SHURER, KATHRYN BROOKE ASHLEY. Expectations and Experiences of U.S. Semester Study Abroad Students in British Universities: A Longitudinal Phenomenology. (Under the direction of Dr. Audrey J. Jaeger).

More U.S. college students study abroad in the U.K. than any other destination in the world (Institute for International Education, 2015). Unfortunately, there is a significant gap in empirical knowledge about their experiences. This is likely due to a common assumption that students within culturally similar contexts should enjoy easier transitions abroad (Church, 1982; Paige, 1993). However, recent scholarly opinion papers and exploratory studies have questioned this assumption for U.S. students in the British Isles and have called for the study abroad community to take notice (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2010, 2012; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the expectations and experiences of adjustment for U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities. Through a longitudinal design, interviews were conducted pre-departure, while abroad, and post-return with 12 U.S. students in semester direct enrollment programs within nine institutions throughout England, Scotland, and Wales. Supplemental interviews were also conducted with six advisors and faculty in the U.S. and Britain. Designed and analyzed through the lens of phenomenology, this study explored the socially constructed experiences of students within an important life transition (Merriam, 2002). Two theoretical frameworks, which address expectations and experiences in U.S. study abroad, informed this research: Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment and Martin et al.’s (1995) modified expectancy violations theory. Findings suggest that U.S. students in direct enrollment programs within Britain encounter multiple unexpected challenges within academic, cultural,
and social aspects of the semester study abroad experience. This study has significant implications for international education practice, intercultural theory development, and future research.
Expectations and Experiences of U.S. Semester Study Abroad Students in British Universities: A Longitudinal Phenomenology

by
Kathryn Brooke Ashley Shurer

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Educational Research and Policy Analysis

Raleigh, North Carolina
2016

APPROVED BY:

_______________________________
Audrey J. Jaeger, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

_______________________________
Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Ph.D.

_______________________________
Lance D. Fusarelli, Ph.D.

_______________________________
James Kiwanuka-Tondo, Ph.D.
BIOGRAPHY

Kathryn Brooke Ashley Shurer was born in North Carolina and earned undergraduate degrees in English and Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Entering college with very limited domestic travel experience, she was initially terrified by the idea of studying abroad. Her friends convinced her otherwise, and she spent a semester studying abroad in Italy during her junior year of college. Bitten by the travel bug and inspired by the significant growth she experienced while abroad, she returned from Italy and switched career paths from K-12 to international education. She spent her senior year as an intern at the Meredith College Office of International Programs. After graduation, she worked as an Assistant Study Abroad Advisor at the Emory University Center for International Programs Abroad.

Brooke then returned to North Carolina where she began her journey as a part-time graduate student and full-time international educator. At NC State University, she served as Assistant Director of Study Abroad, where she managed incoming and outgoing study abroad in the U.K., Ireland, and Africa, and developed the office’s study abroad curriculum integration initiative. She also worked at UNC-Chapel Hill as Director of Study Abroad Advising, as well as Swansea University in Wales as a graduate intern. At Swansea, Brooke learned about the British academic system and helped to prepare incoming U.S. study abroad students for a direct enrollment semester.

Returning where her professional foundation began, Brooke was named Director of International Programs at Meredith College in 2013 where she currently oversees all study abroad programming and international student support at the private women’s college in
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Filled with immense gratitude, I share this degree with:

- The students, advisors, faculty, and institutional leaders who participated in this study. You were generous with time and honest in reflection. Thank you for making this work meaningful.

- My husband, best friend, and partner, Anthony. As I say to everyone, at least half of this degree belongs to you. Thank you for being my rock, for helping me process ideas, for introducing me to communication theory, for keeping our life going when I was engrossed with school, and for providing unwavering support and love in so many ways throughout this journey. Thank you for ensuring I was focused, relaxed, correctly navigated, and fueled with delicious tea during our adventure to Britain for this research. I’m grateful for you and am so excited about our future.

- My parents, Mom, Dad, Max, and Elaine. Thank you for encouraging my initial interest in studying abroad, for sharing how proud you’ve been along the way, and for always supporting my ambitions. I’m beyond grateful for your love and support. Mom, your daily meditations during long writing days brought me such peace.

- My extended families, both in North Carolina and Pennsylvania, who have been relentlessly cheering me on. I truly felt your encouragement during this process.

- Dr. Audrey Jaeger, my dissertation chair, advisor, and incredible mentor for the past decade. I vividly remember the day you said, “You are continuing to the doctoral program, aren’t you?” You’ve always known when and how to nudge me toward an important new challenge. Thank you for encouraging my development as a scholar-
practitioner, and for helping me recognize how my professional challenges were perfect academic opportunities. I can never thank you enough for investing in my growth. You are simply phenomenal, and I’m so grateful for your friendship.

- Dr. Deirdre O’Malley, mentor, colleague, and friend, for your enthusiastic encouragement, steadfast friendship, and sage wisdom throughout this process. You, dear friend, are a rare gift, and a real-life superwoman.

- Liz Yaros, my longtime colleague and friend, for sparking joy and bringing radiant light into my world, for celebrating confetti-worthy milestones with me, for serving as my anger translator, and for selflessly managing our office when I was dissertating. I simply cannot thank you enough.

- Dr. Betty Webb, for shaping my foundation in international education through my first professional role. I feel so fortunate to continue learning from such a brilliant, innovative, and passionate educator. Without question, you set the standard.

- Professor Cathy Rodgers, for your incredible support and thoughtful encouragement. I am beyond appreciative for your partnership and friendship.

- Tammi Dittmar, who joined our team in the midst of intensive dissertation months. Thank you for your positivity and patience. I am grateful you are my colleague.

- Traci Johnson, for sharing your heart of gold with me. Thank you for cheering me on.

- My dear friend, Madhavi Bezwada, for patiently listening to my school stories for so many years, and for knowing exactly when I needed encouragement from my magnificent “twin.” Your friendship is a treasured gift.
• My dissertation committee, Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach, Dr. James Kiwanuka-Tondo, and Dr. Lance Fusarelli. Thank you for building my confidence and skill as a researcher, and for providing such thoughtful reflections on my study. Without question, your contributions made this research stronger, and I am sincerely thankful.

• Faculty in the NCSU Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development, who encouraged my academic focus on international education throughout both graduate programs and helped me think about this field more comprehensively through the lens of a scholar. I am especially grateful to Dr. Paul Umbach for supporting my proposal defense and fostering my growth as a student.

• The NCSU College of Education for providing invaluable financial assistance in support of my site visit in Britain.

• My current and former colleagues at Emory, NCSU, UNC, and Meredith, who have provided steadfast encouragement throughout this process. I am grateful for the support of so many within the Meredith College community, especially Cathy, Tammi, Liz, Erin, Traci, Kelly, Eloise, Carmen, Betty, John, and Cindy for the extra motivation in the dissertation homestretch. I’d also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Matthew Poslusny. Your constant support and sound advice were instrumental as I balanced my academic and professional responsibilities.

• Renee Bush, soon-to-be Dr. Bush, for being an outstanding writing buddy. Thank you for keeping me motivated and focused, especially during our week in the library.

• My brilliant classmates in both the masters and doctoral programs. Your academic insights enriched my learning, and your motivational support provided refreshing
positivity in this journey. I am especially thankful for Allison, Stephany, Jennie, Tara, and Deirdre, who shared valuable perspectives and feedback during this research.

- The Meredith College academic writing group, as well as the NCSU Dissertation Institute for providing positive and encouraging infrastructures of accountability.
- Angela Jones and my former colleagues at Swansea University for developing such a rich and meaningful opportunity for me to learn about studying and living in Wales.
- My past and present circles of mentors and friends, who have supported my academic pursuits along the way, including college friends, who first encouraged me to study abroad, as well as my home church community, who sent perfectly timed care packages throughout 15 years of college.
- Dr. Judith Martin and Dr. Margaret Pitts, whose scholarship greatly enriched this study.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................... xiii
LIST OF FIGURES ....................................................................................................... xiv

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................... 1
Research Problem ........................................................................................................ 1
Purpose of the Study ..................................................................................................... 8
Research Question ........................................................................................................ 8
Subquestions ................................................................................................................... 8
Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................ 9
Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model for expectations, talk, and identity ...................... 10
Modified expectancy violations framework .............................................................. 11
Significance of the Study .............................................................................................. 12
Significance for practice ............................................................................................... 12
Significance for policy .................................................................................................. 13
Significance for theory ................................................................................................. 14
Methods ....................................................................................................................... 14
Data collection ............................................................................................................. 15
Data analysis ............................................................................................................... 18
Trustworthiness ............................................................................................................ 19
Limitations of the Study ............................................................................................... 20
Delimitations of the Study ........................................................................................... 21
Overview of the Study ................................................................................................. 23

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .................................................................. 25

Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................... 26
Pitts’s (2009) model of expectations, talk, and identity .............................................. 27
Kim’s (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation .... 27
Stress-adaptation-growth model ................................................................................ 28
Pitts’s (2009) model and findings .............................................................................. 30
Expectancy violations theory ....................................................................................... 32
Burgoon’s expectancy violations theory ..................................................................... 32
Martin et al.’s (1995) modified expectancy violations framework ......................... 36
Variables ...................................................................................................................... 37
Gender ......................................................................................................................... 37
Prior transitional experience ....................................................................................... 37
Location of sojourn/program ...................................................................................... 38
Theoretical model ........................................................................................................ 38
Martin et al. (1995) longitudinal research findings .................................................... 39
Review of Cross-Cultural Adjustment Literature ..................................................... 41
Academic adjustment ................................................................................................. 41
Higher education in the United Kingdom ................................................................... 42
Founding institutions ................................................................................................. 42
Growth and expansion of higher education ............................................................... 42
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Efforts to increase access of U.K. higher education</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of higher education to U.K. economy</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global expansion of U.K. higher education</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree structures within the U.K.</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions structures in U.K. higher education</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current student population in U.K. higher education</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaring a major within the U.K.</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K. academic structure and differences for U.S. study abroad students</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K. course structure and differences for U.S. study abroad students</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course assessment in U.K. higher education and differences for U.S.</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student affairs support in U.K. higher education and differences for U.S. students</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current funding models in U.K. higher education</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research funding in U.K. higher education</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International funding in U.K. higher education</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic adjustment literature</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic challenges</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-faculty expectations</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International student academic stereotypes</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural framework and literature gap for academic adjustment research</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language challenges</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-faculty perceptions</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on adjustment stress</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique and research gap for studies on language challenge</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of academic adjustment literature</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural adjustment</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundational models of cultural adjustment</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critiques of foundational models</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural adjustment literature</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting cultural expectations</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking similarity</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exempting Britain from otherness</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique responses to cultural adjustment</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of cultural adjustment literature</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social adjustment</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological adaptation literature</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress and anxiety</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression, loneliness, and homesickness</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociocultural adaptation literature</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication confidence</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural distance</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with host students and faculty</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship and support networks</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Chapters and Articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Research Methodology</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rationale for Qualitative Research</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phenomenological research</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guiding philosophy</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Site Selection and Sampling Procedures</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sample population</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sampling strategies</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher journal</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student interviews</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study abroad advisor and faculty interviews</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data reduction</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data display</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion drawing and verification</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confirmability</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethical Issues</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher Paradigm</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subjectivity</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Article Overview</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rationale for Format</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Article Structure</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Article 1: Academic expectations and experiences</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Article 2: Cultural expectations and experiences</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Article 3: Social expectations and experiences</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Article 1: The Intersection of Academic Expectations and Experiences</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of U.S. Study Abroad Students in British Universities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Article 2: The Intersection of Cultural Expectations and Experiences</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of U.S. Study Abroad Students in British Universities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Article 3: The Intersection of Social Expectations and Experiences</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of U.S. Study Abroad Students in British Universities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES ................................................................................................................................. 331
APPENDICES .................................................................................................................................. 350
Appendix A: Pitts’s (2009) Descriptive Model for Expectations, Talk, and Identity ........................................ 351
Appendix C: Interview Protocol for Participants Pre-Departure ................................................................. 353
Appendix D: Interview Protocol for Participants during Site Visit ............................................................ 355
Appendix E: Interview Protocol for Participants upon Re-entry ............................................................... 357
Appendix F: Interview Protocol for Study Abroad Advisors in the U.S. .................................................... 359
Appendix G: Interview Protocol for Study Abroad Advisors and Faculty in the U.K. .............................. 361
Appendix H: Participant Profiles ........................................................................................................ 363
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Student Participants .............................................................................................................. 103
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Stress-adaptation-growth model by Y. Y. Kim (2001). .............................................. 28

Figure 2. Pitts (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity. See Appendix A. 31

Figure 3. Martin et al. (1995) modified expectancy violations framework. See Appendix B... 39

Figure 4. U-Curve model. From the University of the Pacific website: What’s up with culture? Online training resource for study abroad. Retrieved from http://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/ ................................................................. 62

Figure 5. W-Curve model. From the University of the Pacific website: What’s up with culture? Online training resource for study abroad. Retrieved from http://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/ ................................................................. 63
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Research Problem

The Forum on Education Abroad conference is one of the largest annual gatherings of international educators throughout the world. During the 2012 conference plenary address, Dr. Colin Ireland challenged the study abroad field with the following message:

There is a growing tendency in American Study Abroad to see Europe as an “old” destination; one that doesn’t present students with enough challenges, because its standard of living and life-style are too much like the place they come from…But study abroad is about encountering and negotiating differences. The problem in Western Europe is that, because of superficial similarities, so many of those important DIFFERENCES are SUBTLE. How many of your students are good at dealing with subtlety? (2012, pp. 1 & 13)

Ireland (2012) continued by expressing concerns for U.S. study abroad students in English-speaking countries. As an international educator abroad, he had observed significant challenges among students seeking similarities rather than successfully negotiating complex and subtle cultural differences abroad. Expressing frustration, he noted that, “personal comfort should never be equated with social skills or cultural knowledge” (Ireland, 2012, p. 13). He encouraged U.S. study abroad advisors and European administrators to be more mindful of these students, a view, which he acknowledged, was contrary to common tendencies in the field. By helping students understand the unexpected and nuanced cultural differences between the U.S. and other English-speaking countries, Ireland argued that
administrators in the U.S. and abroad could foster important learning opportunities for students.

Surrounded by thousands of international educators from the U.S. and abroad, this plenary sent a divergent message from the presumptive views of many in the study abroad field who feel that “traditional destinations,” such as English-speaking countries, should be “less challenging” for U.S. study abroad students (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011, p. 24). The commonly held assumption in U.S. study abroad is that cultural similarity between home and host cultures should foster easier study abroad transitions for students (Church, 1982; Paige, 1993). If one embraces this assumption, U.S. students in English-speaking countries should require less support and less research on their adjustment experiences than students who study in overtly different cultural contexts.

The problem is that Ireland (2012) is not the only international educator questioning this assumption and calling for the study abroad community to take notice of this student population. In a recent strand of exploratory literature, international educators have written scholarly opinion papers and conducted exploratory studies regarding U.S. students in the U.K. and Ireland (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2010, 2012; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). This literature highlights specific concerns unique to this study abroad population.

The dominant theme throughout this literature is that U.S. students often set inappropriate expectations for study abroad in the U.K. and Ireland, both for the academic experience and with regard to contemporary culture (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2010, 2012; Janes, 2008, 2011; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton
& Hart, 2008). Further observations include that U.S. study abroad students in Britain may be more inclined to seek similarities during their experiences abroad rather than negotiate complex, underlying cultural differences (Edwards, 2000), that U.S. students have difficulty conceptualizing the “otherness” of British culture (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Janes, 2008), and U.S. students in the U.K. and Ireland may blame themselves for challenges rather than acknowledge normal difficulties of cross-cultural transitions (Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). While these are noteworthy contributions to the literature, they are not based on comprehensive empirical studies. As such, they collectively demonstrate and support need for focused, systematic research on this population of students.

These are significant observations, however, because they call into question the assumption of an easy transition and fully integrative experience for U.S. study abroad students in English-speaking countries. Despite growing calls from the field (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2010, 2012; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008), the international education research community has largely ignored the population of English-speaking study abroad students in English-speaking countries when discussing cultural adjustment. The majority of international higher education cultural adjustment literature has examined students who transition between countries with overtly different languages and cultures, including U.S. students who study abroad in non-English speaking countries (Chaban, Williams, Holland, Boyce & Warner, 2011; Hunley, 2010; Pitts, 2009) or non-English speaking international students in English-speaking countries (Akazaki, 2010; Brisset, Safdar, Lewis & Sabatier, 2010; Brown, 2008; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li, Baker, & Marshall, 2002; Searle & Ward, 1990;
Ying & Han, 2006; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

This is problematic not only because it has left a critical gap in the literature, but also because the U.S. sends more study abroad students to the U.K. than to any other destination in the world (Institute for International Education, 2014a). This statistic has remained consistent for over a decade (Institute for International Education, 2001). From Open Doors Report data gathered by the Institute for International Education (IIE) in 2001 until the present 2013-2014 set, U.S. higher education students in the U.K. have comprised between 12 and 19% of the entire U.S. study abroad population (Institute for International Education, 2001, 2015). Although non-English speaking, “non-traditional” (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011, p. 24) destinations have grown in popularity, the U.K. is still the top location of choice for U.S. study abroad students (Institute for International Education, 2014a).

This is an exceptionally relevant time to understand the experiences of U.S. study abroad students, particularly in the most popular host location of the U.K. because current efforts are underway to double the number of U.S. students who study abroad within the next five years (Institute for International Education, 2014b). Launched in March 2014, the Generation Study Abroad initiative, founded by the Institute of International Education (IIE), seeks to bring together educational stakeholders in the public and private sectors to collectively increase the annual total of study abroad students from 295,000 to 600,000 by the year 2019 (Institute for International Education, 2014b). The initiative seeks commitments from 500 institutions to significantly expand study abroad, 10 institutions to require study abroad, 10,000 alumni and students to promote study abroad, 1,000 high school teachers to educate their students about study abroad, and donors to contribute toward the $2
million in scholarships that IIE has already pledged (Institute for International Education, 2014c).

More than 500 partners from academia, public, and private sectors have already accepted the Generation Study Abroad pledge to significantly increase study abroad participation rates (Institute for International Education, 2015). Specific pledges thus far include increases in scholarship support and fundraising/endowment campaigns, plans to integrate and map study abroad into the on-campus curriculum, improvements in faculty and advisor training, and outreach efforts to increase diversity within study abroad participants (Redden, 2014). Colleges that have joined the initiative thus far wanted to take part because they saw the capacity for study abroad to prepare students for careers in a global economy (Redden, 2014). In addition to a growing number of colleges and universities, six higher education associations, the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, and eight foreign governments or national exchange agencies have joined the initiative (including the United Kingdom).

Although the comprehensive impact of Generation Study Abroad remains to be seen, the initiative raises important issues regarding the relevance of study abroad within the current U.S. higher education climate. The Institute for International Education (2014c) has cited multiple global and national career-relevant research studies to promote aggressive study abroad support, noting, “Study abroad is one of the best ways students can acquire global skills and open up personal and professional opportunities” (p. 1). As higher education has responded to globalization with comprehensive plans of campus internationalization (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014), institutions have focused on study abroad as a way for
students to gain “knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences necessary either to compete successfully in the global marketplace or to work toward finding and implementing solutions to problems of global significance” (Lewin, 2009, p. xiv).

For example, the 2014 Global Risks Report, cites high graduation debt and underpreparation for a global workforce as one of the most significant global risks for advanced countries over the next ten years (World Economic Forum, 2014). In contrast, international education research has shown that study abroad can help students prepare for the global workforce and graduate on time. Research has demonstrated that study abroad students have comparatively higher persistence and graduation rates (Sutton & Rubin, 2010), intercultural communication skills (Williams, 2005), global citizenry (Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014), global-mindedness/world-mindedness (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Che, Spearman, & Manizade, 2009; Douglas & Jones-Rikkers, 2001), cross-cultural skills (Kitsantas, 2004), and intercultural learning (Engle & Engle, 2004; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). Study abroad alumni have also self-reported that international programs have impacted their future career choices (Norris & Gillespie, 2009).

Another reason why study abroad is important within the current higher education dialogue is that it supports larger institutional goals of student engagement (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014). Student engagement “represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in those activities” (Kuh, 2009, p. 683). Study abroad is now listed among the top ten “high impact” practices of student engagement in higher education that claim to deepen student learning in productive ways (Kuh, 2009).
The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007) issued a call for institutions to increase these high impact practices, including study abroad, noting that high impact practices “have been widely tested and have shown benefits for college students, especially those from historically underserved backgrounds” (p. 53). They also emphasized, “Because they (high impact practices) feature various forms of active learning, these innovative educational practices also are especially well suited for assessing students’ cumulative learning” (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007, p. 53).

The National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) has provided empirical data to connect active student engagement with many “desired outcomes of college,” including dimensions of both student learning and personal development (Kuh, 2009, p. 683). Study abroad has contributed to this literature as Gonyea (2008) determined that study abroad students experienced greater growth in personal development and increased engagement on campus after participating in study abroad compared with peers who did not. Noteworthy in this study was that Gonyea controlled for self-selecting variables of study abroad students and still found comparatively important gains after study abroad participation.

Kuh (2009) has noted that within the current climate of U.S. higher education, institutions are consistently measuring participation and outcomes of high impact practices. Campuses are also devoting increased attention and resources to embed high impact practices within institutional cultures (Kuh, 2009). Identified as a high-impact practice, study abroad is now receiving more attention, resources, pressure, and assessment than ever before. Considering this context, the fact that there is a significant gap in our understanding and research regarding the number one destination for U.S. study abroad students is a significant
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the expectations and experiences of adjustment for U.S. study abroad students in British universities. This study was made necessary by the critical gap in literature regarding this group of study abroad students, as well as by recent calls from the international education field to be wary of assumptions that cultural similarity elicits an easier transition. Informed by modified expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1978, 1993; Martin et al., 1995), and the descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment (Pitts, 2009), I addressed assumptions and research gaps through a longitudinal qualitative design that explored academic, cultural, and social adjustment in-depth with U.S. semester students who directly enrolled in British universities.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following overarching research question:

How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe expectations and experiences in the cross-cultural adjustment process?

Subquestions. Grounding this research in theory, I chose to explore academic, cultural, and social areas of the semester study abroad experience in alignment with Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment. These three areas represent broad categories of expectation gaps that emerged from a 15-month ethnographic study of U.S. semester study abroad students in Paris, France. While Pitts’s (2009) model describes expectation categories with a higher level of specificity,
I broadened the expectation categories to generate research subquestions for this study. This strategy allowed participants’ voices to directly shape research outcomes as I described the essence of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen; 1990).

1. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe their *academic* expectations?
2. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe the intersection of their academic expectations with academic experiences?
3. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe their *cultural* expectations?
4. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe the intersection of their cultural expectations with cultural experiences?
5. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe their *social* expectations?
6. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe the intersection of their social expectations with social experiences?

**Theoretical Framework**

The current exploratory literature has revealed that students in the U.K. and Ireland may be exceptionally affected by their pre-departure expectations (Gristwood & Woolf, 2012; Ireland, 2010; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008; Woolf, 2011). A recent strand of exploratory literature on culturally similar work placements
within the corporate expatriate community has also strongly reinforced the impact of pre-departure expectations (Fenwick, Edwards, & Buckley, 2003; Selmer, 2007; Selmer, Chiu, & Shenkar, 2007; Selmer & Lauring, 2007). Therefore, it was critical for my research to be grounded in theory that incorporated the study abroad process with the concept of setting expectations. I selected two relevant frameworks to guide my study: Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment and Martin, Bradford, and Rohrlich’s (1995) modified expectancy violations framework.

Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment is an application of Y.Y. Kim’s (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation. It explores the influence of expectations on a student’s cultural adjustment process. Martin et al.’s (1995) modified expectancy violations framework is an application of expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1978, 1993). It informs how expectations impact a student’s overall evaluation of a study abroad experience. These comprehensive issues were all relevant to this study, which is why I utilized both complementary theories to ground the research. Both theories have been applied successfully in a study abroad context but not within a focused study of semester students in British universities.

**Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model for expectations, talk, and identity.** Pitts (2009) applied and extended Kim’s (2001) integrative theory of communication and stress-adaptation-growth in cross-cultural adaptation (ITCCA) to develop a model for semester study abroad adjustment. Kim’s (2001) integrative theory of stress adaptation-growth is in the shape of a spiral (see Figure 1), where travelers adapt and grow as they work through
stress in new cultural environments. Each of the stress, adaptation, and growth processes is
dependent on the other, and the process continues as long as travelers encounter new
challenges abroad (Kim, 2001). Over time, the spiral becomes tighter as travelers develop
skills to navigate successfully within their host cultures (Pitts, 2009).

Pitts (2009) extended this model through an ethnographic study of U.S. semester
study abroad students in Paris, France to explore how external sources of student
expectations and gaps in expectations impact cultural encounters that lead to stress,
adaptation, and growth. External sources of expectations include the international host
university, co-students, friends/family at home, host family, and home university.
Expectations fall into four themes: academic/language, social, travel/cultural, and
value/culture (Pitts, 2009). In this descriptive model, Pitts (2009) also examines how specific
methods of talk-based communication alleviate stress, help students adjust expectations, and
increase their effectiveness within society (Pitts, 2009).

**Modified expectancy violations framework.** Martin et al.’s (1995) modified
expectancy violations framework of sojourner expectations is based upon the foundational
communications framework, expectations violations theory (EVT), which was created by
Judee Burgoon in 1978 and was subsequently revised through later research (Burgoon, 1993;
Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005; Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995), most
notably to provide a theoretical lens for cross-cultural communication. Martin et al.’s (1995)
revision of EVT was the first application of the theory in a study abroad context and
examined how expectancy violations impacted students’ evaluations of study abroad
experiences.
The expectancy violations theory holds that people enter interactions with a set of expectations that are shaped by social norms, cultural norms, and previous knowledge (Burgoon, et al., 1995). Within this framework, expectations are not simply met or unmet. Expectations are either fulfilled, violated positively (outcome is better than expected), or violated negatively (outcome is worse than expected) (Martin et al., 1995). In a longitudinal study abroad research context, Martin et al. (1995) modified the EVT model for the study abroad experience (see Figure 3) and included variables such as gender, prior experiences, and location of program, which have been shown in the literature to impact pre-departure expectations for students (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991).

**Significance of the Study**

This research study is significant for practice, policy, and theory in the international education field. It addresses the critical void in practical understanding of U.S. study abroad students in Britain, informs study abroad policy that is currently grounded in assumptions of easier adjustment and experiences for these students, provides important extensions of cultural adjustment theory development, and serves as a springboard for future research within English-speaking study abroad destinations.

**Significance for practice.** It is concerning that current knowledge about the experience of U.S. study abroad students in Britain is based upon observation and assumption rather than empirical research, not only because international educators and emerging papers are beginning to question long-held assumptions, but also because study abroad practitioners should fully understand potential challenges in order to help students develop appropriate expectations for an experience abroad. In order to most effectively
support study abroad participants, international educators have a critical role to advise students and help them anticipate, understand, and navigate cultural difference. This may be particularly relevant because U.S. students who are less experienced travelers may intentionally study abroad in Britain in part based on the assumption of a less challenging experience.

International educators may also operate on an assumption that the study abroad experience for U.S. students in Britain results in easier transitions. Therefore, they may spend comparatively less time and resources preparing students for Britain than for travel to countries with overtly different cultural and language contexts. Since this study illuminated unique experiences and challenges for academic, cultural, and social adjustment for U.S. students in British universities, practitioners will better understand how to prepare and support these students throughout the study abroad process.

Significance for policy. While U.S. study abroad participation in English-speaking countries continues to grow, and while the U.K. has remained the top U.S. student destination for over a decade (Institute for International Education, 2001; 2014a), study abroad policies such as scholarship decisions may have been influenced by the assumption that these programs are less challenging for students. Since culturally similar countries are perceived to be less stressful, study abroad scholarships may reward students who pursue programs that are perceived to be more challenging. The Benjamin Gilman Scholarship, for example, “aims to encourage students to choose non-traditional study abroad destinations, especially those outside of Western Europe and Australia” (Institute for International Education, 2014b).
This parallels the corporate expatriate practice of rewarding and providing perks to professionals who take “tough assignments” in more culturally different locations than their home countries (Selmer, 2007, p. 186). Selmer (2007) questioned this policy, especially since the professionals in culturally similar countries that he studied encountered just as much difficulty in the transition than professionals in tough assignment countries who were given more resources and support pre-departure and on-site to successfully adjust in the placement.

**Significance for theory.** The study I developed was informed by the extensive previous cultural adjustment research, yet offered a focused phenomenological perspective to explore the academic, cultural, and social expectations and experiences of U.S. semester students in British universities. This research has brought forward new knowledge regarding the U.S. direct enrollment experience in Britain, as well as new perspectives on cultural adjustment theories. Therefore, this research not only contributes to the field’s current gap in understanding, but also provides opportunities for theoretical discussion regarding pre-departure expectations and cross-cultural adjustment. This study provides ample opportunities for international education scholars to build upon these results for future research opportunities on a relatively unexplored, yet dominant group of students in U.S. study abroad.

**Methods**

I designed this research as a qualitative longitudinal phenomenological study in order to understand the expectations and lived experiences of U.S. direct enrollment semester study abroad students in Britain. The phenomenon of this study was expectations and experiences of adjustment for U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities. Embracing a
constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), I share the belief that meanings and concepts of reality are shaped by context and social interactions with the world (Merriam, 2002). Since qualitative methodologists seek to understand unique situations with regard to context, interactions, and how participants make meaning of their lives within the setting (Patton, 1982), a qualitative research method was best suited for this study’s purpose and research questions.

I conducted this study as a phenomenology because this method meets people where they are naturally engaged in the world to produce richness and depth in the description of their experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Further, phenomenology is appropriate to understand and articulate the experience of important life transitions (Merriam, 2002). Participating in a semester study abroad program is undoubtedly a time of important transition. This research met students directly as they were naturally engaged during pre-departure, while abroad, and after re-entry transitions. Grounded in psychology and the twentieth century philosophy of Husserl (2012), phenomenology strives to capture the essence of an experience from those who have experienced it (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). In alignment with phenomenological methods, I constructed a longitudinal data collection strategy and data analysis plan to generate a comprehensive description of the phenomenon: expectations and experiences of adjustment for U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities.

**Data collection.** This study explored the academic, cultural, and social expectations and experiences of U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities. Therefore, I purposively selected a sample of 12 students who were accepted to study abroad in direct enrollment or exchange programs within Great Britain during the spring 2015 semester.
These students came from three institutions in the southeastern U.S. All three institutions are large, public research universities in the same U.S. state. My original research design also included one large private university and one small private college; however, eligible participants from these two private institutions either did not meet selection criteria or did not choose to participate in the study.

My original data collection plan included students throughout the entire United Kingdom, as well as students across diverse study abroad program types. During the data collection process, I refined my focus to direct enrollment programs in Great Britain and interviewed students in England, Scotland, and Wales. Restricting the sample to Great Britain instead of the entire U.K. allowed me to use my time abroad most effectively and to increase my participant sample, particularly since my phenomenological focus was on conducting extensive interviews with students. With more time and resources, I would have included Northern Ireland in the sample to reflect students throughout the U.K.

I applied multiple sampling strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to select a group of 12 students. These students were distributed across nine universities in England, Scotland, and Wales. Aligning with study abroad enrollment trends (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011), half of the group was within greater London. Dukes (1984) recommends between three and eight participants for phenomenology, so a sample size of 12 exceeded recommendations.

In this phenomenological study, I collected longitudinal data that encompassed three phases of the direct enrollment semester study abroad experience in Britain: pre-departure in December 2014; while abroad in March 2015; and re-entry in September 2015. During the spring 2015 study abroad semester, I traveled to Britain for three weeks to conduct an
international site visit and collect interview data in-person.

Further, I originally sought to explore experiences throughout multiple study abroad program types. As I sought to describe a shared experience in a common phenomenon, I realized it would not be empirically appropriate to interview students across program type. Instead, I focused the research to include students on direct enrollment or exchange programs, as they were required to enroll as full-time students in a British university and did not have an outside study abroad provider offering supplemental support.

The central component of phenomenological data collection includes conducting interviews from those who are experiencing/have experienced the phenomenon of study (Merriam, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). I interviewed participants before departure in December 2014, while abroad in March 2015, and upon re-entry to the U.S. in September 2015. I utilized the semi-structured and personal life story format recommended by Van Manen (1990) for phenomenological interviews. I also conducted interviews with six study abroad advisors and faculty, both in the U.S. and Britain. All advisors and faculty were responsible for preparing, supporting, or teaching the participants during their direct enrollment semester in Britain.

My original data collection plan included document analysis, as well as naturalistic observation. Due to resource and time limitations, and because phenomenology should be primarily focused upon the voices of those who experience the phenomenon, I removed document analysis and naturalistic observation from the data collection strategy. This revision allowed me to focus more time, resources, and energy on those who had direct experience with the phenomenon. I conducted interviews with faculty and advisors in order
to supplement and provide additional context for participants’ voices.

Finally, in alignment with phenomenological methods (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990), I kept a detailed journal throughout the research process, beginning before data collection, and continuing beyond data analysis. As I engaged in journaling, I bracketed my personal feelings and views regarding the research topic and theories, including my previous experiences as an international educator, in order for the authentic experiences of the participants to come forward (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data analysis.** Within the simultaneous stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the data analysis method for this study followed the structure of psychological phenomenology. This was an especially appropriate choice for this research design because psychological phenomenology is a useful lens for longitudinal studies (Giorgi, 1985, 2012). Additionally, this data analysis framework provided a clear and comprehensive structure, which supported the rigor of this study.

The psychological phenomenological approach for data analysis included five steps:

1. I read the data in its entirety to understand the data within the context of the study.
2. I read the text again with the specific purpose of identifying “meaning units” (Giorgi, 1985, p.10).
3. I collected and defined all of the relevant and psychologically explicit meaning units into themes. I expressed the insights gained from these meaning units in more direct terms.
4. I synthesized the “transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the subject’s experience” (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10). This statement is often
referenced as the structure or essence of the experience. I communicated the phenomenon into a narrative description.

5. I utilized the narrative essential structure to make connections with the raw data and clarify interpretations and understandings of the data. (Giorgi, 1985; 2012)

**Trustworthiness.** I took deliberate steps throughout the research process to ensure the trustworthiness in this study. I addressed issues of transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability to collectively enhance the rigor of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Meadows and Morse, 2001). For example, I conducted an extensive and purposeful sampling strategy to facilitate thick, rich descriptions, which enhanced transferability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I triangulated complementary sources of interview data and engaged in member checking to enhance credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999). I enhanced dependability by creating a theoretically grounded research design (Miles & Huberman, 1994), keeping an “audit trail” of my research decisions (Meadows & Morse, 2001, 194), and seeking peer colleague reviews of my findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through my journaling process of bracketing or Epoche (Moustakas, 1994), I enhanced confirmability and emphasized participant-based conclusions. I also followed comprehensive structures of data collection and data analysis to increase the confirmability of this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited in a number of ways. My goal for this research was to purposefully understand a smaller group in-depth within a particular context. I applied deliberate sampling strategies for “maximizing variation” in the sample by including a large
and diverse group of students who participated in direct enrollment programs throughout Britain (Merriam, 2002, p. 29). Additionally, I have provided “rich, thick description” in the analysis of the data (Merriam, 2002, p. 29). This research was not intended to be generalizable; however, these strategies enhanced rigor and trustworthiness (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Readers can contextualize, compare, and apply the results of this study to other relevant situations (Merriam, 2002). This aligns with Patton’s (1990) recommendation that qualitative research be considered within “context-bound extrapolations rather than generalizations” (p. 491).

I was limited by research design in this study. I interviewed participants at three distinct points of the study abroad experience. While it would have been ideal to conduct interviews throughout the entire study abroad semester, resource and time constraints prohibited me from doing so. This limitation would have been more problematic within the design of an ethnographic study, as my level of engagement with participants and multiple interview sources exceeded many recommendations for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994).

I was also limited by time and resources. As a phenomenological study, my primary focus in this research was to conduct multiple, extensive interviews with participants in order to capture the essence of their experience (Moustakas, 1994). My original research plan included additional sources of data, such as naturalistic observation in orientation sessions and academic classrooms, as well as document analysis of orientation materials. Understanding time constraints and maintaining focus on rigorous phenomenological methods, I removed these non-interview data sources from the research design. I
supplemented participant perspectives by interviewing faculty and study abroad advisors in both the U.S. and Britain. I also focused the study on Great Britain, instead of the U.K. as a whole, by removing Northern Ireland from the sample. In order to utilize my three-week site visit most effectively, it was critical for me to spend as much time as possible with participants and educators on campuses rather than spend excessive time in transit.

**Delimitations of the Study**

Regarding delimitations, this study was bound by three large, public universities within one southeastern U.S. state. While the multiple sampling strategies I embedded were designed to produce a purposive sample typical of the U.S direct enrollment study abroad population in Britain, I was limited to students from these institutions who were accepted to participate in direct enrollment programs within Britain and students who were interested in this study.

It is important to note that study abroad programs are not accessible to all students in higher education for academic, financial, behavioral, personal, or other reasons. Additionally, of the students who do participate in study abroad programs, approximately 12% study abroad in the U.K. (Institute for International Education, 2015). While this represents the largest group to one destination, it is likely not representative of the current population in U.S. higher education.

Additionally, different structures of study abroad programs vary significantly (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). The study abroad field includes three primary types of programs. The first type, direct enrollment or exchange programs, includes a structure where students fully enroll as international students in universities with other participants from
around the world. The level of additional support and cultural orientation varies by institution and may depend upon resources and international student population size. The second type, island programs, includes organization and management by a study abroad provider that may be based in the U.S. with an office in Britain. In this type of programming, U.S. students live, study, and participate in experiential programming with other U.S. study abroad students. These programs are often characterized by a high level of on-site support, culture-specific orientations and events, U.S.-style teaching methods, and a higher cost. The third program type is considered a hybrid of the two and is most often distinguished by the option of enrollment in a British institution for academic course work, along with the on-site support of a study abroad provider organization.

This study was bound by direct enrollment/exchange programs in Britain, where participants enrolled as full-time international students for a semester study abroad program without the support of an outside provider. I deliberately selected this program type because this structure required the most direct engagement with the British academic system and with local peers. It is noteworthy that students on other program types may have very different experiences in Britain. Research has shown differences in intercultural learning gains by distinctions in program design (Vande Berg et al., 2009). Understanding these differences, and maintaining a research focus to describe a shared experience within the phenomenon, I determined that it would be empirically inappropriate to seek an essence of experience across students on different program types. In doing so, I acknowledge that this research was not fully representative of the current study abroad field because it does not include all program types.
Overview of the Study

For as long as the Institute of International Education has published study abroad participation rates, the United Kingdom has been the top U.S. study abroad destination (Institute for International Education, 2001; 2015). Despite enrollment trends, the international education field has a critical lack of empirical understanding regarding this group of students. This likely aligns with an assumption that students who study abroad in more similar countries will enjoy an easier transition and adjustment abroad (Church, 1982; Paige, 1993). A number of noted international educators in the British Isles, as well as expatriate scholars, have recently questioned this assumption of an easier experience. These scholarly opinion papers and exploratory research studies highlight unique issues for culturally similar transitions (Edwards, 2000; Fenwick, et. al, 2003; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2010; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Selmer, 2007; Selmer et al., 2007; Selmer & Lauring, 2009; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). Consistent across this literature is the importance of setting expectations or the inability to appropriately do so. This longitudinal phenomenological study extends exploratory literature and directly addresses the critical research gap to describe the academic, cultural, and social expectations and experiences of U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities.

In Chapter Two, I begin with a discussion of the two complementary theoretical frameworks that guided this study: Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment, and Martin et al’s (1995) modified expectancy violations framework. Both address unique aspects of expectations and cultural adjustment with regard to the study abroad experience. I then provide a comprehensive review of cross-
cultural adjustment literature. Aligning with the theoretically grounded (Pitts, 2009) subquestions of this research study, I present the literature in three separate sections: academic adjustment, cultural adjustment, and social adjustment. In each section, I review and critique previous literature and identify specific gaps that I addressed in this study. The literature review is structured to align with the research subquestions because these three areas generated distinctive findings for independent publications.

Chapter Three includes an outline for the methodological rationale and structure for the study, including a discussion for why qualitative research and phenomenological methods in particular were most appropriate for the research questions. I also review plans for purposeful sample selection (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and longitudinal data collection strategies, including pre-departure, while abroad, and post-return stages of the study abroad experience in Britain. I utilized the data analysis structure of psychological phenomenology (Giorgi, 1985, 2012) to synthesize themes into an essential structure or essence of the participants’ expectations and experiences in British universities. Finally, I provide an overview of this multi-step data analysis structure, as well as the multiple ways I enhanced rigor by addressing trustworthiness and ethical issues.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the expectations and experiences of adjustment for U.S. study abroad students in British universities. This study was made necessary by the critical gap in literature regarding this group of study abroad students and by recent calls from the international education field to be wary of assumptions that cultural similarity elicits an easier transition (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2010, 2012; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). Informed by modified expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1978, 1993; Martin et al., 1995), and the descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment (Pitts, 2009), I addressed assumptions and research gaps through a longitudinal qualitative design, which explored academic, cultural, and social adjustment with U.S. semester students who directly enrolled in British universities. A review of the literature will explore current knowledge about international cross-cultural adjustment for students in higher education and will situate the need for in-depth research on U.S. study abroad students in Britain.

This review will begin with a comprehensive discussion of the two complementary theoretical frameworks that grounded this research study, Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment, and Martin et al.’s (1995) modified expectancy violations framework. These theories address related yet distinctive concepts of pre-departure expectation and cross-cultural adjustment in the study abroad process. Following a discussion of theoretical frameworks, this review will discuss three
relevant strands of empirical literature which correspond to the three sets of subquestions in this study: academic adjustment, cultural adjustment, and social adjustment. This literature review has been intentionally structured to align with subquestions because these three areas yielded distinctive findings for independent publications.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research study was grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks that combine pre-departure expectations with cross-cultural adjustment. The first theory focuses on how expectations impact the cross-cultural adjustment process, and the second theory examines how expectations impact the evaluation of a study abroad experience. Applying both frameworks allowed for theory triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). These theories have been used successfully in research with U.S. study abroad students, but neither has been utilized in a focused study on U.S. study abroad students in British universities.

Both theories are rooted in the field of communication, which has direct relevance for a study that examined how students form expectations, interact with others, and process cross-cultural encounters within a new environment. It is noteworthy that communication theories have not been widely used in previous study abroad research, especially within English-speaking countries. As such, this study provides a useful new lens through which scholars and practitioners can view cross-cultural adjustment between culturally similar locations.

Additionally, as noted by Pitts (2009), the majority of research on study abroad cross-cultural adjustment has been through outcomes-oriented theory rather than process-oriented theory. Studies that utilize process-oriented theories, Pitts (2009) argued, are significant
because they present a unique framework for analyzing adjustment issues. This research applied process-oriented theory, which adds another layer of distinction from much of the study abroad literature to date.

**Pitts’s (2009) model of expectations, talk, and identity.** Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment (see Figure 2) emerged from a 15-month ethnographic study on U.S. study abroad students in Paris, France. Through this research, Pitts (2009) applied and extended a foundational model of cultural adjustment from Kim (2001) to describe the adjustment process for semester study abroad students. Pitts’s (2009) research explored how gaps in student expectations elicited new aspects to cultural adjustment theory. Pitts (2009) examined these expectation gaps in addition to other cultural adjustment issues through the lens of Y.Y. Kim’s (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation.

**Kim’s (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation.** Y.Y. Kim’s (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation, which formed the foundation of Pitts’s (2009) research, was created from research on stress and adaptation (Pitts, 2009). Kim’s primary concern for theory development was “not whether individuals adapt, but how and why they adapt” (p. 38). Within this framework, communication is the foundation for navigating within new cultures, mediating intercultural encounters, and developing new cultural identities (Kim, 2001).

According to Kim (2001), each person has an “unconscious cultural script,” and entering a new culture requires a deviation from “familiar and assumed” behaviors that may be taken for granted (p. 50). Kim identified the ideal eventual goal in the cultural adjustment
process as assimilation, which is “a state of the highest degree of acculturation” (p. 54). Full cultural assimilation is a lifetime goal (Kim, 2001). Short-term travelers, such as semester study abroad students, will likely not reach assimilation and will more properly fall between minimal acculturation to maximum acculturation (Kim, 2001). Recognizing that cultural adjustment is an ongoing process, Kim created the stress-adaptation-growth model to represent these concepts.

Figure 1. Stress-adaptation-growth model by Y. Y. Kim (2001).

**Stress-adaptation-growth model.** Kim’s (2001) theoretical process is called the stress-adaptation-growth model. Kim noted that humans by nature aim to hold variables constant in their environments, but entering a new culture makes this virtually impossible. Cultural adaptation, therefore, can cause stress. This stress is most severe during the initial phase of adaptation (Kim, 2001). There is possibility, however, for travelers to adapt and
grow from this stress. Kim notes, “A crisis, once managed, presents the stranger with an
topportunity for new learning and for strengthening his or her coping abilities” (p. 56).

Kim’s (2001) stress-adaptation-growth model is in the shape of a spiral (see Figure 1). As a student progresses in an intercultural context over time and develops more
knowledge, the spiral becomes tighter and smaller. A key component of the spiral is a “draw
back and leap forward motion, such that as the sojourner experiences stress she withdraws.
The withdrawal activates an adjustment sequence through which she manages the stress and
reorganizes herself, subsequently propelling her to ‘leap forward’ with new insight” (Pitts,
2009, p. 451). This leap forward is where the intercultural growth occurs over time.
Regarding stress, adaptation, and growth, Kim noted that, “none of the three occurs without
the others, and each occurs because of the others” (p. 56). The process continues as long as
there are new intercultural challenges in the environment (Kim, 2001).

Within this model, Kim (2001) defines cross-cultural adaptation as “the dynamic
process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural
environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and
functional relationships with those environments” (p. 31). There are three key intercultural
transformations that occur within Kim’s adaptation process (Pitts, 2009). The first
transformation is functional fitness, which requires a student to interact competently in the
host culture. The second transformation is sound psychological health, which requires
transitional stress to subside, including mental, emotional, and physical trauma. The third
transformation is intercultural identity, also called intercultural personhood, which requires a
student to embrace the perspectives of multiple cultures (Pitts, 2009). This model grounded
Pitts’s (2009) research on semester study abroad students in France. Pitts applied and extended this model based upon ethnographic findings.

**Pitts’s (2009) model and findings.** Pitts’s (2009) research highlighted the importance of both expectations and communication in study abroad cultural adjustment. Research questions in Pitts’s (2009) study explored a) the nature and source of student sojourner expectations about study abroad; b) the role of everyday talk in the management of expectations and expectation gaps across a short-term program; and c) the relationship between student identity shifts, expectations, and everyday talk.

Through a 15-month ethnographic study with students on a semester program in Paris, France, Pitts (2009) conducted intensive fieldwork through participant-observation, group and individual narrative interviews, and unstructured participant journaling. Through three tier levels of participation, Pitts engaged with 127 students throughout the study. She analyzed data through the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1978) to extend Kim’s (2001) framework and develop a descriptive model of expectations, talk, identity, and adjustment (Pitts, 2009).

Within Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model (see Figure 2), students form expectations about their study abroad experience from multiple external sources. These include the international host university, co-students, friends/family at home, host family, and home university. Expectations fall into four categories: academic/language, social, travel/cultural, and value/culture. Throughout a study abroad semester as students encounter intercultural difference, they “experience gaps between their expectations and the reality of the sojourn” (Pitts, 2009, p. 459). These expectation gaps produce uncertainty and encourage students to
make adjustments that will help them better manage stress and increase their social success (Pitts, 2009).

Students make these adjustments through communication (Pitts, 2009). Pitts’s (2009) model describes nine types of talk: advice, superficial introductory talk, information sharing, comparison, humor, storytelling, gossip, complaint, and supportive talk. Students “evaluate, interpret, and modify their own experiences abroad through the nine types of talk” (Pitts, 2009, p. 459). Additionally, communication allows them to determine whether the cultural adjustment challenges they encounter are normal and appropriate. Most importantly, notes Pitts (2009), these methods of communication allow students to adjust pre-departure expectations throughout the semester and modify behavior to align with revised expectations. As the semester progresses, students’ expectations become more aligned with reality, and stress decreases. As a result, students are more likely to function and interact successfully and appropriately in a cross-cultural environment. This facilitates a higher perception of “succeeding at study abroad” (Pitts, 2009, p. 459).

*Figure 2.* Pitts (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity.
Through longitudinal ethnographic research, Pitts (2009) extended Kim’s (2001) theory of cultural adjustment and developed a descriptive model, including the nature and source of student expectations for study abroad. According to the model, when students participate in intercultural experiences, they encounter gaps between their expectations and reality (Pitts, 2009). The resulting uncertainty provokes students to make adjustments in order to cope with stress and increase their effectiveness within society. This particular model reflects adjustments that are communicative in nature. Over time, expectations become more closely aligned with reality. As a result, stress decreases, and students are better able to function while abroad (Pitts, 2009). Pitts noted that previous to her research, very few studies had addressed expectations and study abroad. One noteworthy exception, as mentioned by Pitts (2009), is Martin et al’s (1995) application of expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1993). This model was the second theoretical framework that grounded this study on U.S. students in Britain.

**Expectancy violations theory.** Burgoon originally developed expectancy violations theory (EVT) in 1978 to explain nonverbal behaviors, but the theory has since expanded in scope and sophistication (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005; Burgoon et al., 1995), most notably to provide a framework for cross-cultural communication. Martin et al. (1995) provided the first comprehensive application of EVT in a study abroad context and developed a modification of the framework to include variables that may impact study abroad students’ expectations (see Figure 3).

**Burgoon’s expectancy violations theory.** Expectancy violations theory (EVT) is grounded in the “assumption that people have numerous deeply ingrained expectations about
the ways others will communicate” (Burgoon et al., 1995, p. 94). These expectations are shaped by social and cultural norms and knowledge (Burgoon et al., 1995). They are “learned and reinforced within one’s culture since birth, operate outside conscious awareness and produce habituated, automated behavior patterns” (Burgoon et al., 1995, p. 94-95). In an intercultural context, if one does not take time in advance to learn about another culture’s standards, he or she will revert to stereotypical assumptions in expectations and interactions (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). Burgoon et al. (1995) noted that it can become “arousing and distracting” when someone’s expected communication patterns deviate from reality (p. 95). This theory posits that expectations wield substantial influence on impressions and outcomes of interpersonal interactions (Burgoon, 1993).

Within EVT, three factors influence expectations during interactions: communicator characteristics, relationship, and context (Burgoon, 1993). Communicator characteristics include physical appearance, personality, demographics, and communication style. Relationship factors include degree of familiarity, similarity, attraction, and status. Context factors include issues surrounding the situational environment and definitions of appropriate behavior. (Burgoon, 1993). Regarding intercultural interactions, Burgoon (1993) notes, “Because expectancies incorporate cultural display rules for appropriate linguistic and nonverbal choices, the content of expectancies clearly must be culture specific” (p. 32).

In addition to the importance of culturally grounded expectations, another significant aspect of EVT is the concept of valences. EVT includes both communicator reward valences and violation valences (Burgoon et al., 1995). Communicator reward valences relate to the notion that during interactions, people naturally evaluate each other on a continuum of
positive and negative attributes. The communicator valence “represents a net assessment of how favorably regarded” a person is evaluated for a specific interaction (Burgoon et al., 1995, p. 95).

The violation valence represents a positive or negative value a person places on an unexpected interaction (Burgoon et al., 1995). With EVT, expectations are not simply met or unmet; expectations are also violated positively or violated negatively. When expectations are violated positively, this means expectations were incorrect, but the outcome is better than anticipated. If expectations are violated negatively, the outcome is worse than expected, and a person may apply a negative evaluation toward an experience (Martin et al., 1995). In both verbal and nonverbal communication, these expectancy violations are influenced by how one interprets the communication behavior (Burgoon, 1993).

Burgoon et al. (1995) summarized EVT with the following six propositions:

1. Interactants develop expectations about the verbal and nonverbal communication of others.

2. Violations of communication expectations are arousing and distracting, causing an attentional shift to communicator, relationship, and violation characteristics and meanings.

3. Communicator reward valence moderates the interpretation of ambiguous or polysemous communicative behaviors.


5. Violation valences are a function of (a) the evaluation of the enacted behavior;
(b) the direction of the discrepancy between the expected and enacted behavior toward a more favorably or unfavorably valued position; and (c) the magnitude of the discrepancy. Enacted behaviors that are more favorably evaluated than expected behaviors constitute positive violations; enacted behaviors that are less favorably evaluated than expected are negative violations.

6. Positive violations produce more favorable outcomes and negative violations produce more unfavorable ones relative to expectancy confirmation. (p. 97)

Many studies have utilized Burgoon’s conceptualization of EVT within the field of communication to examine diverse issues. Examples include studies on social attractiveness (Afifi & Burgoon, 2000), physician-patient communication (Burgoon, Birk, & Hall, 2006), health communication campaigns (Campo, Cameron, Brossard, & Frazer, 2004), college classroom behavior (Booth-Butterfield & Noguchi, 2000), email response (Kalman & Rafaeli, 2010); mobile phone use (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2015), friendship affection (Floyd & Voludakis, 1999), mindfulness and interpersonal communication (Burgoon, Berger, & Waldron, 2002), and returning from international sojourns (Lobdell, 1990).

Recent research strands have been from business and management fields, specifically from the perspective of local members of the host culture/host organization. Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) found EVT to be an appropriate lens to examine Millennials in the workplace, noting the potential for expectancy violation when Millennials’ natural workplace behaviors differed from their older coworkers’ expectations for them. In addition, Joardar (2011) explored how expectancy violations influenced newcomers from a different culture being accepted into workgroups. Within this research, when a newcomer’s cross-cultural
adaptability and performance violated local employee expectations, the newcomer was more likely to be accepted.

In a related workplace findings using EVT, studies determined that workers experienced surprise and irritation when their expectations of similarity with other colleagues were negatively violated (Phillips & Loyd, 2007). Phillips (2003) discovered that teams with surface-level similarities experienced greater disagreements and expectancy violations than teams with surface-level diversity. Participants were irritated when colleagues they perceived to be similar had different perspectives on tasks. Of particular relevance to this research on U.S. students in Britain, Phillips & Loyd (2007) discovered that when group members observed surface-level similarities, they also expected deeper-level similarities.

**Martin et al.’s (1995) modified expectancy violations framework.** Recognizing the important connections between EVT and cultural adjustment theory, Martin et al. (1995) provided the first application of EVT in longitudinal study abroad research. Martin et al. recognized the importance in assessing study abroad student expectations through longitudinal methods but noted that previous literature on the topic either applied retrospective cross-sectional data or failed to extend beyond theoretical speculation. Martin et al. (1995) designed a longitudinal study to explore:

(a) the degree to which sojourners’ predeparture expectations are fulfilled or violated, (b) whether the fulfillment or violation of expectations is influenced by gender, prior experiences with transitions, and sojourn location, and (c) whether the fulfillment or violation of expectations influences the overall evaluation of an intercultural experience. (p. 88)
**Variables.** Before the Martin et al.’s (1995) longitudinal study, Rohrlich and Martin (1991) conducted preliminary research to determine which variables contributed to the development of study abroad expectations. Rohrlich and Martin’s study produced a list of variables related to study abroad expectations: gender, previous travel and prior experience with transitions, and location of impending sojourn. Martin et al. (1995) determined that it would be reasonable “that the same variables would influence the fulfillment or violation of these expectations” (p. 91). As such, Martin et al. used this variable list in their longitudinal research on study abroad expectations. The following sections will provide an overview of why each variable was selected by Martin et al. for longitudinal research on study abroad expectations.

**Gender.** Rohrlich and Martin (1991) found that males and females differed in their conceptualization of expectations. Rohrlich and Martin noted, “Males held more vague (and positive) predeparture expectations, and we speculate that these may be more likely met than the females’ more specific expectations” (p. 91). It is important to clarify, however, that while these findings aligned with studies that suggested males and females differ in expectations (Eccles, 1987; Erkhut, 1983; Vollmer, 1986), a study of American expatriates in London showed no male and female distinctions in expectations (Weissman & Furnham, 1987).

**Prior transitional experience.** Multiple scholars have noted that prior life transitions can be an important factor in determining cross-cultural adaptation (Church, 1982; Dunbar, 1992; Furnham, 1988; Kim, 1988). Martin et al. (1995) agreed that students who had experience with prior life transitions might be more likely to develop appropriate
expectations for a study abroad experience. Martin et al. designed their study so that transitions could be in the form of both prior domestic relocations (number of domestic moves) and prior international travel (length of previous sojourns abroad).

**Location of sojourn/program.** Martin et al. (1995) also included location of the sojourn (i.e. program location) as an important variable in research on expectations. Explaining the rationale, Martin et al. noted that England might be a location where this variable could be especially relevant:

For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals who expect a sojourn in England to be very similar to living in the United States often find these expectations are violated. In contrast, individuals expect a sojourn in a more exotic place to be very different and these expectations are more likely upheld. (p. 92)

**Theoretical model.** Martin et al. (1995) applied the aforementioned variables of EVT (Burgoon, 1978, 1993) and developed a modified expectancy violations framework for expectations and cultural adaptation in study abroad (see Figure 3). In this model, students’ pre-departure expectations prior to a study abroad experience may be positive or negative (Martin et al., 1995). As a student travels abroad and has intercultural interactions, “these expectations are then met or violated negatively or positively” (Martin et al., 1995, p 92-93). Martin et al. hypothesized that students whose expectations were violated positively would have more positive evaluations of their study abroad experience. Students whose expectations were violated negatively would have more negative evaluations of their study abroad experience (Martin et al., 1995). Martin et al. included variables of gender, location of sojourn, and prior transition experience.
Martin et al. (1995) modified expectancy violations framework.

**Martin et al. (1995) longitudinal research findings.** Applying this theoretical framework, Martin et al. (1995) conducted longitudinal survey research with 248 students. One of the primary findings of the study was that fulfillment or violations of pre-departure expectations were significantly related to program location (Martin et al., 1995). Most notably, students in England reported expectancy violations more negatively than students in other countries with regard to language, climate, and course work (Martin et al. 1995). Given these results, Martin et al. called into question assumptions within international education literature and professional practice that cultural similarity always leads to easier adjustments. They also noted the need for further studies that explored this area of cultural adjustment (Martin et al., 1995). This dissertation research directly addressed these assumptions by exploring expectations and experiences for U.S. study abroad students in British universities.
In addition to program location, gender was “somewhat related to variability in the violation of expectations” (Martin et al., 1995, p. 103), particularly in the areas of language learning and using unfamiliar currency. Martin et al. (1995) found that in general, males held more positive expectations that were met, and females held more negative expectations that were met. In language learning and unfamiliar currency, however, both genders experienced expectancy violations in opposite directions. Males’ experiences were more challenging than anticipated, and females’ experiences were less challenging than anticipated. Previous domestic relocations had only a minor effect on expectancy violations (Martin et al., 1995).

In general, the findings from Martin et al. (1995) determined a “positive relationship between expectation violation and evaluation of sojourn” (p. 104). Suggested future research directions included applying EVT to the cultural adaptation process, extending the investigation to include the re-entry process and exploring the framework within a qualitative study (Martin et al., 1995). This dissertation addressed all of these suggested research directions to extend the applicability of the modified EVT framework.

Additional studies have utilized theoretical concepts from Martin et al. (1995), though none have applied the theory in academic, social, or cultural adjustment contexts for U.S. study abroad students in Britain. Of particular relevance to this study, research within the tourism field (Nyaupane, Teye, & Paris, 2008) demonstrated that compared to non-English destinations, U.S. summer study abroad students in Australia had the most positive pre-departure attitudes towards the country and the most negative post-program attitudes. Nyaupane et al. (2008) attributed this attitude shift to inflated expectations toward a culturally similar destination. In a tourism rather than educational context, these results
offered support for Martin et al.’s findings. Martin et al.’s work and EVT (Burgoon, 1993) have also contributed to literature that explores the following: how expectations impact participation in study abroad (Goldstein & Kim, 2006), student perceptions of host family experiences (Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2014), expectations for re-entry in study abroad (Mooradian, 2004), and non-English speaking international student populations (Cox, 2006). Mooradian (2004) advocated for increased research that utilizes EVT in longitudinal studies, noting that Martin et al. (1995) was the only example. A longitudinal phenomenology on U.S. study abroad students in British universities directly supports this significant gap in research.

**Review of Cross-Cultural Adjustment Literature**

Building upon theory from Pitts (2009) and Martin et al. (1995), the following sections present a comprehensive review of the cross-cultural adjustment literature on study abroad and international students in higher education. This review will be presented in three distinct sections: academic adjustment, cultural adjustment, and social adjustment, which aligns with the theoretically grounded (Pitts, 2009) subquestions of this research study.

In this review, I will clarify what we currently know from relevant literature regarding the academic, cultural, and social adjustment of students. I will also identify multiple critical gaps in knowledge that were directly addressed by this research study. In doing so, I will further build the necessity for a focused qualitative study on U.S. study abroad students in Britain.

**Academic adjustment.** Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment incorporates both academics and language in the
concept of academic expectations. As such, this review on academic adjustment literature will include studies that have addressed both academic and language adjustment in international higher education. Before doing so, however, I will provide a foundation for the overall academic context of the U.K.

**Higher education in the United Kingdom.** In order to understand how U.S. study abroad students may adjust to academic life in British universities, it is important to situate a review of the literature within the history and current structure of higher education in the United Kingdom.

**Founding institutions.** The U.K. has a rich higher education history, which includes the oldest universities in the English-speaking world. Oxford University was founded in approximately 1096, according to historical documents that suggest the beginning of teaching in the city (Baskerville, MacLeod, & Saunders, 2011). After the founding of Oxford University, an association of scholars gathered in 1209 to form the University of Cambridge. During the 15th century, papal bull established the three first Scottish universities of St. Andrews, Glasgow, and Aberdeen. University of Edinburgh followed shortly after in 1583 by royal charter. These original founding U.K. institutions of higher education continue to be among the most prestigious universities not only in the United Kingdom, but also throughout the world (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Growth and expansion of higher education.** Throughout the 19th century, the U.K. experienced a significant expansion of higher education (Baskerville et al., 2011). St. David’s College, Lampeter (University of Wales), Durham University, King’s College London, and University College London were created through royal charters during this time. As major
industrial cities grew at the later part of the century, medical, science, and engineering colleges followed (Baskerville et al., 2011). Many of these institutions became known as the “redbrick universities,” and they included Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, and Sheffield (Baskerville et al., 2011, p. 5). The U.K. had nine universities and multiple university colleges by the end of World War II (Baskerville et al., 2011).

As the U.K. population, economy, and technology needs grew in the 1950s and 1960s, the government subsequently expanded higher education to establish colleges of advanced technology (Baskerville et al., 2011). These colleges were established in the mid 1950s and received university status in the mid 1960s. Institutions in this category included Aston, Bath, Bradford, Brunnel, City, Loughborough, Salford, and Surrey (Baskerville et al., 2011). The University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology was integrated into Cardiff University in 1988. Additionally, these two decades included the creation of seven new universities and 13 university colleges, including Hull and Leicester, which achieved university status. These seven new universities included East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex, Warwick, and York (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Efforts to increase access of U.K. higher education.** In 1992, the U.K. government passed the Further and Higher Education Act, which gave university-level status to 35 smaller polytechnic and college-level institutions (Baskerville et al., 2011). Polytechnic institutions had the primary purpose for vocational or technical training. Institutions in this category have since been referred to as “post-92 or modern universities, though it should be noted that many of them have long and illustrious histories as vocational institutions” (Baskerville et al., 2011, p. 5).
The purpose of this intentional and gradual higher education expansion was to meet the needs of the U.K. population by a diverse spectrum of organizations (Baskerville et al., 2011). The collective group of organizations that provide higher education in the U.K. are called higher education institutions, or HEI’s. The U.K. prides itself on having a diversity of higher education institutions in order for prospective students and international partners to identify the best matches for their interests (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Impact of higher education to U.K. economy.** As of 2007-2008, higher education in the U.K. contributed at minimum £59 billion to the nation’s economy and generated approximately 2.3% of the GDP (Baskerville et al., 2011). The international student population has contributed nearly £4.5 billion each year to U.K. higher education in addition to contributing significantly to the business, cultural, and social life within the United Kingdom. While the U.S. is the top worldwide destination for international students, the U.K. is consistently ranked second with more than 10% of the worldwide international students (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Global expansion of U.K. higher education.** As an interesting global expansion of U.K. higher education, of the 408,685 international students who were enrolled in courses toward a U.K. higher education degree in 2009-2010, only 68,450 (16.7%) of these students were studying within the European Union (Baskerville et al., 2011). The remaining 340,235 students (83.3%) were studying outside of the EU on distance learning programs, international collaborative arrangements, international branch campuses, or partner organizations overseas (Baskerville et al., 2011). The UK-based Open University serves over 209,000 students both in the U.K. and throughout the world who take courses on a
predominantly part-time basis (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Relationship between U.K. higher education and government.** Within the U.K., institutions receive power to award higher education degrees by either royal charter or Act of Parliament. (Baskerville et al., 2011) The U.K. government regulates degree-awarding powers. Institutions that have not been granted these degree-awarding powers are not recognized, but may provide transfer courses that lead to an eventual degree elsewhere. These more than 700 institutions are known as listed bodies (Baskerville et al., 2011).

While the government plays a significant role in the degree-awarding status, it is important to distinguish that U.K. HEI’s are not managed or owned by the government. They are autonomous and independent legal institutions with councils that are responsible for strategy and financial management (Baskerville et al., 2011). All HEI’s, with the exception of the University of Buckingham, receive some public funding, which is calculated as a percentage of total income. Higher education policy is developed by each of the separate countries that comprise the U.K. The government has no role in academic courses or human resources. Faculty and staff are employees of individual institutions, not the government. Pay recommendations are negotiated on a national level by an organization that represents trade unions and institutional management (Baskerville et al., 2011).

This independent and autonomous structure has created a “well-deserved and jealously guarded reputation for intellectual and academic freedom” within U.K. higher education institutions (Baskerville et al., 2011, p. 9). U.K. HEI’s consider their autonomy a significant reason why they have been successful in research, scholarship, and education on a global scale.
**Degree structures within the U.K.** As part of this autonomy, institutions set their own admissions requirements for degree programs, called “courses” (Baskerville et al., 2011, p. 9). A bachelor’s degree in the U.K. is called a “first degree course” and is often “awarded with honours” (Baskerville et al., 2011). In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the first degree course is a three-year degree (Baskerville et al., 2011). In Scotland, a first degree course is four years and more closely resembles a U.S. undergraduate degree (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.). The course may require more time if it involves practical work experience. Additionally, professional degrees (medicine, dentistry, and architecture, for example) may require six to seven years of education, plus further specialist training as required (Baskerville et al., 2011). In the postgraduate level, taught master’s (no research) programs are typically one year in length, and research master’s programs are two years. A doctoral degree is at least three years long (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Admissions structures in U.K. higher education.** Students in England and Northern Ireland are required to take the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in secondary school. After completing this assessment, students may elect to leave secondary school, pursue vocational or technical college, or continue secondary study and take the Advanced Level examinations, known as the A-levels, which are the required entrance exams for U.K. universities (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.). Students in Scotland are required to complete seven years of primary education and four years of secondary education before completing the Scottish Certificate of Education, which is considered the Scottish equivalent of A-level exams (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.).

The significant majority of undergraduate applicants apply for all institutions through
a centralized agency called the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS); whereas, most post-graduate students apply directly to the institution of interest (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Current student population in U.K. higher education.** Traditionally, students in U.K. higher education have been 18-21 years old, enrolled full-time, living on or near campus, and studying in institutions away from their hometowns (Baskerville et al., 2011). This traditional model has shifted in recent years, however, and there has been a considerable increase in students who are enrolled part-time, older in age, living at home or studying very close to home, and more engaged in community activities than university activities. As noted by Baskerville et al. (2011), “More than two-thirds (of students) travel less than 62 miles to their place of study” (p. 10).

**Declaring a major within the U.K.** Students in U.K. higher education may begin working toward their major field of study as early as secondary school. As such the concept of an undeclared or undecided major is uncommon (International Student Exchange, n.d.). The concept of general education, which is central to the majority of U.S. higher education institutions, is considered complete at the conclusion of U.K. secondary education. Students in U.K. higher education undertake a focused curriculum and do not often enroll in departments outside of their major field of study. This is why it may be challenging for U.S. study abroad students to enroll across more than one or two departments during a study abroad semester. Faculty in each department assume that students enter courses with a foundational knowledge of the subject area (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.).

**U.K. academic structure and differences for U.S. study abroad students.** According
to study abroad providers, this academic structure can have an impact on U.S. students who enroll in the U.K. higher education system for semester or year-long study abroad programs.

As explained by the U.S.-based Institute for Study Abroad at Butler University in advising materials for the U.K.:

The British academic system is an intensive three-year program.

- First-year courses are appropriate for departments in which you have little or no prior experience;
- Second-year courses will be equivalent to advanced sophomore or junior-level U.S. courses;
- Third-year courses will be equivalent to senior-level U.S. courses;
- Fourth-year courses and higher are part of a postgraduate degree (Masters or Ph.D.);

You are not eligible to take these courses as an undergraduate study abroad student. (Institute for Study Abroad Butler University, 2014)

Another U.S.-based study abroad provider, Arcadia University, echoes this advice, “Because British students come into university ahead of most American students, Year 1 is considered equivalent to a Sophomore level course, Year 2 a Junior level, and Year 3 a Junior/Senior level” (Arcadia University College of Global Studies, 2014).

**U.K. course structure and differences for U.S. study abroad students.** Academic courses in the U.K. are called “modules” and usually fall into three categories: lectures, tutorials, and seminars. Lectures are “sometimes completely optional,” according to an academic handbook for students preparing to enroll in U.K. universities through the
International Student Exchange Program (ISEP), a well-known U.S.-based direct enrollment study abroad provider (International Student Exchange Program, n.d., p. 1). Tutorials include a small number of students in a direct meeting with the lecturer. Seminars are larger classes that, in many cases, are grounded in seminar essays. Compared to the U.S., professors in the U.K. may be less directly accessible to students. Students may be advised to consult tutors for academic advice. Students must be “self-motivated and proactive” with regard to seeking academic support (International Student Exchange Program, n.d., p. 1).

According to ISEP, “The UK education system generally emphasizes independent, self-directed study over class time, attendance, and participation” (International Student Exchange Program, n.d., p. 1). Students who participate in study abroad programs in the U.K. should expect less structure and significant outside reading. It is less common for students to receive assignments and readings throughout the semester. Students should be prepared to receive an extensive reading list accessible through the library, which is meant to serve as a guide for independent research. This is more common than all students in a class purchasing and studying a few books at once. Professors are also more likely to assign essays that require students to demonstrate an argument with supplementary sources as opposed to objective tests (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.).

Course assessment in U.K. higher education and differences for U.S. students. As a contrast to the continuous assessment method of the U.S. higher education system, students in the U.K. should expect a smaller number of papers and tests that have significant weight toward the final grade (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.). With many courses that span a full year, it would not be unusual for British students to take examinations in May.
that span an entire year’s work and comprise 100% of a year’s grades (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.). ISEP notes that, “self discipline, self-motivation, and good time management are very important in keeping up academically” in the U.K. higher education system (n.d., p. 1).

Students in the U.K. do not receive the Grade Point Average (GPA) system of degree assessment that students in the U.S. do. The U.K. has a long-established degree classification system of First-class Honours (1st), Second-class Honours, upper division (2:1), Second-class Honors, lower division (2:2), Third-class Honours (3rd), an Ordinary-degree (Pass) and Fail (Baskerville et al., 2011). As a general guide, grades of 70% and above are considered outstanding, grades between 60-69% are very good, and grades between 50-59% are good (University of Reading, n.d.). While 30 institutions are now piloting a new Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) to provide students with more specific information about their learning achievements upon graduation, the vast majority of students, including those who study in U.K. institutions for semester study abroad programs, receive marks in the current classification system (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Student affairs support in U.K. higher education and differences for U.S. students.**

In the area of student affairs or support for students outside of the classroom, it is noteworthy that in a comprehensive guide to U.K. higher education, Baskerville et al. (2011) mention only that the U.K. HEI’s:

…have a statutory obligation to support their students in establishing some form of students’ union, sometimes known as a students’ association or (in Scotland) a students’ representative council. These organizations aim to work on behalf of all
students in discussion with institutional managers and seek to provide a wide range of appropriate social, sporting and community-based activities for students. (p. 11)

This approach, or obligation of support through the establishment of a students’ union differs significantly from the U.S. model of higher education, which has developed an entire profession surrounding the field of student affairs in higher education, including core professional standards and nationwide graduate programs for prospective practitioners (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 2003).

**Current funding models in U.K. higher education.** Beginning in 2012-2013, funding in U.K. higher education has undergone a significant shift to a more tuition-driven model. This was put in place to increase student choice and competition amongst institutions (Baskerville et al., 2011). In previous years, U.K. colleges and universities received as much as £26.8 billion in funding, and more than a third of this amount came from government distributed grants. Funding councils set grant amounts through a pre-determined formula. Teaching and learning funds were distributed based on the number of students and number of taught subjects. Research funds were distributed based on volume and quality of research at the institutions. The new funding scheme will “increase tuition income routed through students while reducing the amount paid in grants to institutions through the funding councils” (Baskerville et al., 2011, p. 11). It is important to note that beyond this tuition and grant revenue, the vast majority of U.K. institutions, Oxford and Cambridge excluded, have very small endowments compared to large U.S. universities (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Research funding in U.K. higher education.** Institutions have continued to receive financial support for research through a “dual support system” (Baskerville et al., 2011, p.
The first layer of funding support is through a yearly institutional research grant from the funding councils, which allows universities the autonomy to conduct research projects that are most appropriate with their institutional goals. The second layer of funding awards additional public U.K. funds for specific research projects that are deemed worthy of investment by the U.K. research councils (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**International funding in U.K higher education.** Given the topic of this research study, it is also relevant to note that Higher Education Institutions do not receive any funding for international activities and are not permitted to utilize any public funds in recruiting or teaching international students. This includes collaborative programs or projects with overseas partner institutions (Baskerville et al., 2011). This may have a significant impact on international offices and available resources to support international students.

**Academic adjustment literature.** In alignment with this study’s theoretical framework (Pitts, 2009), this review of academics includes both academic adjustment in international higher education and language in international higher education.

**Academic challenges.** Scholars have identified some key themes that distinguish international students’ academic experiences from the experiences of their host country peers. Many of these themes have focused upon differing perceptions of students and faculty since each group enters the academic environment with a culturally grounded set of expectations.

**Student-faculty expectations.** Studies have revealed challenges when international students and host country faculty do not share the same academic expectations. Differing expectations can produce misunderstanding, adjustment difficulty, and confusion for both
international students and the host country faculty who teach and support them (Andrade, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002).

In a meta-analysis of literature regarding international students in English-speaking countries, Andrade (2006) highlighted a number of studies that demonstrated disconnects between international students and faculty. While faculty who were surveyed by Ladd and Ruby (1999) expected international students to prefer an educational system most familiar to their home counties, 80% of the international students surveyed preferred direct experience with their fields of study, rather than the lectured-based instruction of their home countries.

In addition to classroom instruction preferences, faculty and international students have not been aligned on identifying the most critical sources of academic adjustment challenge. In a study by Tompson and Tompson (1996), faculty reported that the behaviors causing international students the greatest academic adjustment difficulty were not asking questions about assignments, not participating in class, and sitting and studying with others from their host countries. The international students in these classes, however, reported their greatest difficulties as understanding rules and regulations, becoming familiar with norms and language, and developing a social network (Tompson & Tompson, 1996). The fact that these perceptions were so different represents a larger gap in communication and expectations between international students and host country faculty.

**International student academic stereotypes.** Scholars have sought to identify and explore academic stereotypes about international students in English-speaking contexts. Such stereotypes include that international students are unable to analyze and logically develop written arguments (Andrade, 2006), that international students do not value warm and
friendly relationships with their instructors (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998), and that international students do not collaborate in groups to complete work (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). Within Sarkodie-Mensah’s (1998) study, international students valued warm relationships with professors rather than the more formal relationships that faculty assumed international students would value. Additionally, while international students collaborated in groups more frequently than other minority students, they often did so within cultural groups. These findings contradicted assumptions about their learning style preferences (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998).

**Cultural framework and literature gap for academic adjustment research.** Since educational systems and ways of constructing thought are culturally based (Andrade, 2006), perceptions of an academic experience are influenced by culture as well. As such, it can be challenging for faculty to identify the multidimensional adjustment difficulties that international students may face. The misconceptions and miscommunications may be grounded in the concept that the educational values and behaviors that international students and faculty members bring to the classroom are largely constructed through the lens of their cultural values (Dunne, 2009). As noted by Dunne (2009), deliberate interventions from the institution are required in order to address the fact that home and host country students and faculty enter the academic environment with different conceptions of higher education culture.

While these insights from the literature are valuable, it is important to clarify that the vast majority of research on international student academic adjustment have explored transitions and challenges for students who have a non-Western cultural lens. Examples of
studies comparing student and faculty expectations include East Asian students in the U.K. (Kingston & Forland, 2008), Asian students in New Zealand (Li et al., 2002), and Japanese students in the U.K. (Akazaki, 2010). This research has generated important findings for the field, but there is still a significant gap on the academic transition of English-speaking students in English-speaking countries. The previous overview of U.K. higher education revealed significant differences between U.K. and U.S. higher education systems; therefore, the lack of academic adjustment research is a critical gap worthy of further exploration.

**Language challenges.** Language challenges have been addressed throughout international student academic adjustment literature in multiple ways. Most often, research has examined non-native English speakers who have transitioned into English-speaking higher education systems. In multiple academic departments, English language proficiency was determined to be the most significant academic challenge for international students. Lack of language proficiency not only required extra faculty assistance, but also negatively affected the students’ performance in the course (Trice, 2003).

**Student-faculty perceptions.** Aligning with research on academic challenges, scholars have also discovered misconceptions between student and faculty perceptions with regard to language issues. For example, while international students in Australia attributed their lack of participation in class to discomfort with the English language and their abilities in specific subject areas, faculty who were surveyed assumed students’ lack of participation was grounded in cultural differences (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000). This assumption was based on the fact that these international students came from cultures that often used lecture-based instruction and did not encourage participation from students in class. A
perception of cultural difference was, in reality, a difficulty with language and academic material. These may have been students who would have benefitted from extra assistance or support (Robertson et al., 2000).

Within this study (Robertson et al., 2000), both students and faculty acknowledged a gap in their understanding of each other’s perspectives. Faculty noted that international students lacked spoken English, writing skills, and critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in an English-speaking higher education classroom. The international students, however, felt that professors often used colloquial English and spoke in a rapid manner that made it difficult to understand. In an educational intervention, students expressed a willingness to apply new language strategies and proactively engage with peers, and faculty learned how the psychological challenges of international adjustment, such as stress, homesickness, and isolation, can present an additional challenge for learning (Robertson et al., 2000).

**Impact on adjustment stress.** Scholars have also examined how challenges surrounding language learning have impacted the overall cultural adjustment process for international students. In an ethnography of 13 students in a U.K. master’s program, 12 of whom were from non-English speaking countries, Brown and Holloway (2008) discovered that the stress students encountered at the beginning of an academic program was exacerbated not only by academic cultural differences, but also by language difficulties. In a comprehensive review of 64 studies of international student adjustment in the U.S., Zhang and Goodson (2011) determined that English language issues were among the most commonly reported challenges of psychosocial adjustment for international students. Across
studies, international students who felt more confident in their English proficiency and had more communication with American students had a more positive sociocultural adjustment in U.S. higher education (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Yang, Noels, and Saumure (2006) also explored this link between competency in host country language and cross-cultural adaptation. They selected a group of international students from collectivist countries who were studying in Canada, a relatively individualistic country. Findings suggested that host country language self-confidence was associated with both psychological adjustment and sociological challenges. International students needed to use the host country language to complete daily tasks, so those who were better able to communicate in the host society were able to more easily negotiate the responsibilities of everyday life (Yang, et al., 2006).

**Critique and research gap for studies on language challenge.** While these studies have presented valuable information on the ways that language can impact academic and overall intercultural adjustment for international students, these studies focus on language predominantly through the lens of non-English speakers from non-Western or collectivist countries who are seeking proficiency in English language. By focusing on language solely as an English/non-English issue, scholars have missed an opportunity to examine adjustment challenges beyond the overtly different transitions from collectivist to individualist countries. While the U.S. and Great Britain both speak the English language, there are undoubtedly vast differences between the versions of English, including many cultural cues embedded in the language.
Just as there may be challenges for U.S. students in the transition to the British academic system, there may also be challenges in the adjustment to a new kind of English language dialect. For example, Martin et al. (1995) found that in a comprehensive survey of U.S. study abroad students throughout the world, those who were studying abroad in England reported significant and expected challenges with language. This is one exploratory study, however, and due to the methodology, researchers were unable to examine why U.S. students in England expressed unexpected challenges with language and how these challenges impacted their adjustment.

The outcomes in Martin et al. (1995) are important, nevertheless, because they have revealed that language challenges are not limited to students who are learning a second language abroad. This dissertation research addressed the significant gap regarding language adjustment issues of English-speaking students in English-speaking countries by including language within research on U.S. study abroad students in Britain.

**Summary of academic adjustment literature.** The U.K. has a rich higher education history, which has included strategic and progressive expansion in recent decades to reach domestic non-traditional and international students throughout the world (Baskerville et al., 2011). With an explicit value on autonomy and independence, universities in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland have developed focused undergraduate degrees that can be completed in three years and postgraduate-taught masters degrees that can be completed in one year (Baskerville et al., 2011). U.S.-based study abroad providers have advised U.K.-bound study abroad students to be prepared for a high degree of independence and self-direction as well as a system of assessment where few papers or one comprehensive exam
comprises a semester’s grade ("International Student Exchange Program United Kingdom Education," n.d.).

There is a significant gap on research that examines the academic experience and potential challenges of U.S. students in this system of higher education. This research directly addressed this gap by exploring U.S. study abroad students in British universities. Aligning with the theoretical framework of Pitts (2009), this study examined academic issues related to both academic course work and host country language.

Although there is a gap in the literature pertaining to U.S. students in Britain, there is a wealth of literature on the academic adjustment of international students. The literature has revealed many culturally grounded miscommunications between international students and host country faculty, where each group had significantly different perceptions about the international student academic adjustment experience and key associated challenges (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002; Robertson et al., 2000; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). This collective research emphasized that educational structures and ways of learning are based in cultural values, and that institutional interventions may be necessary to bring forth more comprehensive understanding between international students and host country faculty.

Additionally, the review of academic adjustment literature demonstrated how both the academic adjustment process and the host country language were sources of additional stress for international students (Akazaki, 2010; Andrade, 2006; Fox, 1994; Li et al., 2002; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In some cases, developing language proficiency was the most significant challenge of the host country transition (Trice, 2003).
It is important to note that vast majority of the relevant research to date has examined non-English speaking international students from non-Western or collectivist countries who have transitioned to English-speaking, Western, or more independent countries (Akazaki, 2010; Andrade, 2006; Fox, 1994; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In one exploratory study, however, U.S. study abroad students in England identified language as one of the most unexpected challenges of the cultural adjustment process (Martin et al., 1995). This was an important finding for this dissertation study, as it revealed that language acquisition in Britain should not be ignored in the overall adjustment process for U.S. study abroad students. In conjunction with the cautionary tone of advice from U.S.-based study abroad providers, this finding further demonstrated the relevance for examining the comprehensive academic adjustment process for U.S. study abroad students in British universities.

**Cultural adjustment.** The transition and adjustment into another culture is a complex process that has challenged students and scholars for over 50 years (Berardo, 2007). In this section, I will explore controversial foundational models of cultural adjustment that continue to frame many students’ pre-departure expectations. Additionally, I will examine research regarding the cultural adjustment of U.S. students in English-speaking countries. Given the significant gap in literature on cultural adjustment issues specific to U.S. students in English-speaking countries, this review will utilize exploratory studies, faculty opinion papers, and corporate expatriate research to illuminate unique cultural adjustment themes for U.S. students in British universities.

**Foundational models of cultural adjustment.** Whereas foundational models of
cultural adjustment were developed over 50 years ago, recent research has shown that practitioners still depend upon these models in orientations and cultural training workshops (Berardo, 2007; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). In Berardo’s (2006) study, 94% of cross-cultural trainers surveyed used the U-Curve model (see Figure 4), and nearly half were applying it in 91-100% of their cultural workshops. The U-Curve (Lysgaard, 1955), W-Curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963), and culture shock stages (Oberg, 1960) are the most popular models, and all share a similar stage-based design concept.

The U-Curve (Lysgaard, 1955) provided the foundational model of cultural adjustment. In this model, a student’s entry, culture shock, and subsequent adjustment in a host culture resemble the curves of the letter “U.” The U-Curve was later extended to the W-Curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) to account for the fact that a student’s return to their home country included a separate set of peaks and valleys of cultural adjustment (see Figure 5). The re-entry into the home country was unaccounted for in the U-Curve model (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963).
In the W-Curve model, the initial excitement at the beginning of a sojourn abroad represents the first peak of the “W” (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). After initial excitement has faded, the student plunges into a sharp drop of culture shock challenge, which is followed by a climb upward of understanding and positive cultural adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955). According to the W-Curve, at the conclusion of a study abroad program, students may undergo subsequent drops and gains in adjustment as they readjust to life back in their home countries and complete the formation of the letter “W” (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963).
Culture shock (Oberg, 1960), another foundational model, is presented as a similar stage pattern of elation and challenge. The stages are directly aligned with the U-Curve, and the two models are often presented together. The four stages of culture shock (Oberg, 1960) include Honeymoon, Hostility, Recovery, and Completion. The stress and anxiety expressed in culture shock occur when a person no longer has familiar norms such as words, symbols, facial expressions, gestures, signs, or customs (Oberg, 1960). The first stage, Honeymoon, results in students feeling optimism, happiness, and fascination with their new host country. The second stage, Hostility, elicits hostile attitudes toward the host country when students face challenges with adjustment. Students in this stage often seek support from fellow foreigners. In the third stage, Recovery, students find their tensions eased and their environment more positive when they increase local interactions and become more
comfortable with their surroundings and language. The final stage, Completion, results in students accepting new customs and ways of life as they celebrate the differences in their host country (Oberg, 1960).

**Critiques of foundational models.** While research has shown that practitioners in international education continue to utilize U/W-Curve models in cultural trainings due to their simplicity (Berardo, 2007), scholars have repeatedly called these models into question (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Church, 1982; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2012; Ward et al., 1998) and have gone a step further to empirically reject them (Berardo, 2007; Brown, 2008; Ward et al., 1998). Comprehensive reviews of research that utilized the U-Curve found “weak, inconclusive, and over-generalized” support (Church, 1982, p. 542) and a “lack of methodological rigor” (Black et al., 1991, p. 231).

Studies have also refuted the U-Curve stages, noting that students experienced peaks of stress at different times (Brown, 2008; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Ward et al., 1998). For example, a number of research studies have shown students to encounter significant stress at the beginning of their international study programs (Brown, 2008; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Ward et al., 1998), rather than the initial peaks of happiness associated with the elation/honeymoon stages of the U/W-Curve (Lysgaard, 1955) and culture shock models (Oberg, 1960). When Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) asked students to draw a representation of their cultural adjustment, a number of students drew a shape that resembled an “M,” which was the opposite experience of a “W” or “U.”

As noted by Berardo and LaBrack (2008), Lysgaard (1955) acknowledged that there were significant limitations of his research and that the study should be treated as a
hypothesis rather than a foundational model. For example, the study was a cross-sectional, retrospective design with some participants describing experiences abroad that occurred up to three years prior to the interviews. Additionally, length of time abroad was not consistent amongst the 198 Norwegian Fulbright students. Groups were divided into less than six months abroad, six to 18 months abroad, and more than 18 months abroad. While Lysgaard provided a written description within the study that the adjustment process appeared “to follow a U-shaped curve,” the study did not contain an actual illustration of a model (p. 51).

It is cultural trainers and international educators who have taken this concept and utilized illustrations of the model in workshops (Berardo & LaBrack, 2008). As summarized by Colleen Ward and colleagues (1998):

> The U-curve has been on trial now for almost 40 years, and the time is long overdue to render a verdict. Despite its popular and intuitive appeal, the U-curve model of sojourner adjustment should be rejected, and more promising conceptual perspective such as stress and coping theories and culture learning approaches should be further and more profitably investigated. (p. 290)

The fact that a significant majority of international education practitioners still use an outdated U/W-Curve model during pre-departure orientation programs was important for this research study on student expectations. Since this study explicitly examined U.S. students’ pre-departure expectations for study abroad in British universities, it was critical to examine the ways that students framed expectations for the cultural adjustment experience. Scholars have noted that if students’ expectations are influenced by U/W-Curve philosophy, there may be additional challenges to consider for their cultural adjustment. For example, participants
may feel abnormal or stressed if their experiences do not align with the distinct stages presented in the U/W-Curve model (Berardo, 2007). The U/W-Curve has presented one pattern of adjustment to students; whereas, 50 years of cultural adjustment research has suggested that factors such as personal and situational variables may also have an impact on the experience (Berardo, 2007).

**Cultural adjustment literature.** Many scholars have examined the cultural adjustment challenges of students who engage in international study during higher education. As research has become more responsive to the complexities of cross-cultural adjustment, studies have examined both psychological and sociocultural aspects of the transition. The vast majority of this research, however, has presented cultural adjustment from the perspective of non-English speakers transitioning into an English-speaking culture (Akazaki, 2010; Brisset et al., 2010; Brown, 2008; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward et al., 1998; Ying & Han, 2006; Zhang & Goodson, 2011) or from U.S. study abroad students entering a non-English speaking country (Chaban, et al., 2011; Hunley, 2010; Pitts, 2009).

This focused lens has created a significant research gap in our empirical understanding of cultural adjustment for U.S. study abroad students in English-speaking countries. However, recent opinion papers by international educators who have worked directly with U.S. students in Britain in addition to exploratory studies within study abroad and corporate expatriate communities have begun to highlight specific and unique cultural adjustment issues for this population of study abroad students. This dissertation research explored these issues in-depth through focused and longitudinal phenomenological research
on U.S. study abroad students in British universities.

Setting cultural expectations. The concept of setting appropriate cultural expectations, or the inability to do so, has emerged as a consistent theme for U.S. students in Britain throughout emerging international education opinion papers (Edwards, 2000; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008) and study abroad exploratory research (McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Martin et al., 1995). Expatriate studies on culturally similar work placements have also reinforced this theme (Fenwick et al., 2003; Selmer, 2007; Selmer et al., 2007; Selmer & Lauring, 2009).

As observed by Edwards (2000), U.S. study abroad students have expected an “autopilot immersion experience” in Britain because of a perceived shared culture and language (p. 88). U.S. international educators and faculty share some responsibility for shaping students’ perceptions, since U.S. higher education and the field of study abroad have made certain assumptions in conceptualizing academic programs in Britain (Edwards, 2000). Many of these sweeping assumptions about study abroad in Britain, Edwards argued, should be re-evaluated. She challenged international educators and students to explore “this usually taken-for-granted corner of our intercultural lives,” not with the usual set of beliefs and expectations that have led to familiar assumptions about Britain, but within the context of an ethnographic framework to understand the deeper cultural differences that exist (p. 83). As noted by Edwards:

We are sending students abroad hoping they will have the kind of perspective-changing experience that can be induced by a significant encounter with the ‘other’...When we send students to the U.K., if they take with them no discriminating
expectations that they will in fact be in a foreign society, it seems over-optimistic to expect that this can possibly be such a meaningful encounter. (p. 91)

Aligning with this theme, another international educator, Ireland (2010), has observed similar challenges for U.S. students in the Republic of Ireland. He cautioned “it is a mistake to assume that Western Europe, or English-speaking countries like Canada, Australia or England do not present U.S. students with deep lessons to learn and foreign differences to negotiate” (Ireland, 2010, p. 27). Ireland noted that U.S. study abroad students arrived with “superficial” expectations for an experience abroad in Ireland that were grounded in a “perceived lack of difference” between home and host cultures (p. 27). While it is reasonable for U.S. students to arrive with expectations of similarity, Ireland cautioned that superficial similarities are a mask for more significant differences. He encouraged international educators to challenge students to seek the more complex cultural differences between English-speaking countries, since this is where learning will take place in education abroad programs (Ireland, 2010).

Reinforcing these opinion papers from international educators, McLeod and Wainwright (2008) and Martin et al. (1995) conducted exploratory research and determined that U.S. study abroad students in Britain do not set appropriate expectations for their experiences abroad. Not only did students set inappropriate expectations, but they also encountered incidents abroad that severely violated their pre-departure expectations (Martin et al., 1995; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008).

McLeod and Wainwright (2008) note that data from students in Scotland and France were analyzed together in an exploratory study, so it is not possible to know which themes
are specific to students in Scotland. The analysis revealed four themes:

a) Students experienced stressful situations that severely violated expectancies; b) successful experiences led to feelings of increased self-confidence; c) successful experiences led to changes in self-perception; and d) successful experiences led to changes in students’ perception of the world. (McLeod & Wainwright, 2008, p. 68)

Violations of expectations included initial periods of extreme stress and confusion, rather than the feelings of positive elation typically expected and described to students in foundational models of cultural adjustment (McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Oberg, 1960). Additionally, students encountered significant unexpected difficulties with the host country academic system and had unexpected challenges forming friendships abroad (McLeod & Wainwright, 2008). As students learned to adjust to new situations abroad, they “reported increased self-confidence, changes in self-perception, and changes in perceptions of the world” (McLeod & Wainwright, 2008, p. 68). This finding is important because it suggests that both met and unmet expectations can significantly shape how students view their study abroad experiences in Britain. These results are echoed in Martin et al. (1995), as students in England experienced expectancy violations more negatively than students in other countries with regard to language, climate, and course work.

This theme of setting inappropriate cultural expectations, especially within the context of culturally similar countries, has also been identified within a recent strand of research on expatriates abroad. Led predominately by Jan Selmer and colleagues, research studies have shown that when expatriates accepted culturally similar job placements, their inflated expectations led to unanticipated challenges with cultural adjustment (Fenwick et al.,
These scholars also discovered that if expatriates minimized host country cultural differences before departing for job placement, they became complacent in preparing for the venture (Fenwick et al., 2003; Selmer, 2007; Selmer et al., 2007; Selmer & Lauring, 2009). Selmer (2007) noted:

For an expatriate assigned to an entirely different host culture, the advantage is that the consciousness of dissimilarity is always there...It is the expectations of the expatriates about the new culture and the attributions they make as to what happens in the new culture that will have a significant impact on the expatriates’ adjustment. (pp. 188-189)

Selmer (2007) found that it could be just as difficult for U.S. expatriates to adjust to the culture in Canada as it was for them to adjust to the culture in Germany. Additionally, Selmer and Lauring (2009) found no difference in the difficulty of cultural adjustment for expatriates from within the European Union and from outside of the European Union who were adjusting to new job placements within the EU. Fenwick et al. (2003) discovered that Australian managers underestimated cultural differences in Britain, which caused “unanticipated difficulties” with their placements because the familiar cultural environment they expected was, in reality, significantly different (p. 301).

Whereas this expatriate literature is exploratory and cross-sectional in nature, scholars have acknowledged that longitudinal studies, such as this phenomenological research, would provide a more rigorous assessment of cultural adjustment (Selmer, 2007). Additionally, while these studies acknowledge previous literature and seek to fill the significant gap in research on adjustment in culturally similar countries, they lack a well-defined theoretical
framework. Nevertheless, the fact that consistent and transferable themes appear in both international educator opinion papers and expatriate exploratory research studies provided an important foundation for this study on U.S. study abroad students in Britain.

Seeking similarity. Another related theme within the literature is that once U.S. students set pre-departure expectations and arrive in their English-speaking host countries, they are either unable or unwilling to recognize the realities of complex cultural difference. As observed by international educators, the expectation of a smooth cultural transition “allows Americans to leap to the belief that a shared language implies a shared culture” (Edwards, 2000, p.88). Edwards (2000) was quick to clarify that while the U.S. and England are similar, they do not share a common culture. Ireland (2010) shared these observations, noting that English-speaking study abroad students were “encouraged by an American mindset that looks for what we all have in common, to look for shared characteristics first” (p. 27).

Again, these observations are aligned with research on expatriates who have taken culturally similar assignments. Selmer and Lauring (2009) discovered that academic expatriates in similar countries had just as much difficulty with cultural adjustment as those in countries with more overt differences. Convinced they were entering a virtually identical culture, expatriates sought similarity abroad rather than adjusting to difference (Selmer & Lauring, 2009). Selmer and Lauring referenced this action as “confirmation bias” and noted that actions of similarity-seeking were efforts to confirm expatriates’ preconceived assumptions (p. 430). As echoed by Burgoon, et al. (2000), it can be counterproductive in intercultural adjustment to focus on similarities because it results in overlooking real
differences and misleads sojourners into thinking cultures are more alike than they really are. Selmer (2007) noted that expatriates in his study, “were not prepared to look for differences, and learning begins with the ability to see difference” (p. 189).

**Exempting Britain from otherness.** Edwards opined that since U.S. study abroad students often “exempt the British from ‘otherness,”’ studying abroad in Britain has given them less pause than other destinations. As such, it has been easy for students to ignore cues about deeper cultural differences, such as contrasts in social organization, views on spirituality, and family dynamics (Edwards, 2000, p. 91). Ireland (2010) described this obstacle for students as a struggle “to become sensitive to the subtleties of foreignness” (p. 27).

International educators agree that when U.S. students enter host countries with assumptions about “cultural and social homogeneity,” (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011, p. 24), study abroad programs have an important educational opportunity to help students learn about the significant and underlying cultural differences that exist in English-speaking countries (Edwards, 2000; Ireland, 2010; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011). As noted by Gristwood and Woolf (2011), these programs have the potential to provide rich environments for academic and cultural growth, especially when programs are intentionally designed to, “explode students’ assumptions” about the host country culture (p. 24).

Janes (2008) reinforced this concept, noting that while students arrived at the beginning of a London semester program with “emotionally focused attitudes” and “little detailed knowledge” about Britain, after a focused course on Britain while abroad, in addition to opportunities for self-reflection and engagement with the local culture, students’
“views of British popular culture had been ‘modernized’ away from heritage images” and reflected a positive view of British diversity at the end of the semester (p. 30). This reflects a current dialogue within international education that has advocated that international educators must intentionally intervene in study abroad programs in order to achieve desired student learning outcomes (Vande Berg, 2007).

Beyond the fact that both countries speak dialects of the English language, Edwards (2000) has argued that students’ perceived lack of cultural difference regarding Britain is rooted in the U.S. K-12 and higher education systems:

The study of British culture, whether focused on the historical or the contemporary, slides into the curriculum of American universities (and indeed all the way through the school system) not as an element in the campaign to infuse the international throughout the intellectual experience of our students, but as something much more comfortable and familiar. English culture is presented as a precursor, or at the very least as a close cousin, of the full-blooded American. The history of Britain is often presented and defined as the natural forerunner of U.S. history. (pp. 83-84)

From kindergarten stories of Pilgrims through higher education studies of Shakespeare, Edwards (2000) suggests that U.S. students have been engaged in continuous and selective British studies throughout their educational careers in a “Masterpiece Theater” version of culture and history that has tended to “mask the real divergences” between the U.S. and Britain. (p. 85). Unfortunately, the version of Britain that has been emphasized in U.S. education has not reflected modern and diverse cultural realities. Students who feel comfortable and familiar with their “muddled assumptions” may be unaware of the “gulf
between contemporary English culture and contemporary American culture” (Edwards, 2000, p. 85).

**Unique responses to cultural adjustment.** While locations within Britain have been classified in the field as “traditional locations, less challenging than non-traditional environments,” (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011, p. 24), an intriguing additional theme in the exploratory literature has emerged that when students and expatriates in these countries do encounter adjustment challenges, they may have unique responses that are distinct from foundational or leading models of cultural adjustment. This includes feeling betrayed by more intensified cultural struggles than expected or blaming oneself or others for difficulties that are, in reality, normal cycles of cultural adjustment. The fact that these studies presented a unique response in the English-speaking cultural adjustment process provided further support for this phenomenological research.

Sobre-Denton and Hart (2008) revealed the concept of “double shock,” meaning double culture shock, as presented by a U.K. and Ireland study abroad advisor in pre-departure orientation (p. 545). In describing this concept, the advisor portrayed an intensified cultural adjustment period in certain aspects of the English-speaking study abroad experience, such as adjustment to the academic culture. Double shock captured the feelings of betrayal that some students at this institution reported upon finding a lack of expected similarity in the U.K. and Ireland (Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008).

Selmer (2007) and Selmer and Lauring (2009) referenced attribution theory (Heider, 1958) in the rationale for why expatriates in culturally similar countries may have failed to adjust as easily as anticipated. When expatriates did encounter difficulties, they resorted to
self-blame or blaming others for difficulties instead of recognizing these challenges as part of the normal cultural adjustment process (Selmer, 2007). If sojourners in a culturally similar country have expected that their behavior will be the same in a host country, they may not understand or recognize negative feedback from culturally inappropriate behaviors (Selmer, 2007). This can be exacerbated by the fact that “an expatriate from a similar, or presumed identical culture, could be treated with less patience and be given less latitude for culturally deviant behavior” (Selmer, 2007, p. 194).

Betrayal and self-blame are unique words to associate with one’s response to the cultural adjustment process, especially in a location such as Britain that is assumed to be “less challenging” within the international education community (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011, p. 24). As is the case with the majority of literature on this topic, previous studies were exploratory in nature and should not be generalized (Selmer, 2007; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). However, they illuminated potential challenges specific to U.S. study abroad students in Britain and questioned the assumption of an easy transition. Within the context of a focused phenomenological study, this dissertation research clarified distinctive cultural adjustment issues for U.S. study abroad students in British universities.

**Summary of cultural adjustment literature.** The process of adjusting to a new culture has challenged scholars, practitioners, and sojourners for decades. Foundational models of cultural adjustment such as the U-curve (Lysgaard, 1955), W-curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963), and culture shock (Oberg, 1960), which were developed over 50 years ago, have continued to serve as dominant frameworks for pre-departure cultural trainings today (Berardo, 2007). While these stage-based models are often used in cultural workshops
because of their simplicity, they can be problematic for framing student expectations because they were based on cross-sectional, retrospective data. Multiple scholars throughout the past 50 years have found significant evidence to contradict them (Berardo, 2007; Black et al., 1991; Church, 1982; Ward et al., 1998).

While there is considerable research on the complexities of cultural adjustment, including the psychological and sociocultural aspects of adaptation, the vast majority of research has been conducted through the lens of non-English speakers entering an English-speaking country (Akazaki, 2010; Brisset et al., 2010; Brown, 2008; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward et al., 1998; Ying & Han, 2006; and Zhang & Goodson, 2011) or with U.S. study abroad students in a non-English speaking country (Chaban et al., 2011; Hunley, 2010; Pitts, 2009). This literature review section sought to identify the distinctive cultural adjustment issues for a transition to a culturally similar context, specifically for U.S. students who enter British universities for study abroad programs.

In the absence of extensive empirical data, I utilized opinion papers from international educators (Edwards, 2000; Ireland, 2010; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011), exploratory research from study abroad literature (Janes, 2008; Martin et al., 1995; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008) and relevant research from the corporate expatriate community (Fenwick et al., 2003; Selmer, 2007; Selmer et al., 2007; Selmer & Lauring, 2009) to build a series of cultural adjustment themes specific to this population. These themes included a) setting appropriate cultural expectations; b) seeking similarity; c) exempting Britain from otherness; and d) unique responses to cultural adjustment. This study
directly explored these issues specific to U.S. students in British universities and provided empirical data to address the significant gap in cultural adjustment literature for U.S. students in English-speaking countries.

**Social adjustment.** In addition to academic and cultural adjustment, this study also included theoretically aligned (Pitts, 2009) subquestions to explore social expectations and experiences abroad. The following literature review sections will explore social adjustment issues within international study programs. Throughout the past 25 years, the international higher education community has devoted a considerable research focus to both the psychological and sociocultural aspects of the student cross-cultural transition. For the purpose of this proposed qualitative study, I will review and critique both psychological and sociocultural research strands of literature under the overarching framework of social adjustment.

**Psychological adaptation literature.** Classified as a distinct cultural research lens within international education by Colleen Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1998), the psychological adaptation research lens “is associated with psychological well-being or emotional satisfaction” of study abroad or international students and is “best understood within a stress and coping framework” (Ward et al., 1998, p. 279).

International education scholars have identified key areas of psychological challenge for students who transition through the cultural adjustment process. Psychological themes identified through research have included acculturative and psychological stress (Brisset et al., 2010; Savicki, 2010; Ying & Han, 2006), perceived discrimination (Zhang & Goodson, 2011), stress from language difficulties (Brown, 2008; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), loneliness
(Brisset et al., 2010; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008), anxiety (Brisset et al., 2010), homesickness (Harrison & Brower, 2011), depression (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward et al., 1998), and disengagement from the academic program (Hunley, 2010). Below, I will review these key themes and research outcomes to explore how psychological adaptation challenges have been examined within international education literature.

**Stress and anxiety.** A number of scholars have explicitly studied the psychological constructs of stress and anxiety in the cultural adjustment process. Many research studies have applied both longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys to examine self-rated measures of anxiety and distress (Brisset et al., 2010), appraisal of stress (Savicki, 2010), educational, sociocultural, and practical stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), and acculturative stressors (Ying & Han, 2006). Beyond quantitative methods, Brown (2008) applied an ethnographic lens to examine student stress within a graduate program in the U.K., where 12 of the 13 international students were from non-English speaking countries.

While this research has illuminated multiple discussions surrounding international student stress, predictive findings have not been consistent across studies. For example, Brisset et al. (2010) found that adaptation and engagement for international students within the host country could be predicted by attachment intimacy and ethnic identification within one’s own ethnic group. Ying and Han (2006), however, noted that variables such as extraversion and female gender were greater predictors of affiliation with host country students and that forming relationships within one’s own ethnic group was not helpful for enhancing cultural adjustment. Savicki (2010) concluded that it is not easy to predict which students will struggle most with cultural adaptation because so many students change within
the first six weeks of a program abroad. It seems clear that the cultural adjustment process can be stressful and can elicit anxiety for students in a variety of areas. The complexity of the cultural adjustment process, however, has perplexed scholars who have sought to create a predictive model for stress.

**Depression, loneliness, and homesickness.** Along with stress and anxiety, scholars have considered how adjusting to a new higher education culture may elicit feelings of depression, loneliness, or homesickness for students. The majority of studies have utilized quantitative surveys for international and study abroad students to self-report on scales of depression and loneliness (Harrison & Brower, 2011; Hunley, 2010; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward et al., 1998).

This research (Sawir et al., 2008; Ward et al., 1998) has been important in providing empirical critiques of U-curve foundational models of cultural adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955) because significant depression and psychological distress can occur for international students at the beginning of an academic program in more prevalence than euphoria or happiness. Additionally, scholars have discovered that student psychological health abroad is not only important for overall well-being, but also in determining success and engagement in the international academic program (Hunley, 2010). With regard to predictability, Harrison and Brower (2011) found that students who entered programs with higher measures of cultural intelligence before departure for study abroad programs experienced less homesickness and an easier international adjustment.

While research has consistently highlighted psychological distress to be an issue for students in cultural adjustment, international educators should be careful not to make
generalizations. In one of few qualitative studies in this area, Sawir et al. (2008) conducted 200 intensive international student interviews and found loneliness to be a concept that was perceived differently by students based on cultural backgrounds. Two thirds of the 200 participants had encountered loneliness or isolation, particularly in the beginning months of their academic programs. Sawir et al., (2008) identified three types of loneliness unique to these students a) personal loneliness due to loss of contact with families; b) social loneliness from loss of networks; and c) cultural loneliness from loss of “preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment” which “can affect even students with adequate personal and social support” (p. 148). Sawir et al. argued that while same-culture networks are certainly important for international students, higher education institutions must also embrace responsibility for this issue:

Transferring the pastoral burden to same-cultural networks is a lazy strategy that allows the institution to go on without changing itself. At worst, operating on their own without strong international student engagement in local institutions, activities, and networks, same-culture networks function as ghettos that block the potential for a richer educational, social, and cultural experience. (p. 171)

**Sociocultural adaptation literature.** Similar to psychological adaptation, Ward and colleagues first classified sociocultural adaptation as a distinct framework for conceptualizing student cultural adjustment in study abroad and international students (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1998). Studies within the sociocultural adaptation lens are “related to the ability to ‘fit in’ or negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment” and are “strongly affected by cultural distance, amount of contact with
host nationals and cultural knowledge” (Ward et al., 1998, p. 279).

Some of the most consistently studied areas within the sociocultural adaptation lens examine students’ communication confidence (Akazaki, 2010; Andrade, 2006; Kwon, 2013; Li et al., 2002), cultural distance (Kwon, 2013; Searle & Ward, 1990), interaction with host culture students and faculty (Akazaki, 2010; Brown, 2008; Dunne, 2009; Gong, 2003; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Kwon; 2013; Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Pitts, 2009; Ying & Han, 2006), and friendship or support networks (Andrade, 2006; Brisset et al., 2010; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Ying & Han, 2006).

**Communication confidence.** Research has shown that host country language difficulties can be a significant contributor to sociocultural adaptation challenges for students on international programs (Akazaki, 2010; Andrade, 2006; Brown, 2008; Kwon, 2013, Li et al., 2002). Some of these difficulties have been grounded in incorrect assumptions, both from international students and local faculty, regarding language proficiency and academic expectations in the host country (Akazaki, 2010; Andrade, 2006; Brown, 2008; Li et al, 2002). As students gain confidence with communicating in the host culture, they are able to better navigate and manage multiple areas of the cross-cultural adjustment process (Pitts, 2009).

While multiple studies have examined communication challenges, they are usually from the perspective of students who are not studying in their home country language. This research has been useful for the field of international education, but there is a significant gap regarding the impact of communication confidence for students who are studying abroad in
their host country language. While this may not seem immediately concerning, exploratory findings from Martin et al. (1995) revealed that, compared to U.S. students studying abroad throughout the world, U.S. students in England reported unexpected expectancy violations in language. Educators and scholars should not neglect the potential challenges of students who are studying abroad in their native languages because they must navigate the complexities of a new dialect in addition to subtle intercultural communication cues. This study addressed this issue and included an exploration of language and communication challenges for U.S. study abroad students in British universities.

**Cultural distance.** Searle and Ward (1990) and Kwon (2013) explored how perceived cultural distance between home and host countries, especially as it related to student expectations, influenced sociocultural adaptation for international students. Both scholars hypothesized that if international students anticipated a greater cultural distance between home and host cultures, they would experience more problems with sociocultural adjustment. This hypothesis was supported within both studies (Kwon, 2013; Searle & Ward, 1990), as students who expected a high degree of cultural distance reported sociocultural adjustment problems.

There is a gap within this theme, however, because Searle and Ward (1990) examined Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand and Kwon (2013) studied Chinese students in Korea. Kwon acknowledged that a majority of participants perceived and expected a great cultural distance between the two cultures. This construct warranted a more full exploration with students who may not expect cultural distance between their home and host cultures, such as this phenomenology with U.S. direct enrollment study abroad students.
in Britain.

**Interaction with host students and faculty.** As identified in the literature, a key component of sociocultural adaptation includes successful interaction and engagement with people in the host culture. In an academic higher education environment, this includes interaction with local students, administrators, and faculty.

Since host country engagement involves a two-way interaction, at minimum, multiple scholars have chosen to include the perspectives of host country students, faculty, and administrators into research designs (Akazaki, 2010; Dunne, 2009; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002; Peacock & Harrison, 2009). This methodological choice has contributed an additional layer of understanding for international student sociocultural adaptation. Contrary to the vast majority of international student research, which has largely depended upon quantitative surveys, all of the aforementioned studies employed qualitative methodologies. In doing so, they have highlighted important themes for international educators who are responsible for campus internationalization strategies. These qualitative research designs provided support for this phenomenological study, which was focused upon interviews with U.S. students in Britain but included supplemental perspectives of faculty and study abroad advisors.

Dunne (2009) and Peacock and Harrison (2009) explored domestic students’ perspectives on cross-cultural interactions with international students in Ireland and the U.K., respectively. In a grounded theory study, Dunne found that host students in Ireland distinguished themselves from international students based on perceived differences in higher education culture. Without deliberate interventions from the institution, students’ tendencies
to stay within their own domestic groups prevented them from making intercultural connections. Peacock and Harrison described a “passive xenophobia” within two U.K. universities with regard to international students, as “many students initially suggested that they had not previously thought about international students as a separate group, but discussions within the focus groups made clear that they had simply been largely invisible to them previously” (p. 506). In some cases, U.K. students actively avoided international students for fear of receiving a lower grade on group academic assignments or making culturally inappropriate remarks (Peacock & Harrison, 2009).

Students in the U.K. were comparatively more comfortable discussing international student peers from Europe, Anglophone countries, and Latin America and were able to provide more detail about occasional contact and socialization (Peacock & Harrison, 2009). Echoing Dunne’s (2009) recommendations for institutional involvement, Peacock and Harrison (2009) noted that institutions within the U.K. needed more direct intervention, particularly within the academic classroom experience, to facilitate cross-cultural learning outcomes for both domestic and international students.

**Friendship and support networks.** Understanding that support networks are an important component for a challenging process such as sociocultural adaptation, scholars have explored how both within-group and host country support networks interact with other variables to impact positive international student cultural adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Brisset et al., 2010; Hendrickson et al, 2011; Ying & Han, 2006). Within the construct of international student support, Stella Ting-Toomey and colleagues have developed qualitative research (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013) and identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1999,
2005) to explore how international students make sense of friendships in their host countries. In connection with this qualitative research on U.S. students in Britain, Hotta and Ting Toomey’s (2013) research presented a strong example of a theoretically grounded qualitative study that utilized multiple sources of data to determine how students constructed meaning from an experience. Noting the gap in qualitative studies within cultural adjustment literature, Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) utilized purposeful sampling to identify a group of 20 participants who completed written questionnaires and in-person semi-structured interviews. Interviews included asking participants to “sketch a diagram representing their satisfaction with their adjustment to living in the U.S.,” using the x and y-axes to represent length of time and satisfaction with adjustment (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013, p. 555). The drawing exercise initiated further conversation, as participants were asked to explain high and low points in the diagram and relate them to adjustment thus far in the host country. Participants also answered questions that aligned directly with identity negotiation theory (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

Hotta and Ting-Toomey’s (2013) theoretically grounded qualitative design yielded important contributions to the literature, not only because it helped fill a gap in methodology, but also because it highlighted unique patterns of student intercultural adjustment. For example, unlike foundational U-curve models of cultural adjustment (Lysaard, 1955), the majority of participants in this study began their drawings with a “low entry starting point to a progressive upward trend” (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013, p. 556). These drawings resembled an “M-shaped curve” (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013, p. 556) compared to the “W” or “U” shapes that have been consistently used in cultural trainings (Berardo, 2007). This
qualitative study took place on a U.S. campus with students from predominantly collectivist cultures and should not be generalized. It provided a sound contribution to the literature, however, as other scholars (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) have echoed calls for more qualitative studies on sociocultural adaptation issues. This longitudinal phenomenology addresses Smith and Khawaja’s (2011) call for additional qualitative research on these issues.

**Research gap in social adjustment literature.** While these studies have examined diverse psychological and sociocultural adaptation issues, a significant limitation within this literature is that the vast majority of the research has explored student experiences within an overtly different cultural and language host country context. Following global enrollment trends with steady increases of Asian international students in English-speaking countries (Institute for International Education, 2013), as well as explicit assumptions of easier adjustment in culturally similar countries (Church, 1982; Paige, 1993), scholars have largely ignored the most dominant group of U.S. study abroad students (Institute for International Education, 2015) within cultural adjustment research studies.

In a comprehensive review of 64 quantitative cultural adjustment research studies published from January 1990 to January 2009 (Zhang & Goodson, 2011), 51.6% of studies examined students from Asia, and the remaining 48.4% considered students from around the world as a collective group. Examples of psychological and sociocultural adaptation research from this review included Vietnamese students in France (Brisset et al., 2010), non-English speaking students in the U.K. (Brown, 2008), Japanese students in New Zealand (Ward et al., 1998), Japanese students in the U.K. (Akazaki, 2010), Asian students in Australia (Kashima & Loh, 2006), Chinese students in South Korea (Kwon, 2013), Malaysian and Singaporean
students in New Zealand (Searle & Ward, 1990), Taiwanese students in the U.S. (Ying & Han, 2006), East Asian students in the U.K. (Kingston & Forland, 2008), Asian students in New Zealand (Li et al., 2002), and predominantly Asian students in U.S. (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

In addition, psychological and sociocultural adaptation research with U.S. study abroad students has predominantly focused on U.S. students in non-English speaking countries (Chaban et al., 2011; Hunley, 2010; Pitts, 2009) or has considered all U.S. study abroad students throughout the world as a collective group (Harrison & Brower, 2011; Harrison & Voelker, 2008). The vast majority of literature on U.S. students in English speaking countries has been either exploratory in nature (Janes, 2008; Martin et al., 1995; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008) or has been written through scholarly opinion papers by international educators (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2010).

Further, this limited literature on U.S. students in Britain has used a predominately cultural lens, which has addressed students’ perceptions or misconceptions about culture. There is an even greater research gap on studies that have examined this population through sociocultural or psychological lenses. Exploring issues such as stress, institutional and social support, local friendships, and host culture communication, the sociocultural and psychological lenses have been consistently important concepts of study abroad adjustment literature. These research lenses were largely missing from research on U.S. students in the Britain but were directly addressed by this phenomenological study.

While the psychological and sociocultural literature has neglected to examine the
experiences of U.S. students in English-speaking countries, it has revealed a critical concept that provided support for this qualitative study on U.S. students in Britain. Studies within the psychological and sociocultural adaptation literature have consistently revealed that issues in the cultural adjustment process related to stress, loneliness, forming support networks, navigating friendships, interacting with host students and faculty, and communicating successfully can all be culturally specific constructs and should not be generalized across student populations.

While these studies provided important insights for Vietnamese students in France (Brisset et al., 2010), non-English speaking students in the U.K. (Brown, 2008), Japanese students in New Zealand (Ward et al., 1998), Japanese students in the U.K. (Akazaki, 2010), Asian students in Australia (Kashima & Loh, 2006), Chinese students in South Korea (Kwon, 2013), Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand (Searle & Ward, 1990), Taiwanese students in the U.S. (Ying & Han, 2006), East Asian students in the U.K. (Kingston & Forland, 2008), Asian students in New Zealand (Li et al., 2002), and predominantly Asian students in U.S. (Zhang & Goodson, 2011), there was a significant void in research related to U.S. students in Britain.

Understanding that these themes depend upon both home and host cultural constructs, it was inappropriate to assume that previous findings, which were formed primarily from collectivist cultures, would translate to a U.S. study abroad student context in Britain. In response, this study provided focused research within cultural contexts to understand if U.S. study abroad students in British universities made meaning of these psychological and sociocultural constructs in different ways.
Summary of social adjustment literature. This overarching review of social adjustment literature included studies within both the psychological and sociocultural adaptation strands of research. Colleen Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1998) created this two-pronged classification for adjustment research to distinguish related yet distinctive studies for cultural adjustment in international higher education. Psychological adaptation research “is associated with psychological well-being or emotional satisfaction” and is “best understood within a stress and coping framework” (Ward et al., 1998, p. 279). Sociocultural adaptation research is “related to the ability to ‘fit in’ or negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment” and is “strongly affected by cultural distance, amount of contact with host nationals and cultural knowledge” (Ward et al., 1998, p. 279).

Psychological adaptation research has fallen within overarching themes of stress and anxiety, as well as depression, loneliness, and homesickness. Specific examples of psychological stressors that have been explored through international education research include acculturative and psychological stress (Brisset et al., 2010; Savicki, 2010; Ying & Han, 2006), perceived discrimination (Zhang & Goodson, 2011), stress from language difficulties (Brown, 2008; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), loneliness (Brisset et al., 2010; Sawir et al., 2008), anxiety (Brisset et al., 2010), homesickness (Harrison & Brower, 2011), depression (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward et al., 1998), and disengagement from the academic program (Hunley, 2010).

Sociocultural adaptation research has included themes of communication confidence (Akazaki, 2010; Andrade, 2006; Kwon, 2013; Li et al., 2002), cultural distance (Kwon, 2013;
Searle & Ward, 1990), interaction with host culture students and faculty (Akazaki, 2010; Brown, 2008; Dunne, 2009; Gong, 2003; Hendrickson et al, 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Kwon; 2013; Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Pitts, 2009; Ying & Han, 2006), and friendship or support networks (Andrade, 2006; Brisset et al., 2010; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Ying & Han, 2006). Cultural adaptation scholars have predominately applied quantitative survey methods, but recent qualitative studies within the sociocultural lens have illuminated additional dimensions of adjustment by including voices of host country students and faculty in research designs (Akazaki, 2010; Dunne, 2009; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002; Peacock & Harrison, 2009).

Previous studies have sought to predict and identify variables that lead to positive psychological and sociocultural adjustment for international students; however, there is still a significant gap in research on students within similar language or cultural contexts. The vast majority of literature to date has examined students transitioning to overtly different cultural contexts, and research on U.S. study abroad students has either explored students in non-English speaking countries (Chaban et al., 2011; Hunley, 2010; Pitts, 2009), or has grouped all students together throughout the world (Harrison & Brower, 2011; Harrison & Voelker, 2008). There is a significant gap in psychological or sociocultural studies on U.S. study abroad students in Britain, even though the U.K. has consistently been the top destination for U.S. study abroad students (Institute for International Education, 2015). Previous research on U.S. students in Britain is exploratory in nature and has been predominantly focused on academic and cultural issues rather than sociological or psychological concerns (Janes, 2008;
According to the literature, this significant research gap on U.S. study abroad students in Britain should be highly concerning for international educators because the challenges frequently associated with the cross-cultural adjustment process, such as stress, loneliness, classroom environment, interaction with host country students and faculty, communication confidence, support networks, and friendships are culturally constructed concepts. This means that these issues can have different meanings across various cultures and thus should not be applied to U.S. study abroad students in Britain without focused research. According to the literature, our understanding of these issues has been framed through a predominantly collectivist cultural lens, which may differ significantly from the cultural perspectives of U.S. study abroad students. This longitudinal qualitative research on U.S. students in British universities explored these issues and directly addressed the research gap through a focused and theoretically grounded phenomenological study.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this longitudinal phenomenological study was to describe the expectations and experiences of adjustment for U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities. This study is made necessary by the critical gap in literature regarding this group of study abroad students and by recent calls from the international education field to be wary of assumptions that cultural similarity elicits an easier transition. Informed by the modified expectancy violations framework (Burgoon; 1993; Martin et al., 1995), and the descriptive model for expectations, talk, and identity (Pitts, 2009), I directly addressed assumptions through a longitudinal qualitative research study, and explored this issue in-depth with students in direct enrollment study abroad programs in Britain. Research subquestions were aligned with theory (Pitts, 2009) to explore expectations and experiences of academic, cultural, and social adjustment for U.S. students in British universities.

This section will provide an outline for the methodological rationale and structure for the study, including a discussion of why qualitative research, and phenomenological methodology in particular, was the most appropriate choice for this research. Further, I will describe the method for participant selection and longitudinal data collection, which included pre-departure, while abroad, and post-return phases of the semester direct enrollment study abroad experience in Britain. I will also provide an overview of the data analysis structure for this longitudinal phenomenological design, including steps that I took to address ethical concerns, trustworthiness of data, and researcher subjectivity.
Rationale for Qualitative Research

I conducted this study through the philosophy of interpretive qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research embraces the concept that, “meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. The world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed up on, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research” (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). I share this constructivist lens that an individual’s interpretations of reality change over time and are dependent upon both context and social interactions with the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 2002).

As a researcher, I want to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences within a complex process. Whereas qualitative research explores questions that examine “how social experience is created and given meaning,” quantitative research questions prioritize measurement and analysis rather than process and seek to understand causal relationships between variables. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 13). Patton (1982) noted, “Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there…to understand the nature of that setting-what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like…what their meanings are” (p. 1). This research with U.S. study abroad students in British universities was unique to this particular context and was impacted by individual student interactions within and among society during the semester of study abroad.

Since I collected and analyzed data directly from participants, I served as the “main measurement device in the study,” which is another key feature of qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 7). An advantage of this strategy is that researchers “are able to be
immediately responsive and adaptable,” as well as understand non-verbal communication, process data immediately, clarify questions with participants to ensure accuracy, and follow-up on unexpected responses (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). While the human research instrument can have biases that may impact a study, I journaled consistently throughout the research process to articulate and reflect upon biases and mitigate my impact on data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research is also often distinguished by “intense and/or prolonged contact with a ‘field’ or life situation. These situations are typically ‘banal’ or normal ones, reflective of the everyday life of individuals, groups, societies, and organizations” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 6). Researchers are engaged directly in the field for many hours in order to collect extensive data and gain access and rapport with the participants (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative data resulting from this fieldwork often come in the form of observation, interviews, or documents, and most of this data requires processing or transcribing before the researcher can analyze it (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 9). This research study explored the everyday lives of U.S. study abroad students during a direct enrollment semester abroad in Britain and involved prolonged contact throughout the study abroad experience. I was directly engaged with students before departure, while abroad, and upon return from studying abroad, including on-site in Britain. Sources of data for this study included longitudinal interviews with participants, as well as supplemental interviews with study abroad advisors and faculty in the U.S. and Britain.

Another important characteristic of qualitative research is thick, rich descriptions of the data (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994), since “qualitative
researchers believe that rich descriptions of the social world are valuable” (Merriam, 2002, p. 16). As such, I have presented the data of this study with “richness and holism” and have provided “thick descriptions that are nested in a real context” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). This is an especially powerful strategy for describing complex concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994), including the study abroad cultural adjustment process that I explored within this study. This rich description helped me “go far beyond snapshots of ‘what?’ or ‘how many?’ to emphasize the lived experiences and meanings within the participants’ expectations and study abroad experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10).

**Research Design**

This research on U.S. study abroad students in Britain was conducted as a phenomenological study because rather than exploring the experience of an individual or institution, it described the “lived experiences for several individuals about a concept” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). From a phenomenological perspective, the purpose of research is to question how we experience the world (Van Manen, 1990). In its three primary uses, Merriam (2002) noted that phenomenological research, “addresses questions about common, everyday human experiences, experiences believed to be important sociological or psychological phenomena of our time or typical of a group of people, and transitions that are common or of contemporary interest” (p. 93). This study, which examined U.S. study abroad students undergoing academic, cultural, and social transitions during a direct enrollment semester in Britain, was connected with each of Merriam’s descriptions of phenomenological research.

**Phenomenological research.** Rooted in psychology and the twentieth century
philosophy of Husserl (1970), phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of a certain phenomenon and focuses on questions of common human experiences that are believed to occur at important times or transitions in our lives (Merriam, 2002). The focus is not on the person or the environment, but on the essence of the experience itself (Merriam, 2002). As Van Manen (1990) noted, “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday lives. Phenomenology asks, ‘what is this or that kind of experience like?’” (p. 9).

The key focus of the phenomenological researcher should be to understand the essence of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those who have experienced it (Van Manen, 1990). As such, participant interviews are the most important aspect of data collection and thus were the central component of this research design. While participant interviews were critical, I also incorporated additional sources of data through advisor and faculty interviews because it helped me understand and describe the essence of the experience (Merriam, 2002).

Within the phenomenological method, I aimed to capture the participants’ experiences in their most “intrinsic system of meaning” (Merriam, 2002, p. 94). As such, I reflectively examined my own experiences as a former study abroad student, graduate intern in Britain, and study abroad administrator before I conducted interviews. This allowed me to be mindful of any viewpoints, opinions, and assumptions I had regarding the issues I explored. According to a key principle of phenomenology, I then aimed to “bracket, or set aside” these opinions “so as not to influence the process” (Merriam, 2002, p. 94). By attempting to suspend my personal feelings through bracketing, or Epoche, I allowed the
experience of the phenomenon to come forward with greater clarity (Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). This method allowed me to examine the phenomenon: expectations and experiences of adjustment for U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities. In doing so, this research facilitated a comprehensive description and universal meaning of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

**Guiding philosophy.** Phenomenology is considered not only a type of qualitative research, but also a strand of philosophy most closely associated with German mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), whose writings on the philosophical philosophy began in 1913 (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). Historically, the philosophical roots of phenomenology can be traced to 1765 and within occasional writings of Kant, though Hegel formed the first comprehensive definition of phenomenological philosophy (Kockelmans, 1967). Kockelmans (1967) explained:

> For Hegel, phenomenology referred to knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience. This process leads to an unfolding of phenomenal consciousness through science and philosophy toward the absolute knowledge of the Absolute. (p. 24)

Moustakas (1994), a leading transcendental phenomenologist, noted that the most significant philosophical influences on Husserl in forming guiding phenomenological philosophy were Descartes and Kant, specifically regarding the concept of Epoche. Epoche “requires the elimination of suppositions and the raising of knowledge above every possible doubt” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). This early philosophical view of Epoche impacts the
phenomenological research practice of bracketing before interviews (Merriam, 2002).

Through Husserl’s philosophical lens, the knowledge gained from intuition and essence leads to discovering the meaning of things as they exist in nature. This type of knowledge precedes information gleaned from experiential knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1970) noted, “all genuine, and in particular, all scientific knowledge, rests on inner evidence: as far as such evidence extends, the concept of knowledge extends also” (p. 61).

This philosophy resonates with the phenomenological research concept of seeking the common underlying essence of experiences and structures above other knowledge or information.

Husserl’s philosophy contends that any phenomenon can be an appropriate cause for inquiry, since “the word phenomenon comes from the Greek phaenesthai, meaning ‘to flare up, to show itself, to appear’” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). While any phenomenon may be relevant for exploration, a researcher must also reflect upon the concept of intentionality, which is another of Husserl’s philosophical tenets (Creswell, 1998, Moustakas, 1994). Intentionality within phenomenology relates to the intentionality of one’s own consciousness (Moustakas, 1994).

Connected to this concept, Husserl’s philosophy contends that objects are perceived and given meaning as individuals experience them (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Intentional thoughts include both a noema and noesis. The noema is the perception of the phenomenon from the view of the researcher. The noesis is the underlying or essential structure of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Translated into a research context, I was mindful that participants had unique perspectives on their experiences based on their
interactions within the context. Additionally, I was mindful of my unique view as a researcher based on my perceptions within the context. Throughout the research process, I sought the underlying meaning amidst everyone’s perspectives.

In addition to the foundational philosophies of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), other scholars have advanced contemporary approaches to build upon the philosophies of phenomenology. A philosophical lens of particular relevance to this study is the hermeneutic phenomenological approach of Van Manen (1990). According to Van Manen, phenomenology’s aim is not to “explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (p. 9). In doing so, researchers can understand far beyond experiential details of what happened, how often it happened, and how events connect to one another. By understanding the essence of a lived experience, a researcher can describe a phenomenon with significantly more depth and fullness (Van Manen, 1990).

Within this philosophical approach, “thoughtfulness” has been described as the word best capturing phenomenological research because studies emerge in response to the practical concerns of educators, practitioners, psychologists, parents, and administrators (Van Manen, 1990, p. 12). This proposed research with U.S. study abroad students in British universities was in direct response to practical concerns and experiences I encountered as an international educator. This provides yet another reason why phenomenology was the best methodological choice for this study.

**Site Selection and Sampling Procedures**

In the tradition of phenomenological research, the primary source of data is from
those who experience the phenomenon in question (Merriam, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). Since I was seeking to understand the essence of expectations and experiences for U.S. semester study abroad students within British universities, I focused specifically on U.S. higher education students who were participating in semester-long academic study abroad programs within Britain. Approximately 34,660 U.S. college students participate in study abroad programs in the U.K. per year (Institute for International Education, 2014a), which is the highest number of any destination for U.S. students. This group comprised the broad population for my study.

**Sample population.** My sample population was selected from students who had been accepted to study abroad on programs in the U.K. during the spring 2015 semester. Five institutions within a southeastern U.S. state agreed to participate in this study, including three large public research institutions, one small private college, and one large private university. During participant recruitment, eligible students from the two private institutions either did not meet selection criteria or were not interested in participating in the study. Therefore, the research sample was from three public universities: Central State University, Southern City University, and University of the Southeast. I received IRB approval from all participating institutions.

**Sampling strategies.** I used multiple sampling strategies to select participants for this study. First, I engaged in criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to select students from participating institutions who were accepted to study abroad in the U.K. during spring 2015. My original sampling strategy included students throughout the entire United Kingdom, as well as students across diverse study abroad types. I applied further criterion
sampling once I began the process of participant selection.

During participant selection, I applied criterion sampling to refine my sample to Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) instead of the entire U.K. (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland). Restricting the sample to Britain allowed me to use my time most effectively during the spring international site visit and adhere to the phenomenological focus of intensive interviews. This strategy also enabled me to increase the sample size of the study because I was able to spend time in interviews rather than in transit while abroad. With more time and resources, I would have included Northern Ireland in the sample, which would have expanded the study to the entire U.K.

Further, my original sampling plan included students throughout multiple study abroad program types. Study abroad opportunities in Britain include direct enrollment/exchange programs, faculty-led programs, and hybrid models, among others. With a methodological focus to describe a shared experience within a common phenomenon, I realized it would not be empirically appropriate to include students across diverse program types. Since program types have significantly different structures with regard to academic instruction, accommodations, student support, excursion, and cultural engagement, students across these programs may have very different experiences. I applied criterion sampling to select students on direct enrollment or exchange programs. This program type required students to enroll full-time in a British university and engage directly with the academic system, institutional culture, and local peers without the additional support or structure of an outside provider.

I applied stratified purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to select one half
of the group from institutions within greater London and the other half from institutions throughout Britain. This strategy was reflective of study abroad enrollment trends in Britain where institutions send a large portion of students to London (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011). I also engaged in typical case sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to highlight student and program criteria that were representative of the study abroad field and were likely to produce rich descriptions for the study. Criteria for sampling included level of previous travel experience, gender, ethnicity, major, location of host program, and housing structure of program (on-campus housing with local students, on-campus housing with U.S. or international students, off-campus housing, and homestay).

Since one of the critical aims of the study was to explore students’ expectations, I selected participants who had not spent previous significant time in Britain. Students who had spent significant previous time in Britain could have developed pre-conceived expectations based upon their previous endeavors. This would have inappropriately represented the essence of the pre-departure experience. Further, since the literature has revealed that males and females differ in the ways that they set expectations (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991), it was important to aim for diverse gender representations in the study. While the sample did include two males, this particular sampling goal was a challenge because females traditionally outnumber males in U.S. study abroad participation (Redden, 2014).

Finally, I engaged in convenience sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to select programs that were closer in geographic distance to one another, especially for the group outside of greater London. Since I traveled to Britain to visit participants during the course of the semester, I wanted to use my time in the country as productively as possible. Selecting
participants within a closer geographic distance allowed me to spend more time on campuses engaging in interviews as opposed to traveling great distances between destinations.

Utilizing all of these sampling strategies, I selected 12 participants for the study who were compensated for their time and participation. Participants were distributed across nine universities in England, Scotland, and Wales. Dukes (1984) has recommended three to ten subjects for a phenomenological study, so a sample of 12 exceeded scholarly recommendations. While I hoped that all participants would continue with the study throughout the longitudinal timeline, this selection of 12 participants also provided some flexibility and ensured continuity of rigor despite potential participant attrition. The sample included 10 females and two males. Table 1 provides participant pseudonyms and demographic information. Within the 12 students, one participant withdrew from study abroad before its completion, and another did not complete the final interview. Therefore, these students completed two interviews, and the remaining participants completed three.

Table 1

Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Institution and Year in College</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Field(s) of Study</th>
<th>Program Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roni</td>
<td>University of the Southeast Junior Transfer</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Media Studies (major) African American Studies (minor)</td>
<td>England (small town)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lea</td>
<td>University of the Southeast Junior</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Theatre (major) American Sign Language/Deaf Studies (minor)</td>
<td>Wales (small town)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>University of the Southeast Junior</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Economics (major) Psychology (minor)</td>
<td>Scotland (big city)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>South City University Junior Transfer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>English (major) Journalism (minor)</td>
<td>Greater London</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Institution and Year in College</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Field(s) of Study</th>
<th>Program Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>South City University Junior Transfer</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Computer Science (major) Mathematics (minor)</td>
<td>Greater London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaclyn</td>
<td>South City University Junior Transfer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Communication Studies (major) Media Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies (minor)</td>
<td>England (big city)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Central State University Junior</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Anthropology (major)</td>
<td>England (mid-size city)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>Central State University Junior</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Chemical Engineering (major)</td>
<td>England (small town)/Greater London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>University of the Southeast Junior Transfer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Religious Studies and Communication Studies (majors)</td>
<td>England (mid-size city)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amaya</td>
<td>South City University Junior</td>
<td>Puerto Rican and Antiguan</td>
<td>Latin American Studies and Sociology (majors)</td>
<td>Greater London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candace</td>
<td>South City University Senior</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Communication Studies (major) Theatre (minor)</td>
<td>Greater London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Central State University Senior</td>
<td>“Part White, part Portuguese, part Persian”</td>
<td>Biomedical Engineering and Biological Sciences (majors)</td>
<td>Scotland (mid-size city)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

This longitudinal study included data collection during three phases of the semester study abroad process: pre-departure, while abroad, and re-entry to the U.S. Aligning with phenomenological research design, I used participant interviews as the primary source of data for this study (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002). My original data collection plan also included document analysis and naturalistic observation. Due to resource and time
limitations, and because phenomenology should be primarily focused upon the voices of those who experience the phenomenon, I removed document analysis and naturalistic observation from the data collection strategy. I did, however, conduct interviews with six faculty and advisors from participating institutions in the U.S. and Britain. It was useful to discuss the phenomenon with the people who helped shape participant expectations and provided support throughout the study abroad experience in Britain. Further, faculty and advisors in the U.S. and Britain were able to provide comprehensive perspectives on their experiences with this phenomenon. This helped provide supplemental context to participant interviews. I conducted all pre-departure and while abroad interviews at participants’ home and host institutions. Due to travel and scheduling limitations in September 2015, I conducted some of the re-entry interviews via videoconference in Skype. In total, I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews during a longitudinal data collection process that spanned from December 2014 through September 2015.

**Researcher journal.** Aligning with the philosophy of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990), as well as best practices of qualitative research (Merriam, 2002), I reflected upon this research topic in a journal before I began data collection and continued journal reflection throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Through this journaling exercise, I aimed to continually bracket my personal opinions and experiences on the research topic from the true nature of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This confidential research journal enabled me to be mindful of my views in connection to the phenomenon of study.
**Interviews.** Interviews are considered the “primary method of data collection” within phenomenology (Merriam, 2002, p. 93), as conducting an interview can be one of the most powerful ways to understand another person’s experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2003). Within phenomenology, interviews can be useful for two distinct reasons: a) they help the researcher gather and explore narrative material that may be useful in the quest to develop a rich understanding of a specific phenomenon and b) they are a means to build a conversational relationship with a participant to better understand the meaning of an experience (Van Manen, 1990).

Van Manen (1990) has cautioned beginning researchers to stay mindful of structure and overarching research questions and to not “let method rule the question” with the traditionally open-ended structure of interviews in many phenomenological studies (p. 67). Additionally, it is often easier for interviewees to share stories of specific situations, instances, or experiences rather than speak about abstract concepts, which helps interviewees and researchers remain as close as possible to the phenomenon of study (Van Manen, 1990). Englander (2012) echoed this interview format suggestion for phenomenological research:

> It is not a traditional question that initiates the interview but the interviewer who asks the participant for a description of a situation in which the participant has experienced the phenomenon. Asking for a situation is vital since the discovery of the meaning of a phenomenon needs to have been connected to a specific context. (p. 25)

I followed the advice of Van Manen (1990) and Englander (2012) and conducted interviews in this study with the recommended semi-structured and personal life story format (1990). I used a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C-E) and reached saturation
by collecting enough data to form rich descriptions and understand the underlying essence of
the participants’ expectations and experiences (Meadows & Morse 2001; Merriam, 2002). I
recorded each interview and took written notes. In addition, I took field notes that noted
“body language and other gestural cues that lend meaning to the words of the persons being
interviewed” (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2003, p. 107).

**Student interviews.** I conducted semi-structured interviews with student participants
during the pre-departure, while abroad, and re-entry phases. During the pre-departure phase,
which began in fall 2014, I conducted one individual semi-structured interview with each
student after study abroad pre-departure orientation programs had concluded. Pre-departure
orientation programs for spring study abroad usually occur in November, so these interviews
were conducted in December 2014. In my first interview, it was important to begin building a
relationship and rapport with each participant and to emphasize my role in seeking to
understand rather than explain (Fontana & Frey, 2003). These pre-departure interviews were
focused on understanding participants’ expectations for the study abroad experience overall,
and within the three sub-question areas: academic, cultural, and social adjustment (see
Appendix C).

The second set of participant interviews took place during a three-week site visit to
Britain in March 2015, during the spring study abroad semester. While academic calendars
across the nine institutions varied slightly, I conducted these interviews after participants had
been abroad for at least two months in order to allow for sufficient opportunities to engage
and interact within the British academic system, local culture, and social structures. These
interviews also followed a semi-structured format (see Appendix D) but were longer in
length to allow for more depth and reflection. I included Van Manen’s (1990) and Englander’s (2012) recommended semi-structured format within this interview. This structure encouraged participants to share stories and anecdotes from their experiences, which demonstrated connection with the phenomenon of study and revealed how their expectations were either met or violated.

The spring 2015 semester in Britain ended during the late spring/early summer, and U.S. students often travel in Europe after the conclusion of the study abroad semester. Therefore, I waited until September 2015 before conducting re-entry interviews. I interviewed participants in a semi-structured format while students were still in the midst of re-entering the U.S. culture and higher education system. Our conversations focused upon participants’ reflections and evaluations of the semester to determine whether there were differences between their on-site and post-program descriptions of the phenomenon. Again, I asked a series of guiding questions and initiated a conversation about specific life stories after returning to the U.S. from study abroad (see Appendix E).

**Study abroad advisor and faculty interviews.** Study abroad advisors, both in the U.S. and in Britain, are responsible for preparing U.S. students for the semester study abroad experience and providing them with support in times of stress and cultural adjustment difficulty. Faculty are directly engaged with students within the academic environment. While the participants undergoing the experience of studying abroad were my primary sources of data, I conducted six interviews with study abroad advisors and faculty. I purposively selected educators who had direct responsibility for participants as well as experience with the phenomenon (see Appendix F-G). These interviews were important
because study abroad advisors and faculty not only worked directly with the participants in the study, but they also had historical perspectives on the research topic from previous student experience.

**Data Analysis**

Miles and Huberman (1994) described the process of qualitative data analysis with three simultaneous stages of activity: a) data reduction, b) data display, and c) conclusion drawing/verification (p. 10). In this section, I will provide an overview of how I analyzed the data I collected through the comprehensive perspective of psychological phenomenology. As noted by Silverman (2006), qualitative research should not be merely a collection of techniques; rather it should be grounded in a clearly defined perspective. In analyzing the data, I utilized Giorgi’s (1985; 2012) structure of psychological phenomenology. I selected this data analysis structure not only because of the close connection between cultural adjustment and psychology, but also because psychological phenomenology is a particularly useful lens for longitudinally oriented qualitative studies (Wertz, 1985). Additionally, this structure provided a clear multi-step framework for data analysis, which enhanced the rigor of my study.

**Data reduction.** The reduction stage of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) began while I was in the data collection process. Merriam (2002) described that data analysis exists simultaneously with data collection in that “one begins analyzing data with the first interview” (p. 14). As each interview concluded, I listened to interview recordings before submitting it to a professional transcription service and reviewed my notes. This allowed me to “test emerging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data” rather than miss
potential opportunities by waiting until all data was collected (Merriam, 2002, p. 14).

I also submitted interviews to participants in order to engage in member checking (Seale, 2003). This step ensured that I authentically represented the reality of participants’ experiences and provided me with an opportunity to amend transcripts as necessary (Seale, 2003). At this stage of the process, I also wrote memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and continued to reflect on perceptions in my journal to bracket personal viewpoints (Van Manen, 1990).

Within the data reduction process, I initiated the beginning steps of psychological phenomenology analysis. As I received transcripts, I read the data in its entirety “in order to get a sense of the whole statement” (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10). The purpose of this exercise was to understand the data within the context of the study and to build a foundation for future data analysis (Giorgi, 2012). I then read the text again with the specific purpose of identifying “meaning units” (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10) that were relevant to the phenomenon being studied or related to a participant’s psychological attitude, perception, or emotion. In this step, I followed the recommendation of Giorgi (2012) to mark transcripts for every perceived transition in meaning. This process was intended to make future steps of data analysis more manageable (Giorgi, 2012) and connected to the data reduction concept of “teasing out themes, making clusters, or making partitions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10).

Data display. Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasized the importance of organizing and compressing qualitative data in a way that facilitates opportunities for researchers to effectively draw conclusions. I digitally recorded all interviews and submitted recordings to a professional transcription service. I listened to recordings in accordance with transcripts to
confirm accuracy. In addition to interviews, I reviewed my notes and memos. I stored the data in multiple password-protected locations.

**Conclusion drawing and verification.** The third stream within Miles and Huberman’s (1994) data analysis framework is conclusion drawing and verification whereby the initially vague patterns that emerge within data collection become “increasingly explicit and grounded” (p. 11). While the data collection and data analysis processes often occur simultaneously, researchers may not be able to state final conclusions until the data collection concludes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994) align with the third, fourth, and fifth steps of Giorgi’s (1985) method for psychological phenomenology data analysis. At the third stage of the analysis process, I collected and defined all of the relevant meaning units into themes. I then expressed the insight gained from these meaning units in more direct terms that explicitly aligned with the phenomenon of this study (Giorgi, 1985). Giorgi (2012) described this step as “the heart of the method” for data analysis (p. 6).

In the fourth step of the process, I synthesized the “transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the subject’s experience” (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10). This statement is often referenced as the structure or essence of the experience (Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Giorgi (2012) recommended using imaginative variation to assist with this step. Imaginative variation involves searching for possible meanings for the experience through imagination, multiple perspectives, and polarizing frames of reference to approach the phenomenon of study (Moustakas, 1994). As described by Moustakas, “the aim is to arrive at the ‘how’ that speaks to conditions that illuminate the ‘what’ of experience.
How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is?” (p. 98). Through this process, I communicated a universal meaning of the phenomenon into a narrative description (Giorgi, 2012). In the fifth and final step, I utilized this narrative essential structure and returned to the raw research data to make connections and clarifications of how the essential structure fostered an understanding and interpretation of the data (Giorgi, 2012).

To summarize, my execution of Giorgi’s five steps for data analysis are as follows:

1. I read the data in its entirety to understand the data within the context of the study.

2. I read the text again with the specific purpose of identifying “meaning units” (Giorgi, 1985, p.10).

3. I collected and defined all of the relevant and psychologically explicit meaning units into themes. I expressed the insight gained from these meaning units in more direct terms.

4. I synthesized the “transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the subject’s experience” (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10). This statement is often referenced as the structure or essence of the experience. I communicated a universal meaning of the phenomenon into a narrative description.

5. I utilized the narrative essential structure to make connections with the raw data and clarify interpretations and understandings of the data. (Giorgi, 1985; 2012)

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is considered to be the collective evaluation of rigor within
qualitative research, including quantitative characteristics of generalizability, internal validity, reliability, and objectivity that have been conceptualized as transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability for qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Meadows and Morse, 2001). Throughout the research process, I took deliberate steps to ensure trustworthiness in this study. Meadows and Morse (2001) emphasized that in order for qualitative studies to be evaluated on their merits within the scholarly community, researchers must clearly describe the criteria applied to establish rigor.

**Transferability.** Transferability within qualitative research replaces the quantitative concept of external validity or applicability (Seale, 1999). It indicates how aligned the participants are to the phenomenon of study and ensures that the research questions can be answered within the contextual bounds of the study (Jensen, 2008). Scholars can increase transferability through purposeful sampling strategies and thick description that gives the reader a complete understanding of the participants and context with relation to the research design and phenomenon of study (Jensen, 2008). Within this study, I applied multiple sampling strategies, including criterion, stratified purposeful, and typical case sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994), not only to identify a sample that best represented the phenomenon of study, but also to maximize my potential for data that facilitated thick, rich descriptions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Credibility.** Credibility reconceptualizes the notion of truth and addresses the questions, “Do the findings of the study make sense? Are they credible to the people we study and to our readers? Do we have an authentic portrait of what we are looking at?” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 274). I addressed credibility in multiple ways throughout the
design of this study. I triangulated complementary sources of interview data by utilizing advisor and faculty interviews in addition to longitudinal participant interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seale, 1999). When interviews concluded, I engaged in member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and allowed participants to reflect and share additional information on interview transcripts (Meadows & Morse, 2001).

The research questions for this study were linked directly to theoretical frameworks and to the phenomenon of study (Martin et al., 1995; Pitts, 2009). As such, results were aligned with both the theoretical frameworks and the constructs of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also followed a clear and explicit structure for data analysis through the stages of psychological phenomenology (Giorgi, 1985, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This intentionality of research design also increased credibility.

**Dependability.** The concept of dependability addresses consistency and stability within the research design and methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I was mindful of dependability by designing a research structure and methodology that flowed logically and consistently from overarching purpose through data analysis phases of the study. The purpose and research questions connected directly with the phenomenon, as well as with significant issues of theory and practice within international higher education. I selected two relevant theoretical frameworks in addition to my focused literature review to ground my research subquestions. I presented a rationale for phenomenology as the most appropriate methodology for this study, and I selected data collection and data analysis structures that aligned with this methodological choice.

In accordance with phenomenological methods (Moustakas, 1994) and standards of
good qualitative practice (Merriam, 2002), I maintained a journal throughout the research process to reflect upon potential subjectivity and kept a written “audit trail” of my research decisions, especially when they diverged from original plans of the design (Meadows & Morse, 2001, p. 194). I also received peer colleague reviews of my findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994) from two other colleagues who are qualitative researchers within the higher education field.

**Confirmability.** Guba and Lincoln (1981) emphasized that research conclusions should be based on the participants and context of the study rather than on the subjectivity of the researcher. Often associated with quantitative tenets of neutrality or objectivity (Seale, 1999), the concept of confirmability addresses the notion that qualitative research should have “reasonable freedom from unacknowledged researcher bias – at the minimum, explicitness about the inevitable biases that exist” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 278).

Through the journaling process of bracketing or Epoche (Moustakas, 1994), this study’s phenomenological methodology required me to be especially mindful about potential biases and to make explicit efforts throughout the longitudinal study to separate my views from observations in the data. This encouraged the true essence of participants’ experiences to come forth. I wrote in my journal before beginning interviews. I have provided my bracketing journal to my chair. All researcher notes are available to the full committee. I have also shared my subjectivity statement below.

An additional tenet of confirmability is that the reader should be able to clearly follow the system of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I have sought to describe the multi-step process of psychological phenomenology in a way that a reader can follow the sequence
(Giorgi, 2012). Embedded in this data analysis process was a requirement to consider alternative and rival hypotheses (Giorgi, 2012), which also strengthened confirmability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Ethical Issues**

I am the Director of International Programs at a small private college, which was one of the original participating institutions in the study. I understand that participants at my institution and elsewhere may recognize my professional role as a director of international programs beyond my role as a researcher. As such, I was aware of “the perception of power” that participants may have had regarding my interest in their study abroad experience (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2003, p. 118).

I addressed this issue within the Institutional Review Board (IRB) informed consent form by providing a clear description of the study, my role as a researcher, and the fact that the study has no impact whatsoever on home or host institution academic records (Creswell, 1998). While the study did not impact students’ academic records or study abroad programs, there was the possibility for participants to discuss issues of a personal or sensitive nature during interviews, especially with regard to challenging cultural adjustment issues. As such, I have used pseudonyms for all participants in order to protect their identities and privacy. Additionally, students had the right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time. I shared this information with participants on the IRB consent form (Creswell, 1998).

If I had selected a student from my own institution to participate in the study, it would have been important to clarify that I am not involved in the study abroad advising process and would not have had a previous relationship with prospective students. I have previously
been involved in leading pre-departure orientation sessions at my institution, and thus would have arranged for colleagues to lead sessions if a participant was present. Additionally, I am the instructor of record in a general education course that awards pass/fail credit for study abroad students who seek to fulfill the requirement while abroad. If I had selected a participant from my institution, I would have made arrangements for an approved colleague to serve as the participant’s instructor of record so that I would not have served in an instructor capacity.

As previously addressed, I took deliberate measures to bracket my subjectivity in continuous journaling exercises and consistent researcher notes and audit trails of my research decisions throughout the longitudinal study. I outlined a plan for ensuring rigor and followed a multi-step data analysis structure.

**Researcher Paradigm**

I embrace the constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes that the world becomes real through actions, thoughts, and interactions, not through discoveries of absolute truths (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). My research was informed by the relevant literature and methodological frameworks of scholars who came before me, but I understood that my participants constructed their own realities within the specific context of the study. My overarching priority was to understand and describe how people construct meaning within the interactions and experiences of their lives, not to test systematic methods and discover generalizable truths about the wider population (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007).

Through longitudinal interviews, I served as the primary instrument of data collection for this study (Merriam, 2002). I placed value on collecting not only the verbatim data, but
also on collecting my impressions, observations, and hunches throughout the process (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). I sought to build a rapport with my participants through multiple opportunities for interaction. Through the constructivist paradigm, my goal for this phenomenological study was to describe the essence of the experience for these participants within this context, which has yielded a useful contribution to the literature and has provided a foundation on which future research can build.

**Subjectivity**

I am the director of an international education office who develops, manages, and studies higher education in a global context. I have advised both study abroad students and international students for over 10 years. My role as an international educator is a direct result of my own study abroad experiences, which have been influential in my personal and professional journeys.

When I studied abroad as a 20 year-old undergraduate, it was my first experience traveling outside of the United States. It was my second time on an airplane. I had been educated in the same state throughout my entire life and had rarely traveled beyond bordering states. I was the first person in my small local family to travel abroad. Admittedly terrified by the thought of spending five months overseas, the study abroad program I chose was the most comfortable and familiar-feeling option I could find. It was comprised entirely of U.S university students who lived together in pre-arranged apartments, took classes in English modeled after the U.S. higher education system, and traveled in groups together on the weekends. My host city was so accustomed to U.S. students and international visitors, local businesses often staffed English-speaking employees.
Although I anticipated that my first international experience would be an adventure, I did not anticipate what a significant impact it would have on my development. Navigating an unfamiliar city on my own, challenging myself to learn a new language, encountering and overcoming difficult situations, and successfully completing an experience that previously intimidated me had a tremendous influence on my personal, educational, and professional growth. I gained self-confidence, improved communication skills, developed an appreciation for and acceptance of other cultures, and changed my career path from K-12 education to international higher education as a result. Due to my own positive experience, I am biased to believe that study abroad programs, even if designed within seemingly familiar and comfortable environments, can have potential for a significant impact on the students who participate in them.

Another relevant international experience was in the summer of 2008 during a graduate internship in Britain while I completed my master’s degree and worked as an entry-level professional in study abroad. I was fortunate to secure a summer placement within a department that had responsibility for preparing incoming U.S. study abroad students. The placement was designed for me to experience my profession from a British perspective and gain valuable knowledge to better prepare U.S. students for study abroad. In addition to the tremendous professional value, it allowed me the opportunity to spend weekends traveling within Britain. I had high expectations that this internship would provide me with an exciting month of professional development and traveling opportunities and that I would return home with many stories and memories to share.
The truth is that my month in Britain was unexpectedly tough. I was surprised by challenges of cultural adjustment and was shocked that life in Britain was not as stress-free as I had expected it to be. I eventually pulled myself out of the slump, but it required deliberate strategy and consistent effort. In my subsequent years as a study abroad advisor for the U.K. and Ireland, I worked with multiple U.S. study abroad students and English-speaking international students who disclosed very significant challenges with their own cultural adjustment experiences. Due to my own personal challenges with cultural adjustment, in addition to my experiences supporting students as a practitioner, I am biased to believe that students may experience some degree of unexpected challenge when adjusting to a similar culture.

I embedded multiple and deliberate measures within data collection and analysis plans to ensure the trustworthiness and quality of this study, including specific efforts to mitigate these potential biases. Additionally, the selection of phenomenological methods required me to consistently journal in order to bracket potential biases or issues of subjectivity that may have otherwise prohibited the authentic participant experiences from emerging (Van Manen, 1990). My knowledge and access regarding study abroad was otherwise a great strength for this study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of methodology. This study was qualitative because I resonate with the constructivist paradigm that truth is made real through actions, interactions, and thoughts in context with the world (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). I connect with the qualitative research philosophy, which embraces the concept that, “meaning
is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (Merriam, 2002, p.3). I selected phenomenology as the most appropriate methodology for this study because phenomenology explores “lived experiences for several individuals about a concept” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51), particularly during times of important transitions (Merriam, 2002). As such, a qualitative phenomenological study was best aligned with the research questions of this study. The phenomenon in question was expectations and experiences of adjustment for U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities.

This study was longitudinal in nature, exploring participant expectations and experiences during pre-departure, while abroad, and re-entry phases of the study abroad process. I applied multiple purposeful sampling strategies to recruit 12 participants in nine institutions within Britain, as well as six study abroad advisors and faculty in the U.S. and Britain. The study began during the pre-departure orientation process in late fall 2014, continued through the spring 2015 semester, and concluded after students re-entered the U.S. in fall 2015.

In alignment with phenomenological methods (Van Manen, 1990), I collected extensive interview data from the 12 participants who experienced the phenomenon. I also collected supplemental interview data from six faculty and staff who had direct responsibility for preparing and supporting participants in the study abroad experience. I conducted semi-structured interviews during December 2014, March 2015 (on-site in Britain), and September 2015. In total, I conducted 40 interviews during the data collection process.

I applied the five-stage data analysis framework of psychological phenomenology (Giorgi, 1985, 2012) and took simultaneous steps of reduction and data display to prepare for
conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I took deliberate measures within the research design to address trustworthiness, and I included steps to increase transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The potential ethical issues were minimal, and were addressed through the IRB consent form, as well as with my employer. While I do have a degree of subjectivity toward this topic because of my personal and professional experiences, I embedded multiple methodological structures throughout the study to mitigate my potential biases and allow the essence of the participants’ experiences to come forward.
CHAPTER 4
ARTICLE OVERVIEW

The subsequent chapters of this dissertation are structured as a series of articles for future publication. Below, I provide a rationale for this dissertation format, as well as a brief summary of the structure and key findings for the articles that resulted from this research.

Rationale for Format

There is consensus throughout higher education that the doctoral dissertation should serve not only as an academic training exercise, but also as an original contribution to scholarly knowledge (Duke & Beck, 1999). Although a central goal for the dissertation is to share new knowledge, scholars argue that the traditional format can be a hindrance for doctoral candidates who wish to publish their research in journals (Duke & Beck, 1999). This is problematic because without publishing to a wider scholarly community, a student’s dissertation findings may not reach the audience that is best positioned to benefit from them.

Further, while doctoral candidates may become proficient in writing within the dissertation genre, this is not the type of academic writing they will be expected to produce after graduation (Duke & Beck, 1999; Krathwohl, 1994). As noted by Krathwohl (1994), although many doctoral candidates generate expansive dissertations that provide comprehensive detail on every issue, “after the doctorate, time to write is used for the opposite purpose—to describe a study as succinctly as will adequately communicate for publication” (p. 30). In response to this concern, multiple disciplines now accept alternative dissertation formats, which provide candidates an opportunity to deliver findings as a series of academic articles. This practice has become common in the sciences and is gaining
increased support within education and social sciences (Duke & Beck, 1999; Krathwohl, 1994). Proponents of this format advocate that it not only provides candidates with important practice in scholarly writing, but also helps ensure that new knowledge is shared more swiftly and widely with appropriate audiences (Duke & Beck, 1999; Krathwohl, 1994).

**Article Structure**

Designed as a study to directly address a critical gap in literature and professional understanding of U.S. direct enrollment students in Britain, the following chapters in this dissertation are presented as scholarly articles. Within each article, I have included introduction, literature review, methods, findings, conclusions, and implications sections. Each article aligns with one of the three theoretically grounded research questions in this study: Article one explores academic expectations and adjustment; article two explores cultural expectations and adjustment; article three explores social expectations and adjustment. In each article, I describe students’ expectations, as well as their on-site experiences. Where appropriate, I also include insights around these themes from faculty and study abroad advisors in the U.S. and Britain. I discuss how each research article extends both literature and theory and provide specific implications for international educators to utilize these findings.

It is important to note that I have purposefully included more extensive information in each section of these three articles than will be required for an academic journal. I have provided the committee with this additional detail in order to demonstrate comprehensive and rigorous attention to research preparation, study design, and findings within this study. In the
future, I will significantly reduce these more expansive articles in order to meet journal publication standards.

**Article 1: Academic expectations and experiences.** Article one explores how U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities describe their academic expectations and how those expectations interact with academic experiences while abroad. The findings highlight areas of inconsistency between students’ academic expectations and on-site experiences. They also suggest discrepancies between how U.S. study abroad students experience British academic life during the semester abroad and what their on-site faculty and advisors expect of them. I review the sources that most significantly shaped academic expectations and present five themes of academic adjustment that arose from interviews. Themes include the priority of academics, self-guided structure, unscheduled academic time, perception of challenge, and faculty interactions.

While participants could name what academic differences they expected and encountered in Britain, they were challenged to understand why these contrasts existed, as well as the underlying academic and cultural values that grounded the British higher education system. Reverting to familiar constructs of academic success, participants in this study were frequently uncertain how best to navigate the landscape of British higher education, expressing concern about whether or not they were succeeding academically. Interviews with faculty and advisors revealed multiple areas of discrepancy between student perceptions and institutional expectations.

**Article 2: Cultural expectations and experiences.** Article two explores how U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities describe their cultural expectations and
how those expectations interact with cultural experiences while abroad. Participant interviews revealed three distinct themes with regard to the intersection of cultural expectations and cultural adjustment for U.S. study abroad students in British direct enrollment programs. These include perception of cultural distance, language challenge, and acceptance of diversity. The findings of this study support previous exploratory research and opinion papers, which have cautioned that U.S. study abroad students in Britain may set inappropriate expectations for their intercultural experience.

Further, while students were able to recognize that they were experiencing cultural difference in Britain, it was often challenging for them to provide in-depth explanations of the difference they felt or to connect perceived difference to deeper British cultural values. Participants wished they had expected cultural difference and encouraged others to “expect difference.” It is noteworthy, however, that they had difficulty providing definitive examples beyond surface-level observations. While students wanted to be open-minded about a direct enrollment semester in Britain, a number of them realized they were viewing their host country through a comparative U.S. lens. As cultural expectations were violated by on-site realities, students experienced disappointment and confusion.

**Article 3: Social expectations and experiences.** Article three explores how U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities describe their social expectations and how those expectations interact with social experiences while abroad. Students looked forward to developing meaningful connections abroad, particularly with local residents, and reflected upon how their active, scheduled social lives in the U.S. would manifest in Great Britain. In many cases, students encountered significantly more challenges than anticipated
in navigating friendships and social landscapes of their host communities, yet they found personal value and growth opportunities within their newfound social realities abroad.

Contrary to participants’ expectations, as well as their advisors’ hopes, students did not enjoy a seamless transition into the social fabric of their host institutions. Nearly all students in this study expressed difficulty in making local and international friends within their direct enrollment programs. Even though participants were studying in a location perceived to be culturally similar, they still experienced feelings of loneliness and solitude. Participants who developed a newfound acceptance of their solitude in Britain not only found personal growth, but were also more positive in describing their overall experience abroad.

This article not only extends literature within international education, but also provides important connections to research on the Millennial generation.
CHAPTER 5
ARTICLE 1: THE INTERSECTION OF ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS AND
EXPERIENCES OF U.S. STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS IN BRITISH
UNIVERSITIES

“It was like A and Z, but there’s all these letters in-between:”

The Intersection of Academic Expectations and Experiences of
U.S. Study Abroad Students in British Universities

The commonly held assumption within the United States study abroad community is
that cultural similarity between home and host cultures should foster easier study abroad
transitions for students (Church, 1982; Paige, 1993). If one embraces this assumption, U.S.
students in English-speaking locations, such as Great Britain, should require less support and
less research on their adjustment experiences than students who study in overtly different
cultural contexts. This echoes the views of many in the study abroad field who feel that
“traditional destinations,” such as English-speaking countries, should be “less challenging”
for U.S. study abroad students (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011, p. 24).

While this assumption may not be surprising, some international educators have
recently challenged the concept of an easier study abroad experience for U.S. study abroad
students in Britain. Through scholarly opinion papers and exploratory studies (Edwards,
2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton
& Hart, 2008), this recent strand of research has indicated U.S. students in Britain may
encounter challenges abroad that are unique from other issues more commonly discussed in cultural adjustment literature. The consistent theme from this literature is that U.S. students may develop inappropriate expectations for study abroad in Britain, particularly with regard to their academic experience (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). Addressing a significant and unresolved conflict between assumptions of ease and observations of challenge, this research provides a focused empirical exploration of the academic expectations and lived experiences of U.S. study abroad students in Britain.

Perhaps aligning with dominant assumptions of an easier transition, it is noteworthy that the international education research community has often ignored the cultural adjustment of English-speaking study abroad students in English-speaking countries. Instead, there is a wealth of cultural adjustment research on students who have transitioned between countries with overtly different languages and cultures, including U.S. students who have studied abroad in non-English speaking countries (Chaban, Williams, Holland, Boyce & Warner, 2011; Hunley, 2010; Pitts, 2009) or non-English speaking students who have studied abroad in English-speaking countries (Akazaki, 2010; Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, and Sabatier, 2010; Brown, 2008; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li, Baker, & Marshall, 2002; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ying & Han, 2006; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

This gap in the literature is concerning, especially because more U.S. students study abroad in the U.K. than anywhere else in the world, accounting for 12 to 19% of the entire U.S. study abroad population (Institute for International Education, 2001, 2014a). This statistic has remained consistent since the Institute for International Education began
collecting participation data more than a decade ago (Institute for International Education, 2001).

Further, current efforts are underway through the Generation Study Abroad initiative to double within five years the number of U.S. students who study abroad (Institute for International Education, 2014c). With over 500 domestic and international colleges, as well as 14 governments (including the U.S. and the U.K.) pledging to significantly increase study abroad participation, the Generation Study Abroad initiative will undoubtedly impact the future of the U.S. study abroad landscape, as well as the longstanding top destination, the United Kingdom (Institute for International Education, 2014a).

There is an empirical lack of understanding about the most dominant group of study abroad students, as well as a call from the international education field to be wary of assumptions regarding the academic transition for U.S. students in English-speaking destinations, such as Great Britain. The purpose of this phenomenological study, therefore, was to directly address this gap and describe the academic expectations and adjustment experiences of U.S. study abroad students in British universities. Informed by applications of expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1993; Martín et al., 1995), and Y.Y. Kim’s integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001; Pitts, 2009), this study explored these assumptions through longitudinal qualitative research with 12 students who directly enrolled in British universities for semester study abroad programs. In doing so, it addressed the following research questions:

1. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe their academic expectations?
2. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe the intersection of their academic expectations with academic experiences?

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This research included two complementary theoretical frameworks to ground the study: Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment, and Martin, Bradford, and Rohrlich’s (1995) modified expectancy violations theory. These theories address related, yet distinctive concepts of pre-departure expectation and cross-cultural adjustment in the study abroad process. In previous study abroad research, both theories have been applied to highlight academic expectations as a source of cross-cultural adjustment challenge (Pitts, 2009; Martin et al., 1995). Applying both frameworks allows for theory triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), as these theories have been used successfully in research with U.S. study abroad students, but neither has been utilized in a focused study on U.S. study abroad students in Britain.

**Pitts’s Model of Expectations, Talk, and Identity**

Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment (see Figure 1) emerged from a 15-month ethnographic study on U.S. study abroad students in Paris, France. Through this research, Pitts (2009) applied and extended a foundational model of cultural adjustment from Y.Y. Kim (2001) to describe the adjustment process for semester study abroad students. Especially relevant for a focused study on student expectations in Britain, Pitts’s (2009) research explored how gaps in student expectations elicited new aspects to cultural adjustment theory. Pitts examined these
expectation gaps, in addition to other cultural adjustment issues, through the lens of Kim’s (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation.

![Diagram of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment](image)

Figure 1. Pitts (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity.

**Kim’s Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation**

Y.Y. Kim’s (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation, which formed the foundation of Pitts’s (2009) model, was created from research on stress and adaptation (Pitts, 2009). Kim’s primary concern for theory development was “not whether individuals adapt, but how and why they adapt” (p. 38). Within this framework, communication is the foundation for navigating within new cultures, mediating intercultural encounters, and developing new cultural identities (Kim, 2001).

Pitts’s (2009). Pitts’s (2009) research highlighted the importance of both expectations and communication in study abroad cultural adjustment. Within Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model (see Figure 1), students form expectations about their study abroad experience from multiple external sources. These include the international host university, co-students,
friends/family at home, host family, and home university. Expectations fall into four categories: academic/language, social, travel/cultural, and value/culture. Throughout a study abroad semester as students encounter intercultural difference, they “experience gaps between their expectations and the reality of the sojourn” (Pitts, 2009, p. 459). These expectation gaps produce uncertainty within students and encourage them to make adjustments that will help them better manage stress and increase their social success (Pitts, 2009).

Students make adjustments through communication (Pitts, 2009). They “evaluate, interpret, and modify their own experiences abroad” through forms of talk (Pitts, 2009, p. 459). Additionally, Pitts argues, communication allows students to determine whether the cultural adjustment challenges they encounter are normal and appropriate. Most importantly, these methods of communication allow students to adjust pre-departure expectations throughout the semester and modify behavior to align with revised expectations. As the semester progresses, students’ expectations become more aligned with reality, and stress decreases. As a result, students are more likely to function and interact successfully and appropriately in a cross-cultural environment (Pitts, 2009).

Pitts (2009) noted that previous to her research, very few studies had addressed expectations and study abroad. One noteworthy exception, as mentioned by Pitts (2009), is the application of expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1993) by Rohrlich and Martin (1991) and Martin et al. (1995).

**Expectancy Violations Theory**
Burgoon originally developed expectancy violations theory (EVT) in 1978 to explain nonverbal behaviors, but the theory has since expanded in scope and sophistication (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005; Burgoon et al., 1995), most notably to provide a framework for cross-cultural communication. Martin et al. (1995) provided the first comprehensive application of EVT in study abroad context and developed a modification of the framework to include variables that may impact study abroad students’ expectations (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Martin et al. (1995) modified expectancy violations framework.

**Burgoon’s Expectancy Violations Theory.** Expectancy violations theory (EVT) is grounded in the “assumption that people have numerous deeply ingrained expectations about the ways others will communicate” (Burgoon et al., 1995, p. 94). These expectations are shaped by social and cultural norms and knowledge (Burgoon et al., 1995). In an intercultural
context, if one does not take time in advance to learn about another culture’s standards, they will revert to stereotypical assumptions in expectations and interactions (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). With EVT, expectations are not simply met or unmet; expectations are also violated positively or violated negatively. When expectations are violated positively, this means expectations were incorrect, but the outcome is better than anticipated. If expectations are violated negatively, the outcome is worse than expected, and a person may apply a negative evaluation toward an experience (Martin et al., 1995).

**Martin et al.’s (1995) Modified Expectancy Violations Framework.** Recognizing the important connections between EVT and cultural adjustment theory, Martin et al. (1995) provided the first application of EVT in longitudinal study abroad research. Martin et al. (1995) designed a longitudinal study to explore:

(a) the degree to which sojourners’ predeparture expectations are fulfilled or violated; 
(b) whether the fulfillment or violation of expectations is influenced by gender, prior experiences with transitions, and sojourn location; and (c) whether the fulfillment or violation of expectations influences the overall evaluation of an intercultural experience. (p. 88)

Martin et al. (1995) applied the aforementioned variables to the expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1993) and developed a modified expectancy violations framework for expectations and cultural adaptation in study abroad to ground the research study (see Figure 2). As a student travels abroad and has intercultural interactions, their “expectations are then met or violated negatively or positively” (Martin et al., 1995, p. 92-93). Martin et al. (1995)
included variables of gender, location of sojourn, and prior transition experience for their potential to impact both formation of expectations and fulfillment/violation of expectations.

Explaining the rationale for including program location among the variables, Martin et al. (1995) noted that England might be a location where this variable could be especially relevant:

For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals who expect a sojourn in England to be very similar to living in the United States often find these expectations are violated. In contrast, individuals expect a sojourn in a more exotic place to be very different, and these expectations are more likely upheld. (p. 92)

One of the primary findings of the study was that fulfillment or violations of pre-departure expectations were significantly related to program location (Martin et al., 1995). Most notably, students in England reported expectancy violations more negatively than students in other countries with regard to language, climate, and course work (Martin et al. 1995).

Given these results, Martin et al. (1995) called into question assumptions within international education literature and professional practice that cultural similarity always leads to easier adjustments. They also noted the need for further studies that explored this area of cultural adjustment (Martin et al., 1995). Suggested future research directions included applying EVT to the cultural adaptation process, extending the investigation to include the re-entry process, and exploring the framework within a qualitative study on the cultural adjustment process (Martin et al., 1995). This research directly addresses all of these areas to extend the applicability of the modified EVT framework.
Literature Review

This review of the literature explores current knowledge about academic adjustment for international and study abroad students in higher education and situates the need for in-depth research on the academic expectations and experiences of U.S. study abroad students in Britain. It also provides a brief overview of the U.K. higher education system, as well as comprehensive academic information and guidance currently provided by institutions and study abroad organizations to U.S. study abroad students who are preparing to embark on a semester direct enrollment program in Britain. This literature highlights multiple critical gaps in knowledge that are directly addressed by this research study and builds the necessity for a focused qualitative study on U.S. study abroad students in Britain.

Higher Education in the United Kingdom

In order to understand how U.S. semester study abroad students may adjust to academic life within British universities, it is important to situate this study within the history and current structure of higher education in the United Kingdom.

Founding institutions. The U.K. has a rich higher education history, which includes the oldest universities in the English-speaking world. Oxford University was founded in approximately 1096, according to historical documents that suggest the beginning of teaching in the city (Baskerville, MacLeod, & Saunders, 2011). After the founding of Oxford University, an association of scholars gathered in 1209 to form the University of Cambridge. During the 15th century, papal bull established the three first Scottish universities of St. Andrews, Glasgow, and Aberdeen. University of Edinburgh followed shortly after in 1583 by royal charter. These original founding U.K. institutions of higher education continue to be
among the most prestigious universities not only in the United Kingdom, but also throughout the world (Baskerville et al., 2011). According to QS World Rankings, four of the top 10 universities in the world are within the U.K. (Quacquarelli Symonds Limited, 2015).

**Growth and expansion of higher education.** Throughout the 19th century, the U.K. experienced a significant expansion of higher education (Baskerville et al., 2011). As major industrial cities grew at the later part of the century, medical, science, and engineering colleges followed (Baskerville et al., 2011). Many of these institutions became known as the “redbrick universities” (Baskerville et al., 2011, p. 5). The U.K. had nine universities and multiple university colleges by the end of World War II (Baskerville et al., 2011).

As the U.K. population, economy, and technology needs grew in the 1950s and 1960s, the U.K. government subsequently expanded higher education to establish colleges of advanced technology (Baskerville et al., 2011). These colleges were established in the mid-1950s and received university status in the mid-1960s. Additionally, these two decades included the creation of seven new universities and 13 university colleges (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Efforts to increase access of U.K. higher education.** In 1992, the U.K. government passed the Further and Higher Education Act, which gave university-level status to 35 smaller polytechnic and college-level institutions (Baskerville et al., 2011). Polytechnic institutions had the primary purpose for vocational or technical training. Institutions in this category have since been referred to as “post-92 or modern universities, though it should be noted that many of them have long and illustrious histories as vocational institutions” (Baskerville et al., 2011, p. 5).
The purpose of this intentional and gradual higher education expansion was to meet the needs of the U.K. population by a diverse spectrum of organizations (Baskerville et al., 2011). The U.K. prides itself on having a diversity of higher education institutions in order for prospective students and international partners to identify the best matches for their interests (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Global expansion of U.K. higher education.** As an interesting global expansion of U.K. higher education, of the 408,685 international students who were enrolled in courses toward a U.K. higher education degree in 2009-2010, only 68,450 (16.7%) of these students were studying within the European Union (Baskerville et al., 2011). The remaining 340,235 students (83.3%) were studying outside of the EU on distance learning programs, international collaborative arrangements, international branch campuses, or partner organizations overseas (Baskerville et al., 2011). The U.K.-based Open University serves over 209,000 students both in the U.K. and throughout the world who take courses on a predominantly part-time basis (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Degree structures within the U.K.** Institutions have autonomy to set their own admissions requirements for degree programs, called “courses” (Baskerville et al., 2011, p. 9). A bachelor’s degree in the U.K. is called a “first degree course” and is often “awarded with honours” (Baskerville et al., 2011). In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the first degree course is a three-year degree (Baskerville et al., 2011). In Scotland, a first degree course is four years and more closely resembles a U.S. undergraduate degree (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.). The course may require more time if it involves practical work experience.
Current student population in U.K. higher education. Traditionally, students in U.K. higher education have been 18-21 years old, enrolled full-time, living on or near campus, and studying in institutions away from their hometowns (Baskerville et al., 2011). This traditional model has shifted in recent years, however, and there has been a considerable increase in students who are enrolled part-time, older in age, living at home or studying very close to home, and more engaged in community activities than university activities. As noted by Baskerville et al. (2011), “More than two-thirds (of students) travel less than 62 miles to their place of study” (p. 10).

Declaring a major within the U.K. Students in U.K. higher education may begin working toward their major field of study as early as secondary school. Undergraduate students in the U.K. begin studying their fields of choice from the beginning of their university experience (Fulbright Commission, n.d.). As such the concept of an undeclared or undecided major is uncommon (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.). The concept of general education, which is central to the majority of U.S. higher education institutions, is considered complete at the conclusion of U.K. secondary education. Students in U.K. higher education undertake a focused curriculum and do not often enroll in departments outside of their major field of study. This is why it may be challenging for U.S. study abroad students to enroll across more than one or two departments during a study abroad semester. Faculty in each department assume that students enter courses with a foundational knowledge of the subject area (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.).

U.K. academic structure and differences for U.S. study abroad students. According to U.S. study abroad providers, this academic structure can have an impact on
U.S. students who enroll in the U.K. higher education system for semester or year-long study abroad programs. As explained by the U.S.-based Institute for Study Abroad at Butler University in advising materials:

The British academic system is an intensive three-year program.

- First-year courses are appropriate for departments in which you have little or no prior experience;
- Second-year courses will be equivalent to advanced sophomore or junior-level U.S. courses;
- Third-year courses will be equivalent to senior-level U.S. courses;
- Fourth-year courses and higher are part of a postgraduate degree (Masters or Ph.D.); You are not eligible to take these courses as an undergraduate study abroad student. (Institute for Study Abroad Butler University, 2014)

Another U.S.-based study abroad provider, Arcadia University, echoes this advice, “Because British students come into university ahead of most American students, Year 1 is considered equivalent to a Sophomore level course, Year 2 a Junior level, and Year 3 a Junior/Senior level” (Arcadia University College of Global Studies, 2014).

**U.K. course structure and differences for U.S. study abroad students.** Academic courses in the U.K. are called “modules” and usually fall into three categories: lectures, tutorials, and seminars. Lectures are “sometimes completely optional,” according to an academic handbook for students preparing to enroll in U.K. universities through a well-known U.S.-based direct enrollment study abroad provider, the International Student Exchange Program (ISEP) (International Student Exchange Program, n.d., p. 1). Tutorials
include a small number of students in a direct meeting with the lecturer. Seminars are larger classes that, in many cases, are grounded in seminar essays. Compared to the U.S., professors in the U.K. may be less directly accessible to students. Students may be advised to consult tutors for academic advice. ISEP suggests that students must be “self-motivated and proactive” in seeking academic support (International Student Exchange, n.d., p. 1).

According to ISEP, “The U.K. education system generally emphasizes independent, self-directed study over class time, attendance, and participation” (International Student Exchange Program, n.d., p. 1). Students who participate in study abroad programs in the U.K. should expect less structure and significant outside reading. It is less common for students to receive assignments and readings throughout the semester. Students should be prepared to receive an extensive reading list accessible through the library, which is meant to serve as a guide for independent research. This is more common than all students in a class purchasing and studying a few books at once. Professors are also more likely to assign essays that require students to demonstrate an argument with supplementary sources as opposed to objective tests (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.).

**Course assessment in U.K. higher education and differences for U.S. students.**

As a contrast to the continuous assessment method of the U.S. higher education system, students in the U.K. should expect a smaller number of papers and tests that have significant weight toward the final grade (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.). With many courses that span a full-year, it would not be unusual for British students to take examinations in May that span an entire year’s work and comprise 100% of a year’s grades (International Student Exchange Program, n.d.). ISEP recommends, “[S]elf discipline, self-
motivation, and good time management are very important in keeping up academically” in the U.K. higher education system (International Student Exchange, n.d., p. 1).

Students in the U.K. do not receive the Grade Point Average (GPA) system of degree assessment that students in the U.S. do. The U.K. has a long-established degree classification system of First-class Honours (1st), Second-class Honours, upper division (2:1), Second-class Honors, lower division (2:2), Third-class Honours (3rd), an Ordinary-degree (Pass) and Fail (Baskerville et al., 2011). As a general guide, grades of 70% and above are considered outstanding, grades between 60-69% are very good, and grades between 50-59% are good (University of Reading, n.d.). While 30 institutions are now piloting a new Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) to provide students with more specific information about their learning achievements upon graduation, the vast majority of students, including those who study in U.K. institutions for semester study abroad programs, receive marks in the current classification system (Baskerville et al., 2011).

**Current funding models in U.K. higher education.** Beginning in 2012-2013, funding in U.K. higher education has undergone a significant shift to a more tuition-driven model. This was put in place to increase student choice and competition amongst institutions (Baskerville et al., 2011). In previous years, U.K. colleges and universities received as much as £26.8 billion in funding, and more than a third of this amount came from government distributed grants. Funding councils set grant amounts through a pre-determined formula. Teaching and learning funds were distributed based on the number of students and number of taught subjects. Research funds were distributed based on volume and quality of research at the institutions.
The new funding scheme will “increase tuition income routed through students while reducing the amount paid in grants to institutions through the funding councils” (Baskerville et al., 2011, p. 11). It is important to note that beyond this tuition and grant revenue, the vast majority of U.K. institutions, Oxford and Cambridge excluded, have very small endowments compared to large U.S. universities (Baskerville et al., 2011). This funding structure has influenced internationalization strategies and institutional priorities within the U.K. Whereas foreign degree students pay full tuition, exchange students do not contribute additional income to the higher education system (De Witt, 2002). As noted by De Witt (2002), “Many administrators in British higher education institutions have seen the exchange of students, where there is no net income gain, as an expensive burden rather than as something to stimulate.” (p. 91)

**Academic Adjustment Literature.**

Scholars have identified some key themes that distinguish the academic experiences of international students from the experiences of their host country peers. Due to a gap in research on the academic experiences of U.S. students in British universities, this review draws from academic adjustment studies with non-U.S. international students, particularly within English-speaking universities. Many themes emerging from this research have focused on differing perceptions between international students and host country faculty. Findings reiterate how students and faculty both enter the academic environment with a culturally grounded set of expectations for the academic experience.

**Student-faculty expectations.** Within the literature, studies have revealed academic challenges resulting from international students and host country faculty not sharing the same
academic expectations and perceptions of the educational experience. This can be a source of misunderstanding, adjustment difficulty, and confusion for both international students and the host country faculty who teach and support them (Andrade, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002).

In a meta-analysis of literature regarding international students in English-speaking countries, Andrade (2006) highlighted a number of studies that demonstrated disconnects between international students and faculty. While faculty who were surveyed by Ladd and Ruby (1999) expected international students to prefer an educational system most familiar to their home counties, 80% of the international students surveyed preferred direct experience with their fields of study, rather than the lecture-based instruction of their home countries.

In addition to making incorrect assumptions about classroom instruction preferences, faculty and international students have not been aligned on identifying the most critical sources of academic adjustment challenge. In Tompson and Tompson (1996), faculty reported that the behaviors causing international students the greatest academic adjustment difficulty were not asking questions about assignments, not participating in class, and sitting and studying with others from their host countries. The international students in these classes, however, reported their greatest difficulties as understanding rules and regulations, becoming familiar with norms and language, and developing a social network (Tompson & Tompson, 1996). While these all may have been adjustment issues, the fact that these lists of critical difficulties were so different represents a larger gap in communication and expectations between international students and host country faculty.
International student academic stereotypes. As academically related stereotypes about international students have formed in English-speaking higher education contexts, scholars have sought to identify and explore these stereotypes. Such stereotypes include that international students are unable to analyze and logically develop written arguments (Andrade, 2006), that international students do not value warm and friendly relationships with their instructors (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998), and that international students do not collaborate in groups to complete work (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). Students in this study valued warm relationships with professors rather than the more formal relationships that faculty assumed international students would value. Additionally, international students did collaborate in groups more frequently than some other minority students, but often did so with others from their own culture. This contradicted assumptions about their learning style preferences (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998).

Cultural framework and literature gap for academic adjustment research. Since educational systems and ways of constructing thought are culturally based (Andrade, 2006), perceptions and expectations of an academic experience are influenced by culture, as well. It can be challenging for faculty to identify the multidimensional adjustment difficulties that international students may face. The misconceptions and miscommunications that have been identified through literature may be grounded in the concept that the educational values and behaviors each participant and faculty member brings to the classroom are largely constructed through the lens of their cultural values (Dunne, 2009). As noted by Dunne (2009), deliberate interventions from the institution are required in order to address the fact
that home and host country students and faculty enter the academic environment with different perceptions of higher education culture.

While these insights from the literature are valuable, it is important to clarify that the vast majority of research on international student academic adjustment has explored the transitions and challenges for students who have a non-Western cultural lens. Examples of studies comparing student and faculty expectations include East Asian students in the U.K. (Kingston & Forland, 2008), Asian students in New Zealand (Li et al., 2002), and Japanese students in the U.K. (Akazaki, 2010). While there are certainly important lessons to be gleaned from this research, there is still a significant gap on the academic transition of English-speaking students in English-speaking countries. The previous review revealed significant differences between British and U.S. higher education systems, so the lack of academic adjustment research is an important gap worthy of further exploration.

**Methodology**

This research study explored the everyday academic lives of U.S. study abroad students in semester programs within British universities and involved prolonged contact with participants throughout the study abroad experience. I was directly engaged with students before departure, while abroad, and upon return from studying abroad, which included on-site interviews in Britain. Sources of data for this study included longitudinal interviews with participants, interviews with study abroad advisors in the U.S., and interviews with faculty and study abroad advisors in Britain.

This research was conducted as a phenomenological study because rather than exploring the experience of an individual or institution, it described the “lived experiences
for several individuals about a concept” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). Rooted in psychology and the twentieth century philosophy of Husserl (1970), phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of a certain phenomenon and focuses on questions of common human experiences that are believed to occur at important times or transitions in our lives (Merriam, 2002). As Van Manen (1990) noted, “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday lives. Phenomenology asks, ‘what is this or that kind of experience like?’” (p. 9).

**Research Sites and Participants**

In the tradition of phenomenological research, the primary source of data is from those who experience the phenomenon in question (Merriam, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). Approximately 34,660 U.S. college students participate in study abroad programs in the U.K. per year (Institute for International Education, 2014a), which is the highest number of any destination for U.S. students. This group comprised the broad population for my study. My sample population was selected from students who were accepted to study abroad programs in the U.K. during the spring 2015 semester from three participating public research universities in the southeastern United States: Central State University, Southern City University, and University of the Southeast.

I intentionally limited participants to those accepted to direct enrollment or exchange programs where students enroll full-time within a host university and do not have the support of an outside provider. There are many other models of semester study abroad programs in Britain, including faculty-led, island, or hybrid programs, where students engage in all or some course work with other U.S. or international students. Since the academic structure of
direct enrollment programs differs substantially from these other models, it would not be empirically appropriate to describe a shared student experience across these diverse program types. Due to time and resource constraints, I also limited participants to those studying abroad in Great Britain (England, Scotland, Wales), as opposed to the entire United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland).

I used multiple sampling strategies to select the participants for this study. First, I engaged in criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to select students from participating institutions who had been accepted to study abroad in Britain during spring 2015 in direct enrollment or exchange programs. I applied stratified purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to select one-half of the group from programs outside of London and one-half of the group from programs within London. This is reflective of the field of study abroad where institutions send a large portion of students to London (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011).

I also engaged in typical case sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to highlight student and program criteria that were representative of the study abroad field and more likely to produce rich descriptions for the study. Criteria included level of previous travel experience, gender, location of host program, housing structure of program (housing with local students versus housing with U.S. students), academic structure of program, and on-site support structure. Since one of the critical aims of the study was to explore students’ expectations, I selected participants who had not spent previous significant time in Britain.

Finally, I engaged in convenience sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to select programs that were closer in geographic distance to one another, especially for the group
outside of London. Since I traveled to Britain for interviews during the course of the study abroad semester, I wanted to use my time in the country as productively as possible. Selecting participants within a closer geographic distance allowed me to spend more time on campuses engaging in interviews.

Applying all of these sampling strategies, I selected 12 participants for the study who were compensated for their time and participation. Students were spread across nine diverse universities throughout England, Scotland, and Wales. The sample included 10 females and two males. Sample ethnicity included four Black students, seven White students, and one Latina student. Among the twelve students, one participant withdrew from the study abroad experience before its completion, and another did not complete the final interview upon return to the U.S. Therefore, these students completed two interviews, and the remaining participants completed three. This sample of 12 students exceeds the recommended range of three to ten participants for a phenomenological study. (Dukes, 1984)

**Data Collection**

This longitudinal study utilized multiple sources of data during three phases of the semester study abroad process: pre-departure, while abroad, and re-entry to U.S. higher education. Adhering to phenomenological methods, this research used interviews as the source of data (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002). Since I examined the concept of expectations, it was useful to go beyond participant interviews and include reflections from two U.S. study abroad advisors and four study abroad advisors and faculty from participating institutions in Britain. These additional sources of data helped me gain a more full contextual understanding of the students’ experiences (Van Manen, 1990).
Aligning with the philosophy of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990), as well as best practices of qualitative research (Merriam, 2002), I reflected upon this research topic in a journal before I began data collection methods and continued journal reflection throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Through this journaling exercise, I continually bracketed my personal opinions and experiences on the research topic from the true nature of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants during the pre-departure, while abroad, and re-entry phases. During the pre-departure phase, which began in late-November through December 2014, I conducted a semi-structured interview with each participant after study abroad pre-departure orientation programs concluded. The second set of interviews took place during my site visit to Britain in March 2015 where I visited each student at his or her host institution. I also interviewed each participant in a semi-structured format during September 2015, shortly after his or her return to U.S. higher education. These final conversations served to investigate whether participants’ re-entry perspectives diverged significantly from their interviews while abroad.

Study abroad advisors, both in the U.S. and in Britain, are responsible for preparing U.S. students for the semester study abroad experience, as well as providing them with support in times of stress and adjustment difficulty. While the participants undergoing the experience of studying abroad were my primary sources of data, I also conducted interviews with study abroad advisors and faculty. I purposively selected six international educators who had direct responsibility for supporting and preparing these students. These interviews were important because study abroad advisors not only worked directly with the participants
in the study, but also had historical perspectives on the research topic from previous student experience.

**Data Analysis**

In analyzing the data, I utilized Giorgi’s (1985; 2012) structure of psychological phenomenology. I selected this data analysis structure not only because of the close connection between cultural adjustment and psychology, but also because psychological phenomenology is a particularly useful lens for longitudinally oriented qualitative studies (Wertz, 1985). Additionally, this structure provided a clear multi-step framework for data analysis, which enhanced the rigor of my study.

Following Giorgi’s (1985, 2015) structure, I read the data in its entirety to understand its context within the larger study. I then identified “meaning units” (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10) and defined these into themes. Next, I integrated these themes into “consistent statements” regarding the participants’ experiences and communicated points of universal meaning into a narrative description (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10). In phenomenology, this description is known as the structure or essence of the experience. Finally, I applied this narrative description to the raw data to clarify my interpretation.

I also submitted interviews to participants in order to engage in member checking (Seale, 2003). This step helped ensure that I authentically represented the reality of participants’ experiences and provided me with an opportunity to amend transcripts as necessary (Seale, 2003). In addition to writing in my researcher journal throughout the process, I also wrote memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to continue reflection upon the data and my personal viewpoints (Van Manen, 1990).
Trustworthiness

Throughout the research process, I took deliberate steps to ensure trustworthiness in this study. I increased transferability through purposeful sampling strategies and thick description that gives the reader a complete understanding of the participants and context with relation to the research design and phenomenon of study (Jensen, 2008). I addressed credibility by utilizing multiple interview sources and by conducting interviews at different points in the study abroad experience (Miles & Humberman, 1994; Seale, 1999). The research questions for this study are linked directly to theoretical frameworks and to the phenomenon of study (Martin et al., 1995; Pitts, 2009). As such, results aligned with both the theoretical framework and the constructs of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I have been mindful of dependability by designing a research structure and methodology that flows logically and consistently from overarching purpose through data analysis phases of the study.

In accordance with phenomenological methods (Moustakas, 1994) and standards of good qualitative practice (Merriam, 2002), I maintained a journal throughout the research process to reflect upon potential subjectivity and kept a written “audit trail” of my research decisions, especially when they diverged from original plans of the design (Meadows & Morse, 2001, 194). I also requested peer colleague reviews of my findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994) from at least two other colleagues who are qualitative researchers within the higher education field.

I have embedded multiple and deliberate measures within data collection and analysis plans to ensure the trustworthiness and quality of this study, including specific efforts to
mitigate potential biases. Additionally, the selection of phenomenology methods required me to consistently journal in order to bracket potential biases or issues of subjectivity that may otherwise prohibit the authentic participant experiences from emerging (Van Manen, 1990).

**Limitations**

Though I embedded multiple techniques in data collection to support participants’ authentic voices, this study is limited in a number of ways. This research seeks to understand a smaller, purposely sampled group within a specific context in-depth rather than to make generalizations across all students in Britain. As a qualitative phenomenology, this research should be considered within “context-bound extrapolations rather than generalizations” (Patton, 1990, p. 491). The “rich, thick description” (Merriam, 2002, p. 29) in the findings and analysis sections below provides readers with the opportunity to contextualize, compare, and apply the results of this research to other relevant situations (Merriam, 2002).

Further, this study is limited within the research design. I conducted interviews with participants at three distinct points of the study abroad experience: pre-departure; while abroad; and upon return. It would have been ideal to conduct interviews throughout the study abroad semester, as well as capture additional sources of data that provided insights into participants’ experiences abroad. It would also have been ideal to include students within Northern Ireland in order to broaden the study to the United Kingdom. Resource and time constraints restricted me from doing so. It is important to note that while I carefully selected the three interview times to align with research questions, the 12 participating institutions had slight differences in their academic calendars. Therefore, I was unable to capture data at the exact same time within each student’s experience. While these limitations are noteworthy,
they would have been more problematic within an ethnographic research design. My level of engagement with participants and multiple interview sources exceeds many recommendations for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994).

**Delimitations**

This study was bound by three participating institutions within one state. All institutions are large, public universities. My sample within this group was purposeful in order to interview a diverse group of students who were typical of the U.S. direct enrollment population in Britain. I was limited, however, to students from these institutions who were accepted to study abroad in Britain and who wanted to participate in this research. The initial research design included two private institutions as well, but students from these institutions either did not enroll in the study or did not meet sampling criteria.

It is noteworthy to remember that not all students in U.S. higher education have access to study abroad programs due to academic, financial, behavioral, personal, or other reasons. Of the U.S. students who do participate in study abroad, approximately 12% study in the U.K. (Institute for International Education, 2014a). While the U.K. is the leading study abroad destination for U.S. students, this collective group is likely not representative of the entire U.S. higher education population.

Further, students can participate in many types of study abroad programs, and these structures differ widely (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). Diverse program types include U.S. faculty-led, hybrid, and direct enrollment/exchange experiences, among others. I selected direct enrollment or exchange programs for this research because these programs
require students to enroll as full-time students in a university abroad and utilize the host institution for support. The level of institutional support, programmatic activity, and intercultural orientation varies by institution and often depends upon resources and population size.

While the direct enrollment study abroad experience requires direct interaction with British higher education culture, students throughout diverse program types may have very different study abroad experiences. As a focused study on the direct enrollment experience, I acknowledge that this research is not fully representative of the multiple models within study abroad. Given the significant structural differences across models, I determined it would be inappropriate to seek and describe a shared experience for students across program types. Future research may expand this focus and consider experiences of U.S. students in different program models within Britain, as well as international students from the U.K. in U.S. direct enrollment or exchange programs.

**Findings**

The findings of this study highlight areas of disconnect between students’ academic expectations and their on-site experiences during semester direct enrollment programs in Britain. Further, the findings suggest discrepancies between how U.S. study abroad students experience British academic life during the semester abroad and what their on-site faculty and advisors expect of them. This section begins with an overview of the resources that most significantly shaped participants’ expectations of the British academic system, both pre-departure and while abroad. Then, I present five distinct themes of academic adjustment that emerged from participant interviews. Academic adjustment themes include priority of
academics, self-guided structure, unscheduled academic time, perception of challenge, and faculty issues. The discussion of each theme includes students’ pre-departure expectations, as well as their on-site experiences and post-program reflections. Where relevant, I also include insights around these themes from faculty and study abroad advisors in the U.S. and Britain.

Sources that Shaped Expectations

Students developed pre-departure expectations for their academic experience in Britain from both traditional and non-traditional sources. Above all, participants consistently prioritized conversations, advice, and personal stories from fellow students. This included in-person conversations with students in their home institutions, as well as online reflections from former study abroad students in Britain. As Anna noted, “Yeah, I've read every (host institution) website, but I don't know. I just feel like personal narratives are a bit more helpful.”

In many cases, students were able to speak directly with study abroad alumni from their home institutions who studied in Britain. As Candace shared, this feedback had the potential to directly shape academic expectations:

I'd had friends who had studied there previously, so I had more of an idea of what their faculty offered. In what the girls that I'm close with who studied in the summer have told me, they are some of the kindest, most involved faculty that they've interacted with. You would think that they wouldn't be so hands on, but yeah, I think that they seem like a really supportive and involved pack of people.
Other participants were more tentative to fully embrace academic advice from other students, recognizing that other students’ experiences may not align with their own. Anna expressed some skepticism:

   I don't know, the girl I talked to or e-mailed, she said it was the easiest semester of her life. But, that could just be her. She could just be really smart. I don't know.

   Maybe her classes are easier.

Some students came from home institutions with significant international exchange student populations. These participants cited conversations with British international exchange students as an influential component in their pre-departure expectations. While international exchange students helped shape pre-departure expectations, it is important to note that these conversations were often not focused on academics. Multiple students, such as Lea, were more eager to discuss issues such as packing, weather, things to do in the host city, housing, and language with their international peers:

   I've been asking them (international exchange students) all these questions of like, ‘What do I need to bring?’ like – because they've come to the U.S., and so they've had that traveling abroad experience, so what's the number one thing that I need to do when I get over there, and then I have also had friends who have gone from America to (host institution) as well last year, so it's just more like getting to know the campus before I actually step foot on the campus and sort of navigating myself around and then just general hubbub, trying to get all my ducks in a row, find my plane ticket and all of that stuff.
In addition to on-campus student narratives, participants sought advice for their study abroad experience in Britain from non-traditional resources. Internet-based resources such as student blogs, YouTube video blogs, Pinterest pages, messaging apps, and Google were an important part of students’ pre-departure research efforts. This information helped shape their academic expectations for the study abroad semester, particularly in the absence of substantial in-person conversations. Multiple students referenced student narratives they found through Google, Pinterest, or YouTube as formative in shaping their expectations.

Anna shared:

For whatever reason ‘Travel Fashion Girl’ (blog) keeps coming up. It's not just about fashion, it's a bunch of bloggers who have been places and they give you advice on academic life as well as fashion I guess. Pinterest is pretty good as well. If you just type in study abroad on Pinterest there's a bunch of bloggers. So, mostly blogs from people who have been – I haven't really found one for (host institution), but I assume most of the academic life is similar.

It is noteworthy that when discussing the source of their pre-departure academic expectations, participants were more likely to reference discussions with other students or independent online resources, as opposed to study abroad orientation programs, conversations with study abroad advisors at home and abroad, and official university office websites.

**Priority of Academics**

The fact that participants were more interested in seeking pre-departure advice about logistics and travel connects with their overall priority for academics. As students prepared
and developed expectations for semester direct enrollment programs in Great Britain, academics were not the highest priority. Academic preparation often fell far behind other areas that occupied students’ thoughts and efforts during pre-departure research. Once participants began their semesters abroad, however, the academic structure had a much more significant and unexpected impact on their daily lives.

**Pre-departure academic priority.** Over 50% of participants cited travel as their top priority for the upcoming study abroad experience, and thus spent a considerable amount of time before departure considering travel opportunities. In addition to travel, students expressed concern about leaving family and friends. They worried about potential homesickness over academic adjustment. As Jaclyn described, “I don’t think school will be stressful, I think being away from home might be a little stressful.”

Students were also concerned about logistical issues such as flying overseas for the first time, navigating public transportation, developing packing lists, and anticipating weather differences. When asked explicitly about how they were preparing for academics in Great Britain, participants often focused on the extensive process of navigating course approvals and the priority to stay on track for graduation, as opposed to research on potential differences in academic structure. Calvin noted:

> Once I got in my application, there were a lot of I guess logistical preparations. That was almost like taking another class. I've been going through that. I'm still not done. I'm still working on transfer credits to bring back to the school, and it's pretty much been the entire semester.
In addition to securing course approvals, these spring study abroad students were consumed by studying for fall final exams during the pre-departure process. With a full credit load and busy schedule, Anna cited a lack of time to mentally prepare:

Oh lord. I'm always feeling like I haven't been preparing just because I haven't had time, but I think December's going to be my month of, like, I don't know. I feel like I really haven't had time to think about what I'm going to do when I get there. Like, I bought my plane ticket and all that, but other than that, I don't feel like I've actually thought about what's going to happen when I arrive. I've just – I've taken 19 credit hours this semester.

When students did have time for pre-departure planning, they utilized it on logistics, rather than mental preparation or research on the academic experience. Calvin shared his dilemma:

All around (logistical) preparation. And this is between classes and finals and studying. Mentally I can't – it's hard to think about it because you're so focused on doing the legwork to get there, and it distracts you.

Influenced by home institution advising strategies and transfer credit policies, many students developed an intentional plan to place a higher priority on experiencing the culture, social life, and travel opportunities within their host country, as opposed to earning high grades. Lea was candid about her priorities:

I'm not super stressed about if I oversleep or if I decide to travel and it's gonna take me more than two or three days to experience something. I'm gonna put my
experiences of traveling before any sort of assignment, and that's something they stress here (at home institution), too.

U.S. study abroad advisors helped shape this academic mindset during the orientation process. Lea’s home institution study abroad advisor, Adam, noted, “Especially for honor students, (we advise to) lower expectations and achievement goals. Be realistic about it's okay not to get perfect marks and that that's not necessarily the measure of success in the U.K.”

While partner institution study abroad advisors wished students placed a higher priority on academics, they acknowledged this was not often the case. Lea’s study abroad advisor in Britain, Sarah, reflected on this reality:

I think their (student) expectations are to be abroad rather than to study. I think their priority is not academic. I think it’s difficult for us to accept given the field that we’re in and we’d hoped it wasn’t the case, but a lot of them are coming just to have an experience and party and to make friends so academics is far down the list sometimes.

Two of the three U.S. institutions in this study required students to earn the equivalent of a C or C- to transfer academic credits from Britain. The other institution applied graded credits from abroad to home transcripts. The students from the two transfer credit institutions were well aware their grades abroad would not impact their home GPAs. Lea was in this group of students and shared:

They say if you have the option of going out with your friends or completing a paper, what are you gonna do? You complete the paper for like a B effort, but then you go
out with your friends. So, they're (home international office) is really like, ‘We know you're good students. We know you strive for As, but take a B,’ because over there academically, all we have to do is pass, which is really helpful.

**Academic priority in on-site experience.** It is perhaps not surprising that academics were not a high priority for pre-departure preparation, especially if most students were earning transfer credit and understood from their home institutions not to be stressed by academic pressure. Given that academics were not a key part of students’ pre-departure experiences, it is interesting to note the significant degree to which the British academic system shaped students’ lives abroad.

After arriving in Britain and participating in multiple weeks of class, participants were much more eager to discuss the academic elements of their study abroad experience. In fact, when answering a general question about how the semester was progressing, the majority of participants led with a discussion of their institutions’ academic structures, which they found to be very different from their home institutions:

Interviewer: How’s your semester going thus far?

Amaya: It’s a little slow. It’s very, very different from American University.

Interviewer: How’s the semester going thus far?

Xavier: There's some good and some bad...the bad is that I don't think it's suitable for me academically.

These statements echo advisor reflections that while students may not devote much time to academic aspects during pre-departure planning, the shift to the British academic
system can be an unexpectedly substantial component of the overall study abroad experience. As Sarah, a study abroad advisor in Britain, noted, “It's (academics is) the harder shift. Definitely.” In the sections that follow, I will provide an overview of the most significant aspects of the academic adjustment process and how these themes compared with participants’ pre-departure expectations.

**Self-Guided Academic Structure**

The British academic structure elicited confusion and concern for students, both pre-departure and while abroad. Students were consistently puzzled by the significant differences from the U.S. system, most notably the more independent structure of academic learning.

**Pre-departure expectations of self-guided academic structure.** While academic planning may not have been a top priority during pre-departure, students still formed some expectations about their scholarly lives in Britain. Many students expected a different and more independent academic structure abroad. Roni described this shift:

> Even though I’m very academically strong I guess, I feel like at the same time having so much power after being in a place that doesn’t really give you as much power as you think you should have is gonna be difficult to see if I’m going to be okay with the power and use it responsibly or if I’m gonna be like oh, no class. Party, party – let me go out with my friends.

The expectation of independence came from students’ awareness of a few notable differences between universities in the U.S. and Britain. At least seven of the 12 participants anticipated fewer courses, fewer deadlines and an altered workload in Britain, with fewer assignments due throughout the semester and a greater emphasis on final exams. Many
students also expected optional class attendance, though most, like Lea, still expected to attend class:

I am not used to not going to class that I guess it's one of those things, and they tell me all the time is like, ‘Oh, lectures are mandatory, but lab is optional.’ And I'm like, ‘What are you talking about?’ I feel like I miss so much when I don't go to one class here, so to not go to something is very weird for me, but very normal for them, and that attendance doesn't count and that you really take charge of your own education, which is unique.

Some students did not enjoy the continuous assessment structure in the U.S. Anna and Roni looked forward to a more independent experience in Britain:

From what I read over there it's a lot different. It's more so you do the work on your own, and the professor doesn’t really keep up with you, which sounds great to me.

(Anna)

I have talked to multiple people who have attended the U.K. or who go to school somewhere in the U.K. and they all tell me like it’s probably like you get one assignment and then a big test that day and those are your two chances to make your grade. And that’s a lot of pressure, but at the same time it’s college. You’re supposed to be on your stuff, you’re supposed to start realizing due dates, studying on your own, learning how to do things on your own, so I respect it. I feel like I’m a little nervous about it but I usually keep up with my work so it’s a chance for me to really see what I’m capable of. (Roni)
Other students, however, were quite anxious about a more independent structure, which many of them described as “hands-off.” They appreciated the U.S. system of continuous assessment and felt homework kept them on track to make sure they were doing well. Jaclyn expressed some anxiety that without continuous graded feedback from their professors, she would not know whether she was absorbing the material appropriately:

I hear you don't have as much homework which kind of worries me a little bit, like it doesn't make me excited, it worries me, like it'll let me like get off track or something. I am nervous about not having homework. Everyone's like, ‘That sounds awesome.’ I'm like, ‘No.’ I feel like homework keeps me doing what I'm supposed to be doing and you get more feedback, you know that you're thinking the right things and having the right kinds of ideas.

Overall, most students expressed concern, uncertainty, and nervousness about a more independent academic structure in Britain. Though they were aware of a few significant differences, they were not sure exactly what to expect from academic life in their host universities. Students worried about the lack of faculty feedback and were not clear about how the grading system worked. They hoped to be able to keep up within a more independent environment. While Candace expected the structure to be different, she was unsure exactly what impact it would have on her experience:

I am definitely a big planner, and with study abroad, it is sort of – apart from registering for classes and figuring out where you're living, it's a bit of a big black hole, an unknown...I just hope to do well. I hope that I can keep up.
In the absence of clear expectations, some students defaulted to the familiar. Even though Jaclyn and Xavier thought some aspects of the academic environment may be different, they anticipated their daily academic lives to be similar:

Well I think it would be kind of like here. I feel like their classes might be a little different just from the stuff I've heard other students say, like not a lot of discussion kind of classes, more lecture classes. But I don't see it being that different from anything I would experience here. (Jaclyn)

I am also worried about the – I don't know how rigorous their academics are over there. If it's similar to what it is here then I should be fine...I'll probably stay on campus throughout the duration of my classes. Do a little homework in the afternoon after classes are over. (Xavier)

**Experience of self-guided academic structure.** After spending weeks in Britain, students had the opportunity to navigate a new university system and test their expectations. For the students who anticipated a more independent academic system, their expectations were confirmed. Most participants described their host academic environment as “student-led” or “self-led.” Students reflected upon the level of freedom they experienced in their host institutions. Candace and Roni compared the U.S. system to feeling parented:

A lot of the way that they do work here is very different than (South City University) because the students have more freedom. So it's more like they create the environment and then just let us go...So we were more parented I feel than I am here in my work. A lot of the time that we spend in class is not focused. And we have a
deadline. And we have to present on that deadline. And if we don't have it, we don't have it. (Candace)

In America it's, like, if a professor sees you and you haven't been at class, they're going to ask you why haven't you been in my class. I guess it's so laidback here that they don't really feel the need, like they're your parent or they have control over you. (Roni)

While students recognized their host university system as a more independent environment, they expressed uncertainty about how best to navigate and be successful within it. They attended classes and worked on projects, yet they felt unsettled within this new system. Most notably, in the absence of continuous assessment, they were not sure whether and how to meet seemingly unclear faculty expectations. Assignment instructions and expectations felt ambiguous to many participants. Lea used the metaphor that faculty assigned projects by providing the letters A and Z, yet skipped the entire alphabet in-between:

There's not any busy work. I'm just so used to here's a paper here, here's an assignment there, go do this required reading, but here it's like here's the project, here's what you need to do, here's how you get there, and you do it. But they're not as clear on what they expect of you. So in the beginning, (faculty said) you do this and this is the due date. It was like A and Z but there's all these letters in between.

U.S. students were accustomed to explicit faculty instructions on what and how to study. Therefore, this self-led system elicited some frustration. Calvin shared his concerns:
It’s just hard to know what I’m supposed to review on my own, so I guess that’s part of being laid back. There’s a lot more on you to kind of go and figure out things on your own. In the U.S. a teacher will give you – if they give you a broad overview, they’ll give you a fair warning like okay, you need to go more in depth on all these topics and then write an essay about these topics or answer questions about these topics in more detail. And it gives me a fair chance to display my knowledge. I feel like I’m not given a fair chance to like display what I know here.

As a few students eventually discovered, and others did not, faculty instructions seemed vague because the British system seeks to foster independent thinking and provide students with the freedom to explore their own topics of interest. This underlying, and sometimes unspoken aspect of the academic system in Britain was confusing to students. As Renee, a study abroad advisor in Britain explained, faculty expect that students will utilize a paper or project topic as a starting point and go beyond it to explore their own research interests:

When you start researching into a topic and you know you have to type it into Google, you know more things start popping up, and you're like ‘oh.’ And then it takes you to something else. Then it takes you to something else. So I suppose the reading list is a starting point, and then you can sort of develop your own paths from that.

The students who realized this underlying expectation were quite surprised. Lea shared an example from class:
I remember we had to research these three playwrights, so I researched them and I thought it was fine. Then the teacher was like ‘why don't you focus on researching more playwrights other than this?’ And I was like ‘but you said these three?’ She was like ‘that's passing, but in order to get the A go and research the plays they've done and then those playwrights.’ So it's kind of like they gave you the starting point but they didn't really explain…We asked around to a lot of the students here and they were ‘no, you have to go above and beyond’ but they don't really tell you what's above and beyond to get the A, so I was kind of like, ‘are you kidding?’ I'm used to here's the expectations and if you go above and beyond that it's extra credit.

In addition to navigating faculty expectations within a more independent environment, students also sensed a shift in responsibility for absorbing course material. Participants were accustomed to faculty in the U.S. following up if they missed class or failed assessments. In their host universities, however, students came to a realization that the ownership for the educational experience was much more on their shoulders than at home. Danielle and Roni described this difference:

I guess very much like here’s the material. Here are the assignments. Do it. If you don’t get it that’s your problem kinda’ thing. (Danielle)

There's no you can answer questions to get extra participation points. It's just like you're there. So it's kind of like you go because you know it's going to help you, but you don't go because you have to go…Here it's kind of like the professor feels like as
long as they're doing their job teaching you, you're either going to receive it, or you're not. They can't force you to…It's just you come, you don't, you fail, you don't. (Roni)

**Unscheduled Academic Time**

Another key aspect of students’ academic experience in Britain was the question of how to spend unscheduled academic time. Along with self-guided structure, some students began their study abroad programs expecting more unscheduled time. The shift they experienced while abroad, however, was much more significant than anticipated. While some students embraced the change in unscheduled academic time, most expressed uncertainty about what they should do once class dismissed. Interviews with study abroad advisors and faculty revealed a disconnect surrounding this issue.

**Expectation of unscheduled academic time.** When describing their pre-departure expectations of the British academic system, multiple students anticipated it to be “laid back.” This notion came from taking fewer courses and anticipating less homework and assessments. As Lea noted, “I am always taking 18 to 20 credit hours here, so having that laid back thing is gonna be weird for me.” Amaya echoed similar thoughts, “I’ve had a few friends who actually studied at (host institution) and they’re like ‘yeah, you know, it’s definitely more laid back.’” In contrast, none of the participants described their academic lives in the U.S. as laid back. In fact, most students could easily recite hourly commitments from wake until sleep.

Upon seeing their study abroad academic schedules and realizing they would likely have multiple weekdays without in-class meetings, students were unsure how they would spend their time outside of class. As Lea reflected, “the one thing that (home institution)
keeps telling me is not to stress and not to worry and that I'm gonna get time to relax…what does that mean?” Since nearly all students were highly scheduled, they questioned how they would adjust to the difference. Jaclyn shared, “I really like to be busy, that kind of worries me… I'm used to taking like full loads of classes and working and I'm just gonna have all the time in the world.” Other students, such as Amaya, looked forward to a change of pace, “I always feel like I’m in a rush and I’m on the go, so honestly that’s one thing that I’m hoping that I can kinda change, so I definitely want to give myself more time.”

**Experience of unscheduled academic time.** Within the British academic system, participants were surprised by the degree of unscheduled or unstructured time. Even participants like Amaya, who looked forward to less structure before departure, seemed unsure how to manage their time:

So I have this big gap in between (classes) and it’s like what the heck do I do for three hours? When you have nothing to study, you have no exams, you have no work. So it’s kinda just like what do you do? I have a whole lot of free time and it bothers me a little bit sometimes because I get really bored and I don’t wanna become lazy.

On the whole, students were uncomfortable with the difference in schedule and structure. Xavier, Roni, and Anna seemed unsure and frustrated about how to navigate it:

I think I'm more used to having homework and having someone say this is due tomorrow and I think the professors are a little bit more free rein with what the work is and because of that, it's not clear to me what I should do when I go home, and if it's not clear then I won't do anything. (Xavier)
I was coming here feeling like I'm going to be so done. I don't need homework. I'm excited. You're going be missing homework. Sometimes I'm just like if I had a worksheet to do, that would be fun right now. You have so much free time. (Roni)

I think it's just very weird because I'm not used to being in school and not having to study all the time. Having so much free time, because I've had one class a day and it's just, like, I go home because I can't really travel. I don't know it's very strange because I don't know how to structure my day here. (Anna)

Similar to Roni and Anna’s reflections, nearly all participants referred to this unstructured schedule as “free time.” When describing their academic environments in Britain, students were quick to note the challenges of unexpected free time. Unsure of what to do during these significant gaps in their weekday schedules, most students filled their time with activities such as watching Netflix, reading for pleasure, shopping, talking with friends and relatives back home, planning travel, going out with international student friends, and exploring their host towns.

**Homework and free time.** The concept of unstructured academic time manifested in this study within the notion of homework. U.S. students, who had been accustomed to explicitly assigned homework since primary school, were surprised by the lack of continuous assignments and assessments in British higher education. Rather than explore why this was the case and what they should be doing during their unscheduled time, participants assumed it was free time.
When students in U.S. higher education complete all course assignments given by faculty, it would be appropriate to assume the remaining time is free. In Great Britain, however, students missed an important component of their host academic culture by reverting to familiar cultural constructs of higher education. Without the explicit instructions they were accustomed to in U.S. educational culture, they were unsure how to proceed. As Xavier shared, “I think I'm more used to having homework and having someone say this is due tomorrow…it's not clear to me what I should do when I go home, and if it's not clear then I won't do anything.”

This issue was perhaps enhanced because as students developed their pre-departure expectations for the study abroad semester in Britain, they prioritized advice from study abroad alumni and new international exchange students. Since these students also viewed their academic environments through cultural lenses, they provided advice that reflected those values. When U.S. students consistently reported hearing the British system was more laid back and included a significant amount of free time, this framed their expectations for the semester. Amaya shared, “I’ve had a few friends who actually studied at (host institution) and they’re like yeah, you know, it’s definitely more laid back.”

Advisor expectations for unstructured time. Study abroad advisors and faculty in Britain revealed a disconnect with this notion of free time. Susan, a faculty member in England noted, “(Students) should view what looks like free time on their timetable is not necessarily free time.” Renee, a study abroad advisor within a different British institution agreed, “It's not free time; it's supposed to be self-study time.” Renee echoed participants’ feelings of uncertainty, “(Students think) I've got all this free time, is this right? Am I
missing something really big that I should be doing?” According to advisors and faculty in Britain, by viewing their unstructured schedules as “free time,” students were indeed missing an important component of British academic culture.

Describing Britain as a “research culture,” (Sarah) host country advisors and faculty presented a different expectation for how U.S. students should be spending their out-of-class time. Advisors compared the British academic system to post-graduate study in the U.S., explaining that for each 10-credit module/course, equivalent to three credits in the U.S., students are expected to complete “at least 100 no show hours.” (Sarah). While students may be in class fewer hours per week, they are expected to create their own weekly independent schedules for additional research and reading. When students leave the classroom, there is a significant amount of reading and research for them to do, even if it is not explicitly stated or assigned (Susan). Advisors in Britain referred to this expectation as “researching around the subject,” and noted that students should be spending time conducting their own exploration and self-study of topics in their courses (Sarah).

Faculty and advisors in Britain acknowledged that this research culture presented for students “a different way of working. It’s getting your head engaged in a different way.” (Renee). They recognized that this aspect of academic life was often difficult for U.S. students to understand and embrace, especially when their home academic schedules consist of clearly structured homework assignments, continuous assessments, and high measures of accountability. Indeed, multiple advisors and faculty reflected that independent time management was perhaps the most challenging aspect of academic adjustment for U.S. study abroad students in Britain.
While faculty and advisors in Britain were closely aligned in their descriptions of the independent research culture, it is interesting that U.S. study abroad advisors had diverging impressions of this concept. When asked about academic challenges, Adam reinforced sentiments from educators in Britain:

This idea that they (students) kind of have to own their education while they’re there, that they need to set their own guidelines about how they’re gonna learn and do homework when it’s not assigned…time management relative to class. I think that’s a big thing.

Steven, another U.S. study abroad advisor, shared perceptions that aligned more closely with students’ observations of the British academic system, conceptualizing unscheduled time as “free time:”

They’re used to being much busier here (in the U.S.), and there they go and they maybe have about as much class time, but they don’t have as much work out of class…I think they have more free time. I think they have more time to sort of explore and do things outside of the academic realm.

**Perception of Challenge**

The pre-departure expectation for how academically challenging the semester abroad would be, along with the on-site perception of challenge, was a significant academic theme for participants. Most students were expecting a challenging semester abroad and were surprised when their experience seemed much easier. As before, interviews with study abroad advisors in Britain revealed disconnects between students’ perceptions of an easier academic system and faculty/advisors’ expectations for academic work.
**Pre-departure perception of challenge.** Before departure, many students felt uncertain about how difficult a semester in Britain would be. Some students, such as Candace, were looking forward to a challenge. She noted, “It sounds like it's gonna be really heavy and challenging, which is what I really wanted.” Others, such as Xavier, were nervous about it:

If it's similar to what it is here than I should be fine, but when I was signing up for classes I was leery of not taking that many hard ones, because I didn't know what it was going to be like.

Students also reflected upon the prestige of the U.K. academic system. This elicited expectations of a challenging semester abroad for Danielle:

My grandpa, who’s an engineer – he told me that stereotypically, U.K. science classes are a lot harder than the U.S. And so, he was telling me, ‘Oh, be careful, they’re going to be really hard.’…I don’t know; it could be super-hard. So then, I’m also scared – if they do presentations, I’m scared of looking like a blithering idiot, because I – it’s at a level that I’ve never had before, or – I don’t know. So, there’s a little – I’m a little apprehensive about that.

A few participants specifically felt the pressure not only to navigate a new academic system, but also to uphold a positive image on behalf of international students and the U.S. Amaya did not want to taint expectations that may be placed upon her:

I’m an international student. So I feel like I have a reputation to uphold when I’m over there as an American and as an international student. I feel like they’re gonna
have this type of expectation of me and I don’t want to taint it basically. That’s my
fear. I don’t want to taint it. I want to make a good impression.

Experience of academic challenge. The majority of participants concluded their
study abroad semesters with an impression that their academics were significantly easier than
expected. Some students, such as Amaya, Melissa, Anna, Danielle, and Kristen, reflected that
the semester was easier because they anticipated assignments and academic content in Britain
to be exceptionally difficult:

I thought that the content would be more difficult than it is, like the assignments, and
that I would find them probably harder and graded more harshly. (Melissa)

It’s easier than what I thought it was gonna be. But, I mean it’s not easy, but I
thought it was going to be very challenging. But it’s actually very doable. (Kristen)

I’m not saying it’s easy, but that was one of my fears was that it would be
unmanageably hard…cause that’s just the stereotype I’ve heard is that the sciences
are a lot harder here. (Danielle)

Some participants, such as Jaclyn, Anna, Candace and Roni, completed their final papers
quite early in the semester and then found themselves without schoolwork for the remainder
of their experience. Candace was conflicted about it:

Some of my classes are a little – I'm not as challenged. So it's less of a workload and
I feel less challenged…It's definitely less challenging than I thought it was going to
be. Which is, you know, a blessing and a curse a little bit…I do like to be pushed in
classes, but then at the same time you find out that you only have one assessment for the whole term, and you finished it within the first two weeks.

While participants began the semester by attending classes regularly and completing readings, some adjusted their behavior when they observed different practices from degree-seeking students:

Probably the first three weeks, I read the main stuff from all my classes. And then I got to class, and I started realizing that no one else was reading. And my professors weren't really expecting us to read, except for – like read one thing and you're good. (Melissa)

And then the school-homework thing isn't as structured here, like they assign readings, but I don't feel like anyone ever does them, so then homework doesn't take up as much time. I'm getting used to it now. But yeah, I definitely prefer the busier lifestyle. (Jaclyn)

Study abroad advisors highlighted this tendency for U.S. students to align with local student behavior in academics and issued a word of caution. Adam noted U.S. students may be tempted to adjust to the behavior of their British peers, but they neglect to consider that local students have more experience navigating the underlying expectations of the academic system:

And I also think too the students, maybe when they look at British students or U.K. students in general, their peers in the classroom, they might kind of get the sense like man, he hasn't been here for two weeks and he seems to be doing all right. Or you
know this idea that overlooking the fact that the British students have an
understanding of how the system works and what they need to do to complete their
education and to learn. And so they kind of probably incorrectly kind of juxtapose
their experience with the British students, which might influence how they perform in
class.

As students reflected upon the level of academic challenge they experienced in
Britain, a few recognized that the semester could have been more academically rigorous or
enriching if they engaged in more self study or better understood the system. Jaclyn and
Anna shared this sentiment:

If I wanted to like, clutter my schedule with more studying and stuff, I could do that, I
guess, to get more out of them (classes), but I don't really feel the incentive to do that
so much, you know? I guess I thought it would naturally be more intense. Which, I
guess it is what you make it here. (Jaclyn)

It is kind of weird because I'm like, kind of wish I could get more out of the classes
but I had no idea how their classes worked. (Anna)

This theme is echoed by Susan, a faculty member in Britain, who reflected that when
students assume they have a significant amount of free time, they might perceive the
academic system to be easier:

When students say ‘free time,’ it’s not. I think that’s because there’s just fewer
contact hours that they make the mistake of thinking that it’s easier, but actually the
emphasis the responsibility is just shifted to their shoulders for them to manage their
own study. I think maybe they struggle with that because they’re used to a lot more direction and handholding.

Expectations and Experiences regarding faculty in Britain

Though students expected the semester in Britain to be challenging, they looked forward to engaging with new faculty. As they discovered while abroad, British faculty had a significant impact on their academic experiences. While most interactions were overwhelmingly positive, study abroad students, advisors, and faculty reflected upon a few specific areas of challenge within these relationships.

Pre-departure expectations regarding faculty. While students may not have placed a high priority on preparing for their academic experience, they expressed clear excitement about learning from new faculty. The majority of students were interested and intrigued to gain a new perspective on academics, particularly within their major and minor subject areas. Over half of the participants selected their host institutions in Britain because of strong offerings in their major or minor subjects. Amaya was excited to learn within a new environment:

I’m so excited – I’ve always wanted to get multiple perspectives on things so I feel like when you go to one university you’re kinda just used to their way of teaching.

So that was my biggest thing.

While a few participants had heard that British faculty-student relationships were not close, they still anticipated better teaching and new perspectives. Julie expressed some concern about the concept of rotating faculty within courses, while Amaya hoped professors would be willing to offer frequent feedback within an unfamiliar academic environment:
I feel like when I go there I’m gonna want more feedback. I’m gonna want to know how I am doing in the course and what things I can improve on, what things I can do better ‘cause I feel like it’s gonna be different. (Amaya)

I am nervous about the professor (rotating) thing. I don't know if it's completely true, because I wasn't looking directly at (host institution), because I like to – once you get to know a professor, you know how they teach, you know what you need to do. I'm worried about – like I don't know how their classes are. (Julie)

**On-site experiences with faculty in Britain.** During interviews while abroad and post return, students expressed that faculty relationships were a significant part of their study abroad experience. Across participants, the majority found their professors in Britain to be much more friendly and interactive than expected. Candace’s experience was a positive one:

It's really positive. It's really open. They're always game to talk. They seem to – they also seem to know everyone's name within the first day. It's just they seem very tuned in, I think would be what I would say… And it's just they bring speakers and different lecturers in. And you can just tell that they're just thrilled to be providing opportunities to us. And so it's a great environment to be in honestly.

Though students consistently described positive faculty interactions, the degree to which British faculty were prepared for international students had an impact on participants’ experiences. Melissa felt her faculty deliberately sought to bring her perspectives into class discussions and cared about getting to know her:
It's really informal. Like they would – all of our professors learned my name within the first couple of weeks, first couple of classes. I definitely – I thought that it would be more like lecture. And so, I didn't think that my professors would really get to know my name and call on me in class, but they definitely do. And I feel like I can comfortably e-mail my professors and ask them questions, and stay after class and ask questions, or go to the office hours and not feel like there's a strange barrier.

A number of participants felt their faculty understood how their needs were different from domestic students. Jaclyn appreciated this recognition:

I guess it's always kind of surprising what – I guess it shouldn't be surprising. But when it's that easy, like, literally all of them I feel like I could go up and they really care about, like, if I'm doing okay. And they all work around me leaving early (at the conclusion of the semester). They have to give me a whole different final than they gave everyone else.

Other students had a different experience. While faculty were helpful and personable, it was clear they did not expect international students to enroll in their classes. When spring study abroad students were enrolled in yearlong courses, they had to independently catch up on first semester material. Amaya’s faculty were taken aback to discover international students in class and had to scramble to make alternative arrangements:

It was a little frustrating coming in and I feel like they weren’t prepared to have these new students come in on the second semester, I think. I’m barely prepared…But yeah, I think everyone was kinda just thrown for a loop. Yeah, so like he (professor)
goes to the class and you’re kinda just like ‘hey, I’m new this semester’ and they’re like ‘oh [laughter] like oh, you missed the whole first part.’

**Roles of students and faculty in the learning process.** While students universally shared how much they sincerely enjoyed the personal and interactive nature of their faculty in Britain, they expressed a degree of confusion and frustration about the instructional system. For example, a number of participants were perplexed that faculty did not seem personally offended or upset when local students did not attend class or follow through on readings and assignments. Jaclyn shared one example:

> In one of my seminars, everyone was supposed to do a presentation. That's like the whole point, you meet for an hour and someone gives a presentation that whole time, and that's the point of the class. And sometimes those people don't show up. And the professor's like, ‘oh, well, sorry guys, I guess you can go.’…‘I'll email them and tell them that they really should have come today.’ But that's like, as far as it goes.

Participants noted that if these situations occurred in the U.S., faculty would have followed up more assertively with the students and would have taken points from their final grades. In a similar way, students expressed surprise, and at times frustration, regarding the lack of assigned work they received from faculty in their courses. Anna expressed frustration because she was not receiving the guidance and workload she paid for:

> In a way I'm actually looking forward to it (returning to U.S. higher education), because I have complaints on this semester, just about not having something to do all the time. Work-wise maybe, which sounds terrible. I never thought I would say that
in a million years. But I don't know. I guess I like being busy and getting. I don't know. I guess for me it's kind of like what you pay for.

*Challenges with faculty academic writing expectations.* Participants also experienced some challenges and confusion in adapting to new expectations for their academic writing. Since the majority of courses/modules in Britain were assessed by essays rather than by standardized exams, this required a shift from students. Danielle, a science student, was surprised by the difference:

They seem to test you more with essay questions, even with biology and stuff, which the past biologies I’ve had have been mostly multiple choice stuff whereas here they’ll ask you to explain. So that’s different in that I have to make sure I memorize every step of the TCA cycle or stuff like that. Know all the little details so that I can explain it essay form, which is fine. I guess that just means I’ll know it better.

Even students like Roni, who were accustomed to writing essays within the U.S. academic system remarked that standards and expectations for writing were different in Britain, particularly with regard to citation and formality:

So when I turned it (paper) in, I thought I did awesome. Got back the grade and it was a 54. A 54 here is a B minus. Because our grading scale's completely different. That's another thing that I had to get adjusted to. And they have a meeting with you and they tell you what you did wrong or whatever. And she was just like ‘your writing is very informal.’ And I guess that's how the United States differs from the U.K.
In addition to structural formalities and new citation methods, faculty in Britain remarked that academic writing can be a challenge for U.S. students because of the expectation for analytical, critical thinking. Susan shared her difficulties:

I have quite a hard time getting them (U.S. students) to write critically and think critically and understand what that means...I think partly 'cause they feel that they don’t wanna be rude and being critical is akin to being impolite. So they don’t wanna be impolite of any thoughts. But yeah, I think their writing tends on the whole to be more descriptive and general and less analytical and critical than we would expect from British students. So that seems to be a problem.

This challenge connects with the overarching academic expectation for students to utilize unscheduled “free time” for independent scholarly exploration and self-study in areas connected with their courses. While participants often reverted to homework strategies from the U.S. of reviewing powerpoints and lecture notes from class, faculty in Britain expected they would go beyond class material and think critically about the topics.

Through the academic cultural lens of the U.S., it would be expected and appropriate for faculty to hold students personally accountable for absences or incomplete work and to equate a rigorous education with the assigned workload. Advisors and faculty, however, consistently reinforced the academic value that students are expected to own their education, and that it is up to the students (not the faculty) to take responsibility for their learning. Adam, a study abroad advisor in the U.S. with over 10 years of experience shared the following reflection:
So I think that really shakes people up a lot. Like when I go into classrooms and say you know you might have one exam at the end of the semester and your grade is based on that, people think man, that's crazy. Or the idea that they don't know what attendance means, like why are we checking to see if you're coming to the education you're paying for.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study suggest that U.S. students experience areas of disconnect between their academic expectations and their on-site academic experiences in a direct enrollment study abroad semester in Britain. Further, interviews reveal differences between how students navigate a new academic structure abroad and how their faculty and study abroad advisors hope or expect them to navigate it. There are noteworthy findings with regard to academic expectation sources, self-guided academic structures, unscheduled academic time, the perception of academic challenge, and interactions with faculty.

This section explores how these findings extend the international education literature, as well as our understanding of cultural adjustment theory. As participants struggled to understand the “whys” of British higher education culture, they deferred to familiar and sometimes inappropriate cultural constructs to make sense of their new academic environment. Throughout this process, they were surprised by the overall impact of higher education culture on their study abroad experience.

**Understanding the “Whys” of Academic Cultural Difference**

The findings of this study extend the existing literature on international academic adjustment by illuminating how academic misconceptions can occur not only between
overtly different languages and cultures, but also when home and host countries are perceived to be culturally similar. Preparing for academic adjustment in Britain was not a high pre-departure priority for U.S. students, and most participants had a degree of general knowledge about some academic differences they may encounter in Britain. What students did not expect, however, was the significant impact these academic differences would have on their overall adjustment process.

Further, while participants could name what academic differences they encountered in Britain (i.e. less structure, optional attendance, fewer assignments), they were challenged to understand why these contrasts existed, as well as the underlying academic and cultural values that grounded this higher education system. Ireland (2010) noted, “The major obstacle for American studying abroad in developed economies, especially in English-speaking countries, is to become sensitive to the subtleties of foreignness” (p. 37). It is not enough for students to identify and negotiate difference; they must also learn how to embrace and appreciate it (Ireland, 2010).

Reverting to Familiar Academic Constructs while Abroad

Participants in this study were frequently uncertain how best to navigate the landscape of British higher education, expressing concern about whether or not they were succeeding academically. In U.S. higher education, success frequently means completing and submitting assigned work to faculty throughout the course of the semester and earning high grades. In many cases, these assignments are designed for students to demonstrate that they have effectively absorbed and understood the course content. As Ireland (2010) explained, previous notions of academic success change dramatically, “The system they (U.S. students)
are accustomed to—of regular graded assignments, and teachers who systematically engage in classroom discussions of topics being studied, and where students are judged on their class participation—disappears” (p. 42).

U.S. students in this study seemed perplexed when trying to apply familiar constructs of academic success to their experiences in Britain. It was challenging for them to understand and appreciate how the lack of continuous assessment and rigorous structure was an opportunity to develop independent research and critical thinking skills. Few embraced the opportunity and instead were confused by the excess “free time.” Faculty and advisors expressed frustration about this reality but also admitted that many of these expectations are not clearly defined or explicitly stated in British higher education culture. While local British students understood these implied expectations, they did not always recognize the significant differences from U.S. higher education culture and were thus unable to provide comprehensive advice to U.S. study abroad students.

Impact of Academic Culture

As noted by Andrade (2006), educational systems and ways of constructing thought are grounded in culture, and our perceptions and expectations of an academic experience are influenced by culture. Further, scholars have identified that in an international study experience, both students and faculty view academic life through their own distinctive cultural lenses. These cultural differences have the potential to elicit misconceptions in the academic environment (Dunne, 2009). Since both U.S. students and British educators in this study conceptualized the academic system through their own cultural lenses, there was
confusion and disconnect between these populations and their expectations for the experience.

Ireland (2010) reinforced that the academic culture is a critical component of host country culture and the overall study abroad experience. By helping international students appreciate the underlying (and often inexplicit) academic expectations embedded within institutions, educators enrich both student learning and intercultural understanding. Edwards (2000) agreed, particularly within the British context:

The subtle difference in content emphasis in courses, the underlying assumptions in discussion, the attitudes brought by their British cohorts to the classroom but not made explicit—all would then become not minor sources of puzzlement but pieces of evidence in the construction of a rich, nuanced understanding of British society that could produce academic work of exceptional caliber. (p. 94)

This study provides empirical support for opinion papers from both Edwards (2000) and Ireland (2010), emphasizing how critically important it is for U.S. study abroad students to understand academic differences in English-speaking host countries and embrace the opportunity to stretch their minds in unique ways. Further, it reveals how current U.S. study abroad students do not appear to be developing this more sophisticated and less explicit aspect of cultural understanding in direct enrollment programs within Britain. Indeed, this is an area where international educators could intervene to facilitate a more enriching cultural experience.
**Extension of Theory**

In addition to expanding current literature, this study also extends our theoretical understanding of pre-departure expectations and academic adjustment in study abroad programs. This study was grounded in two theoretical frameworks. Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment and Martin et al.’s (1995) modified expectancy violations theory. Pitts’s work conceptualizes how study abroad students respond when they encounter gaps in pre-departure expectations, and Martin et al.’s model examines how expectations can impact an overall evaluation of the study abroad experience. The findings of this study with 12 U.S. study abroad students in direct enrollment semesters in Britain provide useful reflections and extensions for both theoretical concepts.

**Application of Pitts’s (2009) model.** In Pitts’s framework (see figure 1), study abroad students adjust their academic pre-departure expectations and subsequent behaviors through on-site communication. This communication, Pitts notes, allows students to determine whether cultural adjustment challenges they encounter are normal and appropriate. When students encounter gaps between their pre-departure expectations and their on-site realities, they feel uncertain and make adjustments in expectations that will lower stress and support success. As a result from these shifted expectations, students are more likely to function and interact successfully and appropriately while abroad.

As applied in an academic context for this study, participants engaged in communication with other study abroad students, degree-seeking local students, and host country faculty. These conversations were an important part of their academic experience.
Many participants especially appreciated dialogue with and observations of local students. They made adjustments in their academic behavior as a result of these interactions.

While these behaviors align with Pitts’s (2009) model, this research on students’ academic adjustment in a “culturally similar” context extends Pitts’s (2009) theory in an important way. Pitts’s model currently assumes that on-site communication and behavioral shifts will help study abroad students function more *successfully and appropriately* in their host cultures. In this study, however, on-site communication led students to make academic behavioral shifts that were not appropriately aligned with host country values. Further, in this study, home and host cultures have different concepts of academic success. For example, when participants gained an on-site understanding that they did not have homework or continuous assessments during the semester, they adjusted expectations and behaved as if they had an abundance of free time. While U.S. students in Britain may have believed they were adapting successfully by embracing a new concept of extensive free time, they failed to conceptualize the underlying expectation that unscheduled time should be spent in self-guided independent research.

Some cultural values, such as the concepts of independent study and critical thinking, lie deeply below the surface. As an example, faculty in Britain may provide a reading list for their classes without stating that students should go beyond the list in self-study. Further, local students and study abroad alumni who provide study abroad students with advice may not realize underlying difference between U.S. and British academic cultures. As a result, they provide advice through their own cultural lenses. Participants in this study adapted their behavior and refined academic expectations during their semesters abroad, but they may have
missed an important piece of British academic culture. While behavioral adjustments may have increased their *comfort*, they did not necessarily increase their cultural *appropriateness*. Without understanding these unspoken definitions of success and appropriateness within British academic culture, students failed to adapt as fully as they could have.

**Application of Martin et al.’s (1995) modified EVT framework.** Martin et al.’s (1995) application of expectancy violations theory (EVT) helps to describe how pre-departure expectations can impact a student’s overall study abroad experience. As Burgoon and Hubbard (2005) note, in an intercultural context, if one does not take time in advance to learn about another culture’s standards, they will revert to stereotypical assumptions in expectations and interactions.

Within this study, participants expected faculty in Britain to be distant and courses to be overly rigorous. In the absence of clear information, they relied upon stereotypical applications of a prestigious academic system and a more reserved culture. When faculty were much more personable and interactive than expected, students noted the positive impact it had on their overall experience. When students perceived much less academic work during the semester as defined by the U.S. concepts of homework and continuous assessment, they consistently felt their academic experience was easier than expected. In both cases, students’ expectations were violated positively.

**Considering additional theory to interpret findings.** Both Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model and Martin et al.’s (1995) model provide valuable frameworks for understanding the intersection of expectations and experiences in a study abroad context. Both can be applied to the research questions of this study to demonstrate how U.S. study abroad students in Britain
shift behaviors and evaluations when their lived experiences contrast with pre-departure academic expectations. It is clear from the findings in this study, however, that the concept of appropriateness is critical for U.S. students in British direct enrollment programs. In a culturally similar context, it is perhaps an even more distinctive concept because students may go through an entire semester without knowing their behavioral shifts do not align with unspoken and culturally defined academic values. The concept of cultural appropriateness can only be explored by considering other theories, such as Deardorff’s (2004; 2006; 2011) intercultural competence theory.

Darla Deardorff (2004; 2006; 2011) has extensively explored the concept of appropriateness in intercultural situations. Deardorff’s (2004) intercultural competence theories note that the external outcome of intercultural competence is “behaving and communicating appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations.” (p. 196). In an important distinction, Deardorff (2011) clarifies that while students can share the extent to which they have been effective abroad, only others can determine whether their behavior and communication has been appropriate.

Since I interviewed not only U.S. study abroad students, but also their faculty and advisors, this study captured the concept of appropriateness within the academic adjustment process. As such, it provides a useful addition to international education literature as outside evaluations of student intercultural appropriateness are not often considered in research designs. Demonstrated by these findings, students shifted their behavior and attitudes in ways that helped them make meaning of their environment and function effectively. However, since their shifts were through a U.S. cultural lens of higher education, we know from
advisors and faculty in Britain that their behavioral adjustments may not have always been *appropriate*. These findings present an opportunity to apply multiple theories and extend our understanding of students’ pre-departure expectations and lived experiences in academic settings abroad.

**Conclusion and Implications**

As an in-depth study on the intersection of academic expectations and lived experiences of U.S. students within British universities, this research provides a number of practical implications for students, faculty, and advisors. These research findings are important not only because scholars and practitioners often overlook foreign university culture in U.S. study abroad (Ireland, 2010), but also because the U.K. is the top destination for U.S. study abroad students (Institute for International Education, 2014a). This study reinforces how U.S. students are challenged to understand the distinctive yet implicit differences in academic culture within British universities. It also reveals how academic adjustment challenge can be unexpectedly significant for U.S. study abroad students in Britain. With a growing focus on learning outcomes in U.S. study abroad research, this study emphasizes how navigating foreign university pedagogy and research expectations should be included within the context of successful intercultural learning.

The participants in this research study did not integrate into the British academic environment as fully as they could have. For many students, this was not because they lacked interest in their subject area or failed to connect with faculty. Indeed, many students sincerely appreciated their British faculty and enjoyed their overall experience abroad. They did not integrate as fully into academic life because they did not recognize the underlying values that
guided their host institutions in Britain. Not only did they fail to recognize these academic values, but they also did not realize they were missing a significant aspect of cultural understanding. As a result, students lost significant opportunities for academic, intercultural, and personal development. Addressing this issue will require deliberate interventions from international educators, as it is inappropriate to assume U.S. students will naturally understand how to successfully integrate into the British academic system without additional support. Edwards (2000) echoed this sentiment:

If we are serious about providing our students with the opportunity to develop global competence, then we will wish to roll up our sleeves and get serious about inventing curricular and extracurricular tools to help students we send to the U.K. have an academically brilliant and genuinely cross-cultural experience, rather than an assumption-confirmation trip to England’s ‘green and pleasant land,’ to that ‘other Eden,’ to the too-familiar domain of the ‘Cousins.’ (p. 95)

International educators should view academic integration as a key component of cultural adjustment and seek to understand this untapped potential for student growth.

**Prioritizing the Academic Experience**

This process begins with exploring how to motivate students in ways that increase their understanding and priority of the independent academic experience in British institutions. This is important because while academics were not a top pre-departure or while abroad priority for participants in this study, academic adjustment had an unexpectedly significant impact on their overall experience.
Increasing the degree of priority and motivation among students is not as simple as assigning graded credit for direct enrollment experiences. The U.K. grading system differs significantly from the U.S. in both scale and philosophy. Further, the participants within this study who earned graded credit were no more likely than transfer credit students to understand and embrace the British academic research culture. It is also not as simple as directing students to third-party providers, who often deliver instruction in a more familiar format for U.S. students. The vast majority of participants in this study cited financial limitations and were only able to consider lower cost exchanges for studying abroad.

International educators may increase the degree of academic priority by seizing upon the reality that many U.S. students are future-oriented and view study abroad as a way to boost their resumes and job/graduate school prospects. Participating in an academic culture that develops independent research skills, time management, and critical thinking can be tremendously valuable and applicable to post-undergraduate pursuits. Developing connections with British faculty can be not only personally rewarding, but also professionally valuable. International educators are well positioned to describe the British academic environment as an opportunity to develop the very skills that graduate programs and employers find desirable, but only if students fully take advantage of the research culture embedded in their academic experience. These conversations can be easily incorporated into advising appointments or pre-departure orientation programs.

**Reinforcing Academic Adjustment as part of Cultural Adjustment**

Further, while students may not have express high academic motivation, they were highly motivated and excited to understand British culture. This is why many of them were
studying abroad in the first place. In this research, participants did not view their academic experience as an important and embedded part of their cultural experience. They conceptualized academics and culture as distinctly different components of their semester abroad.

As part of orientation discussions, advisors can help students understand that adjusting to the academic culture of an institution is part of their overall cultural adjustment. When advisors describe the ups and downs of cultural adjustment, for example, they can expand traditional anecdotes such as homesickness to include issues surrounding academic life in Britain. Students want to be successful in adapting to culture, and by expanding their notion of what “culture” means, advisors may foster greater motivation for students to integrate academically. Ireland (2012) issued a call to international educators regarding this issue:

The different academic systems, the different degree structures, the different pedagogical styles, are all part of the foreign culture that American students need to learn from you. Don’t denigrate those differences. Explain them and celebrate them. (p. 14)

Opportunities for On-Site Orientation Programs

As an additional practical implication, the findings of this study demonstrated some important areas of academic disconnect between U.S. students and their faculty/advisors. For example, students conceptualized unscheduled time as “free,” whereas faculty and advisors described it as “self-study.” The few students who realized this underlying expectation felt surprised and confused, as they were accustomed to academic expectations being clearly
written in syllabus documents. Study abroad advisors in the U.S. and Britain can be the bridge between home and host country academic expectations.

While many study abroad advisors in Britain reported how they describe academic differences during orientation programs, U.S. students appeared not to recall or absorb these discussions. Upon arrival, students were focused upon registering for courses, navigating new public transportation, building peer groups, and recovering from jet lag. Any discussions about academic expectations were likely missed since their priorities were elsewhere. One institution in the study reflected upon this challenge and is considering a second academic orientation once students’ class schedules and personal lives are more settled. Sarah, an advisor in Britain, described the philosophy behind this initiative:

Here it’s much more of a research culture. So, for a ten-credit module, which would be the equivalent to three-credits in the States, they would be expected to do 100 no show hours. So they may only be in a class three hours a week but they need to time table sessions when they’re in the library, they’re researching... I think we need to do it (academic orientation) again half way through. It’s a little bit like information overload in the first week anyway. And talking, I suppose, in more detail about the types of assignments that they’ve now got.

This staggered orientation structure would allow students to focus upon their critical arrival concerns first and then turn their attention toward more complicated and nuanced aspects of their study abroad experience such as academic culture. Further, by scheduling this additional orientation after a month of class, students could bring their writing assignments and syllabi to engage in a more personalized and hands-on working session with advisors.
Opportunities for Pre-Departure Orientation Programs

Study abroad advisors in the U.S. also play an important role in this process. This research demonstrates how pre-departure expectations are a key component in study abroad adjustment, particularly for U.S. students in Britain. Academic expectations are especially challenging because, similar to other cultural values, the guiding rules for appropriate behavior are not explicitly stated. This can be perplexing for students when they anticipate and view surface-level similarities between their home and host institutions.

Many study abroad advisors in the U.S. rely upon international students and study abroad alumni to provide academic advice during pre-departure orientation programs. While this can be a helpful strategy for U.S. advisors, especially if they have not studied in Britain themselves, it requires preparation and facilitation. The results of this study demonstrate that alumni and international student volunteers may not understand the full extent of underlying differences between the U.S. and Britain, particularly when they view each academic system through their own cultural lens.

Study abroad advisors have the ability to bring these differences into consciousness for students by facilitating the discussion in strategic ways. Even without first-hand experience in the British academic system, advisors can ask behavioral and applied questions of international students. Examples of questions may include, “How do you spend a typical day outside of class?” or “When you receive an assignment, what steps do you go through to research the topic?” or “When you are having difficulty understanding course material or assignment requirements, what resources do you use?” This line of questioning may enable student volunteers to articulate differences more clearly than a general question, such as
“How are the U.S. and U.K. academic systems different?” Edwards (2000) describes the significant value of international educators unearthing these less explicit and more subtle academic expectations for U.S. students in Britain:

The subtle difference in content emphasis in courses, the underlying assumptions in discussion, the attitudes brought by their British cohorts to the classroom but not made explicit—all would then become not minor sources of puzzlement but pieces of evidence in the construction of a rich, nuanced understanding of British society that could produce academic work of exceptional caliber. (p. 94)

**Opportunities for Faculty Development**

Connected with this concept, these findings illuminated the importance of preparing faculty in Britain for incoming U.S. students and educating them on the unspoken ways the two academic systems may differ. Faculty in this study were responsive to students and gave feedback on final papers when asked, but students were consistently confused on how to engage with course material and readings. British higher education is a self-led system in which students must take ownership for their educational experience and adapt to difference. As Susan, a British faculty member noted, the responsibility for doing so is squarely on the students’ shoulders:

I would say that they need to adapt as quickly as they can to the emphasis on private study and independent study and that they should view what looks like free time on their timetable is not necessarily free time on their timetable... I think that because there’s just fewer contact hours that they make the mistake of thinking that it’s easier,
but actually the emphasis, the responsibility is just shifted to their shoulders for them to manage their own study.

This poses an interesting challenge for direct enrollment in Britain if faculty feel it is the students’ responsibility to adapt, and U.S. students are accustomed to being explicitly told how to successfully adapt. Dunne (2009) believes institutions have a responsibility for supporting this transition. He calls for deliberate interventions from international educators and institutions to address the fact that home and host country students and faculty enter the academic environment with different conceptions of higher education culture.

One institution in this study works closely with new faculty as they are hired to explain differences between the British and U.S. academic systems. They also provide faculty with advanced notice if direct enrollment students have registered for their classes. Sarah explains her process:

We work really closely with the faculty...Ensuring that they know that there’s gonna be a certain amount of students in their class that are on study abroad. Particularly new faculty coming in, just explaining if they don’t know the U.S. system that I would work with them and explain the differences.

Some participants in this study believed faculty were not expecting their registration and were unclear on how best to offer support. This was especially problematic when spring study abroad students enrolled in yearlong courses. From a policy perspective, the findings of this study would discourage this practice for direct enrollment students. Yearlong enrollments aside, faculty across participants were keen to engage international students in class discussions and were supportive of students’ concerns, particularly regarding logistical
issues with exams. Faculty expressed surprise, however, when students did not understand the expectation to research beyond stated essay topics.

U.S. students in this study viewed their academic department as their primary source of support. They identified more closely with their department than with their international office. This identification and connection with one’s academic department holds true for local British students as well. Understanding this structure and the role faculty will have in supporting international students, it is perhaps even more imperative that study abroad advisors take a proactive role to conduct workshops and schedule discussions with faculty, particularly to explain how the subtle and underlying expectations that guide the British academic culture may not be familiar to U.S. students.

Related to this concept, British institutions often cited how academic tutors within departments were best prepared to support U.S. students who experienced academic difficulty. Very few participants, however, took advantage of this resource, or even knew it existed. This presents an opportunity for international educators, especially since departmental tutors can provide an additional layer of academic support for U.S. students. Involving tutors in a supplemental academic orientation, for example, would provide a structured opportunity for students to build rapport with their tutors and for tutors to deepen their understanding of the complex differences between academic cultures in the U.S. and Britain.

**Thinking Proactively with Technology**

Finally, while faculty and international educators have a critical role in managing academic expectations for U.S. students in Britain, the findings of this study also highlight
the many ways that students form these initial expectations. As demonstrated by this research, pre-departure expectations provide a valuable foundation upon which students base their study abroad experience. Participants in this study developed expectations in a variety of ways. Most notably, students utilized informal personal narratives and independent web resources far more than official content from home or host institutions.

Given this finding, it is imperative that study abroad professionals consider and explore how to manage these informal sources of information, particularly with regard to technology. Understanding that today’s students thrive on instant information through social media and powerful personal narratives, international educators should serve as active partners, rather than passive bystanders, in helping students gain information. If students are more eager to search YouTube, Google, or Pinterest than read an official handbook, international educators can provide lists of curated technological resources that offer accurate and useful content. While we can never erase the possibility that students may access and internalize incorrect information, we can increase the likelihood that students develop expectations based upon appropriate content.

This study highlights particular areas of academic challenge for U.S. students in direct enrollment programs within Britain and suggests ways to extend theory, literature, and professional practice to enhance the student experience. While direct enrollment programs are not the only model of study abroad in Britain, they will continue to provide access and opportunities to students who may not otherwise have been able to afford study abroad. These programs are a critical component of study abroad strategy and provide meaningful opportunities for academic collaboration. While U.S. students should, without question,
continue to participate in these opportunities, it is critical for the field not to take students’ academic adjustment in Britain for granted.
CHAPTER 6
ARTICLE 2: THE INTERSECTION OF CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF U.S. STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS IN BRITISH UNIVERSITIES

“It’s just different. It’s not bad. It’s not better. Just different”

The Intersection of Cultural Expectations and Experiences of U.S. Study Abroad Students in British Universities

Introduction

Throughout the past 50 years, issues of cultural adjustment have intrigued international education scholars (Berardo, 2007). There has been a wealth of research on the cultural adjustment process, as well as on the sociocultural and psychological adjustment issues that students encounter while abroad. This research has helped inform and advance the international education field, yet there is a noteworthy gap in literature regarding the largest group of study abroad students in the United States, those who study abroad in the United Kingdom. While scholars have conducted many in-depth explorations of students within overtly different language and cultural contexts, they have largely ignored the cultural adjustment experiences of U.S. students in English-speaking countries.

Perhaps this gap exists because there is a longstanding assumption in the international education field that students who study abroad in locations deemed to be more culturally
similar enjoy easier transitions (Church, 1982; Paige, 1993). Following this assumption, U.S. students in English-speaking locations should require less research and less attention than students who study abroad in more overtly different cultural contexts. There has been significant research on the cultural adjustment of U.S. students in non-English speaking countries (Chaban, Williams, Holland, Boyce & Warner, 2011; Hunley, 2010; Pitts, 2009) and non-English speaking students in English-speaking countries (Akazaki, 2010; Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, and Sabatier, 2010; Brown, 2008; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li, Baker, & Marshall, 2002; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ying & Han, 2006; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Although literature on U.S. students in English-speaking countries has been limited and largely exploratory, leading scholars have cautioned against taking these students’ experiences for granted (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2010; Janes, 2008).

**U.S. Study Abroad Students in the United Kingdom**

This gap is significant because we lack empirical data on the experiences of the largest group of U.S. study abroad students. Since the Institute for International Education (IIE) began publishing data on U.S. study abroad participation over a decade ago, the U.K. has consistently remained the top destination for U.S. study abroad students (Institute for International Education, 2001). Further, international educators have recently written scholarly opinion papers and conducted exploratory studies that have highlighted unique concerns for U.S. study abroad students in the U.K. and Ireland (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2010; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008).
Throughout this recent strand of literature, a consistent theme is that U.S. students in English-speaking countries may set inappropriate expectations for the study abroad experience and contemporary culture (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). International educators have also observed that U.S. students in Britain may be less inclined to seek out cultural differences (Edwards, 2000) and may have difficulty understanding the “otherness” of British culture (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Janes, 2008). Further observations have indicated that U.S. students in the U.K. may blame themselves for challenges rather than acknowledge normal difficulties of cross-cultural transitions (Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008).

These scholarly opinion papers and exploratory studies are important contributions to the literature because they highlight unique concerns for cultural adjustment of U.S. students in the Britain. Through professional observation, these international educators have called into question the assumption of a fully-integrative and less challenging cultural adjustment experience for the largest group of U.S. study abroad students. As these scholars caution the field against traditional assumptions of cultural adjustment, they support the need for focused, systematic research on this population of students.

There is an empirical lack of understanding about the most dominant group of U.S. study abroad students, as well as a call from the international education field to be wary of assumptions regarding the cultural adjustment for U.S. students in Britain. The purpose of this phenomenological study, therefore, was to directly address this gap and describe the cultural expectations and adjustment experiences of U.S. study abroad students in British universities. Informed by applications of expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1978;
Martin, Bradford, and Rohrlich, 1995) and a descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment (Pitts, 2009), this study explored these assumptions through longitudinal qualitative research with 12 students who directly enrolled in nine British universities for semester study abroad programs. In doing so, it addressed the following research questions:

1. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe their cultural expectations?
2. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe the intersection of their cultural expectations with cultural experiences?

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This research included two complementary theoretical frameworks, Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment, and Martin et al.’s (1995) modified expectancy violations theory. Both theoretical models address the intersection of expectations and lived experiences for U.S. study abroad students. Though they have been utilized to capture the importance of pre-departure expectations in the study abroad experience, neither has been utilized in a focused cultural adjustment study on U.S. students in Britain. Applying both frameworks allows for theory triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) within this study.

**Expectancy Violations Theory**

Grounded in the field of communications, expectancy violations theory (EVT) was originally developed by Burgoon in 1978 to explain nonverbal behaviors. Since its original
inception, EVT has grown in multiple ways, most notably to provide a framework for cross-cultural communication (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005; Burgoon et al., 1995). Martin et al. (1995) provided the first direct application of EVT in research on U.S. study abroad students. In doing so, they developed a modification of the framework to include variables that may impact study abroad students’ expectations (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Martin et al. (1995) modified expectancy violations framework.](image)

**Burgoon’s expectancy violations theory.** According to EVT, our expectations are impacted by social and cultural norms and knowledge. When people enter interactions, they bring with them expectations about how others will communicate (Burgoon et al., 1995). This is especially relevant in intercultural interactions because without learning about another culture’s standards, people often depend upon stereotypical assumptions (Burgoon &
Hubbard, 2005). In EVT, expectations are not simply met or unmet. They can also be violated positively, where the outcome is better than expected, or violated negatively, where the outcome is worse than expected (Martin et al., 1995).

**Martin et al.’s (1995) modified expectancy violations framework.** Martin et al. (1995) sought to explore the connections between tenets of EVT and cultural adjustment theory by applying EVT in longitudinal study abroad research. This research produced the modified expectancy violations framework (see Figure 1). One of the most relevant outcomes of this research was the finding that England might be a location where pre-departure expectations were especially relevant. This exploratory quantitative research suggested that students who expect England to be very similar to the U.S. often found their expectations to be incorrect. In contrast, students who expected significant difference in more exotic locations more often found their expectations confirmed (Martin et al., 1995).

These research outcomes led Martin et al. (1995) to question assumptions within international education about cultural similarity and easier adjustment. Future research suggestions included applying EVT to the cultural adaptation process, extending the investigation to include re-entry, and exploring the framework within a qualitative study (Martin et al., 1995). This study on expectation and cultural adjustment experience for U.S. students in Britain directly addresses all of these areas and serves to extend the applicability of Martin et al’s (1995) modified EVT framework.

**Pitts’s Model of Expectations, Talk, and Identity**

In a more recent model of study abroad expectations and intercultural adjustment, Pitts (2009) developed a descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term
sojourner adjustment (see Figure 2). Through expansive ethnography, this framework applied and extended a foundational model of cultural adjustment from Y.Y. Kim (2001) to describe the adjustment process for U.S. semester study abroad students in France. Within this model (Pitts, 2009), students’ gaps in academic, social, and cultural expectations produce stress and require communication in order to elicit growth and newly refined expectations. This framework explores how student expectations are an important component of their cultural adjustment process. Within the model, students form expectations about their study abroad experience from multiple external sources such as home/host institutions, friends, family, and co-students. As students encounter intercultural difference during a study abroad semester, they “experience gaps between their expectations and the reality of the sojourn” (Pitts, 2009, p. 459).

Figure 2. Pitts (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity.

Throughout a semester abroad, students adjust pre-departure expectations and modify their behavior. Pitts (2009) determined that students processed their inappropriate expectation and modified behavior through communication. In this model, students’ expectations eventually become more closely aligned with reality, and stress decreases. As a
result, students are more likely to function and interact successfully and appropriately in a cross-cultural environment (Pitts, 2009). Prior to this research, very few studies had addressed expectations and study abroad. One noteworthy exception, as mentioned by Pitts (2009), is the other theoretical framework of this study, modified expectancy violations theory (Martin et al., 1995).

**Literature Review**

Given the significant gap in empirical research on the cultural adjustment of U.S. students in English-speaking countries, this literature review will utilize exploratory studies, faculty opinion papers, and corporate expatriate research to illuminate unique cultural adjustment themes for U.S. students in Britain. Additionally, since the participants in this study conceptualized language to be a key aspect of their cultural experience in Britain, I will also review international education literature that explores the intersection of language and cultural adjustment.

**Language Challenges**

Language challenges have been addressed throughout international student academic adjustment literature in multiple ways. The overwhelming majority of research has examined non-native English speakers who have transitioned into English-speaking higher education systems. Two of the most significant themes from this literature are the connection between language and cultural adjustment stress, as well as the impact of language on student-faculty relationships.

**Student-faculty interactions.** International education scholars have discovered that language issues can contribute to misconceptions between international students and faculty.
For example, while international students in Australia attributed their lack of class participation to discomfort with language and subject area content, their faculty assumed the lack of participation was grounded in cultural differences (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000). Faculty noted that international students lacked the speaking, writing, and critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in an English-speaking higher education classroom. The international students, however, felt that professors’ rapid speech and colloquial word usage made it difficult for them to understand and be successful (Robertson et al., 2000).

**Impact on adjustment stress.** In addition to student-faculty interactions, scholars have also examined how language can impact the overall cultural adjustment process, finding a connection between language and stress. In an ethnography of 13 students in a U.K. master’s program, 12 of whom were from non-English speaking countries, Brown and Holloway (2008) discovered that the stress students encountered at the beginning of an academic program was exacerbated not only by cultural differences, but also by language difficulties. In a comprehensive review of 64 studies of international student adjustment, Zhang and Goodson (2011) determined that English language proficiency issues were among the most commonly reported challenges of psychosocial adjustment stress for international students in the U.S.

**Critique and research gap for studies on language challenge.** While these studies have presented valuable information on the ways that language can impact overall intercultural adjustment for international students, they focus on language predominantly through the lens of non-English speakers from non-Western or collectivist countries who are
seeking proficiency in English language. By focusing on language solely as an English/non-
English issue, scholars have missed an opportunity to examine adjustment challenges beyond
the overtly different transitions from collectivist to individualist countries. Though the U.S.
and Britain both speak the English language, there are undoubtedly vast differences between
the versions of English, including many cultural cues embedded in the language.

Just as there may be challenges for U.S. students in the transition to the British
academic system, there may also be challenges in the adjustment to a new kind of English
language dialect. For example, Martin et al. (1995) found that in a comprehensive survey of
U.S. study abroad students throughout the world, those who were studying abroad in England
reported significant and expected challenges with language. This is merely one exploratory
study, however, and due to methodological limitations, researchers were unable to examine
why U.S. students in England expressed unexpected challenges with language and how these
challenges impacted their adjustment.

The outcomes in Martin et al. (1995) are important, nevertheless, because they reveal
that language challenges are not limited to students who are learning a second language
abroad. This study addressed the research gap on potential language adjustment issues of
English-speaking students in English-speaking countries by including language as an area of
exploration in the adjustment process for U.S. students in Britain.

**Cultural Adjustment Literature**

Language is one of many complex issues embedded in international study
experiences. As international education research has become more responsive to the
complexities of cultural adjustment, studies have examined both psychological and
sociocultural aspects of the transition. The vast majority of this research, however, has presented cultural adjustment from the perspective of non-English speakers transitioning into an English-speaking culture (Akazaki, 2010; Brisset et al., 2010; Brown, 2008; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward et al., 1998; Ying & Han, 2006; Zhang & Goodson, 2011) or from U.S. study abroad students entering a non-English speaking country (Chaban, et al., 2011; Hunley, 2010; Pitts, 2009).

This focused lens has created a significant research gap in our empirical understanding of cultural adjustment for U.S. study abroad students in Britain. In the absence of extensive research data, a recent strand of opinion papers by international educators who have worked directly with U.S. students in Britain, in addition to exploratory research data within the study abroad and corporate expatriate communities, highlight specific and unique cultural adjustment issues for this population of study abroad students.

**Setting cultural expectations.** The concept of setting appropriate cultural expectations, or the inability to do so, has emerged as a consistent theme for U.S. students in English-speaking countries throughout emerging international education opinion papers (Edwards, 2000; Ireland, 2010) and study abroad exploratory research (McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Martin et al., 1995; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). Expatriate studies on culturally similar work placements have also reinforced this theme (Fenwick et al., 2003; Selmer, 2007; Selmer, Chiu, & Shenkar, 2007; Selmer & Lauring, 2009).

As observed by Edwards (2000), U.S. study abroad students expect an “autopilot immersion experience” in Britain because of a perceived shared culture and language (p. 88). U.S. international educators and faculty share some responsibility for shaping students’
perceptions, since U.S. higher education and the field of study abroad have made certain assumptions in conceptualizing academic programs in Britain (Edwards, 2000). Many of these sweeping assumptions about study abroad in Britain, Edwards (2000) argued, should be re-evaluated. She challenged international educators and students to explore “this usually taken-for-granted corner of our intercultural lives,” not with the usual set of beliefs and expectations that have led to familiar assumptions, but within the context of an ethnographic framework to understand the deeper cultural differences that exist between the U.S. and Britain (p. 83).

Aligning with this theme, another international educator, Ireland (2010), has observed similar challenges for U.S. students in the Republic of Ireland. He cautioned “it is a mistake to assume that Western Europe, or English-speaking countries like Canada, Australia or England do not present U.S. students with deep lessons to learn and foreign differences to negotiate” (Ireland, 2010, p. 27). Still, however, Ireland noted that U.S. study abroad students arrived with “superficial” expectations for an experience abroad in Ireland that were grounded in a “perceived lack of difference” between home and host cultures (p. 27).

Reinforcing these opinion papers from international educators, McLeod and Wainwright (2008) and Martin et al. (1995) conducted exploratory research and determined that U.S. study abroad students in Britain do not set appropriate expectations for their experiences abroad. Not only did students set inappropriate expectations, but they also encountered incidents abroad that negatively violated their pre-departure expectations (Martin et al., 1995; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008).

In McLeod and Wainwright (2008), data from students in Scotland and France were
analyzed together in an exploratory study, so it is not possible to know which themes are specific to students in Britain. The analysis revealed four themes:

  a) Students experienced stressful situations that severely violated expectancies; b) successful experiences led to feelings of increased self-confidence; c) successful experiences led to changes in self-perception; and d) successful experiences led to changes in students’ perception of the world. (McLeod & Wainwright, 2008, p. 68)

Violations of expectations included initial periods of extreme stress and confusion rather than the feelings of positive elation typically expected and described to students in foundational models of cultural adjustment (McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Oberg 1960). These results are echoed in Martin et al. (1995), as students in England experienced expectancy violations more negatively than students in other countries with regard to language, climate, and coursework. These expectancy violations impacted students’ overall evaluations of the experience.

This theme of setting inappropriate cultural expectations, especially within the context of culturally similar countries, is also embedded within a recent strand of research on expatriates abroad. Led predominately by Jan Selmer and colleagues, research studies have shown that when expatriates accepted culturally similar job placements, their inflated expectations led to unanticipated challenges with cultural adjustment (Fenwick et al., 2003; Selmer, 2007; Selmer et al., 2007; Selmer & Lauring, 2009). These scholars also discovered that if expatriates minimized their host country’s cultural differences before departing for the new job placement, they became complacent in preparing for the venture (Fenwick et al., 2003; Selmer, 2007; Selmer et al., 2007; Selmer & Lauring, 2009). Selmer (2007) noted, “For an expatriate assigned to an entirely different host culture, the advantage is that the
consciousness of dissimilarity is always there” (p. 188).

Selmer (2007) found that it could be just as difficult for U.S. expatriates to adjust to the culture in Canada as it was for them to adjust to the culture in Germany. Additionally, Selmer and Lauring (2009) found no difference in the difficulty of cultural adjustment for expatriates from within the European Union and from outside of the European Union who were adjusting to new job placements within the EU. Fenwick et al. (2003) discovered that Australian managers underestimated cultural differences in Britain, which caused “unanticipated difficulties” with their placements because the familiar cultural environment they expected was, in reality, significantly different (p. 301).

This expatriate literature is exploratory and cross-sectional in nature, and scholars have acknowledged that longitudinal studies, such as this phenomenological study, would provide a more rigorous assessment of cultural adjustment (Selmer, 2007). Additionally, while these studies acknowledge previous literature and seek to fill the significant gap in research on adjustment in culturally similar countries, they lack a well-defined theoretical framework. Nevertheless, the fact that consistent and transferable themes appear in both international educator opinion papers and expatriate exploratory research studies provides an important foundation for this study on U.S. students in Britain.

**Seeking similarity.** Another related theme within the literature is that once U.S. students set pre-departure expectations and arrive in Britain, they are either unable or unwilling to recognize the realities of complex cultural difference. As observed by international educators, the expectation of a smooth cultural transition “allows Americans to leap to the belief that a shared language implies a shared culture” (Edwards, 2000, p.88).
Edwards (2000) was quick to clarify that while the U.S. and Britain are similar, they do not share a common culture.

Again, these observations are aligned with research on expatriates who have taken culturally similar assignments. Selmer and Lauring (2009) discovered that academic expatriates in similar countries had just as much difficulty with cultural adjustment as those in countries with more overt differences. Convinced they were entering a virtually identical culture, expatriates sought similarity abroad rather than adjusting to difference (Selmer & Lauring, 2009). Selmer and Lauring referenced this action as “confirmation bias” and noted that actions of similarity-seeking were efforts to confirm expatriates’ preconceived assumptions (p. 430). Selmer (2007) noted that expatriates in his study, “were not prepared to look for differences, and learning begins with the ability to see difference” (p. 189).

**Exempting Britain from otherness.** Edwards (2000) suggested that since U.S. study abroad students often “exempt the British from ‘otherness,’” studying abroad there gives them less pause than other destinations (p. 91). As such, it is easy for them to ignore cues about deeper cultural differences, such as contrasts in social organization, views on spirituality, and family dynamics (Edwards, 2000). Edwards (2000) argues that students’ perceived lack of cultural difference regarding Britain is rooted in the U.S. K-12 and higher education systems, where:

- English culture is presented as a precursor, or at the very least as a close cousin, of the full-blooded American. The history of Britain is often presented and defined as the natural forerunner of U.S. history. (pp. 83-84)
- From kindergarten stories of Pilgrims through higher education studies of
Shakespeare, Edwards (2000) opined that U.S. students have been engaged in selective British studies throughout their educational careers in a “Masterpiece Theater” version of culture and history that has tended to “mask the real divergences” between the U.S. and Britain. (p. 85). Unfortunately, the version of Britain that has been emphasized in U.S. education has not reflected modern and diverse cultural realities. Students, who feel comfortable and familiar with their “muddled assumptions,” may be unaware of the “gulf between contemporary English culture and contemporary American culture” (Edwards, 2000, p. 85).

**Unique responses to cultural adjustment.** While study abroad locations within Britain have been classified in the field as a “traditional locations, less challenging than non-traditional environments,” (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011, p. 24), an intriguing theme in exploratory literature is that when students and expatriates do encounter adjustment challenges, they may have some unique responses that are distinct from foundational or leading models of cultural adjustment. This includes feeling betrayed by more intensified cultural struggles than expected or blaming oneself or others for difficulties that are, in reality, normal cycles of cultural adjustment. While these themes have only been revealed through exploratory study abroad and expatriate studies thus far, the fact that they demonstrate unique responses in the cultural adjustment process is important for this study.

Sobre-Denton and Hart (2008) revealed the concept of “double shock,” meaning double culture shock, as presented by a U.K. and Ireland study abroad advisor in pre-departure orientation (p. 545). In describing this concept, the advisor portrayed an intensified cultural adjustment period in certain aspects of the English-speaking study abroad
experience. This captures the feelings of betrayal that some students at this institution experienced upon finding a lack of expected similarity in the U.K. and Ireland (Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). The concept of double shock, along with other findings from faculty opinion papers, exploratory studies, and expatriate research, bring forth unique aspects that differ from existing research on students who transition through overly different languages and cultures. This study directly examines these preliminary findings through a comprehensive, yet focused research design on the experience of U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities.

**Methodology**

This study explored the everyday lives of U.S. students who directly enrolled in British universities for semester study abroad programs. In a longitudinal design, I was directly engaged with students before departure, while abroad, and upon return from studying abroad, and through on-site interviews in Britain. Data for this study included longitudinal interviews with participants, interviews with study abroad advisors in the U.S., and interviews with faculty and study abroad advisors in Britain.

Exploring the “lived experiences for several individuals about a concept” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51), this research was conducted through a phenomenological lens. Phenomenology focuses on questions of common human experiences that are believed to occur at important times or transitions in our lives (Merriam, 2002), such as the transition into a new culture during a study abroad experience. As Van Manen (1990) noted, “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday lives. Phenomenology asks, ‘what is this or that kind of experience like?’” (p. 9).
Research Sites and Participants

The primary source of data in phenomenological research is gathered through interviews with those who experience the phenomenon in question (Merriam, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). The U.K. is the top destination for U.S. study abroad students at nearly 35,000 per year (Institute for International Education, 2014a). From this population, I selected a sample of participants from three large public research universities in the southeastern U.S.: Central State University, Southern City University, and University of the Southeast.

This study was intentionally limited to participants who were accepted to direct enrollment or exchange programs where students enrolled full-time within local universities. While many other models of semester study abroad exist, including faculty-led, island, or hybrid programming, I determined it would not be empirically appropriate to assume a shared experience across these diverse program types. Further, due to time limitations during the site visit, I was unable to include prospective participants in Northern Ireland. Thus, this study includes Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) rather than the entire United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland).

Through stratified purposeful, typical case, criteria, and convenience sampling, I selected 12 spring 2015 study abroad participants for the study who were compensated for their time and participation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Reflecting enrollment trends in study abroad (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011), half of the selected group studied in greater London, and half of the group studied elsewhere in Britain. Selection criteria included: level of previous travel experience, gender, location of host program, housing structure of program (housing
with local students versus housing with U.S. students), academic structure of program, and on-site support structure.

I selected participants who had not spent previous significant time in Britain, as one of the critical aims of the study was to explore pre-departure expectations. As a full-time professional, I traveled to Britain for interviews during the course of the study abroad semester. Selecting participants within a closer geographic distance allowed me to spend more time on campuses engaged in interviews.

The twelve participants were distributed across nine different universities in England, Scotland, and Wales. The sample included 10 females and two males. Sample ethnicity included four Black students, seven White students, and one Latina student. Within the sample, one participant withdrew from the study abroad experience before its completion, and another did not complete the final interview upon return to the U.S. These students completed two interviews; whereas, the remaining participants completed three. Dukes (1984) recommends between three and ten subjects for a phenomenological study, so a sample of 12 exceeds the recommended range.

**Data Collection**

This longitudinal study captured multiple sources of data from the semester study abroad experience, including pre-departure, while abroad in Britain, and upon return to U.S. higher education. As a phenomenological study, this research used participant interviews as the primary source of data (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002). I also interviewed two U.S. study abroad advisors and four study abroad advisors and faculty from participating institutions in Britain. These additional interviews not only enhanced rigor, but also
expanded my understanding of the phenomenon in question. These educators worked directly with the participants in the study and had historical perspectives on the research topic from previous student experience. In total, I conducted 40 interviews in a semi-structured format to gather data for this study.

I interviewed each participant after pre-departure orientation programs concluded from November through December 2014. I conducted a second series of interviews in March 2015 during a three-week site visit to Britain where I visited each student at their host institution. Finally, I interviewed participants in September 2015, after they returned to the U.S. The primary purpose of these final conversations was to confirm whether participants’ reflections remained consistent from the while abroad to re-entry phases of the experience. Aligning with best practices of phenomenology, I utilized a reflection journal throughout the data collection and analysis processes to continually bracket my personal opinions and experiences on this research topic from the true nature of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).

Data Analysis

Giorgi’s (1985, 2012) structure of psychological phenomenology provided a clear, multi-step framework for data analysis to enhance the rigor of this study. Giorgi’s method was appropriate not only because of the close connection between cultural adjustment and psychology, but also because this structure is particularly useful for analyzing longitudinal data in qualitative research (Wertz, 1985).

This method includes reading data in its entirety; identifying “meaning units” to comprise larger themes; integrating themes into “consistent statements;” and communicating
points of universal meaning into a narrative description that comprises the essence of the participants’ experience (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10). Finally, I applied this narrative description to the raw data to clarify my interpretation (Giorgi, 1985; 2012).

I also submitted interviews to participants in order to engage in member checking and ensure that I authentically represented the reality of their experiences (Seale, 2003). In addition to writing in my researcher journal throughout the process, I also wrote memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to continue reflecting upon the data and my personal viewpoints (Van Manen, 1990).

**Trustworthiness**

In accordance with qualitative research guidelines, I took deliberate measures throughout the research process to ensure trustworthiness in this study. Purposeful sampling and thick description of findings enhanced transferability (Jensen, 2008). By utilizing multiple interview sources and conducting interviews at each phase of the study abroad experience, I increased credibility. (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seale, 1999). With research questions directly linked to theoretical frameworks and the phenomenon in question, as well as a clear research structure from purpose through data analysis phases, I enhanced dependability (Martin et al., 1995; Pitts, 2009). I reflected upon potential subjectivity and created a written “audit trail” of all research decisions, particularly when they diverged from original plans (Meadows & Morse, 2001, 194). Finally, these findings have been peer reviewed by two colleagues who are qualitative researchers in higher education (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Limitations**
This study was limited in a number of ways. As a qualitative phenomenology, my goal for this research was to purposefully understand a smaller group in-depth within a particular context and not to generalize across all students. I applied deliberate sampling strategies for “maximizing variation” in the sample by including a diverse group of students both within greater London and throughout Britain (Merriam, 2002, p. 29). Additionally, I provided “rich, thick description” in the analysis of the data (Merriam, 2002, p. 29). These two strategies facilitate greater opportunities for readers to contextualize, compare, and apply the results of this study to other relevant situations (Merriam, 2002). This aligns with Patton’s (1990) recommendation that qualitative research should be considered within “context-bound extrapolations rather than generalizations” (p. 491).

The research design of this study is also limited, as only I interviewed participants at three specific points of the study abroad experience. While it would have been ideal to conduct in-person interviews throughout the study abroad semester, resource and time constraints prohibited me from doing so. Further, since students were from multiple institutions and were studying across Britain, university calendars were not precisely aligned across participants to capture data at the exact same times within the study abroad experience. These limitations would have been more problematic within the design of an ethnographic study, as my level of engagement with participants and multiple sources of data exceeded many recommendations for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994).

I was also limited by the amount of time and access I had during the site visit, which prevented me from considering more distant participants or collecting additional sources of
data. Given that I was limited by time and that I visited students, advisors, and faculty at multiple sites in Britain, my primary focus was on conducting interviews on campuses.

**Delimitations**

Regarding delimitations, this study was bound by three participating institutions within one state. The multiple sampling strategies I have embedded were designed to produce a purposive sample typical of the U.S. direct enrollment study abroad student population in Britain. I was limited, however, to students from these institutions who were accepted to participate in programs within Britain, as well as students who were interested in this study. The research design initially included two private institutions in addition to three public universities. Eligible students from these private institutions did not enroll in the research study or did not meet sampling criteria.

It is important to note that study abroad programs are not accessible to all students in higher education for academic, financial, behavioral, personal, or other reasons. Additionally, of the students who do participate in study abroad programs, approximately 12% study abroad in the U.K. (Institute for International Education, 2014a). While this represents the largest group in one single location, it is likely not representative of the entire U.S. higher education population.

Additionally, different structures of study abroad programs vary significantly (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). The study abroad field includes multiple program types, including U.S. faculty-led, island, hybrid, and direct enrollment/exchange programs. Direct enrollment or exchange program were selected for this study because these models require students to enroll as full-time students in British universities. The level of additional
support and cultural orientation varies by institution and often depends upon resources and international student population size.

I deliberately chose to examine direct enrollment student experiences because this program structure requires direct interaction with British higher education culture. It is noteworthy, however, that students throughout diverse program types may have very different experiences abroad. I acknowledge that this research is not fully representative of the multiple program models available within study abroad in Britain. I determined, however, that given the significant structural differences across models, it would be inappropriate to seek a shared experience for students across program types. Future research may expand this focus and consider experiences of U.S. students in different program models or additional English-speaking countries, as well as English-speaking international students in U.S. direct enrollment programs.

Findings

Participant interviews revealed three distinct themes with regard to the intersection of cultural expectations and cultural adjustment for U.S. study abroad students in British direct enrollment programs. These include a) perception of cultural distance, b) language challenge, and c) acceptance of diversity. Within each theme, I will provide an overview of student pre-departure expectations, the sources that shaped these expectations, and the intersection of expectation and experience while abroad. Where relevant, I will also share reflections from interviews with international educators in the U.S. and Britain.

Perception of Cultural Distance
Geert Hofstede (2001) defines cultural similarity and difference between countries as *cultural distance*. This concept frames the structure by which many researchers classify and understand how cultures are similar and different. Before departure, while abroad, and upon return, participants in this study reflected upon the degree to which they perceived the U.S. and Britain to be culturally similar. For many students, pre-departure cultural expectations of similarity contrasted significantly with on-site experiences.

**Expectations: Similar and Less Preparation.** During the pre-departure process, many students felt it would be quite easy to adjust to the culture in Britain, particularly in comparison to other study abroad destinations:

The good thing about the U.K. is it’s very comparable to the U.S. – at least, I feel like. So, there’s not that much to prepare for, as much as if I was going to Mexico. I feel like I’d definitely need more things if I was going there. (Kristen)

I remember listening to him (friend who studied in Spain) and thinking, ‘I won’t have that. I won’t have that much of an adjustment to different ways of life, I guess, and the things you say or don’t say to people’ cause a lot of people say that it’s very much the same as it is here…I have done research, but you don’t research culture.

(Candace)

Students considered the differences they were aware of to be “little things,” and not especially significant for their adjustment to life in Britain. Melissa reflected, “I’ve researched the little things that are different, like they take standing in line very seriously.”
Julie echoed this sentiment, “All I know about the differences are kind of little things.”

Candace also expected differences to be minor:

I feel like a lot of what’s been described to me, and especially when I tell people where I’m studying, they say, ‘That’s great. That won’t be that much of an adjustment.’ So I think a lot of people assume that it won’t be that much of an adjustment, and things my friends have described has – it’s been relatively minute.

Study abroad advisors and faculty agreed that many students select Britain as a study abroad destination because of the perceived cultural similarities and ease of adjustment:

I think the U.K. has always been a popular destination. I think it's probably because of the language. I think it's they'll deem it to be quite easy, because there's no language barriers. (Renee)

I’m sure that they see it as an easy option because of the language, because of the English language. They’ll probably have more choices of modules that they can choose here and I think they probably think that their social lives will be very close to their social lives at home. So familiarity of culture and the English language I think are probably the two reasons. (Susan)

Maybe some familiarity with – or, no let me backtrack on that – an understanding that there are cultural similarities that lesson some of the challenges of studying abroad. Or perception, maybe let's put it that way. Well the fact a lot of students will say well,
I don’t speak another language so I figured this is my only option or that this would be easier. (Adam)

I think the biggest is just familiarity, and they think that it's a place that they can go when they're not too sure about their abilities to maybe navigate a new culture and a new language. And it makes them maybe feel like they can do that. (Steven)

Since participants felt studying in Britain required less cultural preparation and research than other destinations, they spent the majority of their time preparing for other aspects of the study abroad experience. Financial preparation was the top priority across participants, followed by logistical and paperwork preparation. As Calvin noted:

Mentally I can’t (prepare) – it’s hard to think about it because you’re so focused on doing the legwork to get there, and it distracts you…So, mentally it’s kind of been diluted because I’m focused on other things. I should be thinking about when I get there, what it is going to feel like, but I can’t. It’s just so hard to think about me abroad because I’m so focused on what I’m doing now here. Calvin abroad doesn’t really exist right now. (Calvin)

Study abroad advisors and faculty agreed and noted how students often deem it unnecessary to prepare for cultural differences:

Because they think it’s gonna be simple they don’t always prepare themselves for the differences that we do have between the two cultures. So I think they don’t think about their expectations if that makes sense. They’re not really planning ahead
necessarily. They just think it’s an English-speaking culture. It should be simple. I don’t think they actually do enough preparation before they come. (Cathy)

Interviewer: Would you say based on your experiences that U.S. students set appropriate expectations for studying in the U.K.?

Participant: No. I think that a lot of times what they're emphasizing are the similarities and the ways that culturally things are similar rather than you know I think the student going to India is going into it probably thinking more about the differences rather than the similarities, and maybe therefore is investigating more aspects of the culture, the aspects of gender roles, power relationships, all that kind of stuff. And I don't think that students going to the U.K. default to that. I think a lot of it just comes back to this idea that you know we were a British colony, that's kind of our motherland for some people and just that that historical connection maybe has an influence on people. So I think all of that kind of helps color their expectations of what things are gonna be like, even when they're just coming to my office for the first time. (Adam)

Some participants expressed uncertainty about how their host culture would be different. They looked forward to understanding the differences. Julie said, “I don’t exactly know what’s different yet, so that’s part of what makes it interesting.” Melissa echoed, “I’m excited to see because we think of they speak English, so it’s gonna be similar, but I’m excited to see how it’s different.” Some participants tried to keep an open mind, even though
they did not feel entirely prepared. One student explained that an intercultural communications class helped her develop an open mindset:

It’s (intercultural communications class) kinda prepared me for being open, having an open mind set on the different cultures. I think just thinking that your culture is not the right one, so kind of not having a set point of view on things. (Melissa)

It’s impossible to go in without any preconceptions, but I think it’s good to keep an open mind…If I make all these expectations of what I think it’s going to be and what I’m going to do when I get there, not that I’m going to let myself down, it’s just you won’t want to overwhelm yourself. I think you should just take it when you get there. (Anna)

I’m sure there will be a lot of adjusting and I don’t know how to really mentally prepare for that but just trying to prepare to be unprepared I guess and for some things to go wrong and not to have breakdowns or anything because of it, hopefully. (Jaclyn)

Additionally, the majority of students came from families who had not previously traveled abroad. While their families tried to help them prepare for their host culture, it was difficult without a personal point of reference. Many students felt they were preparing on their own:

My family is utterly confused and more nervous than me probably…And so, many people have had advice about getting to know people from the culture and being safe and making sure everything is going in my best interest, so I guess there are two sides, people who don't understand and have numerous questions about what I'm
doing and then people who think that they have the best ideas on what I should do when I go abroad. (Calvin)

My parents have never traveled abroad or studied or anything. Actually I’m the first person in my family to go to college, so they were just kind of in the dark about – they don't know anything. (Xavier)

U.S. study abroad advisors agreed that students often entered the experience with little detailed cultural knowledge. One U.S. institution in this study conducts interviews with students during the application process. A study abroad advisor noted that when he asks students who are going to Britain questions about their host country and what cultural differences they expect to encounter, students overwhelmingly respond with very little information. Often, students are candid in saying they do not know about cultural differences between the U.S. and Britain.

*Source of expectations.* Some participants came from institutions with robust international student populations and noted how international students from Britain were especially helpful in framing their pre-departure expectations for culture. It is relevant, however, that this pre-departure advice focused predominantly on logistical or surface-level issues, such as packing, weather, dress, and local activities, and did not connect with deeper cultural norms. For example, a number of female participants were concerned because they had been told to dress nicely for class and carry a purse instead of a book bag. They took this advice, but were unsure why it was a priority:
(International exchange student) was telling me a lot of things that I can’t do at (host institution). Don’t wear this, girl. Don’t wear this type of clothing. Don’t wear book bags. We do not carry book bags. Girls carry purses. But all this stuff and I was just like oh my gosh, do you guys really look at people who carry book bags as nerds or you don’t think you’re cool? And all this stuff and it’s just like – it’s just a lot. (Roni)

Many of these international exchange students also attended formal pre-departure orientation programs in order to provide advice on studying in their home country. Some U.S. students were frustrated that the orientation dialogue with international students focused on surface-level issues:

> The other people that were going to London, they just weren't asking – they were just asking questions that weren't – like, they could just look up on their own, and I feel like it should've been more so questions you can only ask people who have been there. (Anna)

Advisors acknowledged this surface-level advice was common in orientations:

> At the end of the day, students break up into country specific groups. We invite students that have studied there, international students from the U.K. And a lot of the discussions on the cultural stuff is usually like kind of surface-level like usually kind of more amusing and funny rather than serious about you know family values and concepts of fairness. It's usually not about that. It's more about above the surface cultural stuff. (Adam)

Additionally, the U.S. study abroad advisors in this study noted that due to time and resource constraints, they did not often discuss country-specific cultural issues during advising.
appointments or pre-departure orientation programs. Instead, they relied primarily on students to conduct research on their own, as well as on international exchange students to engage in country-specific dialogue with their peers during orientation.

I don't do a lot of discussion in the individual appointments on cultural adjustment. I just don't know that there's enough time to get into a lot of it…I think also it can be better received coming from their peers. It might be touched upon during the regional breakout groups...And somebody that's going to a country that seems so different, I think they're a lot of times maybe preparing themselves a bit differently mentally for what to expect. Whereas the students that are like, ‘I can speak English; everything else will be fine. I'll be able to figure it out,’ which is not always the case. (Steven)

Many participants utilized resources beyond their personal experiences, pre departure orientations, and international exchange students to frame expectations about British culture. Most notably, they conducted online research and found social media tools, such as Pinterest, to be especially helpful:

Some of it (research) just online but on Pinterest, so I have a Pinterest board set aside for places I want to visit, and so then I read these little snippets about the different cultures and things…So Pinterest has been helpful. (Melissa)

This reliance on social media, particularly in the absence of personal relationships on-campus, presents both challenges and opportunities for international educators.

Experience: Be prepared for cultural difference. Both while abroad and upon return from Britain, many participants were surprised to encounter more cultural difference than expected:
I’m telling you to be prepared for cultural difference. If you go into thinking it’s going to be like America, you might be turned off on it. And that's what happened to me. I didn't go into it thinking like it was going to be something different...I definitely didn’t prepare for the big cultural difference. I didn’t prepare for it. I thought ‘Oh, it’s still an English-speaking country, we’re gonna be good. It’s gonna be just like America but with accents.’ But it was not like that at all, at all...It’s definitely harder (than expected), definitely harder. I took it for granted so bad. (Roni)

I wouldn’t say it’s challenging, but I would say that there have been more differences than I would have thought about. (Melissa)

I think it’s just different. It’s not bad. It’s not better. It’s not worse. Just different. (Anna)

Expect there to be changes. Don’t assume there is a stereotype that things will be easy just because they speak English. (Calvin)

For a number of participants, the most challenging aspect of cultural adjustment was that in many ways Britain appeared similar to the U.S., but the differences collectively combined to account for significant change:

I guess the hardest adjustment was just understanding that it may look like America – I feel like in terms of scenery, sometimes you can find – like oh the sunset looks the same or oh that landscape kind of looks similar, but it’s not...It was just different I
guess is what I’m saying. Just different to get adjusted and to adjust…You look at a person, when they start speaking you expect them to have an American accent and they don't, and so it's the little things that – like I haven't gotten completely used to sort of thing. (Lea)

It’s not really anything you can put your finger on that’s super different. It’s just all the little things, whether it’s language or body language or something. You still get that overwhelmedness of I’m in a foreign place kinda thing. (Xavier)

One student developed the term “subtle culture shock” to describe his feelings and frustrations with not being able to adapt as quickly as expected in Britain:

And so like you’re definitely going through like that first week where you’re struggling to just take the bus to five minutes away. When you’re struggling – I came up with the term subtle culture shock, the state of experiencing mild frustration/uncomfortableness associated with not knowing how to respond to common social situations. (Calvin)

When asked whether life in Britain had been how they expected it to be, the majority of participants said “no.” Study abroad advisors in the U.S. shared how this was often the case with their study abroad students in the U.K. who encountered greater challenge because they took preparation for granted:

We do tell students that go to the U.K. that we do find sometimes that they have greater challenges in adapting to the culture because they may take a lot of things for granted before they go there so when things are just kind of a little off or going
through a normal day is not as easy as you want it to, you don't default to say oh, it's because of the cultural differences. They think well maybe there's something wrong with me. So we tell students yeah, if you're going to the U.K., pretend like you're going to India. (Adam)

Another aspect of cultural adjustment that proved to be more difficult for participants than expected was their tendency to adopt a mindset of constant comparison:

It was just different to get adjusted and to also adjust to not always comparing. That was really hard to be honest. The first week it was like ‘back in America, well back in America,’ and then I sat down with myself one day and I was like no, you can't always think that…It's fun to compare things but there comes to be a certain point where you aren't comparing anymore. You're sort of like reaching out for something you know rather than experiencing something new, and so I have to sort of limit myself from that. (Lea)

Everyone wants to compare everything to America. Oh America does things like this or this is not like this in America. I’m like you’re not in America. It irritates me so much…You know, I think it takes away from the experience when you consistently try to compare compare compare…because all you’re thinking about it what you’re used to and you’re not even trying to live a different way of life (Amaya).

Some students searched for connection between what they learned in Britain and what they knew from their home culture:
I liked learning – like in Scotland, the tensions between North and the South. I liked learning about that. And figuring out the things I like most about Scottish and Irish culture are things that remind me of Southern American culture, in a weird way.

(Jaclyn)

Other students, such as Roni, came to Britain with a deliberate plan to keep an open mind but recognized they were constantly comparing life abroad to life at home:

I compare it a lot to America, which I shouldn't do. I'm not being as open-minded as I should. I'm not going about it in a way where it's just like ‘this is completely new. I'm not comparing it. I'm just going to take it for what it is.’ I don't do that… I always compare things. I compare friends or people. I compare the way we talk, the way we dance, the way we do things. And I know, I don't do it around too many people, because I know that would probably get really annoying. Like, ‘Okay, then go back to America.’ Then I'd be like, ‘Oh, you're right.’ But like I do it in my head all the time. Like I'll see somebody do something and I'll be like, ‘We would not do it like that.’ And it's just like a habit. So I feel like I can adjust physically, or when it comes down to it. But mentally that's the thing that I don't know. (Roni)

Study abroad advisors noted how it could be difficult for students who are consistently comparing and seeking the familiar to recognize that these behaviors are signs of challenge with cultural adaptation. Students may experience frustration, but may not be able to articulate that the source of their challenge is cultural adjustment.

While participants encountered unexpected difference and frustration with cultural adjustment in Britain, they noted that conversations with locals helped them understand their
host culture the most. In these conversations, they discussed a wide range of issues, such as language, politics, religion, violence, health care, gun control, wealth, and stereotypes of each country. They were surprised by perceptions and stereotypes of the U.S. A few students cited specific examples where they were asked to comment on a particular issue. They responded quite differently in these scenarios, with some students embracing an opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue and others favoring silence to avoid conflict. Melissa shared an example of being asked about Christianity in the U.S.:

So, one of the girls from church was asking afterwards – she was asking questions about American Christianity and asking about how, ‘Well, I heard that Americans are – act like Christians and then don't do Christian things.’ And I'm like, ‘Oh, goodness. Where do you go from that?’ I just – I told her about – I'm a religious studies major at home. So, I was like – kind of went into religious studies. But I'm like, ‘Well, actually, there are all kinds of different denominations in America, a lot of different peoples. So, Americans have a lot of individual views of Christianity, even within denominations, and then different opinions about what's right and wrong.’ And then I kind of – it's like, well, I'm gonna take this opportunity and say, ‘What kind of denomination is your church? What kind of differences do you have? What is probably similar?’ And a lot more was similar than was different in how things were framed. But that was kind of interesting because I wouldn't – I wouldn't have thought that America would be singled out in that way. 'Cause I'm like, ‘Well, that's probably true, here, too, but okay, well, I'll humor it. Let's talk about it.’
Danielle shared an example regarding opinions on health care, but had a different strategy for handling her response:

Oh, I talked to a girl who was in medicine. She was talking to me like, ‘Oh yeah. I can’t even imagine how it is in the U.S. Your health system is horrible. You guys are so far behind.’ That kinda’ stuff. I don’t really know a whole lot in that area. So I don’t really know what should be said or whatever. So I just nodded and was like, ‘Oh yeah. We’re miles behind you guys.’ All the while in my head it’s like a sarcastic kind of thing. I don’t wanna start any fights or anything like that. Whatever action will cause the least amount of friction.

When asked to provide cultural adjustment advice for future semester study abroad students in Britain, many students emphasized the importance of being open, expecting difference, and being willing to adapt. As Lea advised, “I would recommend for anybody coming to maybe make a list of realistic things that you can do and be open is the number one thing.” In addition to expecting difference, students also recommended doing significant preparation and research before arrival in Britain. A few students noted how they wished they had done more research and preparation in advance. As Melissa advised:

I would definitely suggest to know like what the things are gonna be like when you get here…get to know the area that you’re going to. Just to prepare – like prepare for that so that, if anything, you can have a conversation with someone and not sound like, ‘Oh, well, I don't know anything about where I'm going.’ You know?

Study abroad advisors reinforced this advice, sharing observations from previous students who have been successful in Britain. Students who have been most successful in adjusting to
culture take the initiative to be curious and prepared for cultural differences so that when they do experience challenge, they are more likely to recognize and reflect upon their own cultural adjustment process. As Steven noted, “I think the ones that have done well, a couple that stick out anyways, are ones that are interested, or curious about the culture, and they’re curious about the other.”

**Language Challenge**

Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model places language within the academic experience of students (see Figure 1). Participants in this study, however, described language as an important component of their cultural experience in Britain. Aligning with phenomenological methods to reflect participants’ authentic experiences (Van Manen, 1990), I have placed participants’ reflections on language within the cultural experience, rather than within the academic experience.

**Expectation: I do not anticipate challenge with language.** The majority of participants did not anticipate challenges with language during their semester abroad in Britain. Anna shared a sentiment consistent with most students when asked whether they anticipated language challenges, “I don't think so. Hopefully, I think I'll be aware that there are phrase differences.” Xavier shared a similar feeling, “No. It's similar. There are just a few words that we have slightly different. And they sent us a list of those words. So I've already made note of them.” Most participants intentionally selected an English-speaking study abroad country because they did not want the stress of managing a language barrier. As Xavier noted, “So the first thing I looked for was a place that spoke English, because I do
speak Spanish a little, but I just didn't want to have to worry about miscommunication. So English speaking preferred.”

Students were aware of some wording differences and expected a faster speed of communication in Britain but were not concerned overall about the impact of language on their overall cultural adjustment. As Jaclyn shared:

Maybe the fact that I'm not anticipating it that much will mean that there might be some problems 'cause I just assume everything's, it's gonna be easy, it's English, but I'm sure there are more differences than I would think of right now.

While they anticipated similarity, a few students expressed concern about being unintentionally offensive with their language, particularly if they did not understand the meaning of their words in a different cultural context:

A lot of people say it's similar, but I am definitely still worried about having certain conversations because we use a lot of idioms here, and you know what certain things mean. So, just getting cultural references and not offending people. (Calvin)

**Source of expectations.** Students’ knowledge of language in Britain came from a variety of sources. They learned about idioms primarily from home institution exchange students, YouTube video blogs, and television:

*Interviewer:* What has she (international exchange student) told you that you need to think about (during preparation)?

*Melissa:* She’s told me kind of more the fun stuff, like the different words—like don’t say something about your pants because that’s underwear.
I was looking – watching YouTube videos of people that have been to the U.K.…

There was one girl that was like, ‘Here are ten differences from when I was in the
U.K.,’ And some videos about people talking about them accidentally using phrases
or gestures that are inappropriate there but mean different things here so that I don't
get embarrassed about that. (Julie)

Maybe watching the Scottish TV show that I watch might help me understand a little
– ‘cause I’m already used to hearing it. But that show has a range of – varying levels
of heaviness of the accent or whatever. So maybe that'll help me out. (Danielle)

**Experience: It feels like I’m speaking a different language.** While most
participants did not anticipate challenges with language in the UK, their experience abroad
was quite different. As Jaclyn noted, “it's (language is) harder than you would expect,
probably.” Lea shared that language was one of the most significant unanticipated cultural
differences in Britain, “I went to an English speaking country, but I still feel like I'm
speaking a different language.”

Language challenges extended into participants’ classroom experiences as well.
Multiple students reflected upon this issue:

I have had one or two (professors) that have had really thick accents… You’ll start
with your notes and put the title in there. Then once he starts talking you just put
your pencil down. You’re just like ‘oh my gosh, I’m not gonna be able to write any
of this down.’ (Danielle)
In class the professors use, I don't want to say slang, or their slang, but some of the words they use are very different...so I can understand what he's talking about, but it's difficult to do. Because they say it and then they keep on going, thinking that no one in the class is misunderstanding what they're saying. And then you have to – you don't want to raise your hand and be, like, ‘Okay. What does this mean?’ And they're like, ‘Oh, they don't say that there?’ And so I learned, but it happens literally on a daily basis. Where they'll say something and I'm, like, come on. You know now that I'm not from here, so don't say those words. But I'll just ask at the end of class. I'll write it down and be like ‘what did you mean by this?’ (Roni)

Participants also expressed concern because they perceived their language misunderstandings to annoy native speakers, especially if they were anxious to ask clarifying questions. Lea shared an especially poignant story about unexpected language anxiety from her first day in Britain:

We stopped at this exit, what they call a gas station exit. We had to go and order food and I was like ‘oh my gosh.’ And I had this money in my hand that I've never used before. You've got the coins – so many different coins. What is this? So I grabbed something really quick – I didn't want to order the McDonald's 'cause I didn't want to have to talk to anybody. I was scared. I was scared to talk to somebody, so I grabbed the sandwich and went to the cash register and he asked me if I wanted it heated, and I didn't understand. I was like ‘nope,’ and I shoved a 20-pound note for something that was like 3 pounds. I always stuck with the big notes first 'cause I always knew that was gonna be enough and then they would just give me back these coins. There
was a straight two weeks where all I did was have these two-pound coins and pound-coins in a collection in my wallet. But that was the biggest thing ever 'cause I remember getting dinner and then getting back on the bus and just going ‘oh my gosh. What am I doing here? I think this is different.’

Amaya and Xavier shared similar experiences, and worried their misunderstandings were frustrating to locals:

And so they were saying certain things and I was just like ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry.’ I just kept saying I’m sorry. Because I just – I didn’t understand. And like I said people get very easily – I would say they get very easily frustrated when you don’t understand something but I don’t want it to seem like I’m stupid, like I’m not stupid. It’s just hard to understand sometimes. (Amaya)

There have been a few times where I was like, ‘what? I'm sorry? Say it again?’ And I felt like I might be annoying when I do that. (Xavier)

Melissa realized over time, however, that the instances when she said or did something she perceived to be wrong helped her understand cultural difference most:

When I said something wrong, or did something wrong…Like saying the wrong word or having to get through the words, or whenever I try to introduce myself. Like those things, that's – when it's glaringly obvious that something's not right here, that's when I can realize the culture.

Acceptance of Diversity
Just as language was a significant reason for students to select Britain as a study abroad destination, the anticipation of diversity was also a key reason. As Xavier noted, “(In addition to language), I also wanted a country that was relatively diverse. And from what I was hearing London seemed to be a good choice for that.” A number of students anticipated Britain to be more diverse and socially progressive than the U.S. They expected greater acceptance of diversity and looked forward to it. Given its prominence in program selection, diversity was a significant component of student expectations and experiences abroad, particularly for participants of color. Experiences in Britain did not always align with expectations, which caused surprise for a number of students.

**Expectation: They are more accepting of difference than the U.S.** Multiple participants expected Britain, and London in particular, to be more accepting of difference, particularly racial difference. This aspect of their future study abroad destination was especially appealing compared to their previous experiences in the South:

This might sound silly, but (home state) is in the South. And I am a person of color. And I have experienced all sorts of forms of racism. But when I spoke to people who were there (in England) they seemed to not have the same ideas that I guess we do here. (Xavier)

What people have told me, and what I've seen on programs, it seems to be more of a hodgepodge of a place, where it's just people mixing and integrating in ways that aren't really questioned or really thought of. It just is the way that it is, and I think that's cool. (Candace)
The only participant who had previously traveled to Britain, Amaya, shared how surprised she was by the diversity she experienced during a short vacation to visit British friends from camp. As an international studies major and ethnic minority, this was a key reason why she wanted to return to England for a semester study abroad experience:

It was just really, really, really diverse. Like I said, I was surprised by the different types of people that I saw there. I don’t know, I felt like before I went there before I met my friends, I’m sorry I literally thought they were just all – I thought they were just white English people. (Amaya)

Susan, a faculty member in England, has observed similar reactions from students:

We don’t all live in castles. We are a very mixed place and we’re quite proud of that. The demographics are very ethnically mixed. I think sometimes they come to England thinking it’s gonna be this White environment and actually London is much more diverse.

While a number of students expected more openness and diversity during their study abroad experience, Amaya’s previous notions align with two Black students, Calvin and Roni, who were concerned that their host institution may not be as embracing of difference as their home institutions. It was a pre-departure concern for them:

It's hard to research culture, but just if I was going...where people didn't seem to be as embracing of other cultures as we are here, and I just felt more isolated within the city, that's going to be my biggest fear...I mean, I don't know how aware they are of cultural things. I don't know if there are a lot of Black people in Scotland. I know it's
a lot of racial issues going on in the U.S. that they might ask me about, which may be sensitive to talk about depending on how they look at it. (Calvin)

Our culture seems more free to a certain extent. We don’t really look at how we’re being perceived by other people as much as others might think we should…

It’s like the way you dress – if you dress urban you may be looked down upon. They might be really judgmental compared to the United States whereas we’re just like especially at (home institution) diversity is accepted. You come as you are. You’re different…I guess that could be one thing that was a turn off kinda with the U.K. ‘cause I mean I’m just the type of person where I’m like as long as you’re there for school or you’re doing what you have to do then I don’t care how you look, what you’re doing. You’re your own person and I’m my own person. But there it’s kind of just like everybody looks at everybody. (Roni)

**Source of expectations.** The students who looked forward to a more diverse and open culture in Britain developed these expectations from a variety of sources. Xavier’s expectations were formed as a result of speaking with residents of his host country through online chat rooms and social media applications before departure. He drew assumptions about the culture from this online dialogue:

I just spoke to people who were there. And they seemed the nicest. They were on apps and internet websites…One is a computer scientist over there. One is an artist – an art teacher. Some are younger. I don't know actually anyone who goes to school over there. Most of them seem to be adults and just people who were generally
helpful...And I was specifically speaking to one of them about how we treat people who are different...It just seemed to be that they were being genuinely nice to me. I felt like maybe everyone would be as open or because I think that if a complete stranger just talks to you what reason would you have to help them unless you honestly did not mind or wanted to...A lot of people have spoken to me and if we don't necessarily agree on a particular subject than they don't hate me all of a sudden. Sometimes here if you're a democrat or a republican you can't be friends. It's just silly to me. (Xavier)

Other students, such as Amaya and Candace, referenced in-person conversations that helped form their expectations for diversity, such as from a professor at Candace’s home institution:

I just had one of my advising papers signed the other day by a professor...And he was saying to me that, ‘You will never find more of a melting pot than you will in London.’ He said, ‘You're gonna hear accents from everywhere – British accents from every kind of person, people speaking English to you that come from all over the globe,’ and so yeah, that's exciting.

**Experience: Diversity does not negate social challenge.** During the semester abroad in Britain, students expressed surprise and concern that the diverse culture they encountered was not immune from its own social challenges. Two Black students, Candace and Calvin, described specific encounters they perceived to be racially offensive:

And I've had to learn, and learn pretty quickly when I got here, that saying the word colored is not as taboo as it is back home. And so, of course, a man who is hitting on me and called me a pretty little colored thing the first two weeks I was here, my face
[Laughs] probably wasn't what he was thinking it was going to be. I don't know what he was thinking it was going to be. Because either way, I still think that's rude. But, yeah, it's a word that's thrown around a lot more. And it's not so much a place that has a blind eye to that, like I thought it would be. I think anybody coming from the South, you think you're going to go New York and it's all going to be peachy. But there's pockets of that, of prejudice everywhere. And I've learned that. For sure that Europe is not as evolved [Laughs] as I thought it was. (Candace)

I guess I'm a special demographic. I am Black and I am American, and like the only other Black people here are actual Africans. Like the first person, which was kind of offensive to me that I talked to, I was like introducing myself, and he assumed I was from South Africa; this was a German guy... Like I'm from the Democratic Republic of Congo or something. I won’t forget that, 'cause I was like no I'm from the U.S....But yeah, so I feel like I'm definitely in a small demographic. (Calvin)

Even Xavier, who was happy to find a more diverse and accepting society in Britain, including more interracial couples and a multitude of languages, expressed surprise about a conversation he had with a local friend:

*Interviewer*: What else has surprised you about the culture here?

Xavier: Well I think I mentioned to you before about the racism.

*Interviewer*: Well you told me that you were expecting that everything here would be very open and diverse and accepting.
Xavier: And for the most part it is...I was just saying (to local friend) ‘people aren't accepting (in the South)’ – I was just basically emphasizing people who were African American only, not treated as well, and he said ‘well London's very open. We're accepting. We don't really care about race,’ and then he said ‘It's just those Pakistani people killing everyone’...It felt very rude for him to say that...And I was like ‘wow, did you just say that?’ It was very shocking.

Other students, such as Melissa and Jaclyn, also discussed how unexpected it was for them to find Britain embroiled in some of the same social conflicts as the U.S. They expected issues such as immigration and race to be predominately U.S. conflicts. Jaclyn, a White student, shared a story from attending an event in her local community:

I went to this – Black Poets Speak Out event, for like, solidarity with –the issues happening in Ferguson, and just police brutality towards Black people in general. And a lot of those issues are in America, but – I don't know... I feel like it's really easy to see a country for their bad things. Like, I even tend to do that with my own country, sometimes...I didn't realize – stuff like that happens here, too. I've heard like, young boys saying misogynistic things, and people saying racist comments. It's kind of – I don't know. Like, I don't – part of me I think really expected to come here and see this place where people had it all together, and had everything figured out. And didn't have the same problems we have. But –it's almost comforting in a way. You know, that we're not the only ones without it all figured out. But I don't know. Everyone kind of has threads of those problems.
Melissa, another White student, was also surprised that social issues she thought were U.S.-centric were an unexpected part of local dialogue in her host city:

There has been one moment – or a couple of moments when I realized that there are social issues that I thought were more issues – so, like racial issues that I would have thought that are a bigger problem in (home town), or a bigger problem in the South, or a bigger problem in the States in general. And then I came here and like, ‘Well, no, they're dealing with the same issues.’ The same issues of people – like immigration and things like that that are kind of hot-button issues. I found an episode online of some – I don't even know what it's called – but it was talking about (host city) and about it being such an international community. And while, for the most part, (host city) was kind of unique in getting along really well and being such an international community. But then on that episode they talked about there are people who are frustrated with the influx of immigrants and things like that. And then I went out one night, and one of my friends is from Korea, and a British boy said something to her about – he said something like, ‘Chinese women love White men.’ And she was so distraught about what he had just said. So, I just didn't – I wouldn't have thought that that would have been as big of an issue here as it has been. And it's not – it's not any more of an issue than it is at home. I just wasn’t expecting it. I expect it at home...It's not a good thing, but I accept it at home. So, that's been – and that has been isolated incidents, but it has been something that I have noticed and just kind of opened my eyes to the same issues are – they're presented in different ways and towards different groups. But there're the same issues in different places.
Discussion

The findings of this study support previous exploratory research and opinion papers, which have cautioned that U.S. study abroad students in Britain may set inappropriate expectations for their intercultural experience. Semester study abroad participants in this study found their expectations challenged in multiple areas of the cultural adjustment, most notably in their perception of cultural distance, language, and acceptance of diversity. In this section, I will situate these findings within current international education literature.

“Just Different”

Across participants in this study, the phrase “just different” was repeated over and over with regard to cultural distance in Britain. Ten of the 12 participants used this phrase as they attempted to describe their cultural impressions during semester direct enrollment programs. These two words, “just different,” are significant in enhancing our understanding of the U.S. student experience in British direct enrollment programs. While participants were able to recognize that they were experiencing something culturally different in Britain, they had more difficulty describing how and why this cultural difference existed. It was often challenging for participants to provide in-depth explanations of the difference they felt or connect perceived difference to deeper British cultural values.

Further, multiple participants advised future U.S. direct enrollment students in Britain to “expect difference” in order to facilitate a successful cultural adjustment process. Participants wished they had expected cultural difference, and encouraged others to set more appropriate expectations. It is noteworthy, however, that they had difficulty upon their return
to the U.S. providing definitive examples of what differences future students should expect beyond surface-level observations.

Perhaps one participant’s observations around this topic connect with a larger underlying issue. Melissa reflected how she could realize culture best when it was “glaringly obvious.” If students feel they are able to recognize and process culture best when differences are obvious, Britain presents an unusual challenge for U.S. students. With many significant cultural differences existing below the surface, U.S. students may recognize that Britain is different, but may not fully understand how this difference manifests in their daily lives. As an example, Calvin developed the term “subtle culture shock” to explain the frustration he experienced when he was unsure how to appropriately respond in everyday situations.

Ireland (2010) emphasized this concept, noting how English-speaking students often struggle to “become sensitive to the subtleties of foreignness” in English-speaking destinations (p. 27). While U.S. students may believe they can understand culture best when differences are obvious, this does not negate the necessity for them to process the more challenging and subtle intercultural encounters within Britain.

“Keep an Open Mind”

In addition to “expect difference,” participants advised future direct enrollment students in Britain to “keep an open mind.” Ten of 12 U.S. students discussed the value of being open-minded during pre-departure preparation and while abroad. Participants emphasized that keeping an open mind would enhance their willingness to embrace new experiences and people without pre-conceived judgment.
While students wanted to be open-minded about a direct enrollment semester in Britain, a number of them realized they were viewing their host country through a comparative U.S. lens. Multiple scholars have observed that when travelers enter a country they perceive to be culturally similar, they seek out similarity rather than explore and embrace difference (Edwards, 2000; Selmer & Lauring, 2009). Participants in this study recognized that their mindset of constant comparison was preventing them from fully embracing and adjusting to British culture. While they aimed to keep an open mind about the experience, they admitted to having pre-departure expectations that Britain would be similar to the U.S.

When participants’ expectations were violated, the reality was disappointing and challenging. This connects with the “double shock” feeling of cultural betrayal that Sobre-Denton and Hart (2008) describe for U.S. students who study abroad in the U.K. (p. 545). When U.S. students are overconfident about similarities in Britain, they may have an inflated degree of optimism about the study abroad experience. As they face disappointments and contradictions, they may feel betrayed by their host culture and experience intensified feelings (Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008).

**Extension of Literature**

The finding that U.S. students are challenged by the subtleties and complexities of cultural distance in Britain offers strong support of previous exploratory research from international education and expatriate literature. Additional findings from this study extend international education literature and offer unique applications of theory.
For example, while there is a wealth of research on the challenges students face who study within a different language context (Akazaki, 2010; Brisset, et al., 2010; Brown, 2008; Chaban, et al., 2011; Hunley, 2010; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002; Pitts, 2009; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ying & Han, 2006; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), there is a considerable gap on research about potential challenges for English-speaking students in English-speaking countries. Students in this study cited language difficulties as one of their most significant and unanticipated cultural adjustment challenges.

This finding emphasizes the complex connections between language and culture, and the underlying cues embedded within local languages. As Janes (2011) notes, “Variations between British and American English may conceal the fact that the same words may have quite distinct resonances for different genders, classes and ethnicities” (p. 64). Edwards (2000) agrees with this sentiment, “We always understand what is said in our transatlantic dialogues, and this effectively masks the fact that we are frequently wrong about what is meant” (p. 91). Students in this study were surprised to find more nuance and cultural cues embedded in a local language than they expected. Edwards (2000) cautioned that this is often the case with U.S. students in Britain:

The fact that Americans and Brits speak mutually-comprehensible varieties of English means that study in Britain is treated as a kind of autopilot immersion experience. It allows Americans to leap to the belief that a shared language implies shared culture (p. 88).

Indeed, participants such as Anna entered the study abroad semester expecting the culture to be “just like America, but with accents.” Much of students’ pre-departure cultural preparation
was focused upon learning variations of English words in Britain, as if mastering a few new vocabulary terms would provide a smooth cultural transition. Those same students were surprised by the impact of language challenges of their overall cultural adjustment.

While Martin et al.’s (1995) quantitative study identified language as a potential area of challenge for U.S. students in England, this qualitative research extends these preliminary findings from Martin et al. by describing how, where, and why students encountered language difficulties. Language, like cultural distance, is not an area U.S. students or educators can take for granted when home and host cultures speak English. Janes emphasized this point:

I was thinking about the issue of different forms of English, specifically American versus British English. I was struck that this was often reduced to being an issue of amusement, such as is summed up by George and Ira Gershwin’s ‘Let’s call the whole thing off’: the idea being that ‘potatoes’ and ‘potahtos’ do not matter and the two singers should just get on with being friends (as cited in Janes, 2011, p. 63).

Since words in the U.S. and Britain may have different meanings by gender, class, and ethnicity, Janes (2008) has recommended engaging with U.S. study abroad students’ preconceptions and cultural stereotypes of language in Britain as a tool to spark the educational process of understanding deeper cultural values within language. Indeed, as Edwards (2000) notes, language comprises many of the “subtler aspects of daily interaction in Britain...which are often completely invisible to them (students)” (p. 89).

These subtle English language differences grounded in hidden and unrecognized cultural beliefs can foster miscommunications during interactions (Murphy, 2012). The
findings of this study regarding English language challenges extend recent work by sociolinguists and higher education scholars who explore differences in meaning within English dialects and emphasize how gaps in understanding can have significant implications. Murphy (2015) writes and lectures extensively on the vast distinctions between British and American English in her blog “Separated by a Common Language,” articulating connections between cultural values and perception within dialects. Dunstan (2013) explores how speaking a nonstandardized dialect of English can influence multiple areas of a student’s college experience. This research identifies dialect as an underexplored aspect of diversity on college campuses and advocates for educating faculty, staff, and administrators on the impact of language diversity within the college experience (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015).

In addition to navigating unexpected challenges within English language diversity, participants’ expectations and experiences of other forms of diversity in Britain provide yet another opportunity to extend international education literature. There have been empirical discussions about how study abroad increases students’ openness to diversity (Ismail, Morgan, & Hayes, 2006), as well as recommendations for structuring study abroad program activities to foster a greater understanding of diversity while abroad (Blair, 2011). This study, however, opens a new opportunity for exploring how students develop expectations for diversity abroad and how students process encounters with social issues in their host country. Though some students were concerned about whether their host country was as diverse as their home environments, most looked forward to greater diversity and acceptance of difference. They were surprised to find conflicts regarding race, gender, and ethnicity were not U.S.-centric issues.
As Sweeney (2013) notes, it is critical for international educators to examine how study abroad experiences are different for students of color. Participants of color in this study, especially situated in the American South, were drawn by the opportunity to live in a more diverse and accepting environment. Most were surprised to encounter opinions and questions that suggested underlying racial, ethnic, and gender-based tensions in Britain. While these social tensions were not greater than the U.S. by any means, these students entered the experience expecting Britain to be far more socially “evolved” than their home communities. It is factually true that London is a more diverse and cosmopolitan city than the hometowns of most participants in this study. The findings of this study, however, reveal an opportunity for international educators to help students set appropriate expectations and process challenging encounters regarding complex social issues abroad.

**Application of Theory**

This study utilized two complementary theoretical frameworks, Martin et al.’s (1995) modified expectancy violations theory and Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment. Both of these frameworks help enhance our understanding of the findings within this study, especially within the context of a U.S. student’s direct enrollment semester in Britain.

**Application of Martin et al. (1995).** As Burgoon and Hubbard (2005) noted, if one does not take time in advance to learn about another culture’s standards, they will revert to stereotypical assumptions in expectations and interactions. The students in this study were primarily consumed by financial and logistical preparation and thus did not devote significant time to understanding and processing deeper cultural norms before departure. Indeed, most
students assumed they would not encounter challenge with regard to culture or language because they were studying in an English-speaking country. They felt they had less to prepare for compared to students who were studying in more overtly different language and cultural environments. As a result, their expectations were grounded in more stereotypical and surface-level assumptions of similarity.

Students’ expectations were violated in areas of perceived cultural distance, language adjustment, and acceptance of diversity. Within expectancy violations theory, expectations are not simply met or unmet. They are violated positively, meaning the situation is better/easier than expected, or violated negatively, meaning the situation is worse/more challenging than expected (Martin et al., 1995, see figure 2). The findings of this study align with Martin et al.’s (1995) quantitative research that U.S. study abroad students in Britain may be more likely to experience negative expectancy violations. As some students expected a similar culture and easy language transition but then encountered challenge, they experienced negative expectancy violations and were tempted to view those experiences through a negative lens. For example, Roni expected cultural similarity, but when she encountered difference, she adapted a comparative mindset and questioned why things she experienced and observed in Britain were not structured in the familiar ways that made sense to her. Melissa expected greater diversity and social progressiveness in Britain but experienced a negative violation when she realized that her host country was working through some of the same social issues as the U.S. As she noted, these social challenges were not more severe than the U.S., but because she did not expect them in Britain, the impact on her experience was more significant.
Where these findings slightly diverge from Martin et al.’s (1995) modified EVT model, however, relates to the connection between negative expectancy violations and a student’s overall evaluation of an experience. Martin et al.’s (1995) model posits that negative violations will elicit a negative evaluation of the study abroad experience. Though many participants in this study experienced negative violations and thus viewed specific aspects of their experience more negatively, they were consistent during re-entry conversations that their overall study abroad semester was a positive experience. These negative violations impacted their feelings about certain aspects of cultural adjustment, but they did not outweigh their comprehensive positive view of studying abroad. Future research may explore how and why students process the overall study abroad experience to be positive, despite encountering significant expectancy violations.

**Application of Pitts (2009).** Pitts (2009) notes that throughout a study abroad semester as students encounter intercultural difference, they “experience gaps between their expectations and the reality of the sojourn” (Pitts, 2009, p. 459). It was challenging for participants in this study to identify and describe complex intercultural differences, as most used the phrase “it’s just different” to describe their observations. There were some situations, however, when intercultural difference was “glaringly obvious,” and students understood they were encountering a gap in their expectations.

Lea’s story about encountering language and cultural differences is an especially relevant application of Pitts’s (2009) theory. Upon arrival, Lea was shocked to find such significant language challenges and was paralyzed in her communications with locals. She found herself consistently comparing the U.S. to Britain. Over time, and through interactions,
however, she was able increase her functional fitness within her host community (Pitts, 2009). This initial stressful encounter caused her to refine her expectations and modify her behavior. Pitts (2009) notes that as the semester abroad progresses, students’ expectations become more aligned with reality, and stress decreases. While students like Lea may not have fully understood the deeper how’s and why’s behind their host community cultures, they recognized that their reality in Britain was different than anticipated and modified previous expectations of similarity. In doing so, they were more open to embrace differences. Lea recognized that her constant comparative mindset was preventing her from participating in her host culture, so she made a deliberate shift to be open to difference:

It's fun to compare things but there comes to be a certain point where you aren't comparing anymore. You're sort of like reaching out for something you know rather than experiencing something new, and so I have to sort of limit myself from that.

This connects with the advice many participants provided at the conclusion of their programs to both expect difference and keep an open mind about a direct enrollment study abroad experience in Britain.

Although these findings connect with elements of Pitts’s (2009) framework that detail how expectation gaps elicit stress and require communication, this research study on the cultural adjustment of U.S. students in British universities provides an opportunity to explore Pitts’s model in new ways. Participants encountered gaps in their cultural expectations, and these gaps elicited stressful responses. From interviews, however, it was apparent that students did not always have the tools or information to refine their expectations in a manner that aligned with deeper cultural norms.
The fact that many participants were unable to articulate complex cultural values and repeatedly acknowledged that Britain was “just different” reveals that they had further potential for growth. As students refined their expectations of British culture from “similar” to “just different,” this acknowledgement appeared to be more of a coping mechanism than a developmental awareness and true understanding of difference. In this way, students were not able to reach their full potential for growth and subsequent identity shifts as reflected in Pitts’s (2009) model. While they utilized on-site communication strategies to refine their expectations, these tools were insufficient to foster deeper shifts in intercultural development.

Conclusions and Implications

The stories from participants in this study emphasize the importance of pre-departure expectations for study abroad programs. As a field, we now have empirical data that demonstrates how U.S. students on direct enrollment study abroad programs in Britain may be especially affected by expectations of cultural similarity. Based on these findings, how should international educators respond? In this section, I will explore key outcomes and suggest implications to extend theory and enhance practical understanding for professionals who prepare, support, and develop curricula for U.S. students on direct enrollment programs in Britain. I will also suggest opportunities for future research to expand our understanding of these concepts.

Implications for Pre-Departure Orientation

From initial advising through pre-departure preparations, U.S. students form expectations for their intercultural experience during a semester in Britain. Study abroad
advisors are in a unique position to help shape these expectations. Edwards (2000) notes that
this preparation can make a significant difference for direct enrollment students in particular,

We are all constantly reassured by the fact that study abroad in the U.K. is often a
matter of direct enrollment, and such students have an excellent chance to become
part of a community, but they too often lack the preparation to turn this into the cross-
cultural experience we believe it to be (p. 93).

While international educators in the U.S. send more students to the U.K. than to any
other destination, study abroad advisors often do not have the time, resources, or
opportunities to become experts on every culture for which they advise. Since it is unrealistic
to expect study abroad advisors to deliver in-depth country-specific orientations for every
location, most offices rely upon international exchange students to deliver country-specific
cultural advice to future study abroad students. There are three challenges embedded in this
strategy.

**Refining the use of international students.** The first challenge, as demonstrated by
this study, is that student-to-student conversations usually address surface-level cultural
issues, such as weather, clothing, travel, social life, and word differences. If British
international exchange students are not aware of their own deeper cultural values and how
those values may differ from the U.S., they will not be equipped to deliver the type of
meaningful intercultural advice international educators expect.

Further, while study abroad advisors may not be in a position to fully understand how
U.S. and British cultures are different, they are in a position to ask deeper reflective questions
of international exchange students in advance, as well as structure exercises to help these
students understand themselves as cultural beings. In developing this intentional level of engagement with international students before study abroad orientation, advisors are not only helping to facilitate more meaningful student-to-student dialogue, but are also helping international exchange students enjoy more immersive and thoughtful encounters during their own study abroad experiences in the U.S.

**Building a foundation to process subtlety.** The second challenge involves developing a foundation upon which U.S. students can recognize, process, and understand the subtle, below-the-surface intercultural encounters in Britain. While a number of participants formed clear cultural expectations for their semester abroad, Melissa cited an intercultural communication class she was taking and discussed how it was teaching her to be open to cultural difference and refrain from judgment or comparison to the U.S. Study abroad advisors are likely not in a position to mandate enrollment in intercultural communications classes before departure, but it would be possible for them to include tenets of this curricula in pre-departure orientations or exercises with future study abroad students. Such content and interactive material could be delivered in self-paced online modules as students prepare for departure and move through the study abroad experience. Along with the international student strategies mentioned above, this is another way study abroad advisors may facilitate thoughtful pre-departure expectations, as well as intentional reflections while abroad.

**Supporting reliable online resources.** The third challenge lies in providing reliable and sound resources by which study abroad students will form expectations for a direct enrollment semester in Britain. Within this study, participants were much more likely to cite online and social media sources to shape their cultural expectations, as opposed to in-person
orientation programs or official websites/hard-copy materials from study abroad offices. Further, multiple participants in this study cited their lack of culture-specific pre-departure planning to the belief that “you can’t research culture.” Edwards (2000) has cautioned against this mindset:

When we send students to the U.K., if they take with them no discriminating expectations that they will in fact be in a foreign society, it seems over-optimistic to expect that this can possibly be such a meaningful encounter (p. 91).

As international educators, we know that not only can you research culture, but you absolutely should before engaging in meaningful experiences abroad. Understanding the reality that students will utilize social media and technology to research their host culture, as they did in this study, it is imperative for international educators to explore and explicitly promote online resources that meet their standards. Students in this study were able to relate to and develop relationships with peers online as easily as peers at their home institutions.

As part of pre-departure curricula, study abroad advisors can emphasize why it is imperative for students to research their host culture, as well as provide curated online resources to facilitate this research. Edwards (2000) emphasizes the importance of researching country-specific knowledge before departure, noting that, “we could at least give them (students) a plan of action for developing this knowledge before they go and while they are there.” (p. 93)

It is important in this exercise, however, to emphasize the fluid and “liquid” nature of cultural identities, as reflected in the lessons from Melissa’s intercultural communications class so that students do not resort to “solid” and stereotypical assumptions of culture (Dervin, 2009, p. 121). For example, students who think in stereotypical assumptions of
culture may watch a video blog on YouTube titled, “Top ten things you should know about U.K. culture” and frame definitive expectations for how people will or should behave abroad. If students begin to recognize their own complex cultural identities, however, they will realize they are comprised of many life experiences, identities, and relationships that have shaped their own cultural values. As a result, they may be more likely to appreciate the multi-dimensional and fluid identities of people they meet abroad.

**Value of Structured Reflection**

An unintended outcome of this study was that multiple participants shared with me how valuable it was for them to process their experiences during our semi-structured interviews before, during, and after their semester abroad. Even though I did not provide advice during our interviews, it was useful for them to think through their intercultural encounters in a structured and focused way. A couple participants also kept extensive personal journals and cited these as another helpful outlet for processing their experience. One study abroad advisor emphasized the value of reflection, particularly during re-entry, in making sense of intercultural encounters in Britain. He indicated that this lack of reflection prevents students from fully processing what they have learned abroad. Janes (2008), who teaches U.S. students in Britain, echoed the importance of this strategy:

> By working with students’ ‘on-board’ cultural knowledge, I can enable them to explore British culture via their personal stereotypes as being something which they are themselves actively exploring, rather than regarding it as an ‘other’ to be learnt for dry pedagogic purposes. They should understand that their experience of that ‘other’ helps them to develop personal awareness. I believe that the crucial thing is
not to worry so much about students initially getting things wrong, but to be concerned about them not engaging (p. 67).

These sentiments connect with the importance of students developing a foundation to expect and be open to cultural difference in Britain and devoting time to processing and reflecting after intercultural encounters. As an example, one participating host institution developed a cultural program where local and international students participate in cultural activities together in the community and then have opportunities to reflect upon their experiences. These cultural activities do not include ambitious travel agendas or typical tourist sites; rather, they emphasize distinctive aspects of the local community.

While such a structured program may not be realistically possible for all direct enrollment institutions, it may be feasible for international educators to work together with partners and ask students to respond to a series of reflective prompts during the semester experience. Dervin (2009) advocated for exchange partners to require student reflexivity while abroad and proposed journal questions such as “What did I learn about myself? About others? About strangeness? About being abroad? Etc.” (p. 126). An advisor in this study emphasized that institutional partners can work together to move beyond logistical conversations about housing and course selection toward the shared goal of enhancing cultural learning.

This supports the current dialogue within international education, which has emphasized that international educators must intentionally intervene in study abroad programs in order to achieve desired student learning outcomes (Vande Berg, 2007). Edwards (2000) has observed that such reflection within British programs is rare, noting,
“The analysis of the host society often takes place in an area which we do not even monitor; we most frequently look at the grades students bring back, and leave it in the hands of the individual student to process the other aspects of the experience” (pp. 90-91).

The findings of this study suggest that it is not enough to leave intercultural adjustment in the hands of U.S. students on direct enrollment programs in Britain. International educators must intervene and can do so in ways that do not require a significant workload burden or sophisticated country-specific knowledge. Study abroad is now listed among the top ten “high impact” practices of student engagement in higher education that claim to deepen student learning in productive ways. Just as other “high impact” engagement activities, such as service learning, insist upon reflection as essential standards of practice, so too should study abroad (Kuh, 2009, p. 683).

Suggestions for Future Research

As one of the very few empirical research studies on U.S. study abroad students in English-speaking countries, this study provides a foundation for many future research directions. Due to time and resource constraints, I was only able to focus upon one type of study abroad program in one English-speaking destination, the direct enrollment experience within Britain. Since many students also study abroad in Britain through hybrid or island programs with study abroad providers, it would be useful to compare student expectation and experience by program type. Further, just as U.S. students participate in British direct enrollment programs, there is a significant and growing population of British students participating in U.S. exchange programs. This study provides a model that could be replicated with British or English-speaking international exchange students in order to
determine whether this population faces similar challenges with cultural adjustment. It would also be useful to see how these issues manifest in other incoming and outgoing English-speaking study abroad destinations, such as Ireland, New Zealand, or Australia. This study used interview data, in alignment with phenomenological standards. Given preliminary findings in this research about the value of structured reflection, future research may also consider embedding additional sources of qualitative data, such as written journal prompts or blogs from participants.

This study illuminated additional sources that may shape student expectations such as ethnic identity and social media. These sources are not currently included in Pitts’s (2009) or Martin et al.’s (1995) theories about study abroad expectations and could be explored with greater depth in future research for theory extension. With the current focus on increasing underrepresented students in study abroad programs (Institute for International Education, 2014b), it is especially important to understand how students of color or first generation college students may have different priorities or expectations for study abroad, how their on-site experiences may be unique, and how international educators can intervene to create a positive student experience before, during, and after study abroad. The data in this study suggests future research opportunities to support these populations, particularly in the direct enrollment programs that are most financially accessible.

There is also opportunity for further research, particularly from a quantitative lens, about how students form expectations for the study abroad experience and the factors that influence expectations and experiences. This could include variables such as personality, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and on-site cultural programs or reflection interventions.
As the U.K. continues to be the top study abroad destination for U.S. students, and as U.S. study abroad numbers continue to grow, there is a considerable gap in knowledge and research to fill. This study helps build the foundation for multiple research directions in the future. While Britain may seem an easier destination in one’s study abroad advising portfolio or international education research agenda, the complex and nuanced challenges of the experience, as described in this study, implore the field to stop taking it for granted.
“It’s kind of jarring:” The Intersection of Social Expectations and Experiences of U.S. Study Abroad Students in British Universities

Introduction

The social adjustment of international students has been identified as a significant factor in “acculturation, satisfaction, contentment, social support, and success” (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2011, p. 282; Bochner, Hutnik, & Furnham, 1985; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Ying, 2002). While these important studies have explored students on “every continent,” (Hendrickson, 2011, p. 282) they have failed to consider the largest group of U.S. study abroad students, those who study in the U.K. (Institute for International Education, 2014a). There is a common assumption within the international education community that cultural similarity between home and host cultures elicits an easier study abroad transition (Church, 1982; Paige, 1993). This has likely directed international education researchers toward studies within more overtly different language and cultural contexts.

Ireland (2012) cautions, however, “personal comfort should never be equated with social skills or cultural knowledge” (p. 13). It is inappropriate for international educators to perceive the social adjustment in culturally similar locations, such as Great Britain, to be
“less challenging” without empirical exploration (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011). Indeed, there are growing calls from prominent international educators who caution that U.S. study abroad experiences in English-speaking countries may not only be challenging, but may also present unique difficulties (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2012; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008).

The dominant theme throughout this exploratory literature has been that U.S. students often set inappropriate expectations for study abroad in the U.K. and Ireland, both for the academic experience and with regard to contemporary culture. These exploratory studies and opinion papers (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2012; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008) reveal an important disconnect between commonly held assumptions and observed experiences on-site. Without focused empirical research on these student populations, however, it is difficult to reconcile and understand this disparity.

A student’s social adjustment can have a considerable impact on the overall study abroad experience. Research on non-English speaking populations has revealed a “worrying disparity between international students’ expectations and lived experience,” specifically within the social experience abroad (Dunne, 2009, p. 223). Within this context, it is troubling that we lack an empirical understanding of the social experience within the largest group of U.S. study abroad students (Institute for International Education, 2015), particularly since these students may be prone to set inappropriate expectations (Edwards, 2000; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011; Ireland, 2012; Janes, 2008; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008).

The purpose of this phenomenological study, therefore, was to directly address this gap and describe the social expectations and adjustment experiences of U.S. study abroad
students in British universities. Informed by a modified expectancy violations framework (Burgoon, 1993; Martin, Bradford, and Rohrlich, 1995) and a descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment (Pitts, 2009), this study explored these issues through longitudinal qualitative research with 12 U.S. semester study abroad students in British universities. In doing so, it addressed the following research questions:

1. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe their social expectations?
2. How do U.S. semester study abroad students in direct enrollment programs within Britain describe the intersection of their social expectations with social experiences?

Theoretical Frameworks

As a study grounded in the connection between pre-departure expectations and lived experiences abroad, this research utilized two complementary theoretical frameworks that directly address the intersection of expectation and experience for study abroad students: Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment and Martin et al.’s (1995) modified expectancy violations framework. These frameworks were built upon foundational process theories in intercultural adjustment (Kim, 2001) and communication (Burgoon, 1978) and provided a useful lens for analysis. While both Pitts (2009) and Martin et al. (1995) have utilized these theories to capture the importance of pre-departure expectations in the study abroad experience, neither has been
applied in a focused study on the social adjustment of U.S. students in Britain. Applying both frameworks allows for theory triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) within this study.

**Pitt’s (2009) Model of Expectations, Talk, and Identity**

Applying and extending the foundational intercultural work of Y.Y. Kim (2001), Pitts (2009) utilized comprehensive ethnographic data from U.S. semester study abroad students in France to develop a descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment (see Figure 1). This model positions pre-departure expectations as a critical component of the study abroad adjustment process. When students study abroad and encounter culture, they may experience discrepancies in their academic, social, and cultural expectations. These expectation gaps produce stress. According to Pitts’s (2009) framework, students utilize various communications strategies to refine previous expectations and align more closely with the reality of life abroad. This process of expectation revision promotes growth, functional fitness, psychological health, and eventual identity shifts during the study abroad experience. Undergoing this process increases the likelihood that students can function and interact successfully and appropriately in a cross-cultural environment (Pitts, 2009).
Prior to Pitts’s (2009) research, very few studies explored the connection between expectations and cultural adjustment in study abroad. One noteworthy exception, as mentioned by Pitts, is the other theoretical framework of this study, the modified expectancy violations framework (Martin et al., 1995).

**Expectancy Violations Theory**

Expectancy violations theory (EVT), which was first developed by Burgoon (1978) to explain nonverbal behavior, has expanded in scope since its inception to include a framework for expectations in intercultural communication (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). According to EVT, our expectations are impacted by social and cultural norms and knowledge. When people enter interactions, they bring with them expectations about how others will communicate. Without learning about another culture’s standards, people will form expectations from stereotypical assumptions (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). In EVT, expectations are not simply met or unmet. They can also be violated positively, where the outcome is better than expected, or violated negatively, where the outcome is worse than expected (Martin et al., 1995).

Realizing the connection between expectations and experiences in study abroad programs, Martin et al. (1995) were the first to apply EVT in international education research. Through this study, Martin et al. (1995) modified EVT to include variables specific to a study abroad context. Through a longitudinal quantitative study, Martin et al. (1995) produced the Modified Expectancy Violations Framework (see Figure 2).
One of the most relevant outcomes of this research was that students in England were more likely to experience negative expectancy violations. In contrast, students who expected significant difference in more exotic locations more often found their expectations confirmed (Martin et al., 1995). This led Martin et al. (1995) to question assumptions within international education about cultural similarity and easier adjustment. Future research suggestions included exploring the framework within a qualitative study and including re-entry perspectives (Martin et al., 1995). This research serves to extend the applicability of the modified EVT framework by directly addressing these future research directions within similar cultural contexts.

**Figure 2.** Martin et al. (1995) Modified Expectancy Violations Framework.

One of the most relevant outcomes of this research was that students in England were more likely to experience negative expectancy violations. In contrast, students who expected significant difference in more exotic locations more often found their expectations confirmed (Martin et al., 1995). This led Martin et al. (1995) to question assumptions within international education about cultural similarity and easier adjustment. Future research suggestions included exploring the framework within a qualitative study and including re-entry perspectives (Martin et al., 1995). This research serves to extend the applicability of the modified EVT framework by directly addressing these future research directions within similar cultural contexts.

**Literature Review**
In this section, I examine research regarding the social adjustment of U.S. students in English-speaking countries. Additionally, given the significant gap in literature within this population, I explore social adjustment research within overtly different language and cultural contexts. The international higher education research community has conceptualized social adjustment issues through both psychological and sociocultural lenses. For the purpose of this review, I include both psychological and sociocultural research strands of literature under the overarching theme of social adjustment.

**Psychological Adjustment**

International education scholars have identified key areas of psychological challenge for students during the cultural adjustment process. Previous research has identified themes such as acculturative and psychological stress (Brisset et al., 2010; Savicki, 2010; Ying & Han, 2006), perceived discrimination (Zhang & Goodson, 2011), stress from language difficulties (Brown, 2008; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), loneliness (Brisset et al., 2010; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008), anxiety (Brisset et al., 2010), homesickness (Harrison & Brower, 2011), depression (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward et al., 1998), and disengagement (Hunley, 2010).

**Depression, loneliness, and homesickness.** Scholars have considered how adjusting to a new higher education culture may elicit feelings of depression, loneliness, or homesickness for students. The majority of studies have utilized quantitative surveys for international and study abroad students to self-report on scales of depression and loneliness (Harrison & Brower, 2011; Hunley, 2010; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward et al., 1998). A key finding is that significant depression and psychological distress can occur for international
students at the beginning of an academic program at a higher rate (Sawir et al., 2008; Ward et al., 1998) as compared with the beginning euphoria or happiness that is often described in models of cultural adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955).

Additionally, scholars have discovered that student psychological health abroad is not only important for overall well-being, but also in determining success and engagement in the international academic program (Hunley, 2010). With regard to predictability, Harrison and Brower (2011), found that students who entered programs with higher measures of cultural intelligence before departure for study abroad programs experienced less homesickness and an easier international adjustment.

While research has consistently highlighted psychological distress to be an issue for students in cultural adjustment, international educators should be careful not to make generalizations. In one of few qualitative studies in this area, Sawir et al. (2008) conducted 200 intensive international student interviews and found loneliness to be a concept that was perceived differently by students based on cultural backgrounds. Sawir et al. identified three types of loneliness unique to these students: a) personal loneliness due to loss of contact with families; b) social loneliness from loss of networks; and c) cultural loneliness from loss of “preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment” which “can affect even students with adequate personal and social support” (p. 148).

**Sociocultural Adaptation Literature**

Similar to psychological adaptation, Ward and colleagues first classified sociocultural adaptation as a distinct framework for conceptualizing student cultural adjustment in study abroad and international students (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1998).
Studies within the sociocultural adaptation lens are “related to the ability to ‘fit in’ or negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment” and are “strongly affected by cultural distance, amount of contact with host nationals and cultural knowledge” (Ward et al., 1998, p. 279).

Some of the most consistently studied areas within the sociocultural adaptation lens examine students’ communication confidence (Akazaki, 2010; Andrade, 2006; Kwon, 2013; Li et al., 2002), cultural distance (Kwon, 2013; Searle & Ward, 1990), interaction with host culture students and faculty (Akazaki, 2010; Brown, 2008; Dunne, 2009; Gong, 2003; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Kwon; 2013; Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Pitts, 2009; Ying & Han, 2006), and friendship or support networks (Andrade, 2006; Brisset et al., 2010; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Ying & Han, 2006).

**Interaction with host students and faculty.** As identified in the literature, a key component of sociocultural adaptation includes successful interaction and engagement within the host culture. In an academic higher education environment, this includes interaction with local students, administrators, and faculty.

Given that host country engagement involves a two-way interaction, at minimum, multiple scholars have chosen to include the perspectives of host country students, faculty, and administrators into research designs (Akazaki, 2010; Dunne, 2009; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li et al., 2002; Peacock & Harrison, 2009). This methodological choice has contributed an additional layer of understanding for international student sociocultural adaptation. Contrary to the vast majority of international student research, which has largely
depended upon quantitative surveys, all of the aforementioned studies employed qualitative methodologies. In doing so, they have highlighted important themes for international educators who are responsible for campus internationalization strategies.

Dunne (2009) and Peacock and Harrison (2009) explored domestic students’ perspectives on cross-cultural interactions with international students in Ireland and the U.K., respectively. In a grounded theory study, Dunne found that local students in Ireland distinguished themselves from international students based on perceived differences in higher education culture. Without deliberate interventions from the institution, students’ tendencies to stay within their own domestic groups prevented them from making intercultural connections. Peacock and Harrison described a “passive xenophobia” within two U.K. universities with regard to international students, as “many students initially suggested that they had not previously thought about international students as a separate group, but discussions within the focus groups made clear that they had simply been largely invisible to them previously” (p. 506). In some cases, U.K. students actively avoided international students, for fear of receiving a lower grade on group academic assignments or making culturally inappropriate remarks (Peacock & Harrison, 2009).

**Friendship and support networks.** Understanding that support networks are an important component for a challenging process such as sociocultural adaptation, scholars have explored how both within-group and host country support networks interact with other variables to impact positive international student cultural adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Brisset et al., 2010; Hendrickson et al, 2011; Ying & Han, 2006). Within the construct of international student support, Stella Ting-Toomey and colleagues have led a qualitative
research strand (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013) and developed an accompanying identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1999, 2005) to explore how international students make sense of friendships in their host countries.

**Research Gap in Social Adjustment Literature**

While these studies have examined diverse psychological and sociocultural adaptation issues, a significant limitation within this literature is that the vast majority of the research has explored student experiences within an overtly different cultural and language host country context. Following global enrollment trends with steady increases of Asian international students in English-speaking countries (Institute for International Education, 2013), as well as explicit assumptions of easier adjustment in culturally similar countries (Church, 1982; Paige, 1993), research scholars have largely ignored U.S. students in Britain, even though the U.K. is the top U.S. study abroad destination (Institute for International Education, 2015).

In a comprehensive review of 64 quantitative cultural adjustment research studies published from January 1990 to January 2009 (Zhang & Goodson, 2011), 51.6% of studies examined students from Asia, and the remaining 48.4% considered students from around the world as a collective group. Examples of psychological and sociocultural adaptation research from this review included Vietnamese students in France (Brisset et al., 2010), non-English speaking students in the U.K. (Brown, 2008), Japanese students in New Zealand (Ward et al., 1998), Japanese students in the U.K. (Akazaki, 2010), Asian students in Australia (Kashima & Loh, 2006), Chinese students in South Korea (Kwon, 2013), Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand (Searle & Ward, 1990), Taiwanese students in the U.S. (Ying &
Han, 2006), East Asian students in the U.K. (Kingston & Forland, 2008), Asian students in New Zealand (Li et al., 2002), and predominantly Asian students in the U.S. (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

In addition, psychological and sociocultural adaptation research with U.S. study abroad students has predominantly focused on their experiences in non-English speaking countries (Chaban et al., 2011; Hunley, 2010; Pitts, 2009) or has considered all U.S. study abroad students throughout the world as a collective group (Harrison & Brower, 2011; Harrison & Voelker, 2008). The vast majority of literature on U.S. students in English speaking countries has been either exploratory in nature (Janes, 2008; Martin et al., 1995; McLeod & Wainwright, 2008; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008) or has been written through scholarly opinion papers by international educators (Edwards, 2000; Ireland, 2010; Gristwood & Woolf, 2011).

Further, this limited literature on U.S. students in the U.K. and Ireland has been predominately through a cultural lens, which has addressed students’ perceptions or misconceptions about culture. There is an even greater research gap on studies that have examined this population through sociocultural or psychological lenses. Exploring issues such as stress, institutional and social support, and local friendships, the sociocultural and psychological lenses have been consistently important concepts of study abroad adjustment literature. These research lenses are largely missing from existing research on U.S. students in Britain, but were directly addressed by this study.

While the psychological and sociocultural literature has neglected to examine the experiences of U.S. students in Britain, it has revealed a critical concept that lends
tremendous support to filling the research gap with the proposed study. Studies within the psychological and sociocultural adaptation literature have consistently revealed that important issues in the cultural adjustment process related to stress, loneliness, forming support networks, navigating friendships, interacting with host students and faculty, and communicating successfully in a new international higher education system can all be culturally specific constructs and should not be generalized across student populations.

Understanding from the literature that these themes can depend upon both home and host cultural constructs, it would be irresponsible to assume that the current research base, which has been formed predominantly from collectivist student cultures, would translate to a U.S. study abroad student context. Before making such assumptions, we must first conduct focused research within the relevant cultural contexts to understand if U.S. study abroad students in Britain make meaning of these psychological and sociocultural constructs in different ways.

**Methodology**

In a longitudinal design that included pre-departure, while abroad, and post-return phases of study abroad, this research explored the social expectations and adjustment experiences for U.S. semester study abroad students who directly enrolled in British institutions. I designed a qualitative phenomenological methodology in order to understand directly from students how they made meaning of their lives within the specific context of a direct enrollment semester in Britain (Patton, 1982).

This research was conducted through a phenomenological lens, as phenomenology focuses on common human experiences that occur at important times or transitions in life.
A semester study abroad experience is undoubtedly an important time of transition for the students who participate. Phenomenology explores the “lived experiences for several individuals about a concept” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51) and provides a deeper understanding of their everyday lives. As noted by Van Manen (1990), “Phenomenology asks, ‘what is this or that kind of experience like?’” (p. 9).

Research Sites and Participants

Phenomenological research requires gathering extensive interview data from individuals who experience the phenomenon in question (Merriam, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). The nearly 35,000 U.S. students who study abroad in the U.K. comprised my broad population for the study (Institute for International Education, 2014a). I selected a sample of participants within this population from three public and two private institutions in the southeastern U.S. The final participant list was comprised of 12 students from three large public research universities: Central State University, Southern City University, and University of the Southeast. Eligible students within the two private institutions elected not to participate in the study.

There are many models of semester study abroad for U.S. students in Britain. These include direct enrollment/exchanges, faculty-led, island, and hybrid programs. I intentionally limited this study to participants who had been accepted to direct enrollment or exchange programs where students enrolled full-time within British universities. Given that phenomenology seeks to understand shared experiences around a common phenomenon, I determined it would not be empirically appropriate to assume students across significantly different program types would have shared everyday experiences. Due to time and resource
constraints during the site visit, I also limited participants to Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) as opposed to the entire U.K. (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland).

Through stratified purposeful, typical case, criteria, and convenience sampling, I selected 12 spring 2015 study abroad participants for the study who were compensated for their time and participation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Reflecting enrollment trends in study abroad with many students selecting London as their host city (Gristwood & Woolf, 2011), half of the selected group studied in greater London, and half of the group studied elsewhere in Great Britain. Selection criteria included level of previous travel experience, gender, location of host program, housing structure of program (housing with local students versus housing with U.S. students), academic structure of program, and on-site support structure. I selected students who had not previously spent significant time in Britain, as previous travel could shape pre-departure expectations in important ways. I also selected participants whose host institutions were within relatively close geographic proximity, which enabled me to interview all students and spend focused time on campuses during a three-week site visit in Great Britain.

The 12 selected participants studied abroad in nine different universities in England, Scotland, and Wales. Within the sample, one participant withdrew from the study abroad program before its completion, and another did not complete the re-entry interview upon return to the U.S. These students completed two semi-structured interviews; whereas, the remaining participants completed three. Dukes (1984) recommends between three and 10 subjects for a phenomenological study, so a sample of 12 exceeds the recommended range.
Data Collection

Phenomenological research utilizes participant interviews as the primary source of data (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002). I collected participant interview data during multiple points of the study abroad process, including pre-departure, while abroad, and re-entry phases of the semester. I also collected interview data from international educators at participating institutions, including two U.S. study abroad advisors and four British advisors and faculty. These educators worked directly with the participants in the study and had historical perspectives on the research topic from previous student experience. This additional data not only enhanced rigor, but also expanded my understanding of the phenomenon. In total, I conducted 40 interviews for this study.

I interviewed each participant during the pre-departure phase from November through December 2014. Each student had received acceptance confirmation from their host institution, as well as pre-departure orientation training from their home institution. The while abroad interviews took place in March 2015 during a three-week site visit to Britain. I traveled to each participating institution and interviewed students on campus. I also interviewed British study abroad advisors and faculty during this time. In September 2015, I interviewed students for a third time upon their return to the U.S. The primary purpose of these final conversations was to confirm whether participants’ reflections remained consistent from while abroad to re-entry phases of the experience. I also interviewed U.S. study abroad advisors during this time.

Data Analysis
I selected Giorgi’s (1985, 2012) framework of psychological phenomenology for data analysis because its clear, multi-step design provided a way to capture the essence of participants’ experiences in a structured method that increased the rigor of this study. Additionally, Giorgi’s method has been identified as an especially useful data analysis lens for longitudinal qualitative studies (Wertz, 1985). This data analysis process included reading data in its entirety, identifying “meaning units” to comprise larger themes, integrating themes into “consistent statements,” converting points of universal meaning into a narrative description of the the experience, and comparing this narrative description with raw data to clarify interpretation (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10).

I submitted interviews to participants in order to engage in member checking and ensure the data authentically represented their experiences (Seale, 2003). I also utilized a reflection journal throughout the data collection and analysis processes to continually separate, or bracket, my personal opinions and experiences on this research topic from the true voices of the participants. This bracketing process is a critical component of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). In addition to the research journal, I wrote memos throughout the research process (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to reflect upon the data (Van Manen, 1990).

**Trustworthiness**

Aligning with qualitative research practices, I made deliberate steps to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. This included attention to transferability, credibility, and dependability. I increased transferability through purposeful sampling and thick description of findings (Jensen, 2008). I enhanced credibility by conducting multiple interview sources
within multiple phases of the study abroad experience (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seale, 1999). The research questions, theoretical frameworks, and research structure are directly aligned with each other and with the phenomenon in question. This increased dependability (Martin et al., 1995; Pitts, 2009). Finally, I reflected upon potential subjectivity by maintaining a written “audit trail” of research decisions (Meadows & Morse, 2001, p. 194), collecting reflections in a research journal, and confirming findings with two peer reviewers, who are qualitative researchers in higher education (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Limitations**

The goal of this qualitative phenomenology was to gain an in-depth understanding about the experience of a smaller group in-depth within a specific context. Qualitative research, such as this study, should be considered within “context-bound extrapolations rather than generalizations” (Patton, 1990, p. 491). I applied strategies throughout the research design to facilitate opportunities for readers to contextualize, compare, and apply the results of this study to other relevant situations (Merriam, 2002). Specifically, I embedded sampling strategies for “maximizing variation” in the sample, such as selecting a diverse group of students who studied abroad both within London and elsewhere in Britain (Merriam, 2002, p. 29). Additionally, I analyzed the data with “rich, thick description,” aligning with best practices of qualitative research (Merriam, 2002, p. 29).

However, this research does have limitations. For example, I interviewed participants at three specific points of the study abroad experience. It would have been more ideal to conduct in-person interviews throughout the study abroad semester; however, resource and time constraints prohibited me from doing so. An additional limitation is that university
calendars were not precisely aligned across participants. While I captured data during pre-departure, while abroad, and re-entry phases, some students arrived in Great Britain sooner than others or returned to the U.S. sooner than others. These limitations would have been more problematic within the design of an ethnographic study, as my level of engagement with participants and multiple sources of data exceed many recommendations for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994).

I was limited from considering a higher number of participants and from selecting participants in farther destinations, such as Northern Ireland, due to time and access considerations during the site visit. As a working professional with a finite amount of time for the site visit, my primary focus was on visiting all participants and conducting as many additional interviews with international educators and faculty as possible. The study would have certainly been enhanced by additional data collection efforts, such as observations, written reflections, and document analysis methods.

For a variety of reasons, study abroad programs are not accessible to all students in higher education. This includes academic, financial, behavioral, personal, or other issues. Of the U.S. students who are accepted to participate in study abroad programs, only 12% study abroad in the U.K. (Institute for International Education, 2014a). While this represents the largest percentage of U.S. students in one location, it is unlikely representative of U.S. higher education as a whole.

Delimitations

This study is bound by three participating institutions, which are all large public institutions within one state. My multiple sampling strategies were designed to garner a
purposeful sample reflective of the U.S. direct enrollment study abroad population in Great Britain.

It is noteworthy that students throughout the diverse program types in study abroad within Britain may have very different experiences than those represented by this study. Since this study explores the experience of U.S. in direct enrollment or exchange programs, I acknowledge that this study is not fully representative of the multiple program models available within study abroad. Given the significant structural differences across models, I determined it would be empirically inappropriate to seek a shared experience for students across program types. Future research may expand this focus and consider experiences of U.S. students in different program models within Britain, expand the framework to additional English-speaking destinations, and explore this topic with international students from the British Isles in U.S. direct enrollment or exchange programs.

Findings

Participants in this study shared important insights regarding their social expectations, as well as their social realities, during a semester abroad in Great Britain. Students looked forward to developing meaningful connections abroad, particularly with local residents, and reflected upon how their active, scheduled social lives in the U.S. would manifest in Britain. In many cases, students encountered significantly more challenges than anticipated in navigating friendships and social landscapes of their host communities yet found personal value and growth within their newfound social realities abroad.

Local Friendship
Local friendships had a significant impact on participants’ study abroad expectations and experiences in Britain. Students looked forward to developing lasting friendships with locals as a way to build a personal connection with their host country. Many students were both frustrated and disappointed that their friendship experiences with locals differed from what they anticipated.

**Expectations of local friendship.** Before departure, participants looked forward to forming friendships with local students in Britain. Most students emphasized that while they were open to developing friendships with other international students, local friendships were a much higher priority. They felt local friends would provide unique insights into their host communities and support their transition from tourist to resident in Britain. Developing local friendships was a high priority for Melissa:

I don’t want to just go hang out with all the international students...I would rather try to be able to hang out with and make friends with people from the U.K. because while I’m there I don’t just want to be a tourist while I’m there. I want to live there.

Lea expressed a similar priority of befriending locals in order to experience the culture:

I hope to befriend a few of the Welsh people and not just international students, because I really wanna experience the Welsh culture instead of like – it'd be great to learn about all of these different places, but I'm there in Wales for a reason.

Candace echoed the sentiments of other participants. While she knew it would be tempting to stick with other U.S. students, she felt lack of local friendships would compromise her study abroad experience:
It’s not that I don't wanna make bonds with those people (other U.S. students), ’cause you're not gonna turn a friend away, but I really want to get to know people who are there. That's what this experience is made for...not just stick with people who are like, ‘Oh, you're from (U.S. state), too? Great. Let's talk about (U.S. city).’

Before departure, a number of participants developed connections with students from Britain, such as those on international exchange in the U.S. This increased their confidence about forming local friendships. These international friends shared that it would be easy to build relationships in Britain. Roni befriended an international exchange student from Britain at her home institution who thought she would have no trouble making friends:

I’m definitely expecting to (make local friends). I was speaking to (British exchange student), and she was just like ‘don’t be nervous. Like the same way we come here and you guys are like, oh your accent. I love you. It’s the same way over there so you’re probably gonna get a lot of attention and people wanting to know about your culture and where you’re from and that’ll start you with something you can talk about and get to know people and have friends. There’s gonna be a lot of people trying to talk to you and trying to be friends.’

While participants consistently hoped to make local friends and expected to do so, a few students had more tentative and measured expectations about the process. Anna, for example, was cautious in her social expectations and tried to remain grounded:

If you go there and you think that you’re just going to befriend all the locals and you’re going to have stuff to do every single night...you’re life’s not going to completely change, ’cause you’re still the same person you were here.
Melissa understood that her expectations had the potential to impact her experience abroad, and tried to remain comfortable with the ambiguity of the situation:

If I make all these expectations of what I think it’s going to be and what I’m going to do where I get there, not that I’m going to let myself down, it’s just you don’t want to overwhelm yourself.

**Experience of local friendship.** In contrast with pre-departure expectations, many participants encountered significant difficulties in forming local friendships during their study abroad experience. They were frustrated and puzzled by the process. Melissa, who was very excited to befriend local students, noted that while she hoped to have British friends, she did not have any. She shared a story that illustrated her challenges:

I'd been on the residence hall team with a couple of British people playing laser tag.

So, after we got done, I was like, ‘Well, I'm gonna go introduce myself to them, because we just played, and maybe that'll give me an in to meet some British people.’

So, I'm like, ‘I wanted to introduce myself.’ And it was just like, ‘Whoa.’ They just weren't ready for me to come up and start talking. At home this would have been no problem. I wouldn't consider myself a super intrusive or outgoing person at all. I was like, ‘Oh, wow, for them I am.’ And then I asked another question, and it's just like a one-word answer. And then, ‘Okay, I'm gonna go back and talk to the other international students,’ just because it wasn’t the kind of welcoming –and they were very polite, but it wasn’t an, ‘Okay, now we're gonna be friends’ thing at all. I was like, ‘Well, I didn't think I was being forward, but I'm learning.’ And it's different – like culturally that's different.
Many students expressed similar sentiments, that while they hoped to make local friends, their social life was far more challenging than expected. As they contemplated why it was difficult to make local friends, they surmised that British students might not be motivated to befriend international students, especially if they already had peer groups. Additionally, students cited housing arrangements as a potential factor, especially if they lived far away from campus or lived within a large community of international students. Other participants noticed how there were many other U.S. or international students in their classes, and that these students tended to cling together.

A few students entered the study abroad semester expecting to spend time with pre-existing British friends. These friends included previous co-workers, former home campus exchange students, and contacts made through social media. Students were disappointed when they did not spend as much time with these acquaintances as anticipated. They realized quickly that these people had their own friend groups and obligations. Many participants in this situation echoed Xavier’s feelings:

I was hoping to make more local friends. It seems right now all of – I only have friends within the exchange student program. That’s not what I was really wanting.

Indeed, most participants faced the social reality that their primary friends in Britain were fellow international students. They were very aware that this reality contrasted with their social expectations. As Lea reflected, “I think we go in with so many expectations of this is what I’m gonna do here and these are the type of people I’m gonna meet and these are the type of experiences I’m expected to have.” Students described the challenge of
befriending local students as surprisingly tough. Calvin admitted that he felt awkward in conversations with local students, especially if they had not been to the U.S.:

It’s just hard to make friends besides a surface-level relationship. People aren’t rude, but it’s just hard. You can feel that awkwardness ‘cause you don’t have much in common to talk about. The only people I’ve been able to comfortably communicate with are people who have been to the U.S. or are interested in U.S. culture. If you talk to somebody who isn’t from the U.S., it just makes a barrier that impedes building close relationships. I’ve even talked to other students from my school, and we all feel like it’s kind of different unless you’re with people who are interested in your culture.

Students shared that their friendship challenges were not isolated. Their discussions with other international students revealed this as a common difficulty throughout the international population. Some students felt they lacked meaningful opportunities to gain an “in” with local peer groups.

Other participants shared similar perceptions, that while they wanted to befriend local students during their semester abroad in Britain, they were unsure how to navigate social situations. They were often anxious and expressed worry that locals perceived their conversation attempts as annoying. Roni shared these reflections upon her return to the U.S.:

I wish I would have known more about how to interact with them (local students) better. Not saying I didn’t try to talk to them, but I was nervous about it. It’s interesting, because I’m so comfortable around people from America...I feel like that’s one thing I would have changed.
A few students experienced situations in British classes where they felt mocked or looked down upon because they were from the U.S. Calvin reflected, “I feel like people from the U.S. are like the ugly duckling of the group almost. We stand out in any situation.”

While participants consistently reflected upon the challenges of befriending local students, a few were fortunate to form local relationships early in their study abroad experience. They used similar language to describe these friends, noting that people decided to, “take me under their wing,” “scoop me up,” or “adopt me.” Most students were unsure exactly why these locals chose to help them adjust, but they were nonetheless grateful for the support. In these few cases, local friends helped participants navigate academic issues, showed them parts of their host city that tourists do not frequent, or introduced them to local social life.

Interviews with participants upon their return to the U.S. revealed that some students did develop local friendships near the conclusion of the semester, particularly through working on final group projects in class. This was the case with Candace, whose peer group was primarily comprised of other U.S. students until the conclusion of the semester. She reflected upon her observations to share advice for future study abroad students:

Don’t be so afraid to come out of your comfort zone and sit down and talk with people. I felt that so many of the other American students felt like we could only associate with other American students and that the British kids did not want to get to know us, but that was the complete opposite... especially in class when we all have a common stressor, you can definitely latch on to that and talk to people.
Affability

As Candace noted, many U.S. direct enrollment students had perceptions that locals did not want to befriend them. Further, many participants expressed how unexpectedly challenging it was to form friendships with local students. Across participants, however, students consistently shared how much friendlier British people were than expected. This perception of friendliness, or affability, presents an interesting social contrast and reveals useful information about students’ engagement with their local communities and host cultures.

Expectation of affability. Before departure for Britain, many participants expected to encounter a culture where people would be much more private and reserved. They often used the word “rude” to describe their perceptions of British culture. Compared to their perceptions of openness and hospitality in the U.S., they expected people to be less friendly in Britain. Danielle shared her concerns about behaving appropriately within this new social context:

I’ve looked up expatriate blogs of people from the U.S. living in the U.K. All of them said they tend to be a lot more reserved...So, I don’t know how that’s going to work. I don’t want to be – what’s the word? – obnoxious, and appear ignorant of their social climate.

Julie shared similar concerns, which were echoed by a number of participants:

I've been told that people will be creeped out if you smile at them on the street, whereas that's a generally accepted practice, and that's something so ingrained in me to be nice to everyone.
**Experience of affability.** In contrast to their expectations, participants consistently shared during interviews while abroad and upon re-entry that people in Britain were much friendlier than expected. This aspect was often referenced as one of their most significant cultural lessons from the study abroad experience. When asked about the most surprising part of her experience, Amaya shared this reflection:

I think people are very friendly. I think they are very, very, very friendly. I’ve had people just talk to me randomly on the street. I don’t know, people are just very, very nice. I don’t think I came here really expecting people to be super-friendly.

Many participants echoed these sentiments and seemed genuinely surprised by their interactions with people throughout Britain.

Within a social context where students expressed frustration with their inability to make local friends, it is interesting how they also described the overt friendliness of local people. These diverging reflections usually took place within the same interview, and students did not recognize the contrast. Upon closer review, however, it became evident that when participants reflected upon how unexpectedly friendly locals were, they referenced brief, surface-level interactions. Usually, the reference point was asking a stranger for directions. Xavier and Lea shared examples reflective of many participants:

The people are very nice. There have been a few times where I got lost and I didn't feel bad about asking someone for help 'cause they're not rude about pointing you in the right direction. (Xavier)
I think in getting from place to place and figuring out how to get from here and there you run into a lot of different people and trying to ask for directions and one thing that I love about this place is everybody's so nice. (Lea)

Many students drew conclusions about host culture friendliness from these surface-level conversations rather than from more challenging interactions with local peers.

**Campus and Community Engagement**

Another interesting aspect of students’ social experiences was their expected and experienced level of engagement within their host institutions. The vast majority of participants were engaged in many activities and organizations on their home campuses and looked forward to being involved in new activities abroad. Although this was an important part of their lives at home, they encountered some difficulties in seeking to develop the same structure of engagement during their semester in Britain.

**Expectation for campus and community involvement.** As active and involved students, participants expected their level of engagement to continue while abroad, and they expressed excitement about becoming involved with their host campus and local communities. In particular, they believed this strategy would be helpful in meeting local students and building friendships. Amaya shared her excitement about the potential for involvement:

I’m all about student orgs (organizations). I feel like that’s just the best way to meet people, especially different kinds of people, so I definitely want to get into different types of organizations that they have over there.
Multiple students also anticipated networking within the local community in order to build connections for their future careers. Candace, a theatre student, shared her plan:

I was hoping to take advantage of getting out into the community and trying to really just place my nose in any door that I can get it into as far as theatre and seeing works and maybe being in works.

**Experience in campus and community involvement.** Contrary to expectations, many students encountered various challenges in navigating engagement opportunities during their study abroad experience. Students who were previously excited about this potential, such as Amaya, expressed frustration:

I think I was expecting to be more involved in things...I feel like most of the things that I’ve found out about the university, I’ve kinda had to find out on my own. I’m unsure of how things really work. I tried to join a student org. I’ve been to the office twice. Whenever I try to get information, there’s nothing that they can tell me.

This idea that students had to research diligently and independently in order to find information within their host institutions was echoed by multiple participants.

As students tried to navigate student organizations and on-campus services in Britain, some were surprised to discover extra costs for opportunities that are usually embedded in student fees within U.S. higher education. Since many of the participants in this study were closely monitoring very tight budgets, they often had to choose between sightseeing and campus involvement. They had not factored in costs for on-campus activities into their semester budgets. For some students, extra costs were a factor in their degree of activity on campus:
This is annoying, here you pay for everything. When I paid tuition to come here, I thought that was going to cover the bases...Back at home when you pay your tuition, you're allowed to go to different things that the school holds. But here it's like if don't pay for it, you can't do it. And that's one thing that was really different...It has impacted the things I’ve gotten involved in. (Roni)

In addition to costs, some students noted that while they intended to become involved in campus and community life within Britain, it was challenging to find a niche when they frequently traveled away from their host city during the weekends. Melissa initially met some local friends by attending church and joining an on-campus choir, but her attendance dropped significantly when she began traveling on the weekends. As a result, these initial relationships did not develop into friendships:

I’d like to have been more involved in group activities or things like that, but I didn’t find a place. It would have been hard to maintain with the traveling...When I’m here and not traveling, I’ll go to church...And that traveling happens a lot. (Melissa)

Further, some students expressed frustrations that the primary activity on campus appeared to be going to the student union bar and drinking alcohol. Students expected the alcohol culture to be a more prevalent aspect of social life in Britain, particularly since they would be of legal age. However, they were very surprised to see an on-campus bar, and many of them tried it, but some expressed how they would have preferred to be involved in other campus activities. They also noted how it was difficult to build meaningful friendships from drinking acquaintances. They did not understand how to build social connections from these experiences. Calvin described it as a “false level of friendship.” Most students in this study
prioritized other aspects of the experience, such as traveling, over drinking. Those who did not travel often, however, expressed challenges in finding activities beyond alcohol. As Kristen observed, “People either all get together and go to the bars, or they don’t really hang out.”

Although many students were not as involved on campus as they intended to be, some participants did find success with campus or community. Jaclyn joined the Feminist Society; Candace performed in an on-campus play; Danielle joined a church and on-campus Christian organization; and Roni worked at the campus radio station. Danielle’s involvement with her local church was sparked by her mother’s efforts to help her be connected. A number of participants cited direct involvement from their parents in the decisions they made during their study abroad semester. Fortunately for Danielle, many of her local friendships resulted from this church connection:

So she (mother) e-mailed this church. It’s actually right down the street. She was like, ‘Hi. Do you have anybody that can meet up with my daughter and make sure that she’s alright?’

Jaclyn’s involvement with the Feminist Society was the result of a serendipitous invitation through social media. She noted how spending time with the Feminist Society was especially useful in understanding the culture and meeting locals, though the society’s activities were quite different than club meetings at her home institution:

I joined the Feminist Society. So I met some people through there, who will go to games with me, and show me new bars. And I've met – I mean, I've met more locals, so it hasn't been a totally lonely experience.
Jaclyn’s hints at loneliness are important. Even though some students were successful in becoming engaged with their campus and local communities, this did not negate their experiences of loneliness and solitude. Nearly all participants experienced such feelings.

**Loneliness and Solitude**

One of the most significant aspects of students’ social experience in Britain was their experience with loneliness and solitude. For many participants, these feelings were unexpected and impactful, particularly within the contrasting context of their highly social and scheduled lives in the U.S.

**Expectation of loneliness and solitude.** Many participants in this study were closely connected with their families, and thus expected a degree of homesickness while abroad. They anticipated missing family, friends, and familiarity. While they expected to be homesick at various points in the semester, they also expected to have lively and active social lives in Britain, filled with meaningful new friendships and busy schedules. Some students described pre-departure how they were most excited about their future social experiences abroad. As Roni noted:

> I’m most excited about making connections and friends. My friends tell me at first they get there and they’re already ready to go home ‘cause they miss home so much but then like towards the end, you don’t want to go home ‘cause you’ve made close friends. They helped you, they’ve seen you when you were sad and homesick and they’ve helped you through it– there’s just life-long friendships.

Xavier echoed these expectations for lasting connections:
I'm most excited about the people I'm gonna meet. Because I think I'm a people person. And I think that the potential to meet lasting connections is what I have been looking forward to most.

Students were consistently excited about their social lives in Britain, but also recognized the likely realities of homesickness, citing the emotional highs and lows of a study abroad experience. Many students referenced pre-departure orientation sessions in framing these expectations. Lea shared how her expectations changed after orientation:

I consider myself a very happy person and a very reflective person, so I never really prepared myself for the idea that I could be abroad and still feel really down. And that's very hard for me to grasp, but, now that I know that it's coming, it's not gonna be some ‘I'm so depressed while I'm abroad’ damper. It's gonna be one of those ‘Oh, this is supposed to happen’ sort of mentality.

As students reflected upon potential emotional challenges of their upcoming study abroad semester in Britain, concerns about homesickness dominated their thoughts. They did not expect a significant difference in their social lives or schedules, and they anticipated developing solid and lifelong connections with other students.

**Experience of loneliness and solitude.** As students moved through their direct enrollment semesters in Britain, they experienced a much less robust and active social network than at home, as well as an academic system that was far less structured than expected. This combination of factors created an environment where participants spent a significant amount of unstructured time by themselves. This solitude was new and
uncomfortable. Students felt unsettled and lonely, and they struggled to understand how best to navigate their environments.

Before departure, participants could recite hourly commitments each day of the week, from the time they awoke until the time they went to sleep. Their newfound reality in Britain was jarring. Lea described her discomfort:

It is kind of jarring 'cause my life back home is so busy all the time. I would just have like days planned to the minute for everything, and I brought my planner over here and I haven't used it once.... How am I gonna readjust to that life (back home) when I'm sleeping all the time here basically?

Jaclyn felt that this change made her adjustment to Britain more challenging than expected. She noted, “At home I really like being busy. When I first got here the adjustment was probably harder.” Candace shared similar reflections, and indicated that this sentiment was evident across U.S. students in her direct enrollment program. She said, “Initially a lot of us were sort of shocked about how much time we had on our hands, and we didn’t really like it. I’m just the type of person that I have to have things going on.” Amaya worried that this new lack of structure was making her lazy, as she was not accustomed to having unscheduled time in her day. She reflected, “It’s like what the heck do I do for three hours...I get really bored and I don’t wanna become lazy.”

Being in an unstructured environment was difficult for participants, but it was perhaps even more challenging because students were less successful in developing friendships than expected. This meant that many of their unscheduled hours were spent alone, which was a new concept for many. Most students filled their time alone with hours of
Netflix, sleep, video games, reading, shopping, and talking to family at home. Xavier defaulted to playing video games, which he admitted was a coping strategy he used when feeling depressed:

Well, this is the thing I subconsciously do when I'm feeling depressed is I play a lot of video games to kind of burn through the rest of the day. There's some days where I don't have any class so I'll stay up all night playing this game and then I'll sleep until 4:00 PM.

Roni, who had such pre-departure excitement about meeting new people, was one of the students who utilized sleep, Netflix, and communicating with home to pass the time:

I go back to my apartment (after class) and watch Netflix for the rest of the day. Like literally that is my week. I eat. Take a nap. Wake up, watch Netflix, go to sleep. I'm so not used to it... I FaceTime my mom and my dad all the time, and my siblings...And I feel like if I was like in America and I had free time like this, I'd have so much to do. Like go see this friend. Go see this person.

Participants expressed that within this environment, it was easy to make acquaintances but difficult to make the type of solid friends who could help them process the emotions they were feeling. They expressed frustration in making local friends, and discontent with the authenticity of international student friendships. Students longed for meaningful connections but experienced difficulty finding them. Candace compared the process of developing international friends to a microwave:

I think it's been tougher than I was expecting it to be. And I've honestly I've tried to sift through my personality and others personalities and figure out why I've been
feeling so disconnected at times. There’s an eagerness to spend time with people that you don't know as well. Microwave. It's just everything very sped up. It's frustrating because I'm surrounded by people all the time but I've probably never felt more alone than I have when I've been here. I've definitely been feeling really lonely at times.

Anna shared similar sentiments. She observed that because U.S. students had pre-departure expectations of lifelong friendship, as well as intentions of traveling in groups, they placed significant pressure on themselves to develop friendships with international students quickly. She noted how many of these relationships felt forced and inauthentic:

You don’t have to be friends with people just because you’re here...I think a lot of people are like, ‘we’re best friends.’ We’ve known each other a month. We don’t actually know each other. I know you can make, and you do make lasting friendships, but you don’t have to expect to make them with everyone you meet.

Anna reflected how it took her nearly a month to come to this realization, and that it was a new experience for her to feel comfortable being by herself.

**Personal Growth through Social Challenges**

Multiple participants reflected how their social challenges in Britain fostered personal growth during their semester abroad. Before departure, they expected significant personal growth, hoping for a broadened outlook on the world and a new degree of maturity from living independently far from home. Many students were surprised to observe personal growth not only in the ways they expected, but also from navigating and overcoming significant social challenges with loneliness and lack of structure.
Students reflected that it was an important learning experience to discover their social experience was different than they expected. Refining their expectations and remaining focused on their goals for the experience helped them navigate challenges. Lea shared her initial difficulty making friends:

I was really down in the dumps the first few weeks ‘cause I was like ‘I’m not making any friends’...And then I was like ‘well maybe I'm not here to make friends’...I think the number one thing that I'm learning here is more about myself than everything else. I'm here to learn about the culture, I'm here to learn about the people, but I'm finding that I'm learning more about me as a person in terms of how I react to the world and to other people than I expected to.

Multiple students came to an important realization that they were perfectly okay being alone and experiencing the semester by themselves. This realization helped them remain focused on their priorities for the experience rather than dwell upon their social challenges. Jaclyn was empowered by this realization:

Just figuring out, like, this is what I want my experience to be. It's okay if I do some things by myself. So learning to do things by myself – I feel like that was like, a really good lesson to get. Because in theory I've always known I was okay with being by myself, but here, like, actively doing things and exploring and embracing the city by yourself, it's kind of an empowering.

Anna shared similar sentiments and noted the importance of being flexible about social expectations for the experience:
Be okay with having downtime and not having to do something every day. I think it took me a good month to understand that...I think I've also come to the understanding that it's perfectly fine to go places alone...It’s not reasonable to think that everything has to be the way people have told you it should be...it’s important to know what you want out of the experience and to be okay that it’s not, maybe gonna go according to plan.

Calvin shared how becoming comfortable with both his newfound solitude and flexible schedule were important lessons for his personal growth:

I don’t have a lot of friends, and I still have to do a lot of things on my own. And it kind of just teaches you to like mature and not be afraid to be alone I guess, be by yourself and just handle things as they come. You can’t really try and plan for too much as well because you never know like what’s gonna happen. I'm less in control of like what I wanna do...My old schedule was very planned. Now it’s very loose, and I have to be open to being more spontaneous.

Danielle echoed these sentiments and shared advice for future semester students in Britain to be open when their study abroad experience does not go as planned. In fact, she noted how this was her most significant lesson learned during a semester in Britain:

If things don’t all fall into place, it’s totally fine. You can work things out as you go. In fact, sometimes planning has the opposite effect. It doesn’t make you feel more secure...It’s definitely different than the U.S., where we have every single thing planned out. We know what to expect. That’s the biggest lesson I’ve had to learn since coming here.
As these students noted, one of the most important lessons of their study abroad experience was realizing how to navigate a social environment that differed quite substantially from their expectations. Refining these expectations and becoming comfortable within their new environments yielded important reflections about their personal growth.

**Discussion**

As scholars throughout the years have explored the experience of international students, challenges with social adjustment have frequently emerged as significant aspects of the experience (Bochner, Hutnik, & Furnham, 1985; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Ying, 2002). Previous research has explored international students’ social challenges regarding friendships (Church, 1982; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Klineberg & Hull, 1979), as well as loneliness (Rajapaska & Dundes, 2002; Sawir et al., 2008). What is noteworthy, however, is that these previous studies usually explored social transitions for students within overtly different language and cultural contexts.

Although the U.S. sends more study abroad students to the U.K. than to any other destination (Institute for International Education, 2015), scholars have not traditionally explored the social aspects of these students’ experiences, connecting with a common assumption that their transitions should be less challenging (Church, 1982; Paige, 1993). This study has provided a significant contribution to the literature, however, by challenging assumptions and revealing how social challenges are also an important issue for U.S. study abroad students in British universities.

Nearly all participants in this study expressed difficulty in making friends within their direct enrollment programs. This lends empirical support to the exploratory findings from
McLeod and Wainwright’s (2008) study on U.S. students in Scotland and France. While the study did not distinguish findings between students in France and Scotland, it revealed how unexpected difficulty in forming friendships was an important area of challenge. Of additional relevance, McLeod and Wainwright found that “expectancies, both met and unmet, were significantly related to how the students judged their experience. Students initially expected to have an incredibly positive experience and often were disappointed by how hard it was for them to adjust” (p. 68). The findings of this study reinforce the connection between study abroad expectations and challenges, particularly within social adjustment. Participants’ most unexpected social challenge was making local friends, though they also expressed discontent with the process of forming international friendships.

Though the findings of this study provide support to McLeod and Wainwright’s (2008) exploratory research, they also offer important distinctions from previous literature on international student social adjustment. Unlike the students in Hechanova-Alampay et al.’s (2002) study where confidence was a factor in friendship development, most U.S. participants in this study entered the semester with a high degree of confidence about making local friends. Their level of confidence, however, did not enhance their abilities to make friends. Further, while the students within Hechanova-Alampay et al.’s (2002) study felt their lack of domestic friendships were the result of a preference for friendships with co-nationals, U.S. students in this study preferred to form friendships with local students over fellow co-nationals. They felt these local friendships would enrich their experience and understanding of British culture. As they perceived the language and cultural contexts in Britain to be similar to home, most students assumed they would be successful in reaching this social goal.
Participants encountered multiple opportunities to befriend local students in classes and social activities, yet they were surprised to find the process much more complicated than expected. Their known methods of forming friendship appeared unsuccessful within a British context. This was perplexing and frustrating to them. Melissa’s story about initiating a conversation with local students after a residence hall laser tag event is a perfect example. She expected the conversation would spark a potential friendship, as this method had been successful for her in the U.S. She was surprised, however, when her attempt failed. She realized in that moment that Britain had a different culture, including the process of forming friendships.

Melissa’s reflections are important, as they reinforce Edwards’ (2000) observations that U.S. students in Britain often treat the study abroad experience as “autopilot immersion” because they assume “shared language implies shared culture” (p. 88). If U.S. students in Britain do not conceptualize notions of friendship as an important part of culture, and if they also assume no difference between how people in the U.S. and Britain develop friendships, it is understandable that they would be surprised and frustrated. They experienced how U.S.-based methods of forming friendships may not receive the same response in international contexts. While this was an important lesson, they were unsure how to adapt their methods of friendship development within a new cultural context. Indeed, multiple students reflected how they wished they would have understood how to better relate with local students. They did not, however, often recognize or connect that their difficulty in forming local friendships was a cultural challenge or part of their overall intercultural adjustment.
Within these findings, this study reveals significant, yet unique challenges with friendship even when home and host country students speak English. This is a valuable contribution to the literature as scholars have frequently cited weak oral English skills as an important factor in why international students encounter difficulties forming local friendships (Parks & Raymond, 2004; Schutz & Richards, 2003). Participants in this study were able to communicate verbally but were unsure how to navigate many unspoken aspects of culture such as notions of friendship.

Edwards (2000) reinforces this point, noting that U.S. students may assume a false “notion of kinship” for interactions in Britain (p. 92). When participants in this study engaged in surface-level dialogue with local residents, such as asking for directions, they expressed how friendly people were. Students experienced difficulty forming significant local friendships, yet they perceived successful interactions with strangers.

Students’ challenges in friendship were not limited to local students, as they also expressed disappointment regarding the friendships with fellow international students. Students prioritized local friendships but also expected to form lifelong bonds within their own international student communities. Roni formed her expectations by noting, “They’ve seen you when you were sad and homesick and they’ve helped you through it—there’s just life-long friendships.” Multiple participants were frustrated by the pressure to develop these lifelong bonds in such a short amount of time. They described the process as an inauthentic or a “microwave,” and often missed friends from home whom they felt truly knew them.

These findings support the work of Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2012), who noted that while international students wanted more significant connections with local students, they
were also “constantly comparing the transitional and temporal nature of their newly-found friends with the long-established friends back home.” (p. 558). Longstanding friendships from home could not simply be replaced with new friends abroad. (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2012). The findings of this study, along with Hotta and Ting-Toomey’s research, reinforce the importance of developing appropriate social expectations for both local friendships and fellow international student friendships.

It is important for students to have positive social experiences during international study programs, not only because it supports their overall cultural adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1993), but also because it can have a beneficial impact on potential feelings of loneliness while abroad (Sawir et al., 2008). International students are more likely than local students to feel lonely and homesick (Rajapaska & Dundes, 2002); therefore, it is especially critical for this student population to develop positive social connections.

Even though the participants in this study were studying in a location perceived to be culturally similar, they still experienced the feelings of loneliness and solitude reflected within international education literature in more overtly different cultural contexts (Barron, Baum & Conway, 2007; Brown & Holloway, 2009; Hunley, 2010; Pitts, 2009; Rajapaska & Dundes, 2002; Sawir et al., 2008). As such, this study provides a useful contribution to the literature that U.S. students in direct enrollment programs within Britain can also have significant feelings of loneliness and isolation.

While most students in this study described a degree of loneliness and solitude, some were more comfortable with this unexpected environment than others. Participants who developed a newfound acceptance of their solitude in Britain not only found personal growth,
but also were more positive in describing their overall experience abroad. Sawir et al. (2008) reinforced this theme, noting that in addition to social networks, students who “have come to terms with a degree of isolation” were less lonely (p. 159). Within this study, participants who recognized and embraced solitude as a component of their study abroad semester seemed to experience an easier adjustment.

Once again, this reinforces importance of expectations for U.S. students in British direct enrollment programs. Among participants, there were a few students who entered the semester abroad with more tentative and measured expectations about their social experience. In addition, some other participants may have had inappropriate social expectations but were willing to readjust those expectations on-site. Overall, these groups of students were more positive about their transition abroad, as compared to students who were unable or unwilling to adjust their social expectations.

While this study extends literature within the international education community, it also provides important connections with higher education literature on the U.S. Millennial generation. This research demonstrates how the current generation of U.S. college students, titled Millennials, may experience unique difficulties with a direct enrollment semester in Britain. Key characteristics of this generation include an appreciation of clear structure, a low tolerance for ambiguity, and preference for a busy schedule (Lowery, 2004). The participants in this study could easily recite hourly commitments from early morning until late at night, as their lives had been tightly structured for years. As Lea stated, she relied on her daily planner “like water” at her home institution. It was “jarring” for her to be in an environment where her planner was unnecessary.
Understanding these key characteristics of the U.S. Millennial generation provides an additional dimension of clarity to the challenges of students within this study. The British university environment has far less explicit structure and relies on self-motivated independence; whereas, U.S. Millennial students prefer clearly defined rules and organized activities in groups (Wilson, 2004). Millennials have grown up in an environment with little opportunity to interpret set standards (Lowery, 2004); whereas, their environment in Britain required academic, cultural, and social interpretation of standards. The students within this study were challenged to understand deeper cultural cues and had difficulty embracing autonomy over their daily schedules. Their independent academic environment and confusion about how to navigate it contributed to their social challenges. It was a new experience for them to be alone and to have full responsibility for their daily schedules. This elicited feelings of loneliness and newfound solitude.

Further, U.S. Millennials tend to have high expectations for their success (Wilson, 2004), and these expectations may be overly ambitious in certain situations (Lowery, 2004). The participants in this study set high expectations, particularly with regard to local friendships and campus involvement. They had difficulty reconciling the fact that their expectations were violated. This connects with Sawir et al.’s (2008) finding that friendship networks are not the only factor in determining students’ social adjustment to a new higher education culture.

Applying a theoretical lens to these violated expectations, this research also advances and extends our understanding of intercultural theory. Martin et al.’s (1995) Modified Expectancy Violations Framework is relevant for this study because students’ pre-departure
social expectations had a substantial impact on their evaluation of the study abroad experience. Above all other aspects of the semester abroad, multiple students expressed how they were most excited about developing strong local friendships. Aligning with EVT, students with these heightened expectations experienced significant negative expectancy violations, meaning their experience was much more challenging than expected.

When the original model of EVT was expanded to include intercultural interactions, Burgoon and Hubbard (2005) noted that without learning about another culture’s communication standards, people utilize stereotypical assumptions to frame their expectations for interaction. This theoretical tenet was evident throughout this study. Since students assumed similarity between U.S. and British cultures, they also assumed they could navigate social situations and develop friendships by using strategies familiar to them in the U.S. Before departure, it did not occur to students that they might need to understand different cultural values in order to form the solid local friendships they hoped to develop in Britain.

This research provides a longitudinal, qualitative application of Martin et al.’s (1995) modified EVT framework, which had previously been studied in a quantitative context. In doing so, it fulfilled Martin et al.’s (1995) suggestions for future research and clearly identified the social expectations and experiences of U.S. students in British direct enrollment programs as areas that require further attention. Further, these findings provide an opportunity to extend Martin et al.’s (1995) framework. Within Martin et al.’s (1995) model, when students experience negative expectancy violations, they assign a negative evaluation to the experience. Whereas students in this study experienced negative expectancy violations
with regard to friendship and social activity, a number of participants were able to reframe the experience as positive. This negative violation and subsequent reframing helped students learn they could be successfully independent and comfortable in solitude. They came to understand how full schedules and active social groups were not critical in order to have a meaningful experience. This reframing adds a further level of complexity to Martin et al.’s (1995) framework.

This study also yielded useful applications of Pitts’s (2009) descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment. Pitts’s model is especially relevant for understanding the social experiences of these participants because of its focus on refining expectations. Previously used in a context of U.S. students in France, this study extended applicability of this model in other study abroad locations.

As participants in this study encountered gaps in their social expectations, they faced significant stress. Some students experienced prolonged stress, as they reverted inward and filled their unexpected solitude with video games, TV, and communication with home. It was challenging for them to refine expectations and to see beyond this solitude and stress. This was particularly challenging because they expected to have active and meaningful social lives in Britain.

Though some students reverted to depressive states and had difficulty moving forward, others were willing to refine their expectations. Once participants realized their social experience in Britain would be much less vibrant than anticipated, they realigned expectations to reflect a reality with less structure and more solitude. Students made comments that they were learning to do things alone and that making friends did not need to
be their top priority in order to have a meaningful experience. Within Pitts’s (2009) model, when students successfully adjust their expectations, they have the capacity to experience personal growth. The participants within this study recognized that they were growing more independent and mature as the semester progressed. While it took time for them to accept their newfound social reality, they recognized it as an important opportunity for growth.

These findings not only provide a relevant application of Pitts’s (2009) model, but also reveal an opportunity to extend it. Within Pitts’s model, when students encounter gaps between expectation and experience, they utilize various types of talk to buffer stress and refine expectations. Though the students in this study did refine social expectations through communication with others, they also refined expectations through personal reflection. Personal reflection was particularly useful in the absence of strong social networks abroad. This act of communicating with oneself through journaling or independent reflection was an important tool to help students become more comfortable and functional within their newfound social realities of loneliness or solitude. Extending Pitts’s (2009) model to include personal reflection as a stress buffering tool would further enhance its applicability in future studies.

**Conclusions and Implications**

This study provides empirical support for the emerging concerns of international educators, who caution that U.S. direct enrollment students in Britain “too often lack the preparation to turn this into the cross-cultural experience we believe it to be” (Edwards, 2000, p. 93). Contrary to participants’ expectations, as well as their advisors’ hopes, students did not enjoy a seamless transition into the social fabric of their host institutions. The
findings of this study suggest opportunities for intervention in a variety of areas, including managing social expectations, understanding cultural contexts, and supporting strategies that facilitate successful integration.

There are certainly opportunities for international educators in the U.S. and Britain to enhance the likelihood for positive social experiences in a direct enrollment semester. It is perhaps equally important, however, for students to have realistic social expectations before they begin the study abroad experience. This study has emphasized the strong connection between social expectations and social experiences for U.S. students in Britain and the potential negative impact of unattainable social expectations. The study abroad semester, therefore, develops long before students step off the plane in Britain.

Orientation programs often include discussions to manage cultural expectations, setting the stage for highs and lows in the cultural adjustment experience. Given the findings of this study, it would also be useful to embed an orientation discussion to manage social expectations. Concepts such as notions of friendship should be included within discussions of cultural adjustment. These below-the-surface aspects of culture can pose a particular challenge for U.S. students in Britain, especially if students do not understand how or why to prepare for these differences. If we do not expect students to immediately understand and adapt to the local culture in their host country, they should know why we also do not expect them to immediately make local friends.

Some students do develop lifelong friendships during direct enrollment semesters; however, I question whether this is the norm. When students expect this level of friendship (local or co-national) in the span of a mere four months, they are more likely than not to be
disappointed by reality. Further, understanding that students’ top priorities for study abroad in Britain often involve traveling, it is important to articulate the impact that traveling away from their host communities each weekend will have on their ability to build meaningful local connections. Without investing significant time in their host campus and local community, it is unreasonable for students to expect social integration. As students develop their priorities for the study abroad experience in advising and orientation conversations, they will need to consider whether their top priority is to travel or to make local friends. It may be unrealistic to have both.

Participants in this study were influenced considerably by the social advice of former study abroad students and international exchange students. While international educators cannot influence the advice provided within outside blogs and web resources, they can encourage the authenticity of advice from within their own institutions. In this era of social media dominance, students often feel pressure to present a carefully curated view of their study abroad experience. Participants within this study observed and felt such pressure. Consequently, prospective study abroad students may not be seeing the more difficult aspects of a semester abroad in Britain, including loneliness, solitude, and challenges with making friends.

As such, it is imperative for international educators to facilitate discussions at orientations to ask study abroad alumni questions such as, “What didn’t go well?” or “What were some parts of your experience that really challenged you?” or “How does your social life in the U.S. compare with the social life you experienced in Britain?” and “How did you adjust if life was not what you expected?” or “What aspects of the experience frustrated...
you?” and “How did you work through this frustration?” or “What do you wish you would have done differently with your time?” It is understandable that study abroad alumni would want to view and present their experiences through an overly positive lens. It is essential, however, that they understand how providing authentic and honest reflections to future students does not diminish the value or success of their experience. Indeed, it enhances it because they are providing critical support to their peers.

In addition to peer influences, the social adjustment of students was also impacted by the independent academic environment of Britain. Citing “jarring” feelings of unstructured solitude, participants did not understand how to navigate an academic environment where independent study and self-directed research were prioritized. Since students did not understand the underlying cultural contexts that guided academic expectations, they struggled with how to manage an unstructured environment. This was particularly challenging because their academic and social schedules in the U.S. were consistently filled with assignments and obligations. This meaningful connection between academic adjustment and social adjustment provides a unique lens through which international educators can prepare U.S. students for the British direct enrollment experience.

It is critical, therefore, for advisors to explain the often unspoken values of British academic culture during pre-departure and on-site orientation programs, not only for students’ academic adjustment (see chapter 4), but also in support of successful social adjustment. Students who study abroad in Britain should be prepared to have more autonomy over their time, and should expect a larger proportion of that time to be spent alone. Students
should also understand that they are not failing at the study abroad experience if they encounter a reality with greater solitude and fewer scheduled obligations in Britain.

Advisors are in a unique position to help students understand the value and opportunity of navigating an environment with less structure and more ambiguous expectations, which requires independent initiative and time management. Embracing flexibility, becoming comfortable with ambiguity, and developing independence are important learning outcomes for the study abroad experience. These cultural differences can be framed as positive opportunities for growth rather than as frustrating challenges to overcome. If students understood this reality of studying abroad in direct enrollment programs within Britain, they may be more likely to develop realistic expectations.

While expectation management and intercultural education are important components for social adjustment in a direct enrollment experience within Britain, there are additional ways that international educators can intervene in the program to encourage a more positive social transition. Participants in this study, for example, often felt disconnected from their host institution and were unsure how to navigate opportunities to become involved in student organizations or gain entry into local friend groups. This may be especially relevant for students who participate in spring direct enrollment programs since they are entering the experience halfway through the academic year. Students were unclear about how to join student organizations/societies, were surprised about the costs involved, and were unsure whether to make the investment without having information about group activities.

International educators can help bridge this gap in understanding by incorporating the following suggestions. Advisors in Britain could invite representatives from leading or
relevant societies to speak about their organizations during international student orientations. Further, they could provide information about costs for societies and on-campus services in acceptance materials or on their international student website so that students could incorporate these fees into their budgetary plans. Participants were often aware of societies and services designed specifically for international students, and they enjoyed these opportunities. They were more interested pre-departure, however, in joining societies comprised predominately of domestic students in order to meet local friends and gain a better understanding of the culture.

Finally, if we know that U.S. students in British direct enrollment programs experience difficulty forming local friendships, as well as understanding cultural values that impact friendships, international educators can intervene in multiple ways. U.S. participants in this study often felt more connected with their academic departments than with their international offices. Local students likely share this feeling of departmental connection, particularly since the U.S. structure of general education requirements does not usually exist within the British curriculum. As such, international offices might consider partnering with academic departments to facilitate more focused social opportunities within departments. International and domestic students within the same academic department may be more likely to share common interests and see opportunities for connection, particularly if they are in the same classes.

Further, as international offices partner with academic departments and faculty, they can also encourage faculty to embed opportunities for collaboration between domestic students and U.S. students. For example, when Lea had an assignment in class that required a
shopping trip into town, her professor asked a fellow local classmate to accompany Lea into town and help her purchase materials. This not only supported Lea’s success with the assignment, but also sparked a connection with a fellow classmate in her department.

Beyond orientation programs, multiple international offices in this study sponsored local cultural excursions throughout the semester for international students. The goal of these trips was to provide opportunities for international students to experience local culture and to ensure accessibility of travel for students on a tight budget. One institution extended this model and developed a cultural excursion program where local students participated in trips alongside international students. Local students were motivated to participate because their costs were subsidized (or covered in full), and many of these students were study abroad alumni or prospective study abroad students. As domestic and international students participated regularly in these sponsored excursions throughout the semester, they enjoyed natural and continuous opportunities for engagement.

While the social experience of international students has been explored throughout higher education literature, there is a substantial gap in our understanding of U.S. students within study abroad programs in English-speaking countries. This research provided a longitudinal, focused examination of U.S. direct enrollment students in Britain to explore their social expectations and subsequent experiences. There are ample future research opportunities in this area, including quantitative studies to explore personality factors and social adjustment, studies that explore Millennial characteristics and study abroad social adjustment, as well as qualitative studies that include local students’ and educators’ perspectives on these issues. This research not only revealed significant expectancy
violations and social challenges for U.S. students within these programs, but also illuminated
unique difficulties from those previously addressed in the literature. Given the impact on
students’ study abroad experiences, it is critical for international educators to understand
these potential challenges and partner with students and colleagues to support more
successful social transitions.
REFERENCES


Berardo, K., & La Brack, B. (April, 2008). *Theoretically speaking...What will we do once the U- and W-curves of adjustment are retired?* Session presented at the Forum on Education Abroad conference, Boston, MA.


doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.02.009


CA: Sage.


doi: 10.1177/1028315308329787


doi: 10.1016/S01471767(03)0013-0


Harrison, J. K., & Brower, H. H. (2011). The impact of cultural intelligence and


Retrieved from

http://www.isep.org/students/Placed/handbook_education.asp?country=40


Kashima, E. S., & Loh, E. (2006). International students’ acculturation: Effects of


344


University of Reading. (n.d.). *Erasmus and Study Abroad Grade Conversion.* Retrieved from http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyabroad/incomingstudents/vso-gradeconversion.aspx


University of the Pacific. (2012b). *What’s up with culture? Online training resource for study abroad: W-Curve Module 2.3.1.* Retrieved from http://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/


Appendix A: Pitts’s (2009) Descriptive Model for Expectations, Talk, and Identity

4.2. Model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment

As indicated in the descriptive model of expectations, talk, and identity in short-term sojourner adjustment (Fig. 1), student expectations about their sojourn came from a variety of external sources (i.e., host university, co-students, friends/family at home, host family, and home university). Most expectations fell into one of four categories (i.e., academic/language, social, travel/cultural, or value/culture). As students engaged in intercultural encounters across the sojourn, they experienced gaps between their expectations and the reality of the sojourn. Uncertainty resulting from expectation gaps prompted students to make adjustments in order to manage stress and increase social effectiveness. The adjustments students made were communicative in nature yielding nine types of talk (i.e., advice, superficial introductory talk, information sharing, comparison, humor, storytelling, gossip, complaint, and supportive talk). Three explanations shed light on why these specific types of talk emerged. First, students were able to evaluate, interpret, and modify their own experiences abroad through the nine types of talk. Second, students were able to assess whether what they were experiencing was "normal," "okay," or "appropriate." Third, and most importantly, through these types of talk, students were able to make minor and major adjustments to their norms and expectations across the sojourn and alter their behavior accordingly. These adjustments allowed students to manage the stress resulting from expectation gaps as well as to anticipate, prepare for, and modify future interactions. The result was closer expectation alignment and, over time, decreased stress and increased ability to function abroad. The extent to which students were able to use this process to align their expectations, and develop norms and behaviors appropriate for their new environment, increased their chances of short-term adjustment and perceptions of "succeeding at study abroad."

Finally, students experienced a shift in personal and social identities. Y.Y. Kim (2001) proposes, "through prolonged experiences of trial and error, the stranger begins to 'earn' a new, expanded identity that is more than either the original cultural identity or the identity of the host culture" (p. 65). Identity formation included a new sense of who students were in relation to the rest of the world, as well as an expansion of their understanding of others. Toward the end of the sojourn and upon return, students articulated an identity shift toward a more nuanced and complex American identity and, for some, a movement toward a world citizen identity. This finding is consistent with Dolby’s (2007) finding that while study abroad programs emphasize expectations for a global identity shift, in short-term programs students' nuanced articulation of their place in the world as American citizens is considerably more likely and equally important as the development of a global identity.

4.3. Implications of co-national support

The co-national support system offers an important and potentially positive mode of adjustment (Church, 1982; Major, 2005; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). Overall, these findings suggest that within the co-national network, everyday talk provides sojourners the agency to make the cognitive, behavioral, and affective adjustments necessary to succeed abroad. This finding adds to our complexity of knowledge regarding the role of co-national (compared to international) support in sojourner adjustment. Previous research on long-term sojourns (e.g., Fontaine, 1996; Y.Y. Kim, 2001) suggests that in the long run, co-national support might be more harmful than helpful in the adjustment process. On the contrary, a co-national support system appears to be highly beneficial for adjustment in the short-term sojourn. Due to the abbreviated adjustment period available in short-term sojourns, the co-national support system aids in the immediate development of skills and confidence necessary for temporary overseas adjustment. While the co-national support system may prove ineffective for long-term sojourners, for short-term sojourners it appears to be both effective and efficient. Thus, the length of the sojourn must be taken into account when considering the trajectory for adjustment and necessity for and effectiveness of co-national support.
Appendix B: Martin et al.'s (1995) Modified EVT Framework

Influences:
Gender, Prior experiences
Location of sojourn

Predeparture Expectations (positive/negative)

Expectations Fulfilled

Positive Evaluation

Violated Positively

Violated Negatively

Fulfillment of Expectations and Evaluation of Sojourn

The application of expectancy violation theory to student sojourning is summarized in Figure 1. Individuals hold expectations—prior to an intercultural experience—that may be conceptualized as ranging from negative to positive. These expectations are then met or violated negatively.
Appendix C: Interview Protocol for Participants Pre-departure

1. How did the idea of studying abroad first come about for you?
2. Why did you decide to apply to the United Kingdom and to your specific program?
3. Did anyone help you make that decision?
4. How have you been preparing for study abroad in (insert city) since you received your acceptance?
5. Are others helping you prepare for studying abroad in (insert city)?
   a. How so?

Academic Expectations:
I would like to ask you a few questions specific to your upcoming academic experience in the U.K.
1. What classes will you be taking in the U.K.?
2. How did you make the decision to take those classes?
3. Walk me through what you expect a typical weekday will be like next spring, from the time you get up until you go to bed.
   a. How does that compare to a typical weekday here?
4. Are there aspects of your academic life in the U.K. that you’re particularly excited about?
5. Are there aspects of your academic life in the U.K. that you’re particularly nervous about?
   a. How do you plan to work through that nervousness?

Cultural Expectations:
I would now like to ask you a few questions about your upcoming experience living within the U.K. culture.
1. What aspects of U.K. culture appeal to you?
2. What aspects of U.K. culture confuse you or frustrate you?
3. What are some words you would use to describe U.K. culture?
4. What do you think are the main differences between U.K. culture and your own culture?
5. Do you expect to encounter challenges as you adjust to U.K. culture?
   a. If so, in what areas?
   b. If not, why not?

Social Expectations:
I would also like to ask you a few questions about your upcoming social experience in the U.K.
1. Are you expecting to form friendships or relationships with locals in (insert city)?
   a. If so, what are some things you’re planning to do to build those relationships?
b. If not, why not?

2. What role do you think (insert program name) will play in helping you to be successful in (insert host city)?

3. Do you anticipate any problems in understanding the language?

4. Do you expect this study abroad semester will be stressful?
   a. If so, what are some of things you expect may bring about stress?
   b. If not, why not?

Concluding Questions:

1. What are you looking forward to most about next semester?

2. What advice would you give to a student who is preparing to study abroad in the U.K.?

   Are there any questions I may have missed that you would like to add?
Appendix D: Interview Protocol for Participants during Site Visit

1. How is the semester going thus far?
2. Has life in the U.K. been how you thought it would be?

Academic Expectations vs. Experience:
I would like to ask you a few questions specific to your academic experience thus far in the U.K.
1. How are classes going?
2. Is your academic life any different than you thought it would be?
   a. If so, how?
3. Can you tell me about an academic situation or assignment here that has really challenged you?
4. How would you describe your relationships with your professors?
   a. Is this what you were expecting?
   b. How does this compare with your relationships with faculty at home?
5. Walk me through what a typical weekday is like for you, from the time you get up until the time you go to bed.
   a. How does this compare with what you thought a typical weekday would be?

Cultural Expectations vs. Experiences:
I would now like to ask you a few questions about your experience living within the U.K. culture.
1. Tell me about the first time you encountered something or someone here that made you think, “Wow, I’m really not in (insert home state) anymore.”
2. What has surprised you most about the culture here?
3. Can you tell me about a time when you encountered something about the culture that was challenging, frustrating, or confusing for you?
   a. What did you do to get through the situation?
4. What experiences have helped you understand U.K. culture the most?
5. Has your transition to living in the U.K. been what you expected?

Social Expectations vs. Experiences:
I would also like to ask you a few questions about your social experience in the U.K.
1. Have you formed friendships or relationships with locals in (insert city)?
   a. If so, tell me about how you became friends.
   b. If not, why not?
2. Who are your closest friends here?
3. Have there been times when you’ve felt homesick, lonely, stressed, or depressed while you’ve been here?
   a. If you’re comfortable sharing, tell me more about that.
   b. What strategies have you used to work through those feelings?
4. If someone from home was coming to visit you, what are one or two experiences that you would want them to have here?
5. Have you experienced any problems in understanding the language?
6. What role is (insert program name) playing in helping you to be successful here?

Concluding Questions:
1. What advice would you give to a student who is preparing to study abroad in the U.K.?
   Are there any questions I may have missed that you would like to add?
Appendix E: Interview Protocol for Participants upon Re-entry

1. How is your return to life in the U.S. going thus far?
2. Looking back on last semester, how does your study abroad experience compare with how you thought it would be?

Academic Expectations vs. Experience:
I would like to ask you a few questions specific to your academic experience in the U.K.
1. How did your final exams and papers go last spring?
   a. In what ways were they different than final exams at your home campus?
2. What surprised you most about academics at (insert program name)?
3. Are there aspects of academics at (insert program name) that you wish (insert home campus name) would adopt?
4. What aspects of academics at (insert program name) did you find to be more challenging (insert home campus name)?
   a. Why is that?
5. Think back to your expectations last fall about U.K. classes and how you thought your academic life would be there. Now that you’ve returned, would you say that the academics of study abroad were as expected, better than expected, or more challenging than you expected?
   a. Why?
6. How are you adjusting to classes on your home campus this fall?

Cultural Expectations vs. Experiences:
I would now like to ask you a few questions about your experience living within the U.K. culture.
1. Now that you’ve returned from the U.K., what are some words you would use to describe the culture there?
2. What is the one experience abroad that taught you the most about U.K. culture?
3. What about U.K. culture do you think would be important for future study abroad students to know?
4. Think back to your expectations last fall about U.K. culture and what you thought it was going to be like to in the U.K. Now that you’ve returned, would you say that living in the U.K. was as expected, better than expected, or more challenging than you expected?
   a. Why?
5. Has your transition back to U.S. culture been how you thought it would be?
   a. If so, how so?
b. If not, why not?

Social Expectations vs. Experiences:
I would also like to ask you a few questions about your social experience in the U.K.

1. How much are you keeping in touch with your friends from last spring?
   a. (If only mention U.S.-based friends) How much are you keeping in touch with local friends from the U.K.?

2. If another student was planning to study at (insert program name), what advice would you provide her/him for having a positive social experience there?
   a. Is this different from advice you followed?

3. Looking back on your experience, was there a time you felt stressed while abroad?
   a. If so, was this stress more intense than you previously felt at home?
   b. If you feel comfortable, can you tell me about it?
   c. If not, why do you think you enjoyed a stress-free semester?

4. Think back to your expectations last fall about what you hoped your social life would be like in the U.K. Now that you’ve returned, would you say that your social experience in the U.K. was as expected, better than expected, or more challenging than you expected?
   a. Why?

5. What role is your home campus playing in helping you transition back to life in the U.S.?

Concluding Questions:

1. Tell me about a time you encountered a pleasant surprise abroad that had a significant impact on your experience.
2. Tell me about your biggest unexpected challenge while abroad.
3. What overall advice would you give to someone who is preparing to study abroad in the U.K.?
4. What advice would you give to someone who is preparing to return home from a semester abroad in the U.K.?
   Are there any questions I may have missed that you would like to add?
Appendix F: Interview Protocol for Study Abroad Advisors in the U.S.

1. How long have you been in the study abroad field?
2. How long have you been advising U.S. students for U.K. study abroad programs?
3. What do you think are the leading reasons why students select the U.K. as a study abroad destination?
4. Based on your experiences, would you say that U.S. students set appropriate expectations for studying abroad in the U.K.?
   a. If so, what do you think has led them to set appropriate expectations?
   b. If not, why not?

Academic Experience
I’d like to ask you some questions specific to the academic experiences of your current and former study abroad students in the U.K.
1. How do you describe the U.K. academic structure to your advisees pre-departure?
2. From your experience, are there aspects of the U.K. academic structure that tend to challenge U.S. students more than expected?
   a. Can you think of a time when your advisee was unexpectedly challenged by his/her U.K. academic environment?
   b. If so, how were you involved in this situation?
3. What are the unique qualities that U.S. study abroad students should possess to be academically successful in the U.K.?
4. What are the unique qualities that U.K. study abroad programs should possess to facilitate academic success for U.S. study abroad students?
5. Overall, do students set appropriate expectations for the U.K. academic experience?

Cultural Experience
I’d now like to ask you some questions specific to the cultural experiences of your current and former study abroad students in the U.K.
1. Do you discuss the cultural adjustment process with your advisees before they depart?
   a. If so, how do you describe the cultural adjustment process in the U.K.?
   b. If not, what other resources are available to students?
2. How do you think the majority of your advisees would describe U.K. culture before they depart?
3. From your experience, have you encountered a situation when a study abroad student was surprised, frustrated, or confused by a cultural situation in the U.K.?
   a. If so, can you tell me about it?
4. Think of your advisees who were very successful in adjusting to and understanding U.K. culture while they were abroad. What specific things do you think they did that facilitated their successful adjustment?
5. Think of your advisees who may have struggled with adjusting and integrating into U.K. culture. What specific things do you think they did that prevented them from being successful?

Social Experience
I’d also like to ask you some questions specific to the social experiences of your current and former study abroad students in the U.K.

1. Do you advise students to form a support network in the U.K.?
   a. If so, what do you advise?

2. What is the primary source of social support for the majority of your students?

3. Do the majority of your students form friendships with the locals?

4. From your experience, have any of your advisees experienced homesickness, stress, depression, or loneliness while abroad in the U.K.?
   a. If so, and if you’re comfortable, can you tell me more about that?
   b. What do you think brought about these conditions?
   c. If not, why not?

5. How have you observed U.K. host programs in helping students be successful during the semester abroad?

6. How would you describe your advisees’ pre-departure expectations about their U.K. social experience?
   a. Are these expectations appropriate?

Concluding Question:
Are there any questions I may have missed that you would like to add?
Appendix G: Interview Protocol for Study Abroad Advisors and Faculty in the U.K.

1. How long have you been in the study abroad field?
2. How long have you been advising U.S. students for U.K. study abroad programs?
3. What do you think are the leading reasons why U.S. students select the U.K. as a study abroad destination?
4. Based on your experiences, would you say that U.S. students set appropriate expectations for studying abroad in the U.K.?
5. If so, what do you think has led them to set appropriate expectations?
6. If not, why not?

Academic Experience
I’d like to ask you some questions specific to the academic experiences of your current and former U.S. study abroad students in the U.K.

1. How do you describe the U.K. academic structure to U.S. students who study with your program?
2. From your experience, are there aspects of the U.K. academic structure that tend to challenge U.S. students more than expected?
   a. Can you think of a time when a U.S. student was unexpectedly challenged by his/her academic environment in the U.K.?
   b. If so, how were you involved in this situation?
3. What are the unique qualities that U.S. study abroad students should possess to be academically successful in the U.K.?
4. What are the unique qualities that U.K. study abroad programs should possess to facilitate academic success for U.S. study abroad students?
5. Overall, do U.S. study abroad students set appropriate expectations for the U.K. academic experience?

Cultural Experience
I’d now like to ask you some questions specific to the cultural experiences of your current and former U.S. study abroad students in the U.K.

1. Do you discuss cultural adjustment with U.S. study abroad students who study abroad in the U.K.?
   a. If so, how do you describe it to students?
2. How do you think the majority of U.S. students on your program would describe U.K. culture before the semester begins?
3. From your experience, have you encountered a situation when a U.S. study abroad student was surprised, frustrated, or confused by a cultural situation in the U.K.?
   a. If so, can you tell me about it?
4. Think of your U.S. students who were very successful in adjusting to and understanding U.K. culture while they were abroad. What specific things do you think they did that facilitated their successful adjustment?

5. Think of your U.S. students who may have struggled with adjusting and integrating into U.K. culture. What specific things do you think they did that prevented them from being successful?

Social Experience
I’d also like to ask you some questions specific to the social experiences of your current and former U.S. study abroad students in the U.K.

1. Do you advise U.S. students to form a support network in the U.K.?
   a. If so, what do you advise?

2. What is the primary source of social support for the majority of your U.S. students?

3. Do the majority of your U.S. students form friendships with the locals?

4. From your experience, have any of your U.S. students experienced homesickness, stress, depression, or loneliness while abroad in the U.K.?
   a. If so, and if you’re comfortable, can you tell me more about that?
   b. What do you think brought about these conditions?
   c. If not, why not?

5. What are the ways that your program helps U.S. students be successful during a semester abroad in the U.K.?

6. How would you describe U.S. students’ expectations about their U.K. social experience?
   a. Are these expectations appropriate?

Concluding Question:
Are there any questions I may have missed that you would like to add?
Appendix H: Participant Profiles

Roni

Roni is a Black female college student who was born and raised in a small town in the southeastern United States. She was “bred in Brooklyn,” where her extended family resides. She attends University of the Southeast, a large, four-year, comprehensive research and primarily residential university in the southeastern United States. Roni is a junior student in the honors program. She is majoring in media studies and minoring in African American studies. This is her second year at University of the Southeast. She transferred after one year at a larger university in the northeastern United States. She transferred in order to be closer to home and because of increasing out-of-state tuition costs each year.

Roni is happy and involved at University of the Southeast. She calls it an “amazing” and “really good school,” citing many opportunities to become involved, if students take advantage of them (p. 2). She appreciates the wide spectrum of diversity, as well as the clubs and student organizations within the institution. She also appreciates that University of the Southeast is in an active college town. It is clear that Roni enjoys a high level of social engagement, as her weekends are often filled with activity.

While Roni is very involved in her home university, she is simultaneously deeply connected to her family. She describes her family as, “very close-knit.” She talks on the phone to her mother at least three times per day and sends text messages to her father, brother, and sister throughout the day. She is the first member of her immediate family to leave the country and notes that this is the first time that a member of her family will be too far to easily visit.

This is one of the reasons why Roni is nervous about studying abroad, but studying abroad is always something she has wanted to do. She “likes the idea of traveling, knowing different cultures, (and) different communities.” The honors program at University of the Southeast requires students to participate in study abroad and provides both financial support and focused courses and orientation seminars for the experience.

Roni originally wanted to study abroad in Italy. She “loved the environment, the fashion (and) the food.” Of the two programs available, one did not accept financial aid and the other was canceled. She selected England because its proximity to other countries in Europe would enable her to travel widely. She selected her institution in Britain because it had many courses that she could take for her media studies major, and it had the highest GPA requirement. She felt that the high GPA requirement meant that it was a strong school academically, which was important to her. She notes that her entire family places an importance on attaining academic achievement and attending institutions of high academic merit. She values the high level of responsiveness and support she received from her host institution pre-departure. She has also befriended British international exchange students at University of the Southeast, who have provided her with advice before her departure.

Roni describes herself as very open-minded with strong stances on certain issues. She says she can “step on people’s toes sometimes.” She is a self-described feminist and feels strongly about equal rights, not just for females or African Americans, but for all people. She is most looking forward to connecting with other people and building significant friendships
while she is abroad. She’s also eager to make professional connections in media studies and radio, as she has interest in working abroad someday.

Lea

Lea is a White female college student at University of the Southeast, a large, four-year, comprehensive research, and primarily residential university in the southeastern United States. She is a junior and honors student, majoring in theatre with a focus in stage management. She is minoring in American Sign Language, deaf studies and communications. She considers her theatre major the program she enjoys most, and the minor in communications a fulfillment of her parents’ requirement to have a more practical minor. Lea does not know if she will pursue a profession in theatre but feels very well-adjusted in the department at University of the Southeast.

Lea was born less than two hours from University of the Southeast and attended a highly competitive high school. She originally wanted to attend a smaller private college out of state but was unable to afford the cost. The international honors program at University of the Southeast, which provides funding and academic support for study abroad, helped finalize the enrollment decision for Lea and her parents. Lea’s brother graduated from college seven years ago and told her that his biggest regret was not studying abroad. She looks up to him and “really valued his opinion strongly,” so his encouragement was influential in her decision to pursue a study abroad program, even though she was nervous about the prospect of leaving the country for the first time.

Lea originally researched program options through University of the Southeast on her own and found an institution in Australia with a strong theatre program. When she presented this option to her parents, they questioned why she would go to Australia to study theatre and convinced her that she should go to the United Kingdom instead, since she would have many more travel opportunities and since the U.K. is the place “where theatre was born and where Shakespeare thrived.” Her first choice institution was unavailable, so she is studying at her second choice in Wales. The more she finds out about her host institution, the more she feels it is a good fit for her academic interests. There are also at least four international exchange students from her Welsh host university in her theatre department at University of the Southeast, and they have been talking with her pre-departure.

Lea keeps a very busy schedule, taking 18-20 course hours as an honors student each semester. She is often scheduled from 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. with classes and theatre rehearsals and performances from 6:00 p.m.-11:30 p.m. She prides herself, however, on being deeply reflective and making time for journaling and scrapbooking so that she can look back on memories in the future. She feels confined in the U.S. and is looking forward to experiencing another part of the world and learning about herself and other people.

Calvin

Calvin is a Black male and an out-of-state junior student at University of the Southeast, a large, four-year, comprehensive research, and primarily residential university in the southeastern United States. Calvin is pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in economics with a minor in psychology. He is from a large metropolitan city in a state farther south and
wanted to study out-of-state for college. Of the institutions to which he applied, University of the Southeast gave Calvin the best financial package and admission to the honors program, which requires study abroad.

Calvin considers study abroad a “very rare opportunity.” He hopes to get an internship next year, and thinks that studying abroad will help in that endeavor. He is very academically motivated and thinks he could have graduated a year early if not for the extra courses he has been required to take to meet his international honors requirements. He is the first member of his family to travel outside of the country. He admits that the concept of studying abroad was difficult for him to visualize at first, and his parents continue to struggle with it. He notes that their closest reference point is a class field trip, so they ask questions such as whether he will have a chaperone. He describes his family as “utterly confused and more nervous than me.” He views studying abroad as an opportunity to live independently and become an adult, which is an aspect that is exciting for him, yet difficult for his family.

Calvin is very involved at University of the Southeast. He is able to share school, work, tutoring, and exercise schedules to the minute, including when he takes 45-minute lunch breaks. He is also an honors ambassador and a member of the Residence Hall Association. Calvin enjoys volunteering and cites his previous volunteer work as the most beneficial part of his first two years in college.

After conducting much research, Calvin selected his host institution in Scotland because he concluded it was a “very well-known business school…and they had a large focus on the economy.” Calvin wants to study abroad in the U.K. because it would be too stressful to manage a non-English language barrier. Additionally, he has developed a strong interest in soccer and has been following the Premiere League. He plans to take courses in finance, psychology, and economics. It has been very stressful for him to finalize his course schedule. He is also hoping to conduct some research with the economics department while he is there. Calvin’s roommate from University of the Southeast will also be studying abroad at his host institution in Scotland, so they will be sharing this experience together.

While Calvin is very nervous about the study abroad experience, he is looking forward to trying new things, such as embarking on outdoor sports, tasting different foods, and traveling to destinations within Europe. He is most excited about the personal growth, confidence, and maturity that he hopes will result from the experience of studying abroad.

Anna

Anna is a White female junior transfer student at South City University. She transferred to South City University from University of the Southeast. South City University is a large, four-year, comprehensive research, and primarily residential university in the southeastern United States. It is larger and in a more urban area than University of the Southeast. It is difficult for Anna to say where exactly she is from because she was in a military family and has moved quite a bit. The town where she lived the longest, as well as the place she considers her hometown, is in very close in proximity to South City University. All members of her family are from a town very close to her university.

Anna is majoring in English. She is currently minoring in journalism but plans to drop it for a second major in marketing next year. She feels that University of the Southeast
was “a little too liberal artsy,” and too female-dominant. She also notes that most students went home on the weekends. She feels South City University is a much better fit.

She has always wanted to study abroad in London. Given her English major background, she is particularly interested in the fact that so many great authors come from London. She also feels that London has a rich history, more history than the U.S. She feels the U.S. public school education system has limited her knowledge of European history. While Anna is happier with the overall environment of South City University, she does not feel the same campus culture with regard to study abroad support and integrated international students. This has been disappointing. She has, however, found multiple options for studying abroad in Britain. Anna is studying abroad in a university within greater London. She selected this program because she heard it was easier to transfer courses back to the home campus, and she likes that South City University has a faculty member on-site in London. While abroad, she plans to take a second level of Italian, as well as literature courses to make progress towards her degree. She is also interested in taking a creative writing class. She is living off-campus, approximately two-miles away from the institution, in the home of an older local woman, along with another college student from the northeastern U.S.

Anna is the youngest child of three and notes that her mother is “super overprotective” and very worried about her study abroad experience. Anna says her mother is going to be “devastated” when she departs for study abroad. Her mother is especially worried about safety. Anna has been trying to reassure her, but she is worried about safety issues too, as she has heard some concerning things about Europe.

Anna describes herself as very studious and notes that she does not go out very much at South City University. She has been enrolled in 19 credits and does not have free time for socializing or extra activities. She prefers to have a few close friends and does not branch out often. She is hoping that a study abroad semester will force her to be more outgoing, social, mature, and capable of international travel. She is already planning another study abroad experience next summer in Italy.

**Xavier**

Xavier is a Black male, first generation junior transfer student at South City University majoring in computer science with a minor in mathematics. He transferred after three years at Central State University. South City University is a large, four-year, comprehensive research, and primarily residential university in the southeastern United States. Central State University is also a large, four-year, comprehensive research university. It is larger in size and also located in the same town as Xavier’s parents. Xavier notes that he has lived a relatively sheltered life as an only child and was not as focused on academics at Central State University.

Transferring to a new institution has offered Xavier the opportunity to “start over” and “get away,” which has provided him a much-needed break and chance to meet new people. Xavier lives on campus at South City University and serves as a computer science teaching assistant. He appreciates the conveniences that come with living on-campus, as well as the good opportunities to meet people.
While Xavier says he is doing better since transferring to South City University, he is not very happy and thinks that perhaps spending time in another place will help him feel better. He has never been on a plane before, but many of his close friends from Central State University have traveled abroad, and their experiences influenced him to explore a study abroad semester. Deciding to study abroad for the spring was a “last minute rush decision.” He notes that as a person of color, he has experienced multiple forms of racism living in the south, but when he has spoken with people from other countries or with people who have traveled abroad, they were nicer and had different ideas than what he has experienced. These conversations have taken place in-person with friends and through websites and apps with adults abroad on the Internet. Xavier considers his study abroad destination much more diverse than his home culture. He is looking forward to being in a place where there are different types of people with diverse ideas, and being in a place where people are not looked down upon for having certain ideas.

The appeal of an English-speaking destination, the fact that people he met online were “genuinely nice,” and the proximity to the city of London were the primary factors that led Xavier to select a university in greater London as his study abroad destination (p. 5). Xavier is worried about a number of factors for his study abroad experience, such as finances and academics, especially since he is not sure he will be able to work abroad. He needs his courses in London to contribute toward graduation. His grades abroad will count toward his GPA. He is the first member of his family to go to college, and while his parents have been supportive and have made many sacrifices for him, they have not been able to help him prepare for the study abroad experience.

At South City University, Xavier spends his free time playing video games. He travels home every other weekend to see his closer friends. He has not gone out socially in a long time and hopes to spend his free time abroad exploring the city and meeting people. He is most excited about forming friendships and making connections with people.

Xavier views the study abroad semester as a chance to “start over again” and “explore different parts” of himself. He has plans to “reinvent” himself during the course of the semester. He wants to get a new haircut, change the way he dresses, and consider a romantic relationship, which has not really been a part of his life. He already has specific ideas about how he will change his style of dress in London. At the time of the first interview, he was dressed from head to toe in Superman-themed clothing. In middle school and high school, he was teased quite a bit. During Xavier’s senior year of high school, he developed a “superhero version” of himself to stand up for himself, feeling that Superman was “invincible…He can do anything.” He considers his high school persona to be a shy Clark Kent, and his college persona to be Superman. He plans to take his Superman-themed clothing with him until he goes shopping abroad and develops his new “edgy” style in London.

Jaclyn

Jaclyn is a White female, junior transfer student at University of the Southeast, majoring in communication studies. She is pursuing minors in media and women’s and gender studies. University of the Southeast is a large, four-year, comprehensive research, and primarily residential university in the southeastern United States. Jaclyn transferred to
University of the Southeast from Central State University. When Jaclyn first attended Central State University after high school, she was unsure what major she wanted to pursue and thought the institution was “huge.” She “felt really aimless” and “was spending a ton of money.” After withdrawing and working for a year, she pursued smaller institutions within the state and selected University of the Southeast. She had never been to the campus of University of the Southeast before she transferred and notes it was a “blind decision.”

The transfer to University of the Southeast has been a very positive one for Jaclyn. She likes the “weird local culture” and wealth of smaller local music shows within the surrounding area. She also works at the local radio station as an on-air personality. Music is an integral part of her life, and she plans to pursue a career in the independent music industry upon graduation. This interest in local music and the arts helped Jaclyn identify her study abroad program in England because she heard that her large host city had a vibrant local arts culture, including many opportunities for independent music shows. Jaclyn is from a very small town in the southeastern U.S. She describes it as, “the tiniest town ever.” Her host institution in England is in a large city, and studying abroad will be the first time she lives in a metropolitan city.

Jaclyn always wanted to study abroad, but was unsure of whether she could afford it. Last year, her roommate at University of the Southeast was an international exchange student who attends college in England. She provided Jaclyn with the motivation and encouragement to seriously pursue study abroad opportunities. This roommate will return to England in the spring and will be one hour away from Jaclyn’s study abroad location. Jaclyn’s younger sister will also be in Europe this spring. While Jaclyn is in England, her sister will be studying abroad in France. In addition to receiving support from her roommate and sister, Jaclyn has received strong encouragement from her long-term boyfriend, who supports her study abroad pursuits. This has collectively helped ease her anxiety about spending a semester abroad.

Jaclyn has spent a considerable amount of time discussing her upcoming study abroad semester with her international exchange student roommate. She is looking forward to exploring the local city, as well as traveling elsewhere. She has also reflected on the fact that she will be without her constant sources of support and companionship while abroad. While she is not taking as many degree-relevant courses as she would like and is anxious about adjusting to a less structured academic system, she is more focused on the overall experience and opportunities to explore her host culture.

**Julie**

Julie is a White female college student at Central State University. Central State University is a large, four-year, comprehensive land-grant research university in the southeastern U.S. Julie’s father is a professor at Central State. She only applied to two colleges, Central State University and another institution, which she says was not really an option. She has lived in the same house her entire life, which is close in proximity to her home institution.

Julie is majoring in anthropology and plans to pursue a career in forensic anthropology. She has always enjoyed “cop shows” and enjoys the thought of solving crimes.
and helping people. While Julie has traveled to nearly every state in the U.S. on family vacations, she has not traveled abroad, except for a short, recent family trip to Turkey. She has been interested in traveling internationally for a long time and figures study abroad is a good way to do it. She sought out a study abroad information session during new student orientation at Central State University. She has planned carefully for study abroad during second semester junior year because she thought she would be the most settled in both university life and her major.

Julie’s priorities for a study abroad destination were an English-speaking location, close enough for family to visit, close to other travel destinations, good academic fit, and a mid-sized (not large) city. She selected a host university in England, which was among the recommended programs from Central State University for her major. She selected her courses abroad by following her degree audit and determining which classes she needs to stay on track for graduation.

Living in the same area throughout her life, Julie depends on a support system of family, friends, and a long-term boyfriend. She has never been away from this support system for an extended period of time. She lives with her boyfriend and spends the night at her mother’s house one night per week. Her parents are divorced, but she sees her father frequently at Central State University and is able to stop by his office at the university.

Julie is currently in therapy and had had the same counselor for a year and a half. She intends to learn how to be independent from counseling while abroad. She says that she is in therapy for other reasons, but one of the things she has been working on with her therapist is how to make friends abroad and develop a good support network in England. She is worried about this aspect of the experience. Julie and her 16-year old sister are best friends and provide each other with significant support and stress relief, so she is concerned about what will happen to family dynamics while she is away.

Julie has been dating her boyfriend for over a year, and they have been living together for nearly four months. She is his first girlfriend, and they are “together all the time.” They have not had a conversation about what it will mean to their relationship when she studies abroad, and she says that, “he tries not to think about it.” She knows studying abroad will put stress on their romantic relationship. She has sought advice from friends who have long-distance relationships and is thinking about having a reading contest with her boyfriend while abroad to maintain a shared connection.

Julie is not as excited about taking classes abroad as she is about traveling and exploring her host country. She is looking forward to going to museums, traveling, and meeting up with a friend from home who will also be in Europe. She has been involved in an online scavenger hunt-type experience called letterboxing for nearly five years and may continue that pastime while in Europe. Otherwise, she spends free time on YouTube, reading, watching TV, and spending time friends while they play video games.

Note: Julie decided to withdraw from her semester abroad in England before the on-site interviews for this study took place. In a post-return interview, Julie noted that she primarily withdrew from the study abroad program due to academic and social challenges in her host institution.
Kristen

Kristen is a White female college student at Central State University. Central State University is a large, four-year, comprehensive land-grant research university in the southeastern U.S. Kristen is majoring in chemical engineering, which is the primary reason why she chose to attend Central State. Cost was also a factor in her decision, as Kristen was limited to in-state public institutions. She is from a small mountain town, approximately four and a half hours away, in the same state as Central State University. Her high school had 600 people, spanning the entire county, and it was not very diverse. Her transition to Central State was a “big change,” particularly being around diverse types of people. While she was a bit intimidated by the change at first, she notes that overall it has been a good transition.

Kristen has traveled extensively within the U.S. on family vacations. She has also been to Canada briefly. She will be the first member of her family to study abroad. While she was always interested in studying abroad during her time at Central State University, she thought it was not financially feasible. Once she saw the opportunity to pay in-state tuition on an exchange program, however, she realized it would be a good opportunity.

Kristen’s priorities for studying abroad were an English-speaking country and chemical engineering courses. She selected England over Australia because of the opportunities to travel elsewhere in Europe. She has always been drawn to the history of Europe and has always wanted to visit. Kristen was not awarded a slot in her first choice program in England due lack of available exchange slots, so she selected from other exchange alternatives. She selected the best remaining engineering school with the closest proximity to London, since she wanted a big city experience. She is planning to take the same courses in England that she would be taking at home. Her biggest concern for academics is maintaining progress toward graduation. She is excited about taking classes with British professors, since she considers her host university in England to be a great engineering school. Kristen is also planning to join the recreation center and play sports while abroad because she plays intramural sports in the U.S.

In the U.S., Kristen lives with three other female roommates in an apartment, and they have a large group of friends. She leads a highly active and social life. During the weekdays when she is not in class, Kristen and friends host group dinners, watch TV, play group video games, and hang out as a group. On the weekends, they attend sporting events, go hiking and kayaking, visit museums, and venture downtown. She notes, “I’m always doing stuff.” She is planning to maintain this lifestyle while abroad and is especially excited to travel as much as possible on the weekends. She notes that travel is one of the main reasons she is studying abroad.

Kristen is planning to live on-campus in England and has applied to live with degree-seeking students, not just exchange students. She is hoping this housing decision will help her meet people and ease her transition. She is also looking forward to meeting other exchange students at the orientation program.
Melissa

Melissa is a White female college student at University of the Southeast. University of the Southeast is a large, four-year, comprehensive research, and primarily residential university in the southeastern United States. This is her second year at University of the Southeast. She transferred from a private institution within the state after one year. Finances were the primary reason for Melissa’s transfer. The transfer decision has opened financial opportunities such as studying abroad. University of the Southeast is close to Melissa’s home, which has increased her motivation to study abroad. She is majoring in religious studies and communication studies. She hopes to engage in mission work abroad before she attends seminary for graduate school. These career interests influenced her major in religious studies. She is currently taking an intercultural communications class, and she thinks it has been helpful in preparing her to be open-minded toward other cultures.

Melissa lives with her childhood best friend and is good friends with her other two roommates. She notes that they all spend a great deal of time together. Melissa has taken Spanish language classes and enjoys attending a weekly conversation group. She also hosts a weekly Bible study in her apartment and volunteers at a local refugee center. She and her friends also enjoy salsa and bachata dancing on the weekends.

She is from a small town within an hour’s drive from University of the Southeast. She is the youngest of 4 children and is the only member of her family to travel outside of the country. Her mother has been supportive and encouraging of her study abroad experience, but the rest of her family has been apprehensive. Melissa notes that her siblings all attended college close to home and are protective of her. They make jokes that she should stay home and go to local cultural events, instead of studying abroad. Though supportive, Melissa’s mother has been concerned about safety abroad. Her mother conducted research on crime statistics in various locations and gave input on Melissa’s program selection based on city safety.

Melissa’s study abroad program selection process was quite extensive. She was originally interested in Malta because of religious studies connections. She referenced a Biblical story about Paul being shipwrecked in Malta. When lack of exchange slots eliminated that option, Melissa selected New Zealand as a second choice, in order to go somewhere “totally different.” Unfortunately, the New Zealand program was cost prohibitive for Melissa. Her third choice was Northern Ireland, again because of the religious studies interest, as well as opportunities to travel elsewhere in Europe. The Northern Ireland program was also highly competitive. The study abroad office at University of the Southeast continued providing her with additional options until she found an interesting fit.

Melissa is studying abroad at a university in England. Both the feedback on safety from her mother and the availability of communications classes that will transfer toward her degree were influential in her decision. Since confirming this decision, she has found other University of the Southeast students who will be on exchange at her English host institution, in addition to an international exchange student who is currently studying abroad at University of the Southeast for the year. The exchange student has told Melissa that, “partying is really important,” in her city abroad and she is unsure what Melissa will do in her host city, since Melissa is “not a partyer.” Melissa is unsure whether this perspective is
shared by everyone or just by this particular exchange student and her friends, so she has accepted the opinion as new information and has remained open about her own experience.

**Amaya**

Amaya is a junior at South City University. Her ethnic background is Puerto Rican and Antiguan. Amaya is from New York City and specifically from the Bronx. She and her family moved to a comparatively much smaller town in the southeastern United States when she was 15 years old. Amaya is studying Latin American studies and sociology at South City University. She has a concentration in the Caribbean, so she focuses her coursework on areas such as Caribbean culture and Afro Latin American history. She applied to South City University on a last minute whim, since her initial first choice institution was a smaller, private university. She had previously been afraid of attending a big school for higher education but inexplicably changed her mind. South City University is a large, four-year, comprehensive research and primarily residential university in the southeastern United States. It is located in a large, urban city. Applying to South City University a week before the deadline, Amaya’s first visit to the institution was during her new student orientation program. Fortunately, she has had a very positive experience. She appreciates the fast pace, wide diversity and large community she has found at her home institution. Of all these qualities, she values the diversity most. She says, “Honestly, it’s very, very, very diverse and that’s the one thing that I really, really loved about it.”

In addition to full-time study at South City University, Amaya manages two jobs. She works as a member of on-site staff at the local apartment complex where she lives. Additionally, she works at the study abroad/international programs office. Through this position, she learned about study abroad opportunities through South City University. Beyond school and work, Amaya is highly involved in student organizations. She is a member of a dance group, as well as an organization for African students. She notes that the student organizations take up the majority of her free time, but they also comprise her primary friend groups. When she is not attending scheduled events for the student organizations, she is spending casual social time with her peers from those groups.

Personal relationships provided the foundation for Amaya’s desire to spend a semester abroad in England. During the previous summer, Amaya worked as a camp counselor. The majority of her colleagues were international, coming to work at the camp from other parts of the world. Amaya became closest friends with the international staff members from England. After the summer concluded, Amaya received an invitation to visit her friends in London in December for a quick trip, which was her first journey outside of the U.S. During this trip, she stayed in East London with her friends and their families.

Amaya’s visit to East London was a very surprising experience for her. She saw and experienced a large Caribbean population. She also appreciated the diversity she saw. This included diversity in people, stores, and restaurants. She notes not having that type of experience since departing the Bronx. Though she had already planned to study abroad in the Dominican Republic and still intends to, she wants to “dig a little bit deeper” into the surprising diversity she encountered in London. Amaya’s career interests have included working for the government in a Civil Service or Foreign Service capacity with Latin
communities throughout the world. Her interests are not limited to Latin American regions or the U.S., as she notes that these communities exist globally.

Amaya has selected her host university in greater London, because she wants to be based in London for her study abroad experience. She used her knowledge from working in the study abroad office to inform her program decision. Amaya knew that her host university is the most popular of the London options and also knew that the application process would be faster. Additionally, she had heard very positive feedback about the program while working in the office. Amaya is most excited about reconnecting with her British camp friends again while abroad. While they attend other institutions in England, she is hoping to see them regularly. She still speaks to them multiple times per week and has developed a relationship with their families, as well.

Candace

Candace is a Black female senior student at South City University. South City University is a large, four-year, comprehensive research, and primarily residential university in the southeastern United States. It is situated within a large, urban city. Candace’s hometown is approximately one hour from school. She selected South City University because of the close proximity to home, as well as the strong theatre department. She is majoring in communications and has a career interest in broadcast journalism. She is quick to point out, however, that her theatre minor is most personally important to her. She says theatre is “everything to me, really, and it’s what I feel like I’m best at.” While a career in acting is her dream, a career in broadcast journalism is her more attainable “big-girl track.”

Candace feels like she has not seen much of the world. She grew up in the same city her entire life and attends college close by. She went on her first plane ride three months ago on a trip to Florida. She has not done much traveling, but she thinks it will be important for her to demonstrate more experience in the world when it comes time to launch her career. Not having opportunities to apply her skills outside of South City University and beyond the state, she wants to show future employers that she has more depth than her resume currently demonstrates. She believes a semester studying abroad will provide her with good networking opportunities and resume-building experiences. She has theatre peers at other universities who have studied abroad in London, and she is impressed by the experiences they have had.

Candace selected a university in greater London for her semester abroad. She has always been fascinated by London, including the culture, fashion, and theatre, particularly Shakespeare. She has completed all of her major and minor requirements, so she will be studying abroad during her final semester of college and has a significant amount of flexibility in her curriculum. She was also drawn to her host institution in England because she has friends who have studied there previously. After conversations with theatre students, she felt more comfortable anticipating the courses and faculty abroad. Candace is looking forward to working with professors who make her rethink her approach in theatre, so she can “become more authentic as an actress.”

Candace’s parents have been very supportive of her study abroad interests. They are excited and encouraging, since they want their children to have opportunities that they did
not have. Candace notes that when she first mentioned the idea of studying abroad, her parents “pushed me to make it a reality.” Candace considers herself to be very family-oriented and very faith-oriented. She feels it will be difficult to be apart from her family for a semester. Recently, however, she has been working multiple jobs and working on the weekends, so she went three months without seeing her parents on the weekends.

Candace is also in a romantic relationship. Her boyfriend just graduated from South City University and is moving to the southwestern U.S. While he plans to visit during her semester abroad, she acknowledges it will be their longest time apart and “it’s a matter of facing reality, that maybe this won’t work out,” especially since they will live in different states upon her return from studying abroad. She hopes the relationship will withstand the significant changes, but she is anxious about it. When she thinks about the situation, her emotions include sadness, excitement, happiness, and feeling overwhelmed.

Multiple people have told Candace that the semester abroad, “is gonna be so great for you. It’s gonna be so good for you.” She feels being independent in a new place will enable her to grow and understand herself more, particularly since she feels she has “never been anywhere.” She sees the semester abroad as an opportunity to see new places and things that neither she nor her family have seen as well as create a new path for herself.

Danielle

Danielle is a “part white, part Portuguese, part Persian – or Iranian” female student, currently in her fifth year at Central State University. Central State University is a large, four-year, comprehensive land-grant research university in the southeastern U.S. Danielle grew up in California but moved to the southeastern U.S. when her father pursued a career change that required additional higher education. He moved Danielle’s family to a city close to Central State and completed his degree. Danielle has lived close to Central State since this initial move, and her sister has also completed a degree at the institution. Danielle appreciated the familiarity and family connection with Central State, which influenced her decision to enroll.

Since enrolling at Central State University, Danielle decided to major in biomedical engineering and minor in biological sciences. She likes science, and everyone else in her family is an engineer, so her mom convinced her to explore engineering as a career path. She really likes her major because it is small, fun, and provides her with practical experience that she will need in a future career. Danielle loves the atmosphere of Central State University, including her classes and the “down-to-earth” nature of the institution. She is very happy with her higher education path and feels fortunate that things have aligned so well.

Danielle has previously traveled abroad on two short trips. The first was a mission trip to Argentina for six weeks through a campus ministry group. The second was a 10-day family vacation to Italy and France. She experienced some emotional highs and lows during her mission trip to Argentina, including challenges adjusting to the culture. Since she “kind of know(s)-ish what to expect, as far as emotions and stuff like that,” she is hoping those experiences will help her for her semester abroad. These two previous travel experiences made Danielle want to pursue a study abroad semester.
Danielle is studying abroad during her final semester of college, in her fifth year, and she does not feel she would have been able to do so at any other time. She notes that her engineering major is very structured, so she had to complete all engineering courses on-campus at Central State. She will be taking courses for her biological sciences minor while abroad. Danielle is studying abroad at a university in Scotland. Danielle was drawn to the U.K. because she listens to and watches a significant amount of media from that part of the world. She notes that most of the television she watches is produced by the BBC, including a Scottish show that she and her family watch together. Danielle’s parents also traveled to Scotland for their wedding anniversary and had a very positive experience, so she was influenced by their stories. They also traveled to one of the cities in England that Danielle was originally considering for a study abroad destination, and they did not enjoy it as much as Scotland. This helped finalize her decision. Danielle is excited to be studying in a smaller town, as opposed to a big city, since she does not like crowds. She is pleased that her home and host universities are in similar size towns.

While abroad, Danielle will be sharing a flat with a local person in town, rather than living on-campus with other students. This was a cost-savings decision. She describes her family as very low-income, with six people living in a 1,500 square-foot home. Her father is a middle school science teacher. She is stressed about money and the financial aspects of her study abroad experience.

Danielle is very connected to her religious faith and notes that she relies on God and prayer when she is afraid or nervous. She is hoping to meet people by joining a Christian student organization on campus, as well as an international students’ organization. She prefers to socialize one-on-one or in small groups and also enjoys alone time where she can “recharge” and write. Socially, she values relationships with diverse people and has since an early age, noting that when she was growing up in California, she attended a predominately Hispanic school. She enjoys getting to know people from different backgrounds and notes that her own ethnicity has helped her blend in with locals during previous travel experiences.