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ARE THEY MATCHING UP?
AN ANALYSIS OF STUDY ABROAD OUTCOMES AND THE VOCATIONAL NEEDS OF
A SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN AREA

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PIM 74

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in
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ABSTRACT

With an increased amount of people seeking higher education, it has become vital to connect education to career in American colleges and universities. To better understand the value of education abroad, international educators must make this connection clear. This research examines student outcomes from Maryville College's (MC) study abroad programs and compares them with human resource needs, with special attention given to the local job market in the surrounding area. Many MC students are from East Tennessee and place a lot of value on their local community, culture, and economy. A case study approach was used to gather data from MC study abroad returnees, local HR professionals, and national sources to understand where student outcomes are or are not lining up with vocation-based competencies. 30 students were surveyed, of whom 13 were later interviewed to increase understanding of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) they gained from their study abroad experiences. Six local employers were interviewed, each from a different sector of the economy, and were asked what KSAs they look for when hiring new employees. Job outlook data for 2016 was used from National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). Significant and minor themes were determined through coding from the three groups. These themes were then compared to determine where there is cross over. There are some similarities between the desired KSAs from employers and the conveyed KSA outcomes from students. But in general, competencies that students gained differ from employer needs. However, with slight alterations, several of the student outcomes could be applied for vocational purposes. In short, there is an opportunity for MC students to use study abroad as a way to gain KSAs needed for career purposes. Four steps are suggested for MC to begin creating stronger connections between study abroad programming and career preparation. They include: (1) The MC International Programming Committee to embed career-based learning outcomes in general study abroad programming goals. (2) The MC Center for International Education (CIE) to begin altering programming components to meet IPC goals. (3) CIE to alter messaging to prospective students to convey career-related tactics. (4) To continue researching this topic with a focus on how students develop certain competencies while abroad.

<u>Introduction and Background</u>

There is an increasing demand for higher education in the United States by individuals who want to have a better chance of finding secure, high-paying, and fulfilling employment. "Between 2002 and 2012, undergraduate enrollment rose 24 percent overall, from 14.3 million to 17.7 million…" (NCES).

When talking with Maryville College (MC) students, they indicate wanting a holistic education, with vocational benefits being somewhat implicit. Many current students can answer why they chose MC, but few can articulate why they chose to earn an undergraduate degree in general. Several simply see it as a next step after receiving their high school diploma. However, their parents encourage them to earn a degree with the hopes of solid employment on the other end.

Throughout my one-year internship at Maryville College's Center for International Education (CIE), where I serve as the International Programs Coordinator, I interact with students on a regular basis. I serve primarily in a support role for international student and study abroad programs. One of my main projects is to oversee study abroad marketing and outreach activities. I have come to realize that CIE recruits a typical demographic of study abroad students similar to other institutions across the country, including women, Caucasians, and students from middle to upper class. Currently, about 25% of the student body studies abroad by the time they graduate. This includes travel-study (short-term programs between 10 to 22 days), summer (3 weeks to 3 months), and semester/year-long programs. However, there is still a large percentage of the student population that chooses not to study abroad.

Through anecdotal evidence collected during class presentations, tabling events, and various conversations, I have realized that of the large portion of the student body who express

interest still do not take the steps to study abroad. They seem to think it would be a nice opportunity, but do not see its direct connection to their overall education at MC. Frankly, I sometimes have a hard time drawing clear connections between a study abroad experience and its vocational benefits.

Students, staff, and faculty of MC state that East Tennessee has little cultural diversity and little interest in cultural exploration. Maryville College is located on the western foothills of the Smoky Mountains in where many of our students were born and raised from families that have been in the region for generations. With such a strong emphasis on being local, many do not pay significant attention to international people and ideas, making it that much more challenging to articulate the value of international experiences and cross-cultural understanding. That said, there is a population craving an education that can help give them the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) they need to obtain strong employment, and that relates to their local lives and culture.

MC has recently launched a large, new program called *MC Works*, which cuts across all four years a student is at the college. It takes students through various stages by exploring, practicing, and refining what they need in order to be vocationally prepared. These activities occur in classes, through a practical experience requirement (study abroad can qualify), extra curricular activities, and in collaboration with the MC Career Center. Keeping in mind the student population that I serve and the focus of my role in study abroad recruitment, I thought it would be interesting and valuable to better understand study abroad's vocational applicability.

Additionally, MC has an International Programming Committee (IPC) made up of four faculty members, the CIE director, two students, and myself. We examine the overall internationalization of MC, with a significant focus on study abroad programs. A major next

step, as articulated by the committee chair and CIE director, is to develop program goals for both independent study abroad programs and faculty-led courses. Considering the career-oriented focus of MC, it would be advantageous for the IPC to incorporate vocational goals as they begin this new task.

Focus

Considering the needs and perspectives of MC students, next steps for the IPC, and institutional career goals, I decided to do a research project that would benefit all three. I set out to better understand the cross-section of MC study abroad student outcomes and the human resources needs of the local community. In addition, I decided to also consider national employer needs since not all MC students are interested in remaining in the region.

My main inquiry question is: **how do the study abroad outcomes articulated by MC returnees compare with the perceived human resource needs of both local and national employers?** This research will help us to better understand what study abroad students gained from their international experience, and tell MC what local and national employers want from recent graduates.

I anticipate this information will help in the following ways: (1) it will guide the IPC to set program goals that have vocational benefits, (2) based on these goals, the CIE will be better able to instigate programmatic changes to help students realize career-focused outcomes, and (3) the CIE will be better able to articulate the career preparation benefits of study abroad to prospective students through demonstration of program activities.

Literature Review

In recent years, connecting education to career has been a hot topic across colleges and universities. In order for many students and parents to understand the value of education abroad,

practitioners must work to make this connection explicit. Related literature discusses the lessons students gain from international experiences, its vocational relevancy, student descriptions of experiences, best practices for study abroad programs, and gaps in research.

Student Gains

Many articles indicate that students walk away from their international experiences with a variety of outcomes. Current literature indicates that students completing study abroad programs often gain improved global competency and awareness (Rubin & Matthews, 2013, p. 72), meaning, they improve understanding of how to navigate international systems and practices than prior to their international experience. Additionally, many students leave with an improved knowledge of the local culture(s) in which they studied (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014, p. 78). This can be helpful vocationally when an organization works with or in a specific country or region.

Students tend to gain new abilities from studying abroad. Repeatedly, research indicates that intercultural sensitivity develops during students' international experiences as they are directly faced with new perspectives and must work to understand them and how they plan to interact (Rubin & Matthews, 2013, p. 72). This process allows students to be aware of people who are culturally different from them and to become more sensitive to such differences. Improved communication skills are one of the most frequently mentioned abilities that students hone as they study abroad (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015, p. 42). This includes, but is not limited to, foreign language abilities (Mohajeri Norris & Steinber, 2008). Many students do not study and/or engage in the local language, if different from their native language, when they study abroad. However, practitioners still see improved cross cultural communication from returnees.

Although not as frequently mentioned, research indicates that students develop abilities to better process ethical and moral issues (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015, p. 42), and improve critical thinking skills (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014, p. 81). Again, this stems from students facing real life situations where their values are being questioned and they must decide how to respond. Additionally, their abilities to be more self-reliant develop in situations where no one is telling them what to think or how to behave.

A very common area of growth for study abroad students is in the way they view the world both inwardly and outwardly. While studying abroad, individuals generally develop global mindsets by befriending others from around the world (Peppas, 2005, p. 143). As students go through the process of not understanding local cultures and customs, they cultivate a tolerance for ambiguity (Mohajeri Norris & Steinber, 2008, p. 122). Research demonstrates that many students improve their academic performance and place more value on their education, both during and after their study abroad experience (Mohajeri Norris & Steinber, 2008, p. 121). Although the way students interact with the world changes as a result of studying abroad, they also tend to alter personally. Evidence shows that those who study abroad walk away with improved self-concept and self-confidence in addition to an increased level of maturity (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014, p. 80). Lastly, returnees' senses of empathy are often awakened through studying abroad (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014, p. 81).

Employment relevancy

Overall, much of the literature indicates that study abroad is an opportunity to learn valuable professional skills. In the article titled, *The Impact of Study Abroad on Business Students' Career Goals*, the authors discuss qualities that global company employers look for in job applicants.

"… [R]esearch among employers found three main selection criteria for global companies. The first criteria is intellectual ability, which includes the ability to be a fast learner, to analyze data quickly, make objective decisions, and the ability to make broader connections between an issue and its application. Motivation is the second criteria, which is evaluated in terms of the candidate's achievements and enthusiasm. Interpersonal skills, defined by Murray (1999) as open-mindedness to, and respect for, other cultures, are the third criteria that global companies seek in employment candidates." (Orahood, Kruze, & Pearson, 2004, p. 120)

Many writers indicate that students who study abroad can develop and demonstrate desired knowledge, skills, and attitudes as a result of an overseas program.

Student descriptions

A great deal of the current research focuses on how students describe the impact of their education abroad experience on themselves and on their career. Franklin's 2010 study on long-term impacts discusses how a student's type of involvement does or does not influence their future career choices. For instance, through study abroad alumni reports, those who engaged in language study or who lived with a host family were more likely to later on have international components in their jobs. Alternatively, a study by Miller-Perrin and Thompson states that students indicate a significant impact on their identity because of their education abroad programs (2010). Orahood, Woolfe, and Kruz's researched career routes of business students looking "to determine the impact of international experience on alumni's career paths." (p. 135) Their findings were then compared with students who did not study abroad. Ultimately, they found there was not a strong correlation, but that study abroad alumni did indicate the experience had significant personal impacts. Lastly, in Potts' study examining early careers of alumni, participants indicated that their overseas educational experience(s) did impact their employability and gave them further drive for their chosen profession (2015, p. 441).

Best practices and application

Current literature offers suggestions and concepts for education abroad professionals to consider when working to connect student overseas experiences to intended careers. As previously indicated, my research examines student outcomes and compares them with employer needs. Some of the literature, although not explicitly related to vocation, examines student outcomes. This is relevant because I seek to understand how student outcomes do and do not line up with vocational preparation, which could inform MC of what competencies participants gain as well as areas for growth in study abroad programming. This section includes outside research that is explicitly connected to career and study abroad, along with other sources which solely discuss student outcomes. Some of it provides concrete programs and/or steps for implementation. Other research discusses concepts to keep in mind when creating programs and setting goals. All of which could be directly related to the application of this paper's research.

Much of the literature discusses how study abroad does provide very powerful growing opportunities for students. However, upon return, students often do not successfully articulate what they learned and how it will help the organizations for which they want to work.

> "Despite improvement in design and administration of study abroad programs, support from offices of career services on some campuses, and increased attention to skill sets and competencies which employers value in talent searches, our students struggle to articulate how their study abroad experiences prepare them for the global workforce." (NAFSA, 2013, p.2)

Rubin and Matthew's article examines successful international service-learning programs. They indicate five practices that ensure solid programming evaluation, which can be transferrable to general education abroad. For instance, it encourages practitioners to begin with identifying desired outcomes, employing multiple outside sources, taking a different look at under-represented groups, and examining causal relationships. Such practices could help guide MC as it tries to create and evaluate study abroad programs, with special attention to its impact

on student career development. The authors state:

> "(1) focus on outcomes about learning; (2) employ multiple sources and methods for data collection; (3) invest in compiling credible comparison groups to build the case for a causal relationship between international service-learning and learning; (4) acquire data from multiple and diverse institutions and programs to better generalize and also to warrant conclusions about best program practices; and (5) acquire data from large samples of program participants to provide insights into under-represented groups and program sites." (2013, p. 62)

Miller-Perrin and Thompson's *Outcomes of Global Education: External and Internal Change Associated with Study Abroad* offers three key suggestions to strengthen intercultural and study abroad outcomes. (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014, p. 86) The first states that students ought to seek out opportunities for exposure to diversity, both at their home campus and while abroad. College personnel can aid in this area by offering and/or collaborating on diversity programming and then encourage students to attend and contribute. The second suggestion discusses the importance of mentorship while one is engaging in cross-cultural experiences and learning. Students require support as they face new circumstances in order to have stability to grow. The last relevant recommendation states that "institutions should encourage students to geographically and culturally leave their comfort zones in order to experience the deepest and most powerful internal and external change." (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014, p. 86) By applying these suggestions, MC could be better able to cultivate intercultural understanding and strong learnings from study abroad.

Poole and Davis' article describes the concept mapping tactics used to assess learning outcomes from a short-term program to Mexico focusing on social work practices for both undergraduate and graduate students (2006). Before students are given the course syllabus, they brainstorm major learning objectives of the program. These are then compared with the course

syllabus. Once the program is complete, students go back to review where they were intellectually and personally before traveling to Mexico, and determine how they would then rank the learning objectives. This helps students and instructors be able to evaluate the depth and breadth of student learning and understand how students met course objectives.

Additionally, several articles stress the importance for education abroad offices to collaborate with career services offices in order to provide students with a well-rounded understanding of their experience's vocational applicability. For instance, Ashwill discusses the value of directly informing students of the most common and valuable learnings from study abroad so that they can work to better create their messaging to employers (p. 12). Additionally, he states that having a list of study abroad alumni would be useful for students before departing in order to network and better understand how their experience will be beneficial in the work world (p. 12). These tactics could be housed in either office, but both need to be involved in order to make sure they are implemented.

Hannigan discusses the opportunity for students to engage in career-related experiences while abroad (p. 13). The author also states overseas practical experience is a great opportunity for students, but requires collaboration between study abroad and career services. In the article by Matherly and Nolting, strategies for how students can directly apply and/or gain better vocational understanding during study abroad are discussed, such as connecting with alumni in the area, asking host families about the local economy, keeping eyes out for information about local jobs, gathering materials from local graduate institutions, and asking how others got their international jobs (2007, p. 39).

Johnson's article about the University of Minnesota's career network offers four key concepts for international educators to keep in mind when connecting study abroad and career.

These include: (1) "Experiential components of a student's college experience are most effective when they are valued as part of the student's education," (2) "Student development is a continuous process, and many of the tools and theories that assist students in developing career skills and interests can be useful in assisting with program selection and engagement." (3) "Students, and education abroad professionals for that matter, cannot assume that employers, graduate committees, etc., inherently accept the value of an experience abroad." (4) "Education abroad professionals cannot assume colleagues in career offices are familiar and comfortable with the international dimensions of experiential programs or the specific cross-cultural competencies gained from a program abroad." (p. 21-22)

Lastly, the following four articles propose specific implementation strategies to help students understand and improve their career learnings. The first is a plan published by NAFSA offering questions and assignments for students at every point in the process to be better equipped to use their study abroad experience for vocational purposes (NAFSA, 2013). Secondly, CERI published an article documenting the need for expanded programming to provide students with resources to articulate their overseas study to employers. The article provides an overview of a workshop and typical student outcomes (Gross & Steglitz, 2008). The third resource comes from Nussbaum, articulating the Global Proficiency program at Boston College, which provides students with a certificate upon completion. It is a tool for demonstrating a student's global proficiency, not only through coursework, but also study abroad, co-curricular activities, and a culminating project (p. 23). This program applies to vocational preparation as it allows students the chance to reflect on the international components of their education and practice conveying what they have learned. Lastly, I reviewed O'Banion's model for academic advising, which was developed in the 1970s. The original model is a five

step linear program that takes students throughout the academic advising process. It includes exploring life goals, exploring vocational goals, exploring program choices, exploring course options, and finally scheduling possibilities. Since its origination, it has been altered by other theorists. Burton and Wellington provide an "integrative approach" to this long-standing model. They maintain the same steps, but change the process to be more flexible and circular to fit the needs of individual students (1998). Jendraszak discusses how the theory is applicable to the study abroad advising process. Specifically looking at the vocational step, she indicates at this point the adviser asks about the student's career goals and major, then move into how study abroad will help that person towards such goals (2007).

Gaps in literature

The article titled *Study Abroad Outcomes* discusses some of the weaknesses of current literature (Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, & Klute, 2012). Most significantly it indicates that most articles only examine a small group of students at a specific school, thus not drawing a picture of the entire United States (p. 90). Furthermore, much of the literature does not compare students who have studied abroad with those who have not (Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, Klute, 2012, p. 91). Therefore, it is uncertain whether claimed outcomes could also be achieved at one's home campus. This is an important point because one key reason for practitioners to examine how programs relate to career is to validate the benefits of study abroad to students, parents, administration, and the community at large.

Miller-Perrin and Thompson's article, which discusses frequent changes seen in study abroad students, indicates that there is room in the field for more research about why these changes take place (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014, p. 86). Understanding this is key in being able to include programming components that encourage intended student outcomes.

My research collects data from MC returnees, local employers, and national employer trends. The literature reviewed above relates to this paper since it discusses many of the same program outcomes and vocational qualities that MC students articulate. In addition, it is a good starting point for national data regarding employers' expectations and desires from the recent graduate workforce. Having access to an overview of current literature provides a solid foundation on which to better situate this study. Many of the best practices can be analyzed and transferred to MC study abroad programming based on student needs found in the following research.

<u>Research Design</u>

This research examines the conveyed needs of employers in the Maryville, TN area, employee candidate attributes desired on a national scale, and the program outcomes as articulated by Maryville College students who have already studied abroad. Local employers were from a variety of industries. National data was taken from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) as suggested by the Maryville College Career Center. Students were those who have completed an MC-approved study abroad program, not including international sport or music competitions.

I used a case study approach which is generally used in circumstances where the researcher is looking to gain an understanding of how a specific topic is featured within a given context with clear boundaries.

> "Choose a case study to examine a 'case,' bounded in a time or place, and look for contextual material about the setting of the 'case.' Gather extensive material from multiple sources of information to provide an in-depth picture of the 'case.'" (Creswell, 1998, p. 40)

Data Collection Methodology

Before

Prior to gathering data, I had already established relationships with a fair number of returnees as I worked with them through the Study Abroad Ambassadors program, which is a collection of returnees who are interested in helping the CIE with outreach and marketing efforts. Additionally, I served as the program assistant for a short-term study abroad program in January 2016, during which I developed relationships with the ten students in that course. As I was developing my plan for my capstone project, I had mentioned to several students that I would likely be sending them requests to do surveys and/or interviews in the near future.

Before contacting local employers to set up interviews, I reached out to the MC Career Center for suggested local employers to contact. The director suggested I come to networking mixers held by the college for MC students to meet local employers, of which she suggested a handful with whom to speak. I attended two mixers and made contacts with six companies/organizations that operate locally. I told them who I was, how I was affiliated with the school, and the focus of my research.

During

My intention in collecting data from MC study abroad returnees was to gain an understanding of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they took from their experiences abroad and better understand how it relates to local and national employment needs. In order to achieve this, I created and sent out a survey to all returnees who are currently enrolled at MC. I received 30 voluntarily completed surveys. My final question asked if they would be willing to do a follow up interview. From that 30, I selected 13 students to do interviews that ranged across a variety of programs in order to have a strong sampling. Interviews lasted anywhere from 20 to

45 minutes. I allowed students to choose a time and location; all chose to do their interview in the International House, the administrative building for the Center for International Education. Of the 30 surveyed students, 8 completed only a semester or year-long study abroad program, three completed only a summer program, 16 completed only short-term programs, and three completed both a short-term and a long-term program. In the following section displaying the data, the three summer students and the three overlap students were counted in the long-term group. (See Appendix A for chart of long-term and short-term student numbers)

I initially intended to hold a group discussion with returnees as a part of a workshop helping students connect their study abroad experiences to their job search. However, because of other CIE priorities, it was not feasible to hold this session until later in the semester. I originally planned to do ten student interviews, but increased the amount to 13 in order to make up for the data collection from the group conversation.

After making contacts at the networking mixers, I contacted the six employers, all of whom have a significant hiring responsibility with their organization; the majority are in human resources roles. To conduct interviews, I met with one in a restaurant, one on the MC campus during an event, and the other four at their work sites. Interviews lasted between 25 and 50 minutes.

To gather national data, NACE offers a list of "attributes" that employers are looking for national-wide and ranks them by the percentage of employers who mentioned their significance. This does not provide as nearly an in-depth understanding as the local data, however, it does indicate similar kinds of information and provides an opportunity to compare with local data. (see Appendix B)

Surveys were produced and collected through my personal Google account. Interviews were recorded using a Voice Memos app on my iPhone while I took either hand-written or typed notes during the sessions. Overall, I collected data through 30 student surveys, 13 student interviews, 6 local employer interviews, and a comprehensive online source.

After

I later re-listened to the recordings and transcribed student and employer interviews. I printed the interview transcriptions and performed open coding to begin deciphering key elements. I then imported that information onto a spreadsheet in columns representing the questions and types of information gathered. This made the process much easier to compare data across different interviewees in order to determine commonalities, after which, I determined significant and minor themes. I then created another spreadsheet where I imported the themes, and finally tallied them up to determine which ones were most significant. During this process, I noticed a change in the data. I began with mostly long-term students, then added short-term student data. It became clear that these two groups had different outcomes and levels of significance, so I decided the data should be displayed separately. To further investigate inputs that cause outcomes, I separated data for students depending on their year in college and level of previous international experience. The point of significance is 30% or more, meaning this portion of those interviewed and/or surveyed would need to indicate the theme if it were to be considered significant and represented in the main data collection section.

Precautionary steps

In order not to disclose the identity of any participants, I did the following to protect them. First of all, I fully explained the purpose of the research and that all participation was voluntary. I made all contacts through my Maryville College work email account, which is only

accessible by me and password protected. The surveys were created and housed in my Google account, which is also only accessible by me and is also password protected. All recorded interviews were kept on my iPhone which requires a password to unlock. All interview transcriptions and spreadsheets with data are housed on my personal laptop computer and also saved on my Google Drive account to ensure nothing is erased. Both require a password only known by me. Lastly, I avoid the use of gender pronouns and do not indicate program location, program provider, or any organization name to ensure the protection of participants.

Data collection tools

All returned MC study abroad students who are currently enrolled were sent a survey and had the option to complete it. The survey asks through which program they studied abroad, for how long they were abroad, and their rationale for studying abroad. It asks their major and intended career field in order to get the student thinking about vocational goals. Later, the survey asks what knowledge, skills, and attitudes they took from their experience and how they expect the experience to impact their career. This progression was less about gaining understanding of their chosen field, and more to encourage students to connect the dots from their study abroad experience to their future career.

During the interview, I asked follow up questions depending on the participant's survey thoroughness in order to gain a fuller picture. Additionally, I asked how they went about obtaining the knowledge, skills, and attitudes while studying abroad and how they expect these to impact their careers. I asked them if they had any regrets and if they thought there could have been any programmatic changes. I finished each interview by asking if they had anything else to tell me that they thought was relevant. Through this inquiry, I was able to get a well-rounded image of each student's program outcomes.

Employers did not receive surveys prior to meeting with me. During the interview, I asked what the organization does and how many people work there in order to get a foundational sense of the organization. Then I inquired about background and qualities they look for in candidates. I later asked what knowledge, skills, and attitudes they want when hiring. Finally, I inquired about the importance of international experience and study abroad, both with regard to its impact on getting into the field and moving up the organizational ladder.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

As previously mentioned, this is a triangulated study comparing conveyed local employer needs, national employer needs, and articulated study abroad outcomes from MC returnees. The research primarily focuses on understanding the knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained or needed depending on the participant group.

This section presents gathered data from these three primary groups by breaking them down into two sections: employers and students. In the first section, I demonstrate national and local employer data, then cross-examine the two to see where they compare and contrast. The next section presents student data by categorizing them based on four criteria. Finally, the last portion provides an analysis comparing student outcomes and employer data by breaking them down into knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Presentation of employer data

National employers

Maryville College's Career Center uses national information from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) to better understand employment trends. When talking with them about my research, they gave me information and resources from this organization. I use a list of "attributes" and "influence of attributes." (See Appendix B for full

list) Attributes are competencies that this paper categorizes by KSAs. The top five out of 19 attributes indicated by NACE are: leadership, ability to work in a team, written communication skills, problem solving skills, and verbal communication skills. Influence of attributes are activities, certificates, or involvements that make up a student's experiential background. NACE provides eight total. The top four include: academic major, leadership positions held, involvement with extracurricular activities, and GPA. Fluency in a foreign language and study abroad experience are listed at the bottom.

<u>Local Employers</u>

To give a sense of the breadth of information coming from the employer surveys, I offer a brief breakdown of who was interviewed. Overall, six local organization human resource personnel were interviewed, each organization representing a different sector of the economy. They included:

- A private, nonprofit youth development organization with 40-50 employees
- A private nonprofit science research organization with around 1000 employees
- A private for-profit education company that locally employs 300 people, but 4000 in total
- A private for-profit mortgage company with 900 local employees, and 5000 in total
- A private, for-profit global business consulting company employing 800 people locally, and 360,000 worldwide
- A TN state government organization focusing on education employing 800 to 1000 employees

For a visual chart of the above information, see Appendix C.

Backgrounds of Applicants

With a variety in types and foci of organizations, employers did not indicate many similar preferable candidate backgrounds. However, three employers indicated they are looking for recent graduates who have proven experience with the skills and knowledge used in the position, and four stated that prior experience in the field is important. Ways of proving experience with applicable skills and knowledge vary depending on the issue at hand. Employers suggested the

following avenues: coursework, outside work, internships, on-campus club and organizations, and/or volunteer positions. Experience in the field could be demonstrated through some sort of professional position, whether an internship or work.

> "I think what puts one person ahead of others when looking at resumes is prior experiences…or have they just attended school or have they done something more…internships can go along way whether paid or unpaid, or volunteer experiences."

Knowledge

I defined knowledge as concrete understandings, such as theories, facts, and figures. Again, because of varying types of organizations, there were fewer specific knowledge themes found across employer participants. However, five out of six interviewees indicated they were looking for candidates with proven understanding in relevant content knowledge. This includes technical training if applicable, understanding of organization's context, specific theories, and/or academic major-specific information.

Skills

Employer participants indicated five primary skill sets they look for in new candidates and recent graduates. This category is defined as one's ability to do something. Interpersonal ability was the leading skill articulated by employers, with five out of six indicating its importance. This characteristic indicates someone's ability to effectively and positively interact with other people.

The second most mentioned skill set was problem solving. Four interviewees indicated the need for employees who are capable of finding solutions to issues. Generally, this task involves examining a situation and determining/selecting solutions for an issue.

Three out of six interviewees indicated that the ability to be analytical and the ability to work as a team are important in their line of work. Analyzing was defined by local employers as

going through a process of conceptualizing a situation and making a decision based on available resources. The ability to engage in teamwork was defined by interviewees as being able to constructively share ideas to improve knowledge base for all, to collaborate on projects, and to work with people from multiple cultures and levels of an organization. One interviewee stated the following when asked to describe team work.

> "I think sharing of ideas. I think giving and taking. For example, if you're in a team meeting with 6 (other people), you know it doesn't always have to be their idea they can be receptive to other ideas and work together. The ability to give and take and get along, and ultimately the ability to put that back (into one's work)."

Two employers reported that they look for candidates who have the ability to be flexible. This is defined as to be able to work effectively as changes arise. Employer participants stated that in their line of work, tasks are constantly changing as new needs arise, thus they need employees who are able to absorb change.

Attitudes

Attitudes were defined as awareness, perspectives, feelings, and points of view. There was less consensus about specific attitudes that local employers look for in new candidates. However, all stated that they wanted someone who was passionate. This concept is defined by employer participants as strong excitement/desire for something or for doing something. In some cases, passion for work is not initially important, but passion for something is; to employers this indicates that perhaps that same drive will flow over into work and impact engagement and productivity. In other cases, it is essential that candidates indicate passion for the profession in order to be considered for hire. For instance, when asked what attitudes are needed, one participant stated "wanting to work and to do a good job."

Three of the six interviewees stated that they looked for people who had an ability and drive to help others. Whether with the population that they serve or with their fellow co-workers, the desire to serve other people was positively indicated.

Less significantly, two out of six employers indicated a desire for employees to possess self-confidence, initiative, and have a desire to grow and learn. Self-confidence is demonstrated when one repeatedly believes in their own capabilities, decisions, and personal character. The desire to grow and learn is defined as an interest in expanding one's current abilities and understanding. Initiative is one's desire to take on responsibility without an external force indicating that they should, in short someone who looks for additional ways to make improvements and then spearheads changes. (See Appendix D for chart including all significant local employer themes)

After gaining a sense of the background, knowledge, skills, and attitudes that local employers seek, I asked about the impact and perception of a candidate's international experience. Interviewees emphasized that one's international experience needs to be relevant and articulated as such in order for the organization to place a great deal of value on it. One interviewee stated:

> "Regardless if it's international or not, does the specific experience that they have…relate to what they're interested in pursuing? Or is it just a study abroad experience that's not really relevant to the specifics?"

The majority said that unless the position requires international expertise, they do not actively seek candidates with this background. However, four of the candidates did indicate that they have a need for foreign language skills, particularly Spanish.

I asked all six interviewees what it tells them when they have a candidate with study abroad experience. Three interviewees said it indicates they are adaptable and two stated that it

means they are independent. Otherwise, local employers mentioned a variety of minor themes, including: study abroad students think broadly, are adventurous, can build relationships with different people, and might be able to bring a knowledge base that could help the organization expand. Lastly, I asked if international experience made an impact on one's ability to move up or be promoted. All stated that it had no impact, or only if it is relevant to the new position.

Although this does not fit in any aforementioned category, two employers stated that when selecting a candidate for a position, the process is not always to find the person who had all the qualifications, but to find the person who is the right fit with the organization. Additionally, three interviewees said they are able and willing to train someone in required knowledge and skills if they appear to have the attitude that the organization needs; indicating, for these participants, that the attitude category carries more weight than the other two categories.

Comparison of National and Local Employer Needs

The top five attributes employers are looking for nationally are (1) leadership, (2) teamwork, (3) written communication, (4) problem solving, and (5) verbal communication. There is overlap with the local employers for teamwork, written and verbal communication (See Appendix E for list of minor local employer themes), and problem solving. However, local employers did not indicate they look for candidates with leadership skills.

Additionally, there are four other national attributes that coincide with what local employers stressed as important. The most significant is interpersonal, listed as the number 11 attribute by national employers and indicated by five of the six local employers. In the number eight spot, national employers indicated that they look for employees who are analytical, which three local employers reported as being important when hiring. Initiative was ranked as number seven for national employers, and two local employers mentioned this trait as being desirable.

Lastly, two local employers stated that they are looking for candidates who can demonstrate that they are flexible, which also was on NACE's list as number nine. (See national and local comparison table in Appendix F)

Analysis

When comparing the two sets of employer groups, it was interesting that leadership was not mentioned by any of the local employer participants and that verbal and written communication was only indicated by one local employer. However, local employers did mention wanting employees with interpersonal skills, as well as placing value on them getting along with others; verbal communication plays a role in these competencies. This could be interpreted as overlap, but with local employers seeing communication as a part of developing and maintaining relationships with others.

Servitude was a significant attitude that local employers said they want in their employees. This was not an attribute found on the national NACE list. Initially, I was surprised that half of the local employers indicated wanting employees who are able and willing to help others. However, upon further reflection I realized that hospitality is a very strong value in East Tennessee, so it seems reasonable that it was articulated as such. Throughout my time living in this part of the country, I have come to find that relationships are a very important part of the culture. It makes sense that employers seek candidates willing to serve others, who have strong interpersonal skills, and are able to work well in teams. Depending on the context, the value of one's ability to communicate may be about their effectiveness in relaying information. However, in East Tennessee it may also encompass one's ability to personally connect with people. This could be a part of the reason why the value of a candidate's leadership qualities was not

indicated from any local participant; a person's ability to function well within their work community is more significant than their ability to lead others.

Presentation of Maryville College study abroad returnee data

Originally, my plan was to determine conveyed knowledge, skills, and attitudes of all interviewed and surveyed returnees and express their outcomes together. However, upon reviewing the data, it became apparent that long-term and short-term students had varying outcomes. The following sections are broken into these categories, with KSA outcomes listed for each group. As previously mentioned, I also display the data based on students' year in college and those with previous international experience and those without. Again, an outcome was deemed significant if mentioned by 30 percent of respondents per category. Additionally, I asked student interviewees if they could think of any specific opportunities they had during study abroad to gain the KSAs expressed, as well as missed opportunities to do so.

Long-term study abroad

On average, these students have a more independent experience than travel-study students. They typically expressed more in-depth outcomes ranging across a variety of topics. (See long-term student significant themes in Appendix G)

Knowledge

Similarly to the desired knowledge expressed by employers, there was less consensus among student participants regarding the knowledge they took from studying abroad. In part, this is because of the variety in locations, institution types, and areas of study. I found the only significant knowledge outcome reported by study abroad students were that they learned about components of the local culture.

Through surveys and interviews, students did not often explicitly state that they learned about the local culture of their host country. Instead, they conveyed this by discussing that they gained an understanding for various segments of the society at hand. For instance, a few mentioned learning about the education structure by being immersed and making mistakes along the way. Others indicated that they not only learned about the political system, but developed an understanding for how the system impacted locals and how locals impacted their government. Several mentioned how they learned about social structures by having local friends. Overall, ten of the 14 students indicated learning about local culture. The following quote demonstrates how one student learned about their host country's political system by watching its impact on the population and talking with friends about it.

> "A lot of the young people really hated the monarchs. I'd never experienced anything like that. The idea of a monarch in the US is so weird…it was really cool watching the students talk about it. I had this one friend and if you got him started on the royals, he could go for days."

Skills

Long-term students expressed three highly significant outcomes, including foreign language skills, travel skills, and cross cultural communication skills. Each of these were expressed by ten of the 14 students surveyed and/or interviewed. Seven student indicated their ability to adapt and be flexible increased from studying abroad. The same amount reported an ability to be more self-reliant as a result of having studied abroad.

Of the ten students who gained language skills, four took regular university coursework in the local language (other than English), three completed intensive summer language programs, and three took coursework in English. With programs varying in local language focus, students expressed different levels of foreign language ability by the end of their programs. However, the

majority did gain and/or improve language skills, with an emphasis on speaking and listening. One student participant said the following as they described the change in language skills.

> "So it went from the first few days being very uncomfortable where I didn't want to speak Spanish. I knew the words and I knew the vocabulary but I didn't know how to use it. I would say that's the biggest thing was the conversation. I would say that I did not grow very much at all in my reading or writing while I was there, but it was definitely the listening and speaking skills."

Of the four students who did not express an increase in foreign language skills, two studied abroad in English speaking countries, and the other two studied in countries with a dominant language other than English.

The travel skills that students expressed were generally gained through independent or small group travel during their time abroad. This includes increased abilities in planning and preparing for trips, navigating large cities, and an ability to utilize public transportation.

Cross-cultural communication skills were developed in a variety of ways. For the most part, students expressed that they were better able to approach a conversation with someone in their host country by better understanding key values that the society holds. Additionally, several expressed that this skill had become transferrable when interacting with people from varying backgrounds.

While initially not understanding systems and social interactions, seven students expressed that they were now better able to adapt to new situations when they are less familiar with protocol, thus demonstrating an increase in flexibility/adaptability. When students indicated that their ability to be self-reliant improved, there were two commonalities. They indicated that either their US family included highly involved parents, and/or they were a part of a program where they were given stipends for housing and food.

Attitudes

MC returnees expressed five significant attitude changes resulting from study abroad. Ten stated that their global awareness changed; seven indicated they were more open-minded and self-confident; and five stated that their tolerance for ambiguity and sense of independence expanded.

The most frequently mentioned attitude was global awareness; these students expressed that they developed a worldview or expanded their worldview because of studying abroad. For a few, this meant recognizing that some daily life tasks and views are American and not encompassing of the whole world, while others indicated going through processes of understanding specific global issues through the eyes of their host country. In general, this means that they are more likely to take on or consider an international perspective when analyzing topics. One returnee stated:

> "(Study abroad) expands your education in a way you wouldn't get, I mean you get a great education from MC, they're experts in their field. But it just expands that knowledge to consider other perspectives and possibilities."

Many students stated that a good portion of their friend group while abroad was also international and they thus experienced a variety of ways to do things and think about concepts. Additionally, students expressed being the minority in their host country, which included carrying viewpoints that were often different from locals. By hearing and interacting with varying ways of life and perspectives, students said they became more open minded.

Seven participants stated that living successfully in a country and culture that was unfamiliar to them greatly increased their sense of confidence. In most cases, completing a study abroad term, and typically entering the academic term alone, they came out feeling better-equipped to handle a wider range of challenges.

As students entered situations and systems that did not make sense to them at the time, their tolerance for ambiguity grew. Some reported they now feel more mentally comfortable in situations that initially appear to be uncomfortable.

Lastly, five students indicated that their sense of independence developed as a result of studying abroad. Since all but three of the 14 students went to their host country not knowing anyone, they initially had to become grounded in their new location without direct support. This process made them feel more comfortable with the idea of doing things individually.

Opportunities to gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes and possible areas for improvement

Of the eight long-term students interviewed, four indicated that classroom excursions were a good way to interact with locals and/or apply learning from coursework. This helped them to better understand the local culture, communicate effectively, and increase their global awareness. One student mentioned that as part of their intensive language class, class excursions were a chance to practice speaking with locals as it was required for class participation.

> "We had excursions every three weeks or so…I really liked that because it forced us to explore the city and talk to the locals more."

Three met local professionals in their field of study, helping them to gain a better understanding of the practical applicability of their discipline. Four returnees indicated that the chances they had to travel independently were helpful in their overall learning, specifically increasing their sense of independence, ability to be self reliant, solve problems, and communicate with a variety of people.

Three student interviewees were provided with the chance to have a conversation partner/tutor through their institution and chose to do so. By having this opportunity, they found their language skills improved, they learned more about the local culture, they improved cross-

cultural communication skills, increased their global awareness, and expanded their open mindedness.

In addition to asking students about opportunities they had to gain competencies, I inquired about any opportunities they wish they had taken advantage of while abroad. Most students stated that interacting with locals was extremely beneficial, three indicated that it would have been helpful if they had had more chances to do so. Two reported wishing they had prepared themselves more for life in the local language (other than English). Two stated that they would have liked to have more opportunities to travel while studying abroad. This is relevant because it helps MC to understand how students could gain KSAs when they study abroad. Having this understanding could help guide programming that encourages new students to follow in returnee footsteps and consider opportunities that might be vocationally beneficial.

Short-term study abroad

On the whole, short-term students expressed a wider variety of program outcomes, and thus have fewer key themes for KSAs. Although there is overlap with long-term student data, there is some differentiation. (See short term student significant themes in Appendix H)

Knowledge

Similar to the long-term group, an overwhelming majority (ten out of 16) of students expressed an increase in knowledge about the local culture, typically mentioning exposure to items such as geography, food, dress, and different ethnic groups. One student stated they learned the following about local culture:

> "…the different types of food to the different places, the different laws. The difference in social economic status. I think it's hard to express all the stuff that you learned."

All travel-study programs led by Maryville College faculty have a course topic. Nine students indicated that they learned about the theory and practice of the course content within

their host country. For instance, I helped lead a program on sustainable tourism in Ecuador. Student participants indicated that they learned principles of sustainable tourism and could point out how it plays out in the communities they visited in Ecuador.

Skills

All of the skills that short-term students mentioned overlap with key themes for long-term students. These include: travel skills, adaptability/flexibility, and improved cross-cultural communication; each was reported by five of the 16 students.

Returnees developed an ability to navigate their way through airports with their group, and better use public transportation and navigate a new city. The latter was sometimes in a group and other times with only a few other students. These activities helped increase their travel skills. Participants reported being in an unfamiliar environment helped them learn how to be more adaptable in situations. Through interacting with locals and other international people, travel-study students developed better communication skills with people from varying backgrounds and native languages.

Attitudes

Five of the 16 students indicated that their desire to and/or appreciation for travel increased because of the travel-study program. For four of those five, this was their first opportunity to go abroad and experience a new culture. Additionally, five students also reported an increase in self-confidence by having participated in a travel-study program. Similar to long-term students, four of the five mentioned that having completed coursework in an international context made them feel better able to take on more challenges.

Opportunities to gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes and possible areas for improvement

I interviewed five returnees who had only done travel-study programs. When asked about key opportunities to gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes, I did not uncover much consensus as their experiences were quite different depending on the program. However, four students said that opportunities for immersion with locals was helpful. This includes activities such as going to markets and talking with vendors, which helped them to learn about local culture, improve their cross-cultural communication skills, and become more adaptive. Below is a quote from a student describing their experience and how they developed certain competencies by engaging with the local people and society.

> "I improved my communication skills with those who I can relate to and those who are more diverse from my own culture and language. And then the adaptive skills. Just having to navigate my way around a new city and figure out how to order a meal, how to buy groceries, how to get money from the bank. I think that has improved my adaptive skills and my flexibility."

None of them had anything to say about programmatic changes they wish would have happened.

MC Class Level

Class level was also taken into consideration in order to see if this variable had an impact on student-conveyed outcomes. Returnee participants include sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Five sophomores participated, of whom two completed long-term programs and three completed short-term programs. Of the nine junior participants, three had completed long-term programs, and six had completed short-term programs. The senior group was by far the largest with 16 in total; nine had completed a long-term program and seven had completed a short-term program. (See Appendix J for chart with student class data)

When comparing outcomes across years, I searched for significant themes (30% or more) and found a wide variety of outcomes. The definitions of the following themes can be found in the previous section.

The leading outcome expressed by sophomores was travel skills with three of the five indicating its importance. The other five outcomes were expressed by two out of five student participants. They included: language skills, cross cultural communication, global awareness, open mindedness, and appreciation for travel. Nine juniors conveyed four significant outcomes including cross cultural communication, adaptability, sense of confidence, and travel skills. Lastly, seniors were the largest participant class. In order of significance, their articulated outcomes include travel skills, cross cultural communication, sense of independence, language skills, adaptability, global awareness, and self-reliance.

Previous International Experience

Interestingly, among the respondents there was an even split between those who had been abroad before and those who had not. Of the 15 who had been abroad, six completed long-term programs and nine completed short-term programs. The other 15 without previous international experience included eight who chose a long-term program and seven who completed a short-term program. Two of the long-term students counted among those who had not had previous international experience were students whose first experience was with a MC short-term program. Thus, only six of the students had not been abroad before their long-term study abroad experience. (See Appendix K for breakdown of students with and without previous international experience and significant outcomes data)

Student participants that had no previous international experience had only one significant outcome theme, adaptability. Those who had been abroad before conveyed four major outcomes, including cross cultural communication skills, global awareness, travel skills, and adaptability, in order of significance. (See Appendix K for student competencies based on previous international experience)

Analysis of student outcomes data

Four ways of separating student groups are included in this analysis: long-term, short-term, class level, and previous international experience. Some of which have stronger correlations than others. Understanding which inputs impact student outcomes can tell MC what components carry greater significance. The main question of this paper is simply *how do student outcomes and employer needs compare*? In order for MC to be able to make appropriate programmatic changes that help students' study abroad experiences be more vocationally beneficial, the CIE and IPC needs to have an understanding of what causes student outcomes.

On average, students who spent a more significant amount of time abroad were able to articulate more outcomes and with more concrete explanations than those who completed travel-study programs. It is possible that the two characteristics that differentiate these groups could be the basis of this difference. Long-term students generally go independently and are there for a longer period of time. Therefore, they are more likely to engage with the local culture in order to find a life and a way to be successful. As previously discussed, short-term students conveyed an increased understanding of the local culture by discussing many of the surface-level cultural components, such as food, dress, music, and geography. Long-term students described having a better understanding of social and political systems within the country because they interacted with and saw them first hand. Additionally, long-term students articulated growth in being able to be more self-reliant, as well as having an increased sense of independence. Without others there to rely on, they were forced to depend on their own wits.

I was surprised by the data regarding previous international experience. I would have expected a much larger portion of long-term students to have previous international experience and a larger amount of short-term students to have no previous international experience. When

conversing with MC students, I have found that many who seek short-term programs have never been abroad before and are looking for this to be their first opportunity. There was more outcome consensus from the students who had more international experience than from those with no previous experience. For students with no previous experience, studying abroad might have been such a new experience that they primarily focused on adapting to their surroundings. In contrast, students with previous experience were better prepared, so that they could gain a broader range of outcomes because the initial shock of being in a new culture was less drastic.

Lastly, although different classes took away different learnings, there was no clear and major difference in the outcomes from these groups. I would assume that the older the student, the better able they are to articulate their experience, however, this does not appear to be the case. It is clearer that one's previous experience abroad and length of time spent studying abroad does have an impact on the depth and breadth of their learning outcomes. Again, this will be important to note when creating and implementing study abroad goals.

Analysis of student and employer data

The following three sections will compare and analyze the knowledge, skills, and attitudes outcomes across the two main groups: current MC study abroad returnees and employers.

<u>Knowledge</u>

Employer participants indicated that they want employees who have a proven understanding of the content knowledge related to the respective position. Both short-term and long-term students indicated a growth in knowledge about the local culture. This could help with their vocational search if the position requires someone with knowledge of that country and/or

region. Short-term students articulated that they learned about the course's content by applying it and/or seeing it play out in the international setting. Again, this could be very relevant for future vocational needs if the course's topic lines up with the position's focus.

<u>Skills</u>

The leading skill that local employers look for, interpersonal capabilities, was not a significant theme conveyed in an explicit manner by returned study abroad students. However, there is still room for students to gain this skill and articulate it to employers. Half of students reported having developed cross-cultural communication skills by studying abroad. Both interpersonal and cross-cultural communication skills require an individual to analyze the context surrounding their communication and then work to have a positive interaction between the parties involved.

The second most sought out skill, problem solving, was not a significant theme for students, however it was a minor theme mentioned by three long-term students. (See Appendix I for minor student themes based on length of student exchange) Although most students did not explicitly convey that they were required to problem solve as a result of their study abroad experience, they did indicate having to stretch themselves through activities such as travel, which often requires creatively searching for solutions in unfamiliar contexts.

The third major skill reported by local employers was analytical ability; this was not a major theme, but was a minor theme that four long-term students reported developing/strengthening during study abroad. Similarly to problem solving, practicing analysis can come in many forms and at several times. Being in a new environment, one is constantly having to question their surroundings and the systems that they may not understand. One summer student stated the following in reference to living in and traveling throughout a different

country: "you don't know anything so you have look at everything and question." Cross cultural communication also requires a students to analyze the cultural context in which one is communicating and then make a decision about how to proceed.

Students did not report developing or strengthening their teamwork skills during their study abroad experience. Cross cultural communication is a component of good teamwork as one is required to think about the others in their group and decide how to interact based on the group and organization's culture. It seems somewhat logical for long-term students since they go on their journeys independently. However, this is a missed opportunity for short-term students since they go with groups of students to new environments and could easily engage in tasks that strengthen their team work skills.

Candidates with adaptive skills were reported as being desirable by two employer participants. This is a major theme articulated by both short-term and long-term students. This is an excellent area for students to demonstrate and to convey they have developed this competency by having studied abroad in college.

One major skill mentioned by long-term students was local language ability. Although not a key theme mentioned by local employers, when asked about the value of international experience, three of the six indicated that they are often in need of employees with foreign language abilities, particularly Spanish. Having the ability to speak another relevant language could be something to set an applicant apart from other candidates. This is a good opportunity for long-term students to use the language skills they gained while abroad.

Attitudes

Passion was an attitude desired by all six local employer participants. For some employers it was specifically passion for one's work, while others wanted to see that a candidate

had passion for something. Short-term student participants indicated an increased desire/appreciation for travel. Although in most cases this would not be applicable to work, it does demonstrate passion in general. Therefore, with organizations that want to see a candidate has strong interests, this outcome could be beneficial.

As stated by local employers, servitude is a key desired attitude. This was not a key student outcome, however, students expressed an increase in global awareness and open-mindedness. Being able to see outside oneself and accept other perspectives often draws people toward compassion and service. Depending on visa restrictions and locations, there certainly are opportunities to engage in formal service while abroad. This is a component that the CIE could encourage long-term students to explore, and to incorporate in more travel-study programs as it would be an explicit way for students to demonstrate that they are committed to helping others, as well as engage with the local culture.

Local employers indicated they look for employees who portray confidence. An increased sense of confidence was an attitudinal shift conveyed by both long-term and short-term returnees. This indicates a prime opportunity for returned study abroad students to both demonstrate and articulate that they feel more confident as a result of studying abroad.

Local employers indicate that a candidate's desire to learn and grow was seen as advantageous when hiring. Although there is no explicit connection between MC student outcomes and this quality, making the choice to study abroad could indicate that a student is willing and interested in going outside of the normal route to have a broader opportunity to learn. Furthermore, this same line of thought could be applied to demonstrate a student's desire to be self-initiating. At MC, study abroad is only required for three majors. Therefore, the majority of students who decide to study abroad must take on the searching and applying stages

independently. Those who are able to strike out on their own are more likely to pick up tasks that are not being accomplished and figure out the steps necessary to do so. Additionally, long-term students indicated an increased sense of independence and ability to be self-reliant. These are competencies that are quite useful when taking initiative.

Lastly, as indicated in the local employer analysis, half of the participants indicated they place more weight on a candidate's attitude when hiring, and are more willing to train someone in order to fill in knowledge and skill gaps. As I interviewed students, they often expressed study abroad having a greater impact on their attitude changes than gaining knowledge and skills. The research demonstrates that student participants conveyed a similar amount of skill and attitude learnings. However, students could generally explain in more detail and with more passion the attitude changes they encountered. Since employers place a significant emphasis on attitude and students can more easily describe attitude changes from study abroad, this indicates there is an opportunity for students to capitalize on their experience for such purposes. Although student outcomes and employer needs do not necessarily line up in this area, it is likely that if students were aware of desired attitudes beforehand, they would be better able to reflect on how they develop them while abroad and after coming home.

Overlap between national employer data and student outcomes

Three of the top five attributes on NACE's national list were not significant outcomes for local employers; they are leadership, verbal communication, and written communication. Although leadership was not indicated as an outcome, many of the outcomes listed by returned study abroad students are qualities that help leaders be successful. The CIE could help returnees to better channel those learnings into a concrete understanding of how they can utilize their experience to prove leadership skills. In Chapter 2 of Ken William's *Effective Multicultural*

Teams, leadership is presented as encompassing several competencies. These include, but are not limited to, collaboration with others, good interpersonal skills, effective intercultural communication, active listening, stress management, and more (Williams, 2008, p. 165). Cross cultural communication is the most significant student outcome that relates to leadership based on the definition above. If students are more aware of leadership qualities before, during and after their international experience, they are more likely to recognize these characteristics and be better able to articulate them to potential employers.

Study abroad students often take verbal communication skills to the next level as they express their needs in a different language and/or through conversation with people from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, returnees could easily translate the cross-cultural communication skills they obtained into a discussion with employers of how they developed stronger verbal communication skills.

Outcomes expressed by students, in general, do not relate well to written communication skills. However, long-term students indicated developing local language skills, which does include writing and reading, perhaps enhancing one's written communication skills. (See Appendix L for breakdown of local employer and MC student outcomes compared with national data)

Now what?

In the analysis portion comparing student outcomes with employer needs, I indicate how students are, in many cases, not articulating that they possess the key KSAs that employers are looking for in new candidates. However, many employer themes could be connected to student outcomes and students could learn to articulate this connection through minor alterations to CIE programming, such as through reflection prompts, pre-departure assignments, and workshops.

The CIE should be better able to alter programming to help study abroad students achieve employer needs considering learning opportunities are present through many programs, and it now has a foundational understanding in employer needs and student outcomes.

<u>Discussion</u>

This research is intended to aid Maryville College through a variety of avenues. Now, with a better understanding of the competencies that MC study abroad returnees develop for their future careers, the IPC will be more equipped to design program goals that steer the CIE toward certain design initiatives.

Based on this paper's research, students are provided with opportunities to develop sought after KSAs for both local and national employment. However, returnees often do not articulate their learning so that it directly applies to vocational needs. They are either not realizing that what they gain could be applied to the work place, or students are unaware of what employers are looking for. As an example of how this research could be directly applied, the IPC might consider including student learning outcomes that include key career competencies. Using that as a goal, the CIE could require students to engage in different activities that strengthen their vocational experience and their ability to discuss what they can bring to a profession. By implementing new career-focused study abroad program designs, the CIE will be better able to demonstrate to vocationally-minded MC students how study abroad is a viable path to gaining career-related competencies.

Limitations and Potential Biases in this Research

This portion examines limitations and biases that may have impacted the research. Additionally, I offer suggested alterations and additions that could make this research stronger.

The most significant bias was during the coding and analysis process. KSA data for students, local employers, and national employers was not often identical. In order to see comparisons, it required me to translate interview and survey responses. While I did my best to make accurate comparisons based on participant responses, there is a possibility that my own subjectively played a role in the KSA research outcomes. Looking back, it may have added value if I determined the key themes, then asked participants if those themes line up with what they think they expressed. This may have lessened the degree to which my subjectivity impacted findings.

At some point in the academic year after one's long-term study abroad experience, the CIE holds a workshop focused on helping returnees connect their experience to their intended career. During this opportunity, students realize the applicability of their time abroad and are better able to translate to a job setting. This had not taken place yet by the time data was collected, and none of the students surveyed/interviewed have participated in past years. Thus, this research may not offer a full view of how students would articulate their experience based on current MC returnee programming.

As it was necessary to disclose the purpose and intent of my research, participants could have altered their responses to better fit the studies focus. For instance, students may have come prepared with responses to only fit their anticipated professional environment and not disclose learnings that they feel do not fit in with their vocational path. However, it is also possible that since I have built relationships with several of the students, they chose to tell me their stories and the personal lessons they took away, rather than conversing as they would with a potential employer.

It is also probable that the students who chose to respond, since it was voluntary, are students who are more engaged with their study abroad experience. Thus, not providing the fullest picture of returnee outcomes.

Although many students thoroughly completed their surveys, there were some that provided very vague answers, making it more challenging to gain a sense of what they learned from the experience. In the analysis section cross-examining different outcomes from student participants, I discuss how long-term students tend to have a broader and more in-depth experience. Since a larger amount of the student interview participants were considered long-term, the lack of survey thoroughness might have impacted the comparison outcomes between long-term and short-term students.

The CIE has a program titled Study Abroad Ambassadors, which is made up of returnees who help promote and market study abroad to other students on campus. These students have more experience articulating their overseas experience(s) than other returnees. Considering there were research participants who belong to this group, it may have impact articulated outcomes.

Prior to interviewing employers, I had very little contact with them and practically no relationship. This could have impacted their willingness to truly open up to me, compared to many of the returnees with whom I had relationships. Additionally, employers were also aware of my role at MC and the point of my research. Again, this could have impacted what they chose to disclose to me. However, when directly asked about the relevance of international experience, the majority were frank and said that unless it is relevant to the position, it does not carry a lot of weight in their selections.

I chose to separate students into long-term and short-term programs, however, as previously indicated, there were a few students who did not truly fit in either category. Three

students completed both types of programs. Although they spoke more about their long-term programs, they also reflected on the short-term programs. This may have impacted the data outcomes. Another three students completed summer programs ranging from one to two months. Their experiences were somewhat of a combination of the other two types. They went independently, but primarily were engaged with other Americans because their programs were language and culture focused. Additionally, their length was less than the average semester-long program, but longer than travel-study programs. Putting these students with the long-term group may impact outcomes data. However, there are not enough students in either of these subcategories to make separate groups.

Recommendations

Research expansion/alterations

This research lays out articulated knowledge, skills, and attitudes for MC study abroad returnees and the employment needs of local employers. However, it would benefit from further exploration of unexamined variables in order to gain a broader understanding of MC study abroad programming. A better understanding of how certain competencies are developed while abroad is the most significant next step in this line of research. There is a need in the field overall to gain more understanding around why and specifically how study abroad students gain certain competencies (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014, p. 86). Doing so, would tell MC what components are most important when selecting and choosing to offer programs that provide vocational benefits.

As demonstrated in the knowledge section, employers are looking for candidates with specific content understanding. Therefore, this research could benefit from comparing students

across different disciplines and different intended professional fields as they need varying types of knowledge to be successful in their fields of study.

As previously indicated, the CIE generally has completed a workshop for returnees to help them better understand and articulate their learning from study abroad. In order to gain a full understanding of current MC programming, it would be helpful to have completed that workshop, then to cross compare students who completed it with those who did not in order to determine the workshop's effectiveness.

A newly implemented program, Study Abroad Ambassadors, involves returnees (both long-term and short-term) in marketing and promotion tactics to encourage other MC students to consider study abroad. They engage in classroom presentations, write articles, and host tabling events. In addition to help the CIE improve and expand outreach, returnees get to practice articulating their experience to campus community members. Again, it would be beneficial to compare how Ambassadors convey their outcomes with those who are not involved in the program in order to see its impact.

It can often take further interaction with life events upon returning to fully understand study abroad's impact on oneself. Therefore, it could be advantageous to examine if length of time since returning impacts one's ability to convey learnings. In some cases, it could provide more in-depth self-analysis, and on the other hand it could put too much distance between the student and the experience to provide a solid analysis. Either way, it would be interesting to see if the length of time since returning has any impact.

Doing a study on how demographic components impact outcomes could add an additional layer of understanding for the CIE. For instance, cross examining the impact of race, income level, first generation, hometown, gender, etc. might provide different lenses when

deciphering articulated learnings. Although this is not a component controllable by CIE, it could tell us different tactics to use for different groups.

As mentioned in the limitations section, having a relationship with students may have impacted what and how they chose to disclose information to me. Utilizing the research and having an understanding of what local and national employers are looking for in candidates, it would be interesting to see if students are able to articulate their study abroad outcomes when specifically asked if and how they gained employer-desired KSAs. Although the intent behind my research was clearly explained, it is possible that some students used less of a vocational lens when telling me what they gained because they see me as support personnel. By explicitly asking how one did achieve or not achieve these outcomes, students may be more likely to have focused answers. However, it would also limit the type of information they disclose, and perhaps not paint a full image of their experience.

Along the same lines, it could be interesting to see how students articulate their study abroad outcomes differently when asked by a potential employer. This could be set up in a mock interview situation while the researcher simply observes. Although much more complex to organize, it would probably provide a better understanding of how students convey their experience(s) in a professional setting.

Although the six employer participants do represent a nice cross section of the local economy, a fuller understanding would be advantageous. This would provide both breadth and depth in understanding local employment needs.

CIE programmatic changes

Utilizing findings from this research and best practices from other institutions discussed in the literature review, the CIE could begin to implement strategies and/or programs to further

aid returnees in applying their study abroad to their intended vocation. My main suggestions, based on this paper's finding and outside data, are:

1. Have students come up with competencies that they want to strengthen through study abroad; these should come from employer-conveyed needs, academic advisor information, MC Career Center suggestions, and analysis of current job descriptions.

2. Students should do research before and while studying abroad to gain an understanding of the types of career opportunities available in their host country (i.e. internships, volunteer, work opportunities) and then take advantage when possible.

3. The CIE could help make employer competencies come to life for students by:

   o Encouraging reflection on career competencies both during and after one's experience abroad through the help of prompts and questions outlined by the CIE and/or the Career Center.

   o Create other structures that encourage development of competencies, mostly likely through travel-study program activities.

4. By using this paper's findings, the CIE can re-evaluate the study abroad career workshop and make alterations where appropriate.

5. Similarly to suggestion four, the Study Abroad Ambassador program should examine where and how it can begin employing research findings in order to give returnees more direct experience with articulating vocation-focused requirements.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that while there is certainly room for improvement, studying abroad is a good avenue to gain vocational competencies. I suggest the following four steps: (1) The International Programming Committee embeds career goals in general programming goals, as well as strategies for short-term programs. (2) CIE should alter

programming to meet the IPC's goals by starting with the ideas listed in the paragraph above. (3)

CIE can alter messaging to prospective students to convey new career-related tactics. (4) This

paper provides an overview of what students gain abroad, the next major research phase is to

gain a better understanding of how students develop competencies while they study abroad.

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Appendix A – Breakdown of student participants

These charts include the number of students interviewed/surveyed from two major groups, long-term and short-term study abroad students.

Long-Term Study Abroad (LT)	Number of Students
Total	14
Summer only	3
LT & ST programs	3
Semester/Year only	8
Interviewed and surveyed	8
Surveyed only	6

Long-term students are separated by those who only did a summer program, those who did both a long-term and short-term program, and those who only did a long-term program. Secondly, the chart lays out the number that was interviewed and surveyed, and the number that was only surveyed.

Short-Term Study Abroad (ST)	Number of Students
Total	16
Interviewed and surveyed	5
Surveyed only	11

All of those accounted for in the short-term chart only completed short-term program(s). They are categorized by those who were surveyed only and those who were both surveyed and interviewed.

Appendix B – National data from NACE

This chart is the data directly taken from the NACE website examining desired attributes (or competencies) in new hires and the percentage of employer respondents who indicated that they place value on the attribute.

Attribute	% of respondents
Leadership	80.1%
Ability to work in a team	78.9%
Communication skills (written)	70.2%
Problem-solving skills	70.2%
Communication skills (verbal)	68.9%
Strong work ethic	68.9%
Initiative	65.8%
Analytical/quantitative skills	62.7%
Flexibility/adaptability	60.9%
Technical skills	59.6%
Interpersonal skills (relates well to others)	58.4%
Computer skills	55.3%
Detail-oriented	52.8%
Organizational ability	48.4%
Friendly/outgoing personality	35.4%
Strategic planning skills	26.7%
Creativity	23.6%
Tactfulness	20.5%
Entrepreneurial skills/risk-taker	18.6%

Source: *Job Outlook 2016*, National Association of Colleges and Employers - See more at: http://www.naceweb.org/s11182015/employers-look-for-in-new-hires.aspx#sthash.GAi6FtQl.dpuf

Appendix C – Overview of local organization participants

This chart contains information from the six interviewed organizations in the greater Maryville, TN area. The sector and the range in number of employees is included.

Overview of Organizations Interviewed		
Organization	**Sector**	**Employee Size**
Organization A	Private Non-profit (youth development)	40-50
Organization B	Private Non-profit (science research)	950-1000
Organization C	Private For-profit (education)	300 (local) 4000 (total)
Organization D	Private For-profit (finance)	900 (local) 5000 (total)
Organization E	Private For-profit (global consulting)	800 (local) 360,000 (total)
Organization F	State Government (education)	800-1000

Appendix D – Significant themes from local employers

The chart includes significant themes expressed by employers when asked what KSAs are important to them when hiring. A significant theme was one reported by 30 percent of employer participants.

Significant Themes	
Background	**Number of Employers**
Experience in the field	4
Experience with needed skills	3
Knowledge	**Number of Employers**
Proven understanding of content knowledge	5
Skills	**Number of Employers**
Interpersonal	5
Problem solving	4
Analytical	3
Ability to work in a team	3
Adaptability	2
Attitudes	**Number of Employers**
Passion	6
Servitude	3
Confidence	3
Desire to grow and learn	2
Self-initiating	2

Appendix E – Minor themes from local employers

The following themes were those indicated by less than 30 percent of local employer participants when asked which KSAs are important to them when hiring.

Minor Themes - Local Employers	
Knowledge	**Number of Employers**
Exposure to company background	1
Cross cultural understanding	1
Skills	**Number of Employers**
Time management	1
Written communication skills	1
Verbal communication skills	1
Attitudes	**Number of Employers**
Humility	1
Empathy	1
Desire to be ethical	1
Respect for others	1
Self-awareness	1

Appendix F – Cross over between local and national employer desired competencies

This chart includes the top 19 nationally-ranked competencies for new hires. The third column indicates if the attribute was also articulated by any local employer participants.

National Significance	National Attributes	Reported by Local Employers
1	Leadership	
2	Ability to work in a team	X
3	Written communication skills	Minor
4	Problem-solving skills	X
5	Verbal communication skills	Minor
6	Strong work ethic	
7	Initiative	X
8	Analytical	X
9	Flexibility/adaptability	X
10	Technical skills	
11	Interpersonal skills	X
12	Computer skills	
13	Detail-oriented	
14	Organizational ability	
15	Friendly/outgoing personality	
16	Strategic planning skills	
17	Creativity	
18	Tactfulness	
19	Entrepreneurial skills	

Appendix G – Long-term student outcomes data

This chart includes significant themes as articulated by long-term students when asked what KSAs they took from their study abroad experience(s), including those who completed summer, both short-term and long-term, and only long-term programs.

Long-Term Student Data	
Knowledge	**Number of Students**
Local culture	10
Skills	**Number of Students**
Local language	10
Travel	10
Cross-Cultural Communication	10
Adaptability/flexibility	7
Self-reliant	7
Attitudes	**Number of Students**
Global awareness	10
Open minded	7
Sense of confidence	7
Tolerance for ambiguity	5
Sense of independence	5

Appendix H – Short-term student outcomes data

This chart includes significant themes as articulated by short-term students when asked what KSAs they took from their study abroad experience(s).

Short-Term Student Data	
Knowledge	**Number of Students**
Local culture	10
Theory and practice of travel-study course contact	9
Skills	**Number of Students**
Travel	5
Cross-cultural communication	5
Adaptability/flexibility	5
Attitudes	**Number of Students**
Sense of confidence	5
Increased desire/appreciation for travel	5

Appendix I – Minor student outcome themes

This chart includes themes articulated by 10 – 30 percent of all student participants. It is broken down into short-term and long-term student populations.

Minor Themes for Students	
Long-Term Student Data	
Knowledge	**Number of Students**
Academic major-specific understanding	3
Understanding of local indigenous groups	2
Skills	**Number of Students**
Analytical	4
Problem-solving	3
Money management	3
Ability to live abroad	2
Planning skills	2
Time management	7
Attitudes	**Number of Students**
Value of experiential learning	2
Sense of curiosity	2
Patience	2
Self-awareness	2
Appreciation for travel	2
Short-Term Student Data	
Skills	**Number of Students**
Negotiation	3
Local language	2
Group travel	2
Attitudes	**Number of Students**
Sense of independence	3
Increased respect for others	3
Open minded	3
Global awareness	2
Personal value change	2
Tolerance for ambiguity	2
Appreciation for home	2

Appendix J – Student outcomes by year in college

This chart provides an overview of if the number of sophomores, juniors, and seniors surveyed/interviewed. Within each of those categories, it is further broken down into number of students who completed long-term and number who completed short-term programs.

Year in College	Number of Students
Sophomores	5
LT program	2
ST program	3
Juniors	9
LT program	3
ST program	6
Seniors	16
LT program	9
ST program	7

This chart includes significant themes articulated by students based on their year in college. Again, significant themes are ones reported by 30 percent or more of participants.

Significant Themes by Class	
	Number of Students
Sophomores	
Travel skills	3
Language skills	2
Cross cultural communication	2
Global awareness	2
Open minded	2
Appreciation for travel	2
Juniors	
Cross cultural communication	5
Adaptability	4
Sense of confidence	4
Travel skills	3
Seniors	
Travel skills	9
Cross cultural communication	8
Sense of confidence	8
Language skills	7
Adaptability	7

Global awareness	7
Self-reliance	6

Appendix K – Student outcomes by level of international experience

This chart provides an overview of the number of student participants who had previous international experience and those who did not. Within those categories, it is further broken down by students who completed short-term programs and students who completed long-term programs. Two of the students who reported not having previous international experience, were a part of the long-term group. However, their first time abroad was through a short-term MC program. This is a unique case, because although they mostly reported outcomes based on their long-term experience, their first experience abroad really was shaped by MC. In short, it is unclear as to where they fit. They are unable to make their own group because of the small sample size.

Previous international experience?	Number of Students
Yes	15
LT program	6
ST program	9
No	15
LT program	(for two, first time was MC travel-study) 8
ST program	7

This chart offers an overview of significant themes as articulated by students in groups based on whether they had previous international experience or not before completing an MC study abroad program. Again, a significant theme was one reported by 30 percent or more of participants.

Significant Themes by Previous Int'l Experience	
	Number of Students
No	
Adaptability	5
Yes	
Cross-cultural communication	7
Global awareness	6
Travel skills	5
Adaptability	5

Appendix L – Local employer and MC student outcomes compared with national data

This chart begins with all national competencies, then indicates if there was overlap with significant or minor themes among local employers and/or students.

National Significance	National Attributes	Reported by Local Employers	Reported by Students
1	Leadership		
2	Ability to work in a team	X	
3	Written communication skills	Minor	
4	Problem-solving skills	X	Minor
5	Verbal communication skills	Minor	
6	Strong work ethic		
7	Initiative	X	
8	Analytical	X	Minor
9	Flexibility/adaptability	X	X
10	Technical skills		
11	Interpersonal skills	X	
12	Computer skills		
13	Detail-oriented		
14	Organizational ability		
15	Friendly/outgoing personality		
16	Strategic planning skills		
17	Creativity		
18	Tactfulness		
19	Entrepreneurial skills		

This chart includes local employer themes (significant and minor) that were not listed on the national list, and then indicates if it was reported by students as a significant or minor theme.

Local Employer Data NOT on National List	Reported by Students
Proven understanding of content knowledge	
Passion	X
Servitude	
Confidence	X
Desire to grown and learn	

Minor Local Employer Themes	
Exposure to company background	
Cross cultural understanding	X
Time management	Minor
Humility	
Empathy	
Desire to be ethical	
Respect for others	Minor
Self aware	Minor