including the perceived importance of study abroad for future generations. Findings indicated

that the American people both valued the idea of study abroad and supported it. The study states that “virtually all Americans (90%) believe it is important to ensure that future generations have the skills and knowledge needed for a more interconnected world” (NAFSA, 2006, p. 2). While it could be argued that an interconnected world doesn’t exclusively correlate with study abroad, it does report that 82 % of Americans feel that educational experiences where time is spent abroad in other cultures is “important” or “a little important,” with just 8% feeling it wasn’t important or were undecided (NAFSA, 2006, p. 2). So parents, as a component of this general demographic, are in favor of American students being exposed to other cultures, but how does that translate to their direct impact on influencing their own children?

### **Parental Influence in Study Abroad**

Paus and Robinson (2008) present a clear connection between parent’s influences on their student’s study abroad decisions in their article, “Increasing Study Abroad Participation: The Faculty Makes the Difference.” This study has several interesting findings, and synthesizes previous information about parent- student relationships to highlight the importance that parents play in their student’s decision to study abroad. They found that parents and friends are one of the largest contributors to student’s decision to study abroad, outpacing faculty and college administrators. At Mount Holyoke (where the case study took place), they also found that significant factors included income level, education level, and ethnicity. Parents were more likely to encourage their student’s study abroad plans if they had higher income and if they had attended college. African-American and Hispanic students at Mount Holyoke were 23 percent less likely to receive parental support than White students.

However, two additional separate studies conclude that educational level of parents does not have any discernable impact on the influence of their student to study abroad. As part of the study “Why do Gen Y Students Study Abroad,” the authors Pope, Sánchez, Lehnert, and Schmid (2014) find these somewhat surprising results, “Students whose parents had higher levels of formal education were no more motivated to study abroad than students whose parents had lower levels of formal education” (p. 11). Their study also found that “students’ prior experience visiting foreign countries at a younger age positively moderated how the desire for individual growth affected their intent to study abroad” (Pope, et. al., 2014, p.110).

Another study by Stroud in 2010, echoes this sentiment and puts forth another motivating factor: that students choose to study abroad not because of parental support or pressure, but because of their own self-motivation to advance their future careers by distinguishing themselves to employers (Stroud, 2010, p. 503). Pope, et al. also suggest that because of these somewhat conflicting results, that further research is conducted about motivations behind student decision making in study abroad.

### **Current Parent Communication Practices**

Most schools and providers prefer to communicate primarily, and sometimes exclusively, to the student who is studying abroad, but have a positive outlook on fielding some questions from parents. Consistently across study abroad organizations and universities, it seems that promotion and marketing of study abroad is focused primarily towards students, with limited targeted efforts with parents (notable exceptions would be study abroad information sessions during admission events) before the student has made a decision to study abroad. Resources and engagement focused on parents increase after students have chosen and been admitted to a study

abroad program. In order to meet the needs of parents in the study abroad process, some colleges and universities, especially those with a large in-state population, offer parent-specific orientation sessions to include them in the predeparture process. Some universities, as well as some third party providers, offer online orientation sessions specifically for parents.

Since parents are already recognized as an important stakeholder in the process, the field of international education is continuing to expand their directed efforts towards parents. There are several publications in the field of international education, including some from study abroad providers, which are marketed directly toward parents and work to address some of the most common concerns that parents have about their students studying abroad. In IIE and AIFS's joint publication, "A Parent Guide to Study Abroad," President and CEO of AIFS, William Gertz, makes some marked and poignant points that reflect the modern day world of study abroad. He contrasts his experience studying abroad, when "there was nothing to unplug (p.6)" to his daughter's experience. He notes that while his daughter was abroad "we spent far too much time talking on Skype and communicating via Facebook. We were always connected; and while this was comforting for us both, it may have hampered the freedom she needed (p. 6)." This reality of a fairly typical parent-student communication habit during study abroad is contrasted by the advice the guide gives on the appropriate amount of time to interact. The guide urges parents to "be supportive from afar" (p. 47) and make the effort to limit their communication with their student in order to encourage them to become more immersed in their environment. The guide even goes as far as setting a parameter for the amount of contact students and parents maintain, suggesting that parents "set up a regular form of contact that gives you both peace of mind but is not obsessive, perhaps one email per week and a Skype every few weeks or once a month (p. 47). Although IIE recommends this "right" amount of contact, my research shows that this level

of contact is definitely not the reality that students and parents have today. This can be absolutely seen by the recommendations of the guide and the reality of Gertz's own experience. I believe this struggle between what how much a parent wants to communicate, how much a student wants to communicate, and what is in the student's best interest in terms of personal growth (and subsequently- how and who knows what is in their best interest?) is at the heart of this topic, and of parenting in general. At a time in student's lives where they are growing and changing so rapidly, study abroad can accelerate their journey of self-discovery, independence, and learned skills. How much of that development, if any, is affected by their relationship with their parents? And, like Gertz, even if parents are self-aware of this time, can they provide distance from their own child in this context, and should they?

### **Practitioner Inquiry Design**

To answer this question, I took an exploratory approach and conducted a qualitative study that evaluated pairs of college-aged students who have studied abroad and their parents. I surveyed and interviewed eight college students from a variety of institutions in the United States. To capture the most relevant responses, I limited this study to students who had studied abroad in the past year, but was open to any length of study abroad experience (one-week to one-year) in any location. To find participants, I utilized my personal network to ask for references for volunteers and also contacted select study abroad offices to solicit volunteers. Students then chose the parent for me to speak with, and provided their contact information. Participants were contacted and interviewed separately. I first collected data by asking participants to complete a fifteen question survey, which focused on establishing demographic information to save time in the follow up interview. The survey also focused on the methods and frequency of

communication both home and abroad, to both establish a baseline for communication and to allow parents to reflect on their communication patterns before participating in the interview.

The participants were then interviewed over the phone or in-person, which ranged from ten to twenty minutes. The interview questions were broader and open-ended, so probed more at the involvement of the parents in the students' decision to study abroad, and in their program and location choice. It also asked about the general relationship between the parent and student in the context of their study abroad experience. Each group of participants were asked variations on the same questions. Please see appendix A for the full list of questions.

Limitations of this study include the diversity of the demographic and study abroad location of students and parents, since this sample cannot be fully representative of the study abroad population. The participants roughly reflects the national demographics in who studies abroad, but I had more male students participate than is the national average, and less people of color. Since I have a small sample size, I am aware that the information gathered cannot be over generalized, but is representative of each student's experiences, which may apply to others as well.

The structure of the interview may have affected the survey results, since I received the parent's contact information directly from their student, so the students who agreed to participate felt comfortable enough with their parent to agree to an interview. They also may have chosen the parent that they were closer to, were most supportive to study abroad, had a more flexible schedule, or would be most open to being interviewed.

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

There were sixteen total participants in the survey and interviews, eight sets of parents and students. Of the eight students, five were male and three were female and they had a moderately diverse length of experiences and range of locations. Students are all US citizens, and attend different types of institutions: public research universities in the southeast, a private research university in the northeast, and small, private liberal arts colleges in the Southeast, Northeast, and Midwest. All students studied abroad once, except for one student who studied abroad twice- for both a summer and an academic year. Students selected the parent that they wanted to participate, and there were five mothers and three fathers. It's useful to see the comparison between my participants and the study abroad population as a whole (Table 1). The 2015 Open Doors Data is a national survey administered by the Institute of International Education, and reports on all US students studying abroad (Open Doors, 2015). Overall, my participants were less ethnically diverse, had more male representation, and studied for a longer term than the general study abroad population.

*Table 1: Demographics Comparison of Open Doors 2015 Data to Student Participants in Study*

	Open Doors 2015 Data	Student Participants
Female	65.3%	37.5%
Male	34.7%	62.5%
White	74.3%	87.5%
Minority (African-American)	25.7% (5.6%)	12.5% (12.5%)
Eight weeks or less	62.1%	25%
Mid-length (quarter or semester)	34.9%	75%
Academic or Calendar Year	3%	12.5%
Europe	53.3%	75%
Asia	11.9%	37.5%
Latin America & Caribbean	16.2%	0%
Oceania	3.9%	0%

**Pair 1***Table 2: Pair 1 Demographics*

Gender	Male
Parent	Mother
Study Abroad Destination	India
Length of Experience	Short term
Frequency of communication at home	Multiple times a day
Frequency of communication abroad	Once a day

Student 1 had planned to study abroad for a semester junior year, but safety concerns delayed his plans, so in order to still have the opportunity to study abroad, he opted for a short term experience during his senior year. His destination was very non-traditional for him and his mother, so there was some initial concern about safety.

**Student’s perspective.** Student 1 remarked on the campus culture as one of the big reasons he wanted to (and felt able to) study abroad. Because of this, it wasn’t a surprise to his mother when he told her he wanted to study abroad. “She knew that study abroad was a main component of the [school] experience, and that’s what kind of sold me and her too. That you can study abroad and still be engaged [on campus] throughout your four years.” He noted that although the atmosphere and his parents were supportive, he made the decision and researched the program independently of his parents. When asked why his plans changed, he said, “I was supposed to study abroad spring semester of my junior year in Africa, but that was around the time of the Ebola scare and everyone was a little hesitant about me going- me, my school, and my mom. So I decided to postpone studying abroad to the next year.” He really wanted to have the experience of study abroad, regardless of the destination and actually applied to two different faculty-led short term programs, which were both cancelled, before he decided on India. After he

chose his program, he received substantial support from his mother with logistical preparations like his passport and visa application, financial considerations, and general paperwork. “She had gotten a passport before, so she helped me with that process. I also asked her to call financial aid, and figure out the payment plan and all that stuff.” Although he was comforted by the structure of a program (short term, faculty led), his biggest concern was still general safety, especially since he wasn’t very familiar with India before he left. “I knew that safety was a big one for me, as far as Americans abroad in general. They emphasized a lot of the health issues during orientation, so I was thinking about what could happen. I didn’t want to be put in a situation where I had to go to the hospital, even though I knew I had insurance and they have great hospitals, but here [at school] my mom is about an hour or so down the road versus there it would be 17 or 20 hours away, so that was a big concern.” Additionally, he had specific concerns that many of his classmates did not face, which he thought was concerning for his mother too, “She knew my roommate was going with me, and I had friends there so that was good. But not only are you an American, but you are a black American, so that was her biggest concern. As an African-American male traveling, you don’t really see a lot of faces like me traveling abroad. You don’t see a lot of students of color traveling from [my school] so that was a worry for her.” Additional anxieties before the program was how he would communicate with his mom, “I was just like, Hey mom, how are we going to be able to make it work? It’s a new process for her and a new process for me, so we just talked about how to figure it out before I left.” They mainly relied on texting, which is their primary means of communication on campus as well, but also phoned fairly often, even though it was expensive.

**Parent's perspective.** His mother also noted her lack involvement in the decision making process. "Well, he just came to me and said I'm going to India. And I was like ok, if that's what you want to do, ok. (laughing) Are you sure you want to go to *India*?" She also noted that this was a typical reaction as part of her general parenting, since he had had domestic summer research and internships outside of his home state before. She said "You know, He's 21 and I'm behind him on all of his endeavors. So there wasn't a whole lot of conversation about it." After he had decided and was accepted, she did get more involved in working with him to consider his experience abroad. "He had never that far before, and we had been to the Caribbean but always places we could get to more quickly. We're more island people. So, I was just like 'What are you going to do when you are there? What are you going to eat? Are you sure you want to do this, because it will be a wonderful experience, but it's going to be very different than anything you've done before. And because I've never experienced it, it's almost like it's the unknown.'" Safety was her biggest concern, especially since he was studying in a non-traditional location that she was not familiar with. She noted, "We are born and bred here, so somewhere like that [India], you of course know it's there but it's almost like it's out of your reach."

The type of experience, a short term faculty led program, added to the sense of comfort since she knew that his friends were going to be on the program as well as faculty members. After he arrived, communication was heavy in the first few days and then subsided slightly to about once a day. She said, "I'm a take you to the airport, see the plane leave kind of person, but I didn't do that this time since he wasn't by himself. So when he got to India I was very relieved. I let him know, know matter what time it is, I don't care about the time difference, you need to let me know you are there." Their group also had a specific Facebook group for parents, and kept a blog, which she noted was extremely helpful and another way she monitored his experience.

**Pair 2***Table 3: Pair 2 Demographics*

Gender	Male
Parent	Mother
Study Abroad Destination	France
Length of Experience	Short term
Frequency of communication at home	Once every few days
Frequency of communication abroad	Once every few days

Student 2 had a research internship during the summer in Paris, France. Although he did not receive academic credit, as a research internship experience, I thought it would be interesting to include in this data set, specifically to see if there was more or less involvement from his parents since there was no institutional support.

**Student's perspective.** When asked about his parent's involvement in the program decision, he noted they didn't participate in anything before he decided, "It wasn't through my school, it was something I found entirely on my own. It was really self-organized." After he was accepted to the program, the only thing that was different in his parent's involvement was the level of communication. "I would say that I probably spoke to them a little more often than I usually do, just because I was going to this exciting place and there was just more to talk about, I guess." He departed directly from his university (outside of his hometown), so didn't see his parents before he left to go to Paris and relied primarily on phone calls and FaceTime to communicate. Once he got there, that continued, "My mom wanted me to turn on Facetime on my phone, so she could see what my neighborhood looked like, and what my walk to work looked like, and things like that." Before he left, his biggest concern was "definitely the language." Since there weren't many details about the research program, and he didn't have any

past students to talk to about it. He said, “There were a lot of questions going into it that couldn’t be answered by the people who worked there or by the website. I didn’t know exactly if I would have to speak French for most of the time, or if there would be any English used.” He thought his parents’ biggest concerns were safety, which he noted were somewhat alleviated by the fact that the location was well known, and that they had traveled there before themselves.

**Parent’s perspective.** When asked about his decision to study abroad, his mother said, “He decided on his own...He went out and found out about it himself, since it wasn’t your traditional study abroad [experience].” Since he didn’t have any institutional support, he was responsible for coordinating travel, finding housing, etc. by himself. Confirming her student’s thoughts, the location made a huge impact in the comfort level for his parents. He had previously spent about 2.5 weeks in France before during high school as part of an exchange program, and had lived with a family who then sent their son to live with him for 2.5 weeks. She noted that coincidentally, “his housing (an AirBnB that he found) was literally around the corner from where his host family lived, so he was familiar with the neighborhood, and that gave me a little bit of comfort knowing that the parents of the exchange student were nearby.”

When asked about the predeparture preparations, his mother mentioned there was little involvement but “a fair amount of the focus was how we would communicate with each other. We used iMessage and FaceTime, and he gave us a tour of his house and neighborhood via FaceTime the morning he got there.” Since his experience wasn’t part of a larger group, I asked if there was any hesitation or concern about him living abroad for the summer. His mother noted that since he had lived there previously and was familiar with the area and could speak French,

that made a big difference in her confidence and comfort. Also, he had other friends from the US studying at the same time, so “His friend was already studying abroad in Paris so they overlapped time, so I knew he was there with someone he knew.” Overall, asked her level of involvement in the whole process, especially given that this wasn’t a school-run program, she replied, “Not much.”

Timing also played a big factor in the concerns and comfort of the experience, echoing a thought that many other parents also expressed in their interviews: the current political climate and perceived safety in Europe. “I definitely would have different feelings about it if it was like, now... I’m glad that he went when he went. I would be very uncomfortable with him there after the attacks in Paris [November 2015] and Brussels [March 2016].”

### Pair 3

*Table 4: Pair 3 Demographics*

Gender	Female
Parent	Father
Study Abroad Destination	France
Length of Experience	Semester
Frequency of communication at home	Once every few days
Frequency of communication abroad	Once every few days

Student 3 had a unique situation because of the timing of her study abroad experience. She left for France just two days after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015, which shaped the specific concerns around her study abroad experience for both her and her parents.

**Student’s perspective.** She had initially decided to study abroad in Paris because of her language minor, and her familiarity with the city- she had traveled there several times before. “I decided I wanted to study abroad when I was young, like in middle school, because I took

French and always wanted to study abroad in Paris. When I got to college, I was pretty adamant about studying abroad. My parents were always really supportive, they had lived in Paris after they were married so I knew they approved of the location.” Asked about their involvement in the process both pre and post acceptance, she said, “My parents support every decision I make, they were pretty hands off in my college search and were pretty hands off in my study abroad search, and now are hands off in my job search so they are like ‘we believe in you, we support you [and that is the extent of involvement].’ I should give them much more credit for involvement because they’ve been incredible generous financially which is a huge part of study abroad. In general, they are much more hands off than some of my friend’s parents.” Pre-departure and before the attacks, her concerns were centered around what her homestay family was going to be like, or if her language was going to be good enough to be successful. Just before she was to leave, the Charlie Hebdo attacks occurred. This drastically changed her thoughts about Paris as a destination, and studying abroad that semester in general. She said, “I didn’t want to go, I thought it would be unsafe and that I wouldn’t have a good time but both my dad and my mom were encouraging, and said to me ‘you’re going- not because you have this obligation- but because you are going to really enjoy it’ so that was the biggest push they had.” Post-Charlie Hebdo, concerns shifted exclusively to safety, she worried about “Would there be random civilian targeting and if people would be protesting on the metro, or if schools would be shut down. I was just a little scared.” After she arrived, she had roughly the same frequency of communication with her parents as she normally did at home, just through different means. While she primarily would communicate with her parents via phone and text at home, she relied more heavily on FaceTime and email in France.

**Parent's perspective.** Her dad also commented on the embedded importance of study abroad in their family, "We traveled with her as a kid, we emphasized the value of travel, her mom told her happy stories about her semester abroad, and so travel as part of recognition of being in the larger world and education were just values in our home. Also, her brother did it [studied abroad], so there was a level of expectation, I guess you could say, that she would study abroad. More that she was given this opportunity and we wanted her to take advantage of it if she could. We weren't surprised at all when she wanted to go to France." During the predeparture process after acceptance into the program, her parents played a very minor role. Her dad said, "We were minimally involved. If she needed something, we were there, but we let her do a lot of the heavy lifting. It was important that she did the paperwork, and things like that... we're not real deadline keepers for our kids." The concerns from her parents before the attacks were generally about her happiness abroad. They wanted her to have a good living situation and homestay family, and hopefully love the city as much as they did. Concerns after the attacks were terrorism related and focused primarily on safety. Her dad said, "There were some specific security concerns. We did get assurances from the program about what they were doing. We had to work with her and say it's going to be a really safe city for the next few months. Since we lived in Paris, we know it's a really big city [so concerns were more realistic]- we were certainly not unaware of what was going on." As the program continued, concerns did ebb a little on both sides, her dad said "Every day there wasn't an attack, it was better." They visited her at the end of her program and noted "There was still guards with machine guns on the street, it was definitely a tense town. Our concerns were very event driven." When asked about how the timing affected their ultimate decision to encourage her to attend the program, her father said, "Going forward, those [the threat of terrorist attacks] are going to be realities for any parent of

any kid who is going abroad. I don't know honestly what we would have done, if the other, much larger, less specifically targeted terror attack [Nov 15 Paris attacks] preceded her trip. What if she had been starting the day after that?" I would imagine this statement resonates with many of the interviewed parents, especially with students who studied abroad in Europe. While abroad, they communicated much more via video messaging than they had while she was on her home campus, and her dad also noted that checking in with her on social media was a good way to stay in contact, which will be further explored in the discussion section.

#### Pair 4

*Table 5: Pair 4 Demographics*

Gender	Male
Parent	Father
Study Abroad Destination	Germany
Length of Experience	Semester
Frequency of communication at home	Once every few days
Frequency of communication abroad	Once a week

Student 4's desire to study abroad didn't come to a shock to his parents, because he was planning to major in German and his college has an extremely supportive culture of study abroad. Since he attended a faculty-run program, and there was a lot of trust in his school by him and his parents, there were very few concerns in general.

**Student's perspective.** He noted that his initial conversation with his parents about study abroad was easy since it aligned so well with his academic goals, "Knowing that I was going to major in German they [his parents] kind of assumed that I was going to study abroad in Germany from the start. They weren't surprised by the fact that I wanted to do that. They were supportive

of the idea. They agreed with me that it would be a good part of my education, especially for the German major.”

He said that his parent’s didn’t have any involvement or influence in the program decision and details, and after he decided he told them about the program. Another factor was the lack of financial concerns, “Financially, I had scholarships that paid for my entire study abroad so that was a different conversation with my parents than I assume other people have.” There weren’t many concerns since he knew others in the program, and over 80% of the students at his college study abroad during their academic career, most of those on semester or year-long experiences, so the concept is institutionalized. One of the largest shifts in their relationship and communication habits was the physical proximity, as he states, “I go to school in the town I grew up in, and [at home] I wouldn’t see them all the time but I would definitely see them much more than abroad obviously- just if I happened to run into them at the store or going over to their house for dinner. There wasn’t an intentional phone call every week because we just happened to live in the same town as them. My shift from being at college to being at study abroad was more like other student’s going from high school and college where I’m not in the same town and I would talk to my parent’s on the phone sometimes. So that transition was interesting.”

**Parent’s perspective.** His father echoed the same sentiment about the college culture and support for study abroad stating, “study abroad is almost an inherent part, it’s something like 80% of students that go to [his college] study abroad, it’s just kind of part of the deal. So with his decision to go there [to the college]- he and we knew that going in.” Asked about his involvement in both the decision and pre-departure, his dad said, “We were pretty hands-off. He is very independent, so a lot of the stuff he just did, he got good advice from everyone. We did

go to one informational session at the college, since we live right here it was easy for us to attend. We heard one presentation and probably asked a few questions there, but not a whole lot of involvement overall.” His parents didn’t have many concerns about the program before it began, mostly because it was a college-run program and they trusted the college’s study abroad office. His dad states, “Well I think being from [the college town], I’ve known the school my whole life so there is some inherent comfort. There wasn’t a lot for us to learn about it, since we knew about it already.” He also echoed his son’s stance on communication, which had to be more intentional with each other, which was very different than at home.

### Pair 5

*Table 6: Pair 5 Demographics*

Gender	Male
Parent	Mother
Study Abroad Destination	Spain
Length of Experience	Semester
Frequency of communication at home	Once every few days
Frequency of communication abroad	Once every few days

Student 5’s parents were very supportive of the idea of study abroad, but had never been to Europe themselves so his perception was that they were a little more cautious than other parents who had traveled extensively.

**Student’s perspective.** Although studying abroad was something he knew he wanted as part of his college experience, he also chose a major where study abroad was a requirement so that it would be built in to his academic life. This didn’t give his parents much to object to when he brought up study abroad, since it was a component of his graduation, so they were on board

and supportive. He did most of the research and chose the program on his own, stating, “My parents knew that it was something I really wanted to do and something that was required for my major. They pretty much let me do it and told me, as long as it was something safe and fits within reasonable financial boundaries, I could pretty much decide and run with it. They didn’t really do much as far as picking a program kind of a thing.” They were extremely supportive of his final decision, especially because they had so much faith in his judgement, “I did all the research and then came back to my parents and told them about the program, and how much it was going to cost because my parents were going to be paying for the program so I was really fortunate in that regard. They were confident after hearing that about my decision. They pretty much just cheered me on from the sidelines and bankrolled me.” His parents got involved in researching- looking up what type of gear he may need (backpacks, money belts, etc.) or where he may like to go in Europe on the weekends. He stated, “Neither of my parents had been to Europe so it was more of them not having a reference, and the way they dealt with that was doing a lot of research.” Once he was on site, his communication was about the same frequency but slightly different interactions. They utilized Skype much more than they did on their home campus, and the conversations were slightly longer.

**Parent’s perspective.** One of the only ways in which his parents influenced his study abroad process was restricting him from certain locations they deemed were unsafe. His mother stated, “I remember we talked about where he could and couldn’t travel. Because there was the Ebola epidemic, so we said that he couldn’t go over there [to Africa]. He talked about wanting to go but we didn’t think it was worth the risk and we weren’t comfortable. It was probably the only thing we really put our foot down on.” She said that he was very independent and did most

of his forms, visa information, and preparations himself so there wasn't much involvement from them in that process. She did talk over certain requirements, asking him if he had to get vaccinations and if he needed her help with any aspect. She also helped him get his passport, "I called the post office and figured out how to get it, and then got his documents together and did actually go with him to apply for it. So that is something that I definitely helped him with." Other than the initial preparation, both parties said that for the most part, he was on his own. His parent's biggest concern was personal safety, and then secondarily his housing situation. She stated, "We did worry some, but he is very independent and very smart so as it turns out we didn't need to. And he was in an excellent program." Once he was settled into his environment, his mom's worries settled more, "I was less concerned once he began the program because I knew he was in a safe home with a nice family and the community he was in was very safe and he was very happy and excited and he liked everything that he was doing. He liked the school and traveling, and really everything." For parents that were a little more on the hesitant side of supporting study abroad, this very positive experience has influenced them to encourage his younger sister, who was initially not planning on studying abroad at all, to apply for a semester. His mom stated, "We knew it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and really wanted him to not have any regrets and take advantage of it if he could."

## Pair 6

Table 7: Pair 6 Demographics

Gender	Female
Parent	Mother
Study Abroad Destination	Spain
Length of Experience	Semester
Frequency of communication at home	Once every few days
Frequency of communication abroad	Once every few days

Student 6 self-classified herself as an outlier in this study because of the special circumstances surrounding her semester abroad. She had some preexisting health conditions that caused her parents to be much more involved than she says they would have been had she not had any medical issues.

**Student's perspective.** Her health concerns did play a large role in where she studied abroad. "I really wanted to go to Chile, and had done some research about it but when I talked to my mom about it she pretty much just said no." Since she wanted to study in a Spanish speaking country, which left Spain as her only option. She notes that her mother didn't have much involvement in packing or what to bring, but was heavily involved in getting her visa and all of her medical concerns. She says, "Our family had done a good amount of international traveling and I've traveled alone so she wasn't really too concerned about my ability to function in airports, and pack and everything. The few days before we were going through checklists. She was mostly concerned about the medical aspect. There was a lot of prep- I had to get all my medical records, I had a bracelet made, I had to talk to our health care provider and get all my medication for 6 months. So her biggest fear was just that something would happen and my existing condition wouldn't be well communicated in a second language. My mom being so concerned about so much of that medical stuff for me, I just went into it just saying I'm fine. She's worrying enough for the both of us." After she arrived, and met her homestay family, both of their concerns were eased as she got into a routine and they continued to communicate as they had in the past. She notes, "we talked about the same amount, but it was a little bit more intense.

I guess since it was FaceTime more instead of texting or calling as often, it felt like we were communicating more even though the frequency was the same.”

**Parent’s perspective.** Her mother noted that health concerns were in the forefront from the beginning, influencing the program location choice. She said, “I was very uncomfortable with her going anywhere that was not strictly first world medicine. So she sort of expressed a preference for South America, and I’ve been there and know that some cities are great with high quality medicine and some are not so great. So knowing that she would want to branch out of wherever she went [and visit smaller, less developed cities], I had a preference that it be in Europe so that mostly where she would branch out to would be first world places and other bigger cities. And other than that, I was like go where you want to.” After she chose the program and was accepted, her mom’s involvement was “mainly staying on her case. Following up with a lot of questions about if she had completed things on time and if she had everything she needed.” Once she arrived on site, she said her communication frequency was really about the same as it is when she’s on her home campus, but the conversations felt different, as Student 6 also noted. “Because we FaceTimed more than we usually do, it felt like the conversations were more substantial. And we checked in more about how she was adjusting and how she was feeling about everything.”

**Pair 7***Table 8: Pair 7 Demographics*

Gender	Male
Parent	Mother
Study Abroad Destination	Thailand
Length of Experience	Semester
Frequency of communication at home	Once a week
Frequency of communication abroad	Once a month

Student 7 participated in a field-based experience that mostly had unreliable phone and internet connections, which affected his communication patterns with his parents on site. It was also a unique time to travel to Thailand since it has just gone through a political coup which affected the perception of safety in the country.

**Student's perspective.** He chose his location without any input from his parents, but they were supportive of the experience and were expecting him to study abroad. His school has a very supportive study abroad culture, and that was one of the factors for both him and his parents in choosing which college to attend. He said, "They were excited for me to basically go halfway around the world. They didn't get the chance to travel themselves and they were excited that I was getting the chance to and that I was so excited about it! Once I made my decision, they were doing their own research on where I was going. They were excited that I was going to get the chance to go somewhere so different for 6 months." After he decided on the program, he says he was solely responsible for submitting forms and making sure he was up to date with deadlines. His biggest concern about the program was the language barrier. He had never taken Thai before, and part of the program required students to take the language so they could speak with locals in the sequential months, so he was very worried he wouldn't learn it fast enough or not be able to

manage the language. He notes his parent's biggest concerns were the political stability of Thailand. He said, "At the time of my travel, Thailand was under military rule. They had just had a coup. So they [my parents] were worried about that whole debacle. That makes it sound worse than it really was. It seemed so unstable to them." Once he was in Thailand, communication was challenging because he didn't have regular access to wifi. After the initial check-in, they both knew that communication would be spotty and that they would take as much or as little as was possible.

**Parent's perspective.** His mom also noted that the opportunity to study abroad was a big part of why they were supportive of his college decision, "We wanted him to go abroad and that was partly why we wanted him to go to [the college]. And beyond that, we weren't really informed. Then he came home and said I'm going to go Thailand and study biology and that's his thing. [He said] I don't know the language but I'll learn it when I'm there. So we were like ok, let's go. So we didn't have any input really." Concerning her involvement after the program decision, she said, "He had some deadlines that he had to submit, I never really saw all the requirements. But we said don't lose your opportunity to go, make sure you are doing what you need to do to make this work." Beyond that, her involvement was a little circumstantial because she was a nurse, "So he needed tons of shots to go to Asia, so I rallied around that. So I think with another parent, I don't know how they would have dealt with that. So really the only involvement before he got his packing list was his immunizations." Another lesser concern for her was financial, "I also had no idea how the money worked. I didn't know how he was going to be able to get any money. It would have been nice to talk to another family who had done it before. Because some of the things that parents worry about, he was like oh yea I'll figure it out

there, but we were like no really this is something you need to sort out now.” After he arrived, all of those preliminary worries were resolved and his parents were much less concerned about the experience, even though communication was so limited. Overall, she says “I wasn’t overly anxious, I knew that he would figure it out. I was never tempted to call the college to ask anybody even when I didn’t hear from him for weeks.”

## Pair 8

*Table 9: Pair 8 Demographics*

Gender	Female
Parent	Father
Study Abroad Destination	Italy, Denmark, Hong-Kong
Length of Experience	Summer, Academic Year
Frequency of communication at home	Once every few days
Frequency of communication abroad	Once a day

Student 8 studied abroad in three different locations, once in the summer in Italy and then for a semester each in the same academic year in Hong Kong and Denmark. She also was self-financing her experience, and said that had an impact on some conversations she had with her parents about her location choice.

**Student’s perspective.** Asked if her parents had any involvement in the program choice she says, “All three [study abroad experiences] were kind of the same where I just told my parents I was going abroad.” They were aware when she had applied for the program, which also included a scholarship application, so weren’t surprised when and where she wanted to go. After the program decision was made, her dad became heavily involved in helping her figure out her visa and logistics situation. She says, “Well, my dad was super involved. There was a lot of visas to be gotten and things to do, so my dad did almost all of it for me which was great. That is

similar to the way that he does things at UNC for me though so it wasn't unexpected." She didn't have any concerns about any of the programs before she went, but her parents were much more worried about Hong Kong than her other experiences. She said, "Before I went to Copenhagen they weren't too worried since I had been abroad in Italy. I came home for winter break and they were more nervous for Asia. They had never been to Asia so they were a little more worried about that." She notes that the financial aspect did come into play when she wanted to travel to places her parents were especially concerned about. "When I was in Asia, some of the places I was going to travel, they were not happy about. I definitely recall saying well I'm paying for everything anyway. When they didn't want me to go to Cambodia or Laos, I was like, well I'm paying for it anyway so I'm going to do what I want." An interesting piece of this experience was the way that communication shifted through the different experiences. She notes not talking to her parents very frequently during her summer in Italy, but "As I was abroad for longer, I started talking to my parents more often."

**Parent's perspective.** Her dad noted that study abroad was always something that he wanted for her to do during college. He said, "We definitely wanted her to do it. The assumption now I think is that everybody can and should take advantage of study abroad, it seems like every college has all sorts of opportunities now." He agrees that he had little input in the specific program choice. After she was accepted however, he said, "I was very heavily involved. Not as much for Italy since it was shorter, and she would stay right around her town during the program. I did most of the flight setting up. The year-long one was very complicated and took a lot of pre-work because some of the visa requirements were quite complicated and you had to go to the embassy. There were a lot of Chinese forms you had to fill out and different fees and difference

exchange rates. So those two were complicated and I did a lot.” Concerns for him were limited to general health and safety, and were mainly focused on her semester in Hong Kong. Her parents were not worried at all about European countries, but were much more concerned about Asia in general, and specifically any side trips she might take outside of her program location. He says their concerns were extremely location specific, and he wouldn’t have been concerned at all if she was traveling in Europe. He said, “Once she got settled into her home base in each place, we usually were fine and didn’t worry about it too much. We would communicate once a week or every few days. Mostly it was the side trips that were of most concern. She was going to weird places and proposed to go even to stranger places. My wife is a doctor and she would always be concerned about medical issues and what kind of diseases or mosquitos, etc. that were there.” A safety scare happened on her spring break, which reinforced their nervousness about her program location. Her dad says, “One of the most concerning was that she was going to go to Nepal and she flew in the day that the earthquake happened. She was actually in an airport in Western China and they stopped the flight. She was flying into directly where the earthquake happened so that had us rattled.” This did have an effect on communication, as they wanted to check in with her more with her while she was in Asia. He said, “We always wanted to make sure she touches base with us and keeps us apprised of her plans. At least we know the hostel she’s tentatively staying in and who she is with. Just keeping tabs on where she was and who she was with.”

## **Discussion**

Although this study was exploratory, several patterns emerged that I thought could be representative of a great population, and explored for further research. Almost all students and parents indicated they communicated differently while they were abroad, compared to their home campus. An indication of this was the increased use of video messaging, as opposed to texting at home. The content of conversations also changed, including more focus on how students were emotionally adjusting, their financial situations, and general concerns about health and safety while abroad.

### **Communication Patterns**

The majority of parents and students concluded that their communication patterns did shift while they were away, but in different ways (Please see Appendix B, C, D, and E, etc. for survey results on frequency and methods of communication). A minority of students and parents said that aside from the time difference and the content of their conversations, communication (style and frequency) was very much the same than when their student was on their home campus. The rest of the parents were pretty evenly split between a marked increase or decrease in communication frequency. One student was studying in a location with less reliable internet, so the initial expectation was set between him and his parents that communication would be less frequent (every few weeks). He noted this was the main reason he didn't contact them more often, and stated if he had reliable internet, he would probably have contacted them once a week.

All parents unanimously agreed that texting was the most common form of communication while their students were on their home campus (interestingly, their students were split between phone calls and texting as the most common form), and in interviews parents

noted that they were less likely to have brief interactions like those that happen over text and more likely to have more meaningful conversations and video calls while their students were abroad. When asked about the amount of contact they had with their students, two parents independently said the exact same phrase, which was also reflected in similar terms by other parents, “We’re parents, so you know, you always wish you had a little more contact.” However, most were satisfied with the level of contact they did have, and some mentioned that they didn’t want to have too much contact in case it interfered with the experience their student was having abroad.

### **Increase in Video Messaging Abroad**

As previously mentioned, the most common form of communication between students and parents on their home campus was a phone call or text, with Skype or Facetime rarely being used. Once students were abroad, messaging apps like WhatsApp or iMessage or a video chat service like FaceTime or Skype became the most common forms of communication. While this shift can be expected, since students and parents are presumably not seeing each other in person as much while abroad, during interviews it was noted that some parents didn’t see their student very often even on their home campus, especially if they were at a college away from hometown. So while students and parents may see each other once or twice a semester more than while abroad, there is not that substantial of a difference in the frequency of face-to-face communication at home versus abroad. Since the same communication tools are available both at home and abroad, I was curious why parents were not using video chat services more at home, since they expressed an extremely positive reaction to using video messaging. I think this may be due in part to the increased physical distance between parent and student, which is perceived as a greater emotional separation, resulting in the desire for more intimate contact (like being able to

see them) although the realities of their communication patterns may (or could) have stayed the same. One parent noted about communication abroad, “We did text which we normally do. He skyped and we loved that. We hadn’t done that since his freshman year, we only did that a couple times his first semester. We loved seeing him and where he was” (Parent 5, personal communication, March 23, 2016). I think this quote is very representative of the desired shift to video messaging for most parents. When parents haven’t been to the place where their students are, they have a greater desire to see it in person. On campus, parents most likely have visited or seen their student’s living arrangements so are less curious about what the surroundings look like. Two students also noted that it was a little anxiety inducing to be so physically far away from their parents even though they were also living apart from their parents at home. One student stated, “Going from a couple hour drive away to a whole ocean away was kind of something that made us both a little bit nervous” (Student 5, personal communication, March 22, 2016).

### **Active v. Passive Contact**

During one of my first interviews, a parent mentioned that they used social media as a way to check in on their student without having to directly communicate with them. I incorporated this into all of my future interviews, and the feedback was incredibly consistent, which has led me on an interesting path exploring the differences in communication habits between “passive contact” and “active contact.” Active contact involves parents directly communicating with their student through phone calls, texts, video chat, or other ways in which they are mutually connecting. Passive contact happens from observation of third-party information, including social media to “monitor” or “check in” with the other’s behavior. In the

context of study abroad, this primarily is a one-way relationship, with the parent checking in on a student. That is to say, it's much rarer for the student to be the one passively contacting the parent.

You are most likely already familiar with this concept, even if you are unaware of it. Many people who have friends or family who have traveled via air most likely participated themselves, by tracking a flight online to make sure that it arrived in its destination and wasn't delayed or cancelled. You are passively monitoring their experience without making direct contact. Other ways of passive contact include being friends and watching feeds on Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat (or other forms of social media) or following a blog.

By seeing their student's liking other people's photos, updating their status, or being tagged in other's pictures, parents can get the information they want about their student's wellbeing and enable them to stay connected to their student without needing to directly contact them via text, Skype, email, or call. This observation was reiterated by every parent who had social media (as some did not). One parent said, "It feels good, you feel closer because you know what's going on. I know that her friend is there that week, or whatever it may be, and that she is having a good time" (Parent 3, personal communication, March 23, 2016). One student said his parent created an Instagram account just to follow him for this semester abroad as a way to keep in contact and see his posted pictures. One student commented on this contact, noting that their parent would bring up things they would see on social media the next time they did have active contact. She said, "One time I was tagged in a picture at a famous park he had been to before, and a few days later when we were talking he said- Oh, I'm so jealous you went there, I love that park!" (Student 3, personal communication, March 22, 2016).

Another student said that with his permission, his parents activated the “Find My Friends” app on his iPhone, which acts as a location tracker, so they could observe where he may be traveling or doing while abroad. He commented that they said it was nice for them to be out to dinner with friends and when asked where he was that weekend, they could check and talk about which country he was in, or what he may be doing or seeing without actually contacting him and potentially interrupting his experience. Another form of passive contact mentioned by two pairs was reviewing or monitoring credit or debit card statements. One student used a credit card that was a joint account with his parents, who could and did observe his flight plans and hotel reservations to monitor his location or planned trips, and his general spending habits. Although no parents mentioned it specifically, I can see this extending to observations of splitting/sharing costs with their friends on money-sharing apps with public feeds, like Venmo.

Several parents noted that they are already in the habit of passive contact from their student being away at college so it was a natural progression to continue to be involved virtually while they were away. Some noted an increase in how often they were checking their feeds on social media. One parent noted, “I looked at Facebook a lot because I knew that if he was at least liking things that were coming across my feed, he was doing ok” (Parent 5, personal communication, March 23, 2016). Parents and students both noted that sometimes a large factor in the decision to get on social media is to follow their students, and not to post anything themselves. This seems to be particularly true with SnapChat, as none of the parents noted having posted anything themselves, but those who were on it were able to look at their student’s Stories to get an update on their day.

**Finances**

60% of students said that their parents or other family members were paying for all of their tuition, and the remaining 40% stated that scholarships, grants, loans, and their own resources were paying for all of their tuition. However, all but one student noted that their parents were financially supporting them outside of their tuition. The student who was not supported by her family (at least while abroad) noted that on her study abroad program, there was a marked difference between the students who were and were not self-financing. Students who did not self-finance were much more hesitant in making decisions about travel plans or committing to plans that cost money while those self-financing were more immediately decisive and didn't feel the need to consult with anyone before making their decision.

**Concerns**

I asked students what their biggest concern was before the program and what they thought their parents' biggest concerns were. There were fairly diverse answers ranging from their ability to either speak or learn the local language, their living situation, especially if they had a homestay family, and general anxiety about the newness of the experience, similar to how they felt before they left for college. When asked what students thought their parent's biggest concerns were, they unanimously cited personal safety.

I asked parents what their biggest concerns were and all cited personal safety or health-related safety as their first or second concern. Two parents mentioned budgeting or financial management as one of their top concerns. Secondarily, parents mentioned living situations, personal comfort, general social happiness, and academics as other topics they may have worried or thought about before their students left.

### **Practical Applicability**

This research can be used to better inform study abroad advisors and organizations to connect more deeply with parents and alleviate concerns. This research certainly confirmed a reality that study abroad offices currently face, as the threat of global terrorism is becoming an anticipated point of the study abroad discussion. While no one can guarantee safety, without supportive parents encouraging their students to study abroad, there may be a decline in study abroad growth as terrorism continues to be a more widely perceived threat to US parents.

Two parents mentioned a parent-directed study abroad orientation that they attended and found very helpful. All communication that was directed to parents was appreciated, and the biggest negative feedback from parents was the lack of direct outreach their home schools or study abroad organizations. In short, there were no complaints about too much information and some regarding too little information. Study abroad administrators have the expectation that students will communicate the appropriate information to their parents, and encourage them to reach out if they have questions, so this point can be reinforced during student orientations. Additionally, this indicates there should be a more involved discussion with parents directly, and with students about what they are responsible for communicating with their parents. For schools or organizations that either do not agree with increased parent contact or do not have the resources to implement it, they can highlight to students the information that is of more interest to their parents (health and safety concerns, insurance, financial and budgeting information). Additionally, they can work with students to give them the tools to initiate these conversations with their parents.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This topic can be expanded in so many ways, as this study only scratched the surface of data that could be available to pursue this specific research question more thoroughly. Additionally, all of my students and parents ultimately described their relationship as supportive. This result is somewhat self-selecting, as the students who agreed to participate would be comfortable enough with their parents to give them my contact information, and would probably not have been so willing if their parent was not supportive. So, interviewing students who had the opportunity to study abroad but chose not to, in order to explore if their parents had any impact on that decision would present another aspect to this question that may be even more enlightening about how to target both those students and parents.

I also think the topic of active v. passive contact can be specifically explored, and how the impact of social media affects the likelihood of someone to receive support from their parents to study abroad in general as well as how the specific ways that they choose to communicate affect their frequency of communication.

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Appendix A  
Interview Questions- Students

- 1) Tell me about your parent's involvement in your decision to study abroad and specifically, your program decision. How much influence did your parent have over your decision to study abroad?
- 2) What was your parent's involvement after you decided on a program, but before you left to study abroad?
- 3) What was your parent's involvement like after you arrived on-site? Did your parent's involvement change over time: pre-departure v. on the site?
- 4) What were your biggest concerns before the program began? What do you think your parent's biggest concerns were?
- 5) How would you describe your relationship with your parent related to study abroad focused choices or preparations?

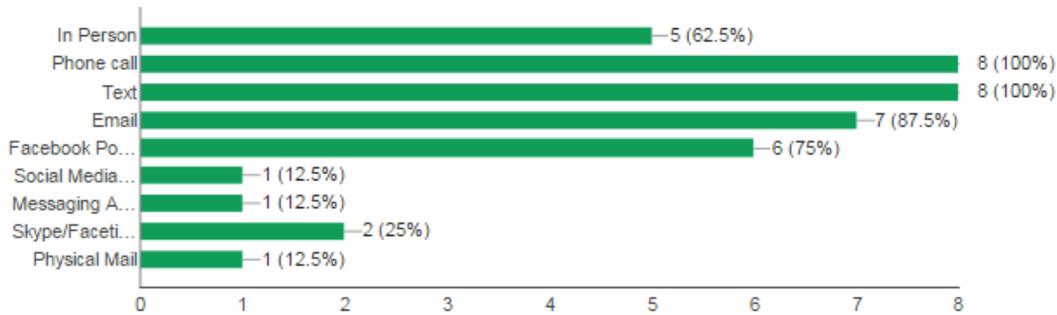
Interview Questions- Parents

- 1) Tell me about your involvement in your student's program decision. How much influence did you have on your student's decision to study abroad? Program choice?
- 2) What is your involvement after your student decided on a program, but before they left to study abroad?
- 3) What were your biggest concerns before the program began? Did your concerns evolve as the program began/continued?
- 4) How would you describe your student's level of dependence on you for study abroad related choices or preparations?

Appendix B

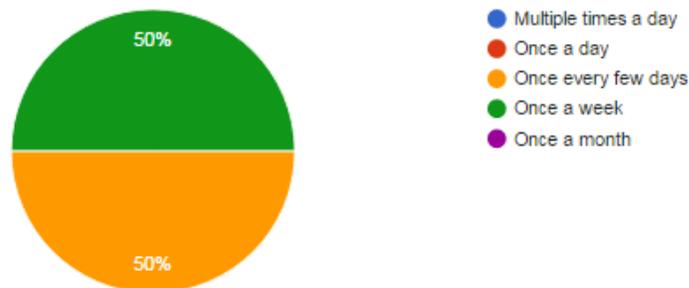
In what ways did you communicate with your student when they are on their home campus (select all that apply)?

(8 responses)



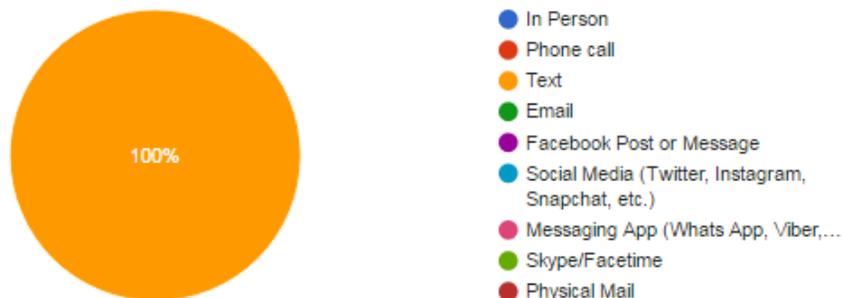
How often did you communicate with your student during a semester on their home campus?

(8 responses)



What is the most common form of communication with your student while on their home campus (select one)?

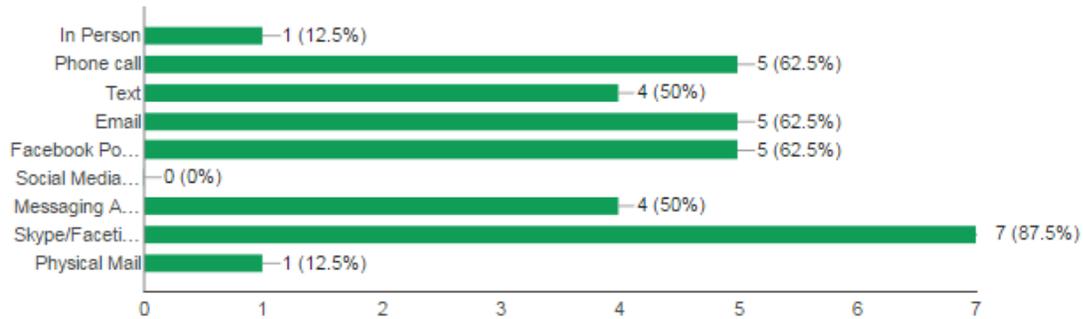
(8 responses)



Appendix C

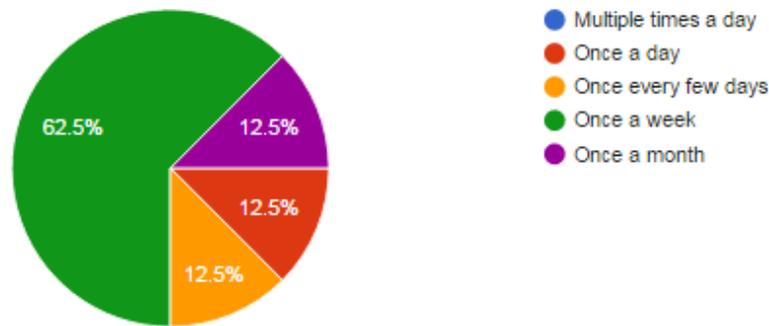
While they were studying abroad, in what ways did you communicate with your student (select all that apply)?

(8 responses)



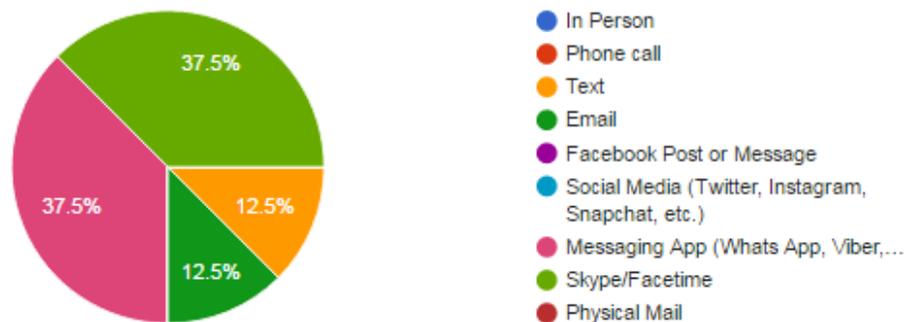
How often did you communicate with your student during their time abroad?

(8 responses)



What was the most common form of communication with your student while abroad (select one)?

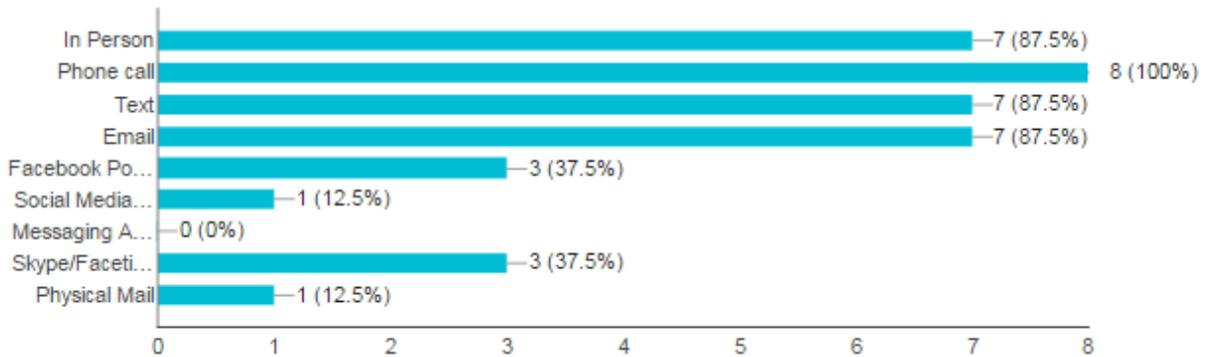
(8 responses)



Appendix D

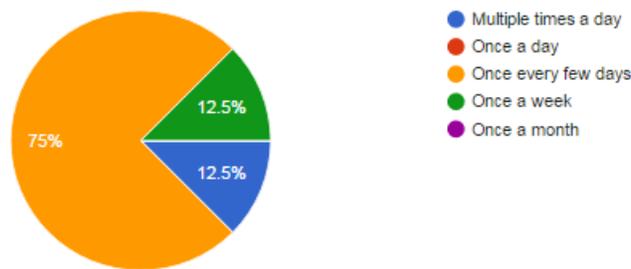
Before you studied abroad, in what ways did you communicate with your parent when you were on your home campus (select all that apply)?

(8 responses)



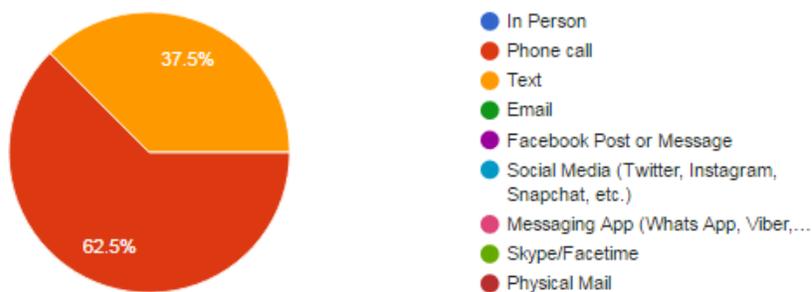
How often did you communicate with your parent during a semester on your home campus?

(8 responses)



Before studying abroad, what was the most common form of communication with your parent while on your home campus (select one)?

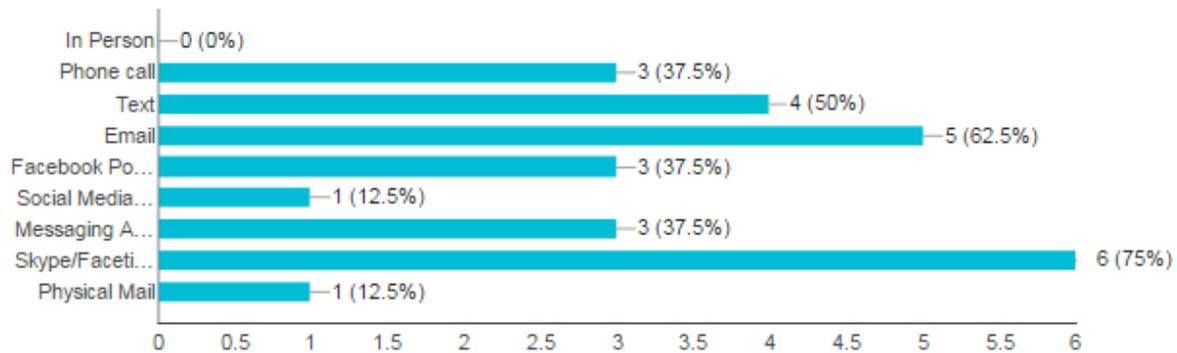
(8 responses)



Appendix E

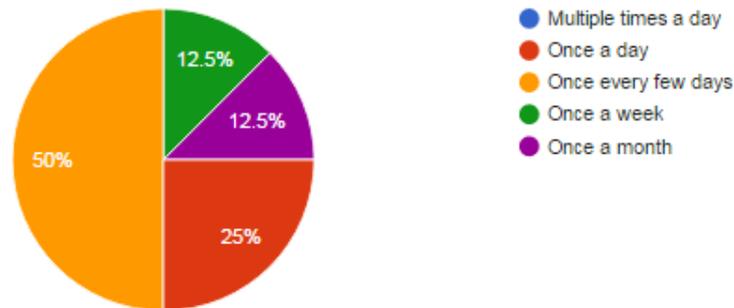
While studying abroad, in what ways did you communicate with your parent (select all that apply)?

(8 responses)



How often did you communicate with your parent during your time abroad?

(8 responses)



What was the most common form of communication with your parent while abroad (select one)?

(8 responses)

