Understanding the Feelings, Perceptions, and Attitudes of Students Who Participate in a Service Study Abroad Program

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UNDERSTANDING THE FEELINGS, PERCEPTIONS, AND ATTITUDES
OF STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATE IN A
SERVICE STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM

by
Jennifer Jean Jackson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Spanish and Portuguese
Brigham Young University
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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING THE FEELINGS, PERCEPTIONS, AND ATTITUDES
OF STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATE IN A
SERVICE STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM

Jennifer Jean Jackson
Department of Spanish and Portuguese
Master of Arts

This study was designed to understand the experience of being a service study abroad student. It examined feelings, perceptions and attitudes that developed as students from Brigham Young University participated in a service-centered study abroad program to Guadalajara, Mexico. The study enumerates participants’ initial, developing, and final impressions during service study abroad and shows that students go through an extensive process of discovering, reformulating, and solidifying their attitudes and perceptions as they interpret their experiences. The study examined factors related to language and culture, but focused on the service component of the program. It found that service study abroad participants feel their experience is more successful when they perceive that the service they render is needed, service assignments align with personal interests, duties are clearly outlined, and meaningful responsibilities are assigned.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Educators have long incorporated study abroad into university curriculum as a means of providing students with language immersion and cross-cultural experience. Because of its long-standing history, much research has been conducted concerning the effects of study abroad on participants. Recognized benefits of foreign study include greater cultural understanding (Kitsantas, 2004; McCabe, 1994); enhanced cross-cultural effectiveness (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Williams, 2005); and increased levels of personal development (Carsello & Creaser, 1976; Kitsantas, 2004; Kaufman & Kuh, 1984; Sell, 1983).

The foreign component of study abroad serves as a catalyst for change as students interpret new systems of meaning in foreign environments. Although study abroad programs maintain an academic focus on language and culture, many of students’ experiences are determined by adjustments made to live in a society with a different value system. The prospect of interpreting the world from entirely different perspectives (Paige, Cohen, Kappler, & Lassegard, 2002) affords students great opportunities for personal, social, and cultural development as they confirm, reject, or reconcile their own beliefs with those of the dominant culture.

Service-learning is emerging as a powerful tool to connect students in the classroom to individuals in the community. The two primary components of this new form of education, service and academics, are designed to be mutually beneficial (Bringle, 1997; Giddings, 2003; Jacoby, 1996). Service in the community invites students to apply the principles and concepts learned in the classroom to the populace outside the
classroom. Likewise, the scholastic component provides an intellectual underpinning to service (Sax & Astin, 1997), making it a more meaningful experience.

As evidenced by research, extending service and learning beyond the classroom to the community provides numerous benefits to participants. As students focus on contemporary issues in the community (Astin & Sax, 1998; Grusky, 2000), they strengthen their sense of civic responsibility (Smith-Paríolá & Gökè-Paríolá, 2006; Sax & Astin, 1997). Benefits of service-learning also include the development of skills for penetrating social barriers (Smith-Paríolá & Gökè-Paríolá, 2006); better academic performance by students (Astin & Sax, 1998); and, in cases where language learners interact with members who speak the target language, increased motivation to apply linguistic and cultural knowledge (Webster Hale, 1997).

Rationale for Study

Although much research has focused on the benefits and effects of study abroad, little research has focused on the formation of perceptions and the development of attitudes while students are studying abroad. Coelho (1962) points out that the cross-cultural education afforded by study abroad involves the participant as a whole person as he or she undertakes the educational sojourn. To understand the extent of personal growth and the far-reaching effects of study abroad, it is increasingly important to study development while participants are adjusting to and experiencing the foreign culture.

Service-learning challenges students to confront social issues and evaluate their role in the community as they deduce meaning from the relationships formed with those they serve. It prompts participants to connect academic curricula to daily circumstances of life. Researchers have studied the effects of service-learning in the United States, but
have not focused on students’ participation in service-learning experiences abroad. Because of the benefits afforded students through service-learning in their home country, similar results would be expected as they served in a foreign setting.

Study abroad and service-learning are more than mere media for scholastic achievement. They both present to students a powerful vehicle for personal development and an opportunity to interact with the community of people surrounding them. Despite their advantages, there is a scarcity of research on combining these two educational elements into one program of study. Making service a major component of study abroad increases students’ contact with the dominant culture and provides dynamic possibilities for growth, as well as new avenues of research exploration.

The Present Study

Because research about service-learning while studying abroad is not common, this study sought to understand the experience of students as they participated in a service-centered study abroad. The research questions for this study were:

1) How do students interpret their experiences as participants in a service study abroad program?

2) What feelings, perceptions, and attitudes develop as students participate in a service study abroad program?

Overview of Study

In an effort to integrate practical experience in international settings, (David M. Kennedy Center, 2006) Brigham Young University’s International Volunteer Program to Guadalajara, Mexico, offered students the chance to combine academic language study with service opportunities abroad. Participants in this program enrolled in second-year
university Spanish grammar and conversation courses at the Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara. Students spent three hours each weekday in classes. In addition, they served two hours, four afternoons a week, as volunteers at assigned non-profit organizations affiliated with the university. Each participant remained with the same organization for seven weeks.

The 35 participants in this study were BYU students who applied and were selected to participate in the international volunteer program. Students completed a pre-questionnaire before their departure and a post-questionnaire at the end of the program. To better understand the experience of service-learning and study abroad, I accompanied the program participants to Guadalajara, Mexico, to conduct my observations. While in Mexico, I spent an extended amount of time observing participants at the nine different service sites.

In collaboration with the program director, Dr. Robert Anderson, I collected weekly journal reflections from participants. Based on responses from the pre-questionnaire, my observations, and the journal reflections, I selected five participants with whom to conduct two half-hour ethnographic interviews, one at the conclusion of the program and one a year after the commencement of the program. Data from my field notes, the pre- and post-questionnaires, the journal responses, and the interviews were combined into a large database and then analyzed.

Definition of Terms

Study abroad. Formal academic study that takes place outside of a student’s country of origin.
Service-learning. A form of education that seeks to reinforce course content through meaningful service opportunities in the community.

Delimitations

This study did not seek to outline the benefits or disadvantages of participating in a service study abroad program. The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of being a service study abroad participant.

The study was conducted using participants from Brigham Young University in second-year university Spanish courses. No data were collected from students at a higher level of Spanish, so results cannot be generalized to students with greater Spanish proficiency. Also, because all participants were BYU students, similar results might not be expected beyond the participant population of this study.

Overview of Thesis

This chapter provided an introduction to study abroad and service-learning, rationale for the current study, overview of the study design, definition of terms, and delimitations of the study. Chapter Two reviews the literature related to study abroad and service-learning. Chapter Three details the methodology of the study, including research questions, participant and setting descriptions, sources of information, and procedures for data analysis. Chapter Four presents findings from both the qualitative and quantitative segments of the research. Chapter Five discusses results and implications for practice, delineates limitations of the study, and gives recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of Related Literature

Study abroad has long been available to students seeking to supplement their studies through cross-cultural experience in foreign countries. The sheer number of study abroad participants attests to the various benefits afforded to students as they engage in academic pursuits abroad. Although study abroad is nothing new on educational agendas, service-learning is a newer form of experiential education that seeks to connect academic study and community service. Research shows that both study abroad and service-learning have much to offer in the realm of education and could become an even more powerful medium for learning if combined. This review of literature first examines the components and benefits of study abroad and then explores the aims and benefits of service-learning.

Study Abroad

Defining study abroad. Kitsantas and Meyers (2001) define study abroad programs as “all educational programs that take place outside the geographical boundaries of the country of origin” (p. 4). Though once reserved exclusively for the elite, study abroad programs have grown in participation and popularity in recent years (Carlson, Bum, Useem & Yachimowicz, 1991). Increasing numbers of participants creates a greater need to study and research this “foreign” element gaining widespread popularity in the field of education.

The goals of study abroad programs vary depending upon the university, the program design, the host country, and the experience of program directors. Klineberg (1981) explains that the aims of educational exchange programs should be conceived in
terms of the change programs intend to produce in participants, universities, and relations between native and host countries (cited in Carlson & Widaman, 1988). Based upon program objectives, students decide which course of foreign study to follow, aligning their own personal goals with the aims of a particular program.

_Reasons for study abroad._ Because the design and goals of study abroad programs can be as diverse as the countries in which they take place, reasons for participating vary. One obvious reason for participation includes the opportunity to travel and visit new places (Carsello & Creaser, 1976; Langley & Breese, 2005). Personal reasons, such as building friendships, are also factors in students’ decisions to study abroad (Carlson et al., 1991; Carsello & Creaser, 1976; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Sell, 1983). For some, improving language proficiency (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001) is an attractive reason for foreign study. Others seek international experience that will make them more competitive for future educational pursuits or career endeavors (Carlson et al., 1991; Langley & Breese, 2005). An overarching goal of many students is to increase their awareness of global issues and cultural diversity (Langley & Breese, 2005).

Study abroad provides the experience necessary to accomplish many of these goals. Even early research purports that foreign study accounts for a greater amount of change in a shorter time period than is possible with regular campus study (Leonard, 1964). In fact, research shows that study abroad can increase students’ intercultural communication skills (Williams, 2005), self-concept (Carsello & Creaser, 1976; Sell, 1983), world-mindedness (Carlson & Widaman, 1988), and help promote international understanding (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Kitsantas, 2004).
Limitations of study abroad research. Study abroad claims are not without their limitations. One factor that must be taken into account is the maturation of participants over the course of study abroad. Many studies using a pre-test/post-test design show significant gains made by students during their time abroad. Carlson and Widaman (1988) warn that numerous changes will take place after a semester or year of study, regardless of whether the student is abroad or not. As researchers investigate changes that occur during study abroad, they must isolate the changes that are unique to the experience of studying abroad from those that are common among all university students.

Also, the point at which study abroad participants are surveyed will greatly affect the results of the study. A researcher interviewing a participant at the conclusion of the student’s time abroad may get very different results than if the interview were conducted in the middle of the program or at some time after the conclusion of the program. In a study conducted on a group of exchange students in France, Nash (1976) found that personality changes noted during the semester of study abroad did not persist through the summer after students’ return. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to study participants at various phases of their experience in order to ascertain the lasting effects of study abroad.

Cultural implications of study abroad. Study abroad invites students to interpret the world from entirely different perspectives (Paige et al., 2002). Because the environment in which participants find themselves is unfamiliar, students must redefine their relationship to society as they interact in a different culture. According to Paige et al. (2002), culture is the sum total of what a certain group of people creates together, shares,
and transmits. It is amid this new system of meaning that students construct a new identity for themselves as they interact in a new world.

Study abroad represents the unique intersection of two cultures: one that is comfortably familiar to the students and another that is new and foreign. A student studying abroad has begun to “free himself from those unconscious ties which have limited his identity and his intellectual and perceptual movement to the prescribed traces of his native milieu” (McEnvoy, 1968, p. 85). Although many study abroad programs maintain an academic focus on language and culture, much of students’ experience is determined by adjustments made to live in a society that shares or transmits a value system different from their own.

Students may experience elements of culture shock when there is incongruence between their native cultural values and those held by members of the foreign culture. In an ethnographic study of one student’s experience in Mexico, Bacon (2002) discovered that the participant initially considered elements of Mexican culture that were different from her own to be wrong and rebelled against them. However, at the end of the participant’s stay in Mexico, she was more apt to accept differences, recognizing that her culture was not necessarily the norm. The student explained, “It’s their culture, and who am I to say they’re wrong.” (p. 645).

In order to successfully adapt to a foreign culture, students must maximize their contact with that culture (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001). It is through regular and sustained contact that students learn the values, beliefs, and practices of people in a new culture. From this knowledge base, they will more easily adapt to living in the culture, deciding which components of the culture they will accept, adopt, reject, or ignore. Observing
study abroad participants in a yearlong study program in Ireland, Langley and Breese (2005) found that interaction with members of the host culture, whether through extracurricular activities, informal social activities, or home stays, gave students the greatest sense of understanding a culture that was once new and foreign. If students understand the underlying perspectives of a culture, they are better prepared to adapt to living in the culture.

When students become a minority by virtue of choosing to study abroad, they must acquire skills necessary for effective cross-cultural communication if they are to derive positive, meaningful insights from their experiences. “Cross-cultural effectiveness involves the ability to maintain a positive attitude while fitting into the new social network and deciphering the inherent logic of the foreign setting” (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001, p. 4). As students gain exposure to different cultural processes through interaction, they come to understand social hierarchies, communication, and “the connection of local meanings and relations to a larger system of meanings” (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2001). From this exposure, students more fully understand the culture in which they are now participating.

It is essential to note that cross-cultural experience alone does not guarantee or produce change (Sell, 1983). Even though time spent abroad and contact with a new culture can be predictors of a student’s success in study abroad programs (Bacon, 2002), perhaps it is personal characteristics that most influence the way a student benefits from study abroad. Because participants come from varied backgrounds, with different life experiences and distinctive personality traits, they will differ in the way they respond to the same phenomena (Sell, 1983). Bacon (2002) points out that the degree to which
students will benefit depends on, among other factors, their cultural knowledge, language proficiency, satisfaction with instruction, and their personality. Foreign experience simply provides a vehicle for change or growth. Actual benefits occur as students use this vehicle in conjunction with personal attributes to bring about change.

*Increasing language proficiency.* Through study abroad, students are exposed to continual linguistic input through interaction with members of the host culture. One of the primary reasons students study abroad is to increase their proficiency in a foreign language (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001). Increases are directly related to the students’ proficiency level at the time they arrived in the foreign country (Bacon, 2002). Those who have a more in-depth understanding of the language upon their arrival can use linguistic tools necessary to access the language and thus acquire more extensive practice speaking the language.

*Personal attitudes.* Personal attitudes affect the type of development and change that takes place as students participate in study abroad. Participants must be aware that changes may result from incorporating a life of past experiences into a new culture of foreign experiences. Carsello and Creaser (1976) point out that various influences encountered in the new setting can alter attitudes, interests, and values. It is expected that even open-minded students will experience some conflict as they adjust (Bacon, 2002), but positive contact with host nationals can help students develop a positive attitude as these changes are taking place. Carlson and Widaman (1988) explain, “Individuals are unlikely to become successful mediators of culture unless they develop positive attitudes toward the culture that is brought into relation with their own” (p. 15).
The effects of personal attitudes also extend to the realm of language acquisition. Brecht and Robinson (1993) explain that learners with an aggressive attitude toward finding opportunities to talk are more successful than those who do not. As students actively seek for opportunities to use language, they are able to build on their linguistic knowledge and increase their language proficiency.

**Benefits of study abroad.** Despite being complex and multifaceted (Sell, 1983), foreign experience in study abroad programs does provide recognized benefits to participants. Because foreign study affords students the opportunity to learn by doing (Hopkins, 1999), students are able to test life skills in a real-world setting as they adjust to living in a foreign culture. Research shows that study abroad students show greater cultural understanding (McCabe, 1994); increased interest in travel, art, and foreign languages (Carsello & Creaser, 1976); higher levels of international political concern and cross-cultural interest; enhanced worldviews (Carlson & Widman, 1988); higher levels of personal emotional resilience; openness and flexibility; perceptual acuity; and personal autonomy (Kitsantas, 2004).

**Service-Learning**

*Defining service-learning.* Just as study abroad enhances students’ education in a number of practical ways, service-learning aims to positively impact students’ educational experiences through practical application. “Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community need together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Regardless of the form that
service-learning takes, this form of education is designed to be mutually beneficial to both the participants and the community (Bringle, 1997; Giddings, 2003).

The focus of service-learning courses is often on contemporary problems found in the community (Astin & Sax, 1998). Rather than simply reading about these problems in a text or watching a documentary addressing social issues, students use public service as a living text. Service-learning gives service an intellectual foundation, improving the quality of service rendered, while simultaneously enhancing course content by allowing students to test abstract theory in real world settings (Sax & Astin, 1997). From these experiences, students have the opportunity to see the practical application of theory in everyday situations.

*History of service-learning.* Although service-learning does not have the long-standing history that study abroad has, it is gaining momentum in educational curriculum. Thousands of K-12 schools nationwide have received grants through the Learn and Serve America initiative to integrate classroom study with community and school service projects (Silcox & Leek, 1997). In the past, community service has been incorporated into education in the U.S., but there is an increasing desire to focus on connecting classroom instruction with service. Rice (1998), a former director of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), claims that service-learning could potentially “bring coherence and direction to higher education at a time when it is most needed” (p. xi). He explains that service-learning is effective because it stimulates the imaginations of those participating and simultaneously meets community needs.
**Service participation.** Though service-learning conducted at the K-12 level usually includes all members of a class as participants, service in higher educational institutions is often on a volunteer basis. UCLA and the RAND Corporation conducted an assessment of the effects of the Learn and Serve America Higher Education (LSAHE) program on students’ development at the university level. Through this assessment, Astin and Sax (1998) discovered that most students’ reasons for service participation centered on civic responsibilities, such as wanting to help other people or wanting to improve the community or society as a whole.

In addition to a strong sense of civic responsibility, students who choose to volunteer service at the university level share other characteristics as well. Sax and Astin (1997) indicate that the most important factor influencing service participation at the university level is whether students participated in service activities in high school. They also identified other similarities among these students, including self-rated leadership ability, being female, having tutored peers in high school, and involvement in religious and community action programs.

Regardless of predispositions to serve, those who participate in service-learning courses become social agents in communities and places outside the classroom (Manley, Buffa, Dube & Reed, 2006). In such roles, students will confront issues related to stereotypes, racism, cultural arrogance, and economic disparities (Grusky, 2000, p. 867). Dealing with real-world problems on a practical level allows participants to internalize theory learned in the classroom, and apply it to circumstances with which they have personal experience.
Benefits of service-learning. Practical service experience in education affords great personal benefits to students. Smith-Paríolá and Gökê-Paríolá (2006) list only some of the benefits resulting from service-learning experiences:

1. Enhancing students’ interest in and understanding of course concepts by demonstrating their relevance and usefulness;
2. Cultivating a concern for social problems, a sense of civic responsibility, and a commitment to public service;
3. Challenging students’ perspectives on social problems and on others who are in different social groups than themselves;
4. Assisting students in developing skills for relating to others across social barriers;
5. Teaching social problem-solving techniques that rely on critical thinking and responsible research; and
6. Giving students the opportunity to develop other important occupational and life skills. (pp.73-74)

Astin and Sax (1998) found that service positively influences academic performance. They also concluded that education-related service affects more academic outcomes than almost all other types of service. Although critics may argue that service takes away from academic pursuits because it requires time that might otherwise be spent studying, research shows that students involved in service activities spend more hours studying per week than non-participants. Sax and Astin (1997) also found that service participation slightly increases students’ grade point averages by .1 grade points.
Although the benefit attributable to service is small, it is apparent that service participation has positive, rather than negative, effects on academic performance.

Service-learning is especially useful in acquiring a second language. Because foreign language students in the traditional classroom do not have access to the level of input one might have in a study abroad setting, any contact with members of the target culture is useful in helping students acquire linguistic and cultural knowledge. Webster Hale (1997) discovered that service-learning that provides opportunities for interaction with native speakers can increase student motivation to apply linguistic and cultural knowledge. Until students come into contact with speakers of a foreign language, the language has little practical use outside the classroom. When participants see that the foreign language can be used in serving members of the target culture, language becomes an asset that helps connect them to other people.

*Service-learning in international settings.* Service-learning is gaining momentum in the United States, but this methodology is already widespread in international settings (Silcox & Leek, 1997). Programs within the United States are starting to tap into the resources available at the international level and are using service-learning experiences to immerse students in other cultures. Grusky (2000) explains that service-learning experiences in a foreign culture are powerful because they allow students to experience daily life alongside members of the host culture. As students reach out to members of another culture, they gain invaluable exposure to the culture of the people they serve. Seeing firsthand the challenges that people from different societies confront, participants begin to understand the complexities of systems and structures that give rise to the challenges (Smith-Paríolá & Gökè-Paríolá, 2006).
Further Research

Study abroad and service-learning, two forms of experiential education, both provide promising benefits for students. Researchers have long studied the effects of study abroad but have not focused on the development of perceptions and attitudes while students are experiencing the new culture. To understand the development of these attitudes, it is important to study the formative phases during participants’ course of study in the foreign country.

Also, benefits of service-learning in the United States have been discussed in educational research. If such results are common within the United States, similar results can be expected as students participate in service-learning experiences through study abroad. Despite potential benefits, very little research has been conducted into cross-cultural, service-learning programs.

The present study focused on the feelings, perceptions, and attitudes that develop as students participate in a service-centered study abroad program. Also, the study was designed to investigate the experience of service-learning in a foreign setting. The following chapter describes the study’s methodology, participants and settings, and procedures for data collection and analysis.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The previous chapter examined the literature related to study abroad and service-learning. This chapter focuses primarily on the methodology, participants, setting, sources of information, and procedures for data analysis used in the present study.

*Phenomenology and Ethnography*

Because the purpose of this study was to understand the experience of being a service study abroad participant, the primary traditions of inquiry used were phenomenology and ethnography. As Creswell (1998) points out, phenomenology discusses the essence of a lived experience; therefore, it can be utilized to explain the phenomenon of being a service study abroad participant. Using a number of ethnographic techniques (Merriam, 1998), I immersed myself in the world of the research participants in order to investigate multiple instances of the phenomenon. I became a participant observer, carrying out extensive observations over a two-month period in the natural settings of the students, and then recorded the findings in my field notes. I also compared data from a pre- and post-questionnaire, collected weekly journal entries from participants, and conducted ten ethnographic interviews with five participants.

*Research Questions*

An international volunteer program that combines academic study with volunteer service creates unique opportunities for learning and growth. Academic language instruction opens the gates of communication with native speakers, whereas service affords regular contact with members of the host culture. These two elements, when combined, produce a singular experience for program participants. This study sought to
understand the experience of service study abroad students and the sentiments that
developed as students participated in the program. The following research questions were
addressed:

1) How do students interpret their experiences as participants in a service study
abroad program?

2) What feelings, perceptions, and attitudes develop as students participate in a
service study abroad program?

Participants and Sources of Information

Research participants included 35 students, 8 males and 27 females, from
Brigham Young University who took part in an eight-week international volunteer
program to Guadalajara, Mexico, during Spring Term, 2006. Students were at different
points in their academic careers, but the median age of the students was 20 years old.
These students voluntarily completed the application process for the program, and
subsequently were selected by the program director based on their qualifications and an
interview.

Apart from Spanish courses, only about half of the students had taken university
courses related to the study of cultures, multiculturalism, or intercultural communication,
but all of the students were enrolled in a mandatory preparation course at BYU prior to
their departure. During their stay in Mexico, students lived with native Mexican host
families. Participants attended the Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara where they
were enrolled in second-year university Spanish courses. They also spent two hours a day,
four days a week, serving at various non-profit organizations in the city.
Most participants were from the United States and spoke English as a first language, but two were from countries outside of the U.S. Though a few students had spent significant time abroad, the majority of students’ experience in foreign countries was limited to leisure travel. Participants cited various reasons for their participation in the program, including the fulfillment of general education or minor requirements, a desire to increase Spanish fluency, the opportunity to volunteer, and interest in experiencing another culture.

The program director, Dr. Robert Anderson, administered the pre-questionnaires (see Appendix A) to the students on the last day of the preparation course. A total of 33 students completed the pre-questionnaire before their departure. Dr. Anderson also assigned students to write weekly journal reflections about their service study abroad experiences over the eight-week course of the program in Mexico. I received approval to conduct the study from the University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix F) after they determined that the study posed minimal risk to human subjects. Thirty-five participants signed consent forms (see Appendix D) allowing me to use their responses on the pre- and post-questionnaires and weekly journal reflections, as well as to observe them at their various service sites. I accompanied the group of participants to Guadalajara for the two-month program as an assistant to Dr. Anderson.

Researchers come to recognize the underlying meaning of an experience through immersion in the settings in which the phenomena abound. So as to become personally familiar with the phenomena being investigated (Merriam, 1998), I carried out extensive fieldwork for the duration of the program. For six weeks, I accompanied participants as they performed their volunteer service. I also observed students during weekly church
attendance, student meetings with the professor, organized social events, informal conversations, and bus trips and excursions to cities outside of Guadalajara.

My observations provided rich detail that contributed to my personal perceptions of the experience. But as Patton (1990) explains, it is not possible to observe how people organize the world or what meanings they associate with their surroundings. In order to gain an *emic* perspective, or insider’s view, of the phenomena, I read and analyzed the students’ 300-400 word journal entries submitted weekly via e-mail. Through these entries, I became more aware of feelings and attitudes that were present but difficult to observe from the outside. Participants were free to choose the aspects of the service study abroad experience on which they reflected. Occasionally, some students asked for topic suggestions, so I offered a list of themes that had surfaced in my fieldwork and invited them to select one on which to comment.

Key to understanding an experience is the ability to enter the perspective of the participants (Patton, 1990). To accomplish this, I selected five students with whom to conduct a half-hour ethnographic interview at the conclusion of the program. A follow-up interview was also conducted with the same five students a year after the commencement of the program to ascertain persisting perceptions and new insights gained relating to the service experience. A list of possible interview questions was used to guide the interviews (see Appendix C). The five students were purposefully selected because they represented the widest variations of the phenomena relating to the service study abroad experience. Selection was based on their responses on the pre-questionnaire, my field observations, and their weekly journal reflections. The participants interviewed signed
the student interview consent form (see Appendix E) allowing me, the researcher, to use their data in my study.

To further my understanding of the service study abroad experience, I administered a post-questionnaire (see Appendix B) to 33 students at the end of the program. Through the questionnaires, I elicited information to verify the findings from my field notes, student journal entries, and interviews. The same scale present on the pre-questionnaires also appeared on the post-questionnaires (see Appendices A and B), allowing me to detect statistically significant differences between students’ pre- and post-responses.

Service Settings

The Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara reviewed a talent/interest survey completed by the students and then assigned them to serve at various service organizations affiliated with the University. On weekday mornings, students spent two hours in a Spanish grammar class and one hour in a Spanish conversation class. In the afternoon, they dispersed to various service sites in Guadalajara to serve for two hours a day, four days a week. The service organizations with which the participants in this study worked were Casa Hogar, Centro Cultural de Corea, Instituto Helen Keller, MAMA, Asilo Juan Pablo II, Casa de Descanso Villa Hogar, and three Centros de Bienestar y Asistencia infantil de Jalisco: Hogares de Nuevo México, La Casita, and Zapopan. A description of each service site and a list of participant responsibilities are provided below.

Casa Hogar. Casa Hogar was a boarding school for underprivileged children run by Catholic nuns. Orphans and children coming from dysfunctional homes were
integrated with students who paid tuition. Four male and four female participants volunteered at Casa Hogar. The site had three large, outdoor patio areas in which participants interacted with the children. The boys played separately from the girls during the time that participants volunteered at the site. Participant responsibilities included helping children with their homework, carrying out group activities, playing sports, and participating in musical activities.

_Centro Cultural de Corea._ Corea was a Korean cultural center that held a daily, two-hour, after-school program for Mexican children. Four female participants served at this site. The center itself had a few small rooms inside, but participants spent most of their time teaching in an outdoor, underground area separated from the sidewalk by tall white bars. An average of eight children, ranging in age from 5 to 12 years old, interacted with the volunteers on a regular basis. Participant responsibilities included teaching English, doing skits with the children, directing art activities, and giving music lessons on recorders.

_Instituto Helen Keller._ Helen Keller was a school for children who had visual impairments or were blind. The school was dedicated to helping children gain more confidence and independence as they interacted with the world. Two male participants and two female participants worked at this service site. Though the school was quite large and had numerous classrooms upstairs, the volunteers worked only in a patio area and a room downstairs. There were about 15 children at the school, but research participants had very little contact with the students. Participants often did behind-the-scenes work, such as decorating the school, helping with preparations for the end-of-year program,
creating invitations, painting signs, and other artistic activities. Once a week, the participants helped teach the children swimming lessons.

**MAMA- Movimiento de Apoyo a Menores Abandonados, A.C.** MAMA was an organization that reached out to underprivileged youth, especially street children. The aims of MAMA were to help educate and teach these children decision-making skills in an effort to improve their future standard of living. Two female participants and two male participants served at this site. Most students at the school were between the ages of 8 and 14 years old, but participants had very little contact with them. The participants spent most of their time in a large entryway painting posters and signs to decorate the school. Once a week, they went with administrators from the organization to play games with street children in a plaza.

**Asilo Juan Pablo II.** Asilo Juan Pablo was a rest home for older residents. The asilo had two large gathering rooms, one with chairs and a TV, and one with an eating area and tables. The center also had two separate rooms for sleeping, one for male residents and one for female residents. Participants served only in the main gathering areas. The center was not very well kept and was often filled with flies and cigarette smoke. Many of the residents were mentally or physically handicapped. The number of elderly served varied from day to day, depending on how many of the residents were present in the gathering areas. Three female research participants served at this site, conversing with the residents or playing games, such as dominos, to entertain the elderly.

**Casa de Descanso Villa Hogar.** Casa de Descanso Villa Hogar was also a rest home. The rest home was well staffed and housed about 30 residents, two per room. The majority of the residents were female, but there were also three males. Many of the
residents congregated in a shaded, open-air patio when participants served at the site. Occasionally the participants went to residents’ rooms to visit them. The rest home was clean and well kept. Two female participants served at this site and carried out activities such as nail-painting, singing, conversing, reading stories, and playing bingo with the elderly.

_Hogares de Nuevo México._ This site served as a daycare center. Parents dropped off their children in the morning and picked them up in the afternoon. Employees from the center tended the children until their parents returned from work and accompanied primary school-age children to and from their respective schools. There were about 25 children, ranging in age from one-and-a-half to seven years old. The site had a kitchen, an eating area, and a playroom stocked with various toys and books. The center was clean and well kept. Four female participants served at this site, playing with the children and reading them books.

_La Casita._ La Casita was also a daycare center. Many of the children at the site came from single-parent or dysfunctional homes. Employees fed the children breakfast and lunch, accompanied school-age children to and from their respective schools, and tended the children until late afternoon. Approximately 10 younger children remained at the site throughout the day. The site was very small and had a playroom with toys and books as well as an outdoor area with a playhouse and sinks. Two female students served at this site, teaching children correct hygiene habits and playing indoor and outdoor games with them.

_Zapopan._ Zapopan was a daycare center that also provided meals and training in good hygiene to children. The center had an eating area, a patio with a playhouse, a
section of grass and trees, and three additional playrooms. The play areas were small and usually lit only by sunlight coming through barred windows. There were about 25 children, ranging in age from 4 to 11 years old. Four female participants served at this site and were responsible for getting the children clean before the afternoon meal, fixing their hair, reading books, and playing indoor or outdoor games with them. During meal times, the participants helped refill water glasses and serve various dishes.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis. A large qualitative database was created, consisting of typed field notes, pre- and post-questionnaire responses, weekly journal reflections, and transcriptions of the ten ethnographic interviews. Data were organized into initial, developing, and final impressions categories based on the dates they were collected. Data from the first two weeks of the program were categorized as initial impressions; data from the middle weeks as developing impressions; and data from the last two weeks as final impressions. After fleshing out my field notes by adding observer comments and then reviewing the entire database of information, I wrote memos detailing the main ideas that emerged from the data. I conducted data-source triangulation, during which I “compared data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of the fieldwork” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 198) in order to ascertain more accurately the underlying essence of the service study abroad experience.

Using NVivo software, I proceeded through the process of open-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) by developing categories based on recurring themes identified in the data and coding all information in the database. I used the constant comparative method of Glaser & Strauss (1967) to continuously compare themes, to connect instances of
particular phenomena, and to collapse categories of information until each category was mutually exclusive. Bracketing my personal judgments and preconceptions, I proceeded to analyze the themes in search of all possible meanings (Creswell, 1998). After analyzing all items coded for a particular theme, I wrote a general description of the facets of the experience. I included these descriptions, along with personal examples from participants, in the results reported in Chapter Four.

Quantitative data analysis. One section on both the pre- and post-questionnaires (see Appendices A and B) asked students to rate their level of preparedness to interact with native Mexicans, their confidence speaking Spanish, their level of self-reliance, their comfort level attending social events with Mexicans, the likelihood of enrolling in another Spanish course after their return, and likelihood of future travel to Spanish-speaking countries. After students completed the questionnaires, I assigned numeric values one through six to the responses for each question in order to create equal interval scales. The two groups of interval data were then compared in a paired \( t \) test to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the results on the pre- and post-questionnaires. I used these findings to strengthen themes that emerged from qualitative analysis.

Summary

This chapter discussed the methodology of the present study including its participants, procedures, sources of data, and data analyses. Chapter Four will detail the results of the qualitative and quantitative data analyses.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This chapter presents the results from the study outlined in Chapter Three. The study was conducted to understand the experience of being a service study abroad participant as well as to understand the attitudes, feelings, and perceptions that developed as students participated in such a program. Students’ individual responses included in this chapter are coded using pseudonyms.

Qualitative results, which are presented first, are divided into five sections. The first three sections correspond to students’ comments about culture, language, and service, respectively. Although culture and language were not the central focus of the study, they emerged as important factors influencing students’ experiences. Each of these sections is further subdivided in order to address students’ initial, developing, and final impressions about the topic. The fourth section presents program-related factors that affect participants’ attitudes. Section five is a summary of the general outcomes of the service study abroad program. Quantitative results from the analysis of students’ pre- and post-questionnaire responses follow qualitative results.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Culture

The service study abroad experience to Guadalajara, Mexico, introduces participants to the complexities of culture. No longer do students find themselves in a familiar world; rather, they are functioning in a different setting with different people, having different experiences. This section discusses participants’ initial, developing, and final culture impressions.
Initial Culture Impressions

At the beginning of the program, students have a keen attentiveness to the facets of Mexican culture. One student comments that she wishes her camera could capture all that her eyes can see. This thought portrays the essence of what students do as they try to recognize, experience, and interact in a new culture: they seek to “capture” culture. In the initial stage of the program, the pursuit of culture is characterized by observation and discovery. Students are trying to understand what Mexican culture is and what it means to participate in the culture. From the students’ journal entries, I identified three themes relating to their initial cultural impressions: (a) confirming or discarding preconceptions, (b) the process of “soaking in” the new culture, and (c) whether or not students consciously experience culture shock.

Confirming or Discarding Preconceptions

The first two weeks in Guadalajara mark the beginning of the process of confirming or rejecting preconceptions of Mexican culture. Jessica reflects:

I think I was expecting something different when I decided to come to Guadalajara. I was expecting cobblestone streets, Mexican radios and maybe even a donkey or two. Now that I have spent more time here—a week to be exact—I have realized that I am indeed in a different country. I don’t know if I just needed that extra time for it to hit me . . . or if it took . . . time for me to get rid of some preconceived notions that I had already acquired.

When students are introduced to Mexican culture, they are called on to verify or refute their preconceptions.
Soaking It In

The cultural novelties for which students have positive feelings can bring about a sense of wonderment and excitement. In her journal, Amanda describes the anticipation of each new day. “Every day has brought new discoveries both about this culture in which I am immersed and about [me].” Lisa comments on her cultural impressions:

I love how busy it is . . . at a slow pace, if that makes sense. People walking between cars selling stuff, the whole *piropo* thing, old men sitting on the sidewalk with soft drinks and cowboy hats . . . It is really neat. I love the homes and even the graffiti on the walls . . . It all adds its own touch.

New sights, smells, and sounds perceived as positive aspects of the culture inspire many students to admire elements of the culture.

Admiration for culture does not encompass all feelings felt at the onset of the program. Many students experience a dichotomy of feelings: their thirst for discovery among the novelties of Mexican culture leads to excitement, but a yearning to understand their world can lead to bewilderment. Rachel describes her early impressions accompanied by delayed realizations about the difficulties of commencing life in a new culture:

I was pleasantly surprised by everything. The food was edible, the people were human, I felt safe, they used money and had stores I recognized, and even though I couldn’t understand a word from the Mexicans, I thought I was doing [well]! However, as I set my standards a little higher, the frustration is starting to set in. As the days have continued, . . . I have discovered the difficulty of things like using the Internet, discovering bus routes, crossing streets, using phone cards or
cell phones, coordinating use of our limited electrical outlets, cold showers, climbing stairs . . . running out of toilet paper, and most of all not being able to communicate with people.

Michelle echoes these feelings:

My first week in Mexico has been up and down. On one hand I am so excited to be here. The city is so beautiful, new and exciting. I love the people, I love the culture, and I love being somewhere new! At the same time, this has been a week of tricky adjustments.

Culture Shock

A common phenomenon among people in a foreign setting is culture shock. Culture shock refers to the conflict experienced as individuals discover differences between their native culture and the host culture. On the post-questionnaire, 20 of the 33 students surveyed felt that they had not experienced culture shock. Other sources of data reveal that most students do experience conflict to some degree, but the level at which they perceive conflict varies. I identified three elements that influence the amount of culture shock students perceive they experience: (a) the degree of disparity between cultural expectations and reality, (b) cultural similarities and differences, and (c) the individuals’ system of values versus the host culture’s system of values.

Expectations and reality. When there is little disparity between projected views of the culture and the actual circumstances in which students find themselves, many students do not identify feeling culture shock. Natalie says, “I don’t think I had any really big expectations, so I was really pleasantly surprised with everything.” Because she has
not painted a picture of what the experience would be before coming here, her expectations are not different from her present situation.

Another factor contributing to this feeling is that preparation facilitates the formation of accurate expectations. Melissa says, “I feel like the prep class and other experiences in the U.S. adequately prepared me for what to expect here, and therefore I didn’t experience any culture shock.” Due to preparation, this student feels her expectations have been met as she experiences Mexican culture.

**Similarities and differences.** Some students perceive little difference between their native culture and the new culture. Those sensing the similarities identify feeling minimal, if any, “shock.” Courtney finds that the standard of living in Guadalajara is closer to that of the U.S. than she imagined before coming. “I wasn’t expecting it to be as affluent as it is.” Anna says, “I was so surprised at how much it looked like home.” Katie adds:

The first week I was in Mexico, I was waiting for the culture shock to shock. That shock has still yet to come. I honestly do not feel like I am in a foreign country—I just happen to be speaking in Spanish all the time.

Identifying more with the similarities instead of noticing the differences between cultures helps minimize feelings of culture shock for many participants.

**System of values.** Another element that contributes to feelings of culture shock is the difference in value systems held by members of the host culture and the participants. Data from journal entries and interviews show that if students find that members of the host culture esteem similar values in a similar way, adjustment is simplified. When what is perceived to be important differs, students have more difficulty adjusting to life in the
new culture. One cultural element with which two participants struggle is the perception of time in Mexico compared to the perception of time in the United States. Scott says:

I hate how much time I waste in Mexico. . . . I can’t stand that we spend two-and-a-half hours a day on a bus. . . . I’m more of a time-efficient kind of person. I get things done. I like to go 100 miles an hour and run my own pace. I want to get done what I want to get done. . . . I’m thinking to myself, “Man, I’ve never wasted this much time in my life!”

James expresses similar sentiments:

It is definitely a little different than how we Americans do things; time sitting is sometimes thought [of] as time wasted. I have seen how my personality has clashed with the culture here.

Developing Culture Impressions

During the middle stages of the program, students continue to observe people, places, and things around them as they reformulate conceptions and first impressions. Two factors seem to affect students’ developing cultural impressions: (a) experience with physical manifestations of the culture, and (b) interaction with natives.

Physical Manifestations of Culture

As students take notice of expressions of culture, many endeavor to interpret the significance of the cultural features they see. This pursuit is especially apparent in students’ contemplation of the physical evidences of culture. Jacob explains that the artwork “really changed my perception of Mexico.” Emily considers mural painting “such a beautiful way to depict a nation’s history,” and wonders why it is not done more often in the United States. After James’s visit to Mexico City, he comments, “I learned a
lot about the history of Mexico and why people are the way they are here. It was amazing
for me to see the roots and the deep beliefs of the Catholic faith.” Jessica reflects on the
size of the cathedral and the ancient pyramids, explaining, “I can easily see why people
worship(ed)” at each site, as they “both inspire feelings of smallness. That feeling is what
I think a lot of people use to know there is a higher being.”

Although sightseeing only scratches the surface of culture, Kelly contemplates
physical evidences to form deeper perceptions about culture:

A lot of the artifacts are still here and they carry much symbolism and are
important just for that reason. They represent a story, person, event, something,
that matters. The pyramids are just stones and dirt . . . but it is what they stand for
that makes them unforgettable and places of interest. It is the passion and the
ideas of Orozco and Rivera that makes their murals so meaningful. [It is] the story
of the six young cadets [who] took their lives rather than give up the Mexican flag
to the North Americans that draws an interested ear rather than simply six statues
of young men. Learning about Mexican history and how much it means to them
makes me want to delve into my own and other countries’ histories as well to
understand where we are today, and to decide where we want to be tomorrow.

Another physical evidence of culture that students notice is food. Although
somewhat apprehensive at first about the difference in diet between the two cultures,
students have developed more informed opinions about this cultural element. Michelle
comments, “I found I could eat a lot of things that I wouldn’t normally eat just because I
[thought] . . . ‘I don’t want to offend my mamá.’ And they were good!” Other students do
not hold high opinions of the diet, especially those who experience foodborne illnesses.
Laura’s attitude about food has transferred over to her opinion about other parts of Mexican culture. She says:

I still don’t know what I ate but I have been having angry feelings towards the food, sanitation, and people here in general. I am fighting it, but it’s hard not to feel like it’s dirty when you are that sick because of something you ate.

*Members of the Host Culture*

Aside from pictures and places, many participants also look to people to experience and understand more about culture. Summer says, “There is really something special about the Latin people. The things I am learning from being a part of this culture are invaluable.” Amanda shares the cultural insight she gained simply by watching the children she serves at Hogares de Nuevo Mexico.

Kids were bumping into us, squeezing past us, and even crawling over us if they wanted to get around us . . . Sometimes I had to adjust my attitude when someone crawled across our laps to get to the blocks on the other side. . . . Why didn’t they just go around? Then I started looking around, noticing that Lupe and Marga, though old enough to know the difference, did not seem to mind that the younger children were constantly all over them. In fact, they didn’t even blink an eyeball, but continued with their discussion like we were the only ones in the room. . . . It was almost as though these children did not have any personal space.

Numerous participants consider their host families and their *mamás* to be a valuable link to Mexican culture. Rather than simply observing culture as an onlooker, living with a family allows students to participate with natives in the culture. Speaking of this cultural connection, Amanda says, “I believe it has allowed me to get a glimpse
inside the Mexican culture far beyond what I would see as a tourist staying in a hotel or living in an apartment.” Living in a native’s home connects students to real people who face real problems in daily life. Matt says:

I really like it when my family invites me to eat dinner with them. I can’t add much to the conversation, but I do understand most of what’s going on and I like to feel a part of it. That’s Mexico to me: home life. These are real people in real situations of daily life. Sometimes I feel like school or the mall is just some role play situation, but at home I realize that it isn’t role play, it’s real.

Living with host families provides opportunities for students to understand more about how family members function in their respective roles in Mexico. Doug remembers that, at first, he was surprised by his mamá’s interest in his daily activities and even considered her to be “nosy.” He writes:

With regards to my nosy mamá, I asked one of my Mexican friends, who is also familiar with the culture in the United States, and his response was classic. He said, “She is Mexican.” Apparently it is normal to have your Mexican mamá . . . wanting to be involved in your business. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, just very different [from] what I’m used to [after] living on my own for several years.

Other participants recognize advantageous aspects of living with a host family and see the experience as a keyhole to Mexican culture. Writing about attending Catholic Mass and a family gathering with her host family, Natalie says, “It’s been . . . neat to see real Mexican people and how they really live and interact.” Alicia adds, “It is fun to live with a family here. I think that makes this trip . . . a good cultural experience because I
am able to see into the daily life of a real Mexican family.” Andrea comments early on about being considered an *hija* in her family here. She explains:

I am having a wonderful experience living with Maria. She calls us her *hijas* and has completely welcomed us into her family circle. We went to a fiesta for her married daughter’s birthday, and it was such a pleasure to get to know her relatives. It was my favorite cultural experience thus far to see a huge family get together on a regular basis, eat delicious food, and enjoy each other’s company.

*Final Culture Impressions*

By the end of the service study abroad program, participants have experienced many parts of Mexican culture firsthand. Participants learn to confirm, reject or adjust initial impressions through continual contact with the culture, and in the end, form their final perceptions about what Mexican culture is, what native characteristics are, and how they relate personally to the culture. Six themes relating to students’ final cultural impressions emerged from the data: (a) American cultural influences, (b) gender roles, (c) feelings about Mexican culture, (d) cultural connections, (e) changing cultural perceptions, and (f) increased cultural understanding.

*American Cultural Influences*

Many students do not expect their experience in Mexico to be influenced by American culture. At the beginning, Rachel says, “Arriving in Guadalajara was somewhat of a disappointment—a big, dirty, busy, ‘Americanized’ city. . . . Guadalajara isn’t as different from the U.S. as I thought it would be—or as I hoped it would be.” In the end, she feels that many Mexicans “are voluntarily tied to their version of America”
and subsequently feels, “[I] didn’t really experience the Mexican culture that I was prepared to experience.” Dana has similar sentiments about a native Mexican tour guide:

Why is it that our guide thought we loved McDonald’s so much? This is something that has puzzled me. I came to experience Mexico, not settle for the cheap American imitation. The mall we stopped at to eat on the way home had a McDonald’s and Subway, and the group I was with went hunting until we found a taco store.

**Gender in Culture**

***Separate roles.*** Through their associations with members of the Mexican culture, many students sense that gender roles are distinctly defined in Mexico. Scott comments that it “wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for an American [man] to have to vacuum,” but that here it seems inappropriate for a man to do so. The man’s responsibilities seem to lie outside of the home, whereas the woman’s seem to be inside of the home. Scott feels that spouses are not as “equally yoked” because they function only in their respective roles and do not share in the same responsibilities.

Some participants also perceive that the man plays the role of protector, whereas it seems the woman’s role is to serve. Lisa says that the women in her host family “most definitely serve and take care of the needs of the men at the table [and] refer to them as Señor,” but she also feels that there is a genuine “underlying respect for women from men” as each fulfills respective roles. This comment illustrates the perception of a division but also recognition of cultural attitudes toward gender roles.

***Machismo.*** Clearly defined gender roles can make the notion of machismo more visible to participants. Various terms surfaced throughout the journal entries and
interviews to describe feelings about men in the Mexican culture. Some of the terms include forward, aggressive, controlling, romantic, and sensitive. Regarding her Mexican boyfriend, one student remarks, “There were times when I felt, ‘He’s being manipulative or he’s being dominating.’ Overall I saw the machismo, but I understood it a lot better.”

Living in the culture helps students recognize different facets of machismo. Katie says, “Mexican boys are true gentlemen, always offering their seats to the ladies and opening the doors for them.” Lisa explains that she has a better understanding of the underpinnings of the attitude. She comments, “There is machismo, but it isn’t always arrogant and pushy. Sometimes it is just protective.”

Piropos. Another factor influencing gender roles in Mexican culture is the practice of men making obvious catcalls, or piropos, at females. Jessica explains that, initially, she was taken aback by such forwardness, but after more extensive interaction, surprise turned to expectation. She writes, “I was overwhelmed at first by all the Spanish piropos, but you get used to it after a while.” Jacob recognizes, “Back in the United States, I think that would be totally out of line . . . really rude. But here, it’s just part of the culture.” As Becca now has had more extensive experience in Mexico, she identifies piropos as elements of culture, rather than individual cries for attention. She explains, “I can understand behavior more, especially piropos, and accept what role it plays in their culture instead of just being disgusted by generalizations.”

Feelings about Mexican Culture

On the post-questionnaires, 25 of the 33 students surveyed expressed positive feelings toward elements of Mexican culture. In various sources of data, students used the following terms to describe Mexican people: warm, friendly, laid-back, open, persistent,
accepting, hard-working, respectful, and family-oriented. Summer comments, “I rapidly came to love nearly everything about this wonderful place. I have an unconditional love for the people. Just observing how they treat each other with respect on the bus says volumes about their culture.” Natalie also admires several aspects of the culture and hopes to incorporate them into her life:

I would like to be more personal in my communication and more sincerely friendly with all that I see. I believe that makes a huge difference in how we perceive our world and I know that a few people make a great difference in a community.

Final cultural perceptions are susceptible to being cast in a favorable light. Near the end of the program, and even after the conclusion of the program, some students remember successful experiences, rather than focusing on the difficulties. This attitude is apparent as Candice comments on her experience a year after the start of the program. “I really did love it there. I loved the way it looked in the morning, and I loved the tree trimmers and I loved the traffic and the buses and the sweat.” When asked if those were feelings she felt while she was experiencing the culture, Candice responds, “A large part of me loved it there. A bigger part of me loves it now.”

Michelle also comments about viewing her experience through rose-colored glasses but, in contrast, explains that she has adopted a more realistic view since returning home. She says:

When I was leaving, I [was] all starry-eyed, and [thought], “I could just live in Mexico forever.” . . . Being away, I think, “Okay, I love Mexico. I’d love to go
back and be there,” but I don’t think I’d live the rest of my life in a developing country.

Not all students feel that their final views of culture are influenced by the fact that they are leaving Mexico. Natalie says she “[took] it for what it was” and explains: “I think I kept a pretty realistic view while I was down there, and [that is] just the way that I think and the way I work. . . . I didn’t get caught up in it.” Although Natalie does express admiration for many features of the culture, she sees those as inherent cultural characteristics, rather than a byproduct of sentimental feelings about leaving Mexico.

Though many students express approbation for Mexican culture in the final stages of the program, other students hold less favorable opinions about their contact with the culture. Rachel explains:

I have learned that Mexicans are nice to me because I am a tourist and they assume I have money. They call me pet names because I’m blonde, and they let me pass first, if I dress like I’m important. Everyone here says “¡Qué la vaya bien!” whether they mean it or not.

*Drawing Cultural Connections*

As participants leave Mexico, many evidence an increased ability to draw connections rather than highlight differences between cultures. On their post-questionnaires, 14 students addressed similarities between their native culture and Mexican culture. Reflecting on a party she attended, Andrea writes in her journal, “At the fiesta I felt so at home and comfortable that I didn’t have my usual thought, which is to remember that it is a different culture here.” Natalie explains that natives of the Mexican culture “really are more like us than we [Americans] allow ourselves to see.” Whereas an
introduction to a new culture can make differences more noticeable, extended time in a foreign culture has helped numerous students draw connections between the two cultures.

*Changing Perceptions*

After spending two months in Mexico, participants have had opportunities to reformulate perceptions of Mexican culture. In the reformulation process, two students take note of the way their perceptions have developed from preconceived notions to current perceptions. Jacob realizes just “how big of a misconception” many Americans have of Mexicans. Addressing negative stereotypes, Chris comments, “I came down here—it’s not like that at all. People are honest; they’re hard-working, very warm and friendly, in general. I mean, they’re just like us.”

Experiencing the culture challenges students to recognize previously held personal biases in order to create an accurate perception of Mexican culture now. Michelle says that being here helps students see that “Mexicans aren’t just people that are trying to come across the border . . . who live in huts or something.” She continues, “There are people who are really poor, but there are people who are doing just as well as people you know.” In the end, “it does teach you that in Mexico, there is diversity.”

*Cultural Understanding*

For some, the service study abroad experience in Mexico results in greater cultural understanding. Jessica explains, “You can’t know a culture until you live it.” When students have the opportunity to “live” the culture, they receive more in-depth exposure to various facets of Mexican life. Doug says, “It is healthy for my worldview to be in this country . . . because my perspective is deepened and my understanding is more comprehensive.” Even though a comprehensive understanding does not necessarily lead
to cultural acceptance, it does allow students to develop better-informed views about
culture and recognize the central role culture plays in daily life. Becca explains,
“Although I may never fully understand or like their culture as much as my own, to them
it is just as important as mine is to me.”

Language

Communication through spoken language determines, in large part, participants’
ability to interact, converse, and form relationships with those around them. Because
spoken language greatly facilitates interaction with members of the target culture, lack of
fluency severely limits opportunities for interface with native speakers. Although
students use non-verbal cues, such as exaggerated facial expressions and hand gestures,
to aid comprehension, they forego more intricate levels of communication if they cannot
speak the native language.

Regardless of whether participants are at their service sites with Spanish-speaking
children, eating dinner with their host families, or mingling with youth their own age at a
social event, language shapes much of the service study abroad experience. This section
details participants’ initial, developing, and final language impressions.

Initial Language Impressions

Prior to their arrival in Mexico, 21 of the 33 participants expressed apprehensions
on the pre-questionnaire about their ability to communicate in Spanish. When they arrive
in Guadalajara, students form their impressions about language based on the experiences
they have speaking Spanish. The data analysis of all sources revealed two factors that
affect students’ initial language impressions: (a) challenges and success with the
language, and (b) attitudes toward language.
Challenges and Success

Preliminary responses to immersion in the language depend upon participants’ initial success understanding and communicating in Spanish. Participants are second-year university Spanish students when they come to Mexico, but this factor does not generate a homogenous experience for all. Language immersion tests students’ ability to comprehend constant input in a foreign language. Some, like Natalie, quickly discover that “trying to listen so hard” is mentally and physically “exhausting.” Natalie adds, “It was harder to understand than I thought it would be. . . . I would hear one thing that I didn’t understand and I’d try to figure it out, and then I’d miss the rest of the sentence.” Jacob, on the other hand, says, “I came here, and I understood almost everything that people spoke.”

Language barriers present very real challenges for participants at the service sites and in daily communication. Becca talks about her inability to communicate with the children at La Casita. “[They] can’t understand that I don’t understand. The poor children just stare up at me sometimes with questioning faces and keep repeating what they are saying while I stare back with a blank face.” Feelings of frustration can carry over to other aspects of the service study abroad experience as well. Rachel explains:

I HATE not understanding people, especially friends and family. . . . When I can’t connect with my family and the JAS (jóvenes adultos solteros), things seem kind of meaningless. I have been a little lonely and have a hard time enjoying their company sometimes because I feel so inadequate.

Conversely, some participants have positive experiences with Spanish at the beginning, and view language immersion as a source of empowerment and a step to
fluency. Scott says, “When we first got here I actually had little trouble . . . getting my point across. Yes, I struggled a little here and there but overall I really felt like things went well.” Tammy also feels optimistic about her language use. During her second week in Mexico, she writes:

As for the language, I feel more like I CAN do it. The things we learn in class I love to turn around and try to improve. Language acquisition here is so much easier because we are in the country where we can use it! I feel very much in control of my learning.

_Attitudes Toward Language_

As students accept the challenges that language presents, some develop a more positive attitude toward language. Chelsea describes the shock of realizing her first day that being in Mexico meant she could no longer resort to English for added clarification. “I was hit over the side of the head with the realization that I had to tune in and challenge myself. There would no longer be the option of saying, ‘Will you say that again in English, please?’” By the next day, the shock had subsided as she adds, “Things began to come together and actually sound like words instead of meaningless gibberish. . . . The challenge was exciting and fun, and my roommate and I pretty much only spoke in Spanish to one another.”

Other students though, feel frustrations toward language. Lindsey says, “I’m starting to understand more but still not enough to express myself or be effective when I converse with others.” Jane feels “upset” because she cannot communicate as well as those around her. She explains, “I wish that I had studied harder in Spanish 101 and 102! I feel a little behind . . . the rest of the group.”
As evidenced above, first impressions of language immersion are closely tied to students’ perceived success with Spanish fluency and attitudes toward language after their arrival.

**Developing Language Impressions**

A sense of improvement best describes what many students feel toward language at the midpoint of the program. Though some participants are frustrated with not being able to communicate as well as they would like, there is general recognition of progression. Five main themes relating to developing language impressions emerged from the data: (a) textbook language versus spoken language, (b) complexities of language, (c) language choice, (d) native speakers as language learning aids, and (d) other language learning strategies.

**Textbook Language Versus Spoken Language**

Past academic success in university Spanish classes motivated many program participants to seek out further language learning opportunities through service and study in Mexico. Immersion quickly alerts students to the differences between textbook language and spoken language. The longer students are in an environment where Spanish is spoken almost exclusively, the more opportunities they have to see that success in reading and understanding a textbook does not translate to guaranteed success in speaking the language in the native culture. Andrea explains:

I have learned many of the rules and concepts we are studying. It is easy to recognize the things I am familiar with and think ‘Oh, I know about that.’ But in reality, I still have tons of work to [do] remembering and applying them. It is like
if Spanish were a song, at BYU I learned how to listen to and describe it but now I am learning how to imitate and reproduce it; two totally different processes.

*Complexities of Language*

Struggles to communicate in Spanish can increase participant desire to understand the language. In their efforts to improve language skills, many participants develop an acute awareness of the complexities of spoken communication. Vocabulary words and grammar rules now play a greater role than simply appearing on written exams; they are the means by which students make sense of the world around them. Candice says, “Everyday is something completely different. It has made me think about what is most important to know in another language, why we want to communicate in other languages, [and] how to best understand each other.” Consciousness of language compels participants to contemplate how language structures can be used to relate to the world around them.

Amanda recognizes language as a means of connecting with individuals at her service site. She explains:

My service experience is becoming more and more enjoyable for me as I am able to understand more of what is going on around me. Now that I can converse (rather haltingly, yes, but communicate nonetheless) with the ladies at the care center and now that I can understand enough fragments of little Juan’s continual and demanding chatter every day, the experience is only getting better.
Language Choice

As participants endeavor to communicate in a foreign language, many also recognize the need for and naturalness of speaking English in certain situations. Candice says:

You need to use enough English to make sure you understand things . . . It’s important to speak Spanish as much as you can, but when you can’t communicate at all, and it’s just a point of frustration . . . you stop wanting to learn a language.

One situation in which some students feel more comfortable speaking English is when they are conversing with one another. Chatting at school, home, the service sites, or on excursions, students often use English with each other to communicate their ideas more clearly. Jacob says, “We always started out in Spanish and then ended up in English.” Scott continues, “It’s so much easier to revert back to the way that I’ve been speaking for 22 years when I’m with somebody that speaks that language perfectly.” Matt finds that it makes little sense to use Spanish when conversing with fellow participants during group activities. He says:

When I am with the other American students, I feel a little silly for speaking Spanish. I think about if I were at BYU and saw two Chinese students walking together and speaking broken English, I would think, “Why don’t they just speak Chinese?”

Native Speakers as Language Learning Aides

Trying to comprehend Spanish continually challenges participants. As they become more aware of language, they also discover keys to comprehending it. Living in Guadalajara, students receive language input from countless sources, such as classes,
books, and service, but many identify human contact as the most important key in language learning. Students look to individuals at their service sites, the families with whom they live, and the Spanish-speaking friends with whom they associate for language support. Adults, youth, and children all provide this support in different ways.

Adults. The service study abroad program puts students in contact with native adults through class instruction, service sites, and student placement in homes of native speakers. Scott notes that one of the most useful aspects of adult conversation is that, “If they say something, and you don’t understand them, they can change the sentence to the point where you will understand them.” Participants also receive corrective feedback from adults. Megan talks about sitting down to read a book to two elderly women at Villa Hogar: “They helped me get my pronunciation right, and even helped me understand some of the basics of the storyline.” These participants feel that conversing with adults allows them to ask for clarification of meaning and grants them access to language comprehension.

Youth. Many participants also consider Mexican youth who speak some English to be important sources of language assistance. Through school, service, home, and particularly church attendance and activities, students develop relationships with native speakers their own age. Most of the native adults with whom students associate speak little or no English. In contrast, some of the native youth speak English because they have had more extensive exposure to the language. In speaking about a group of youth from church, Chelsea explains:

It is helpful that some speak English and some don’t because at times we are forced to only speak Spanish with people, but I have learned a lot from talking to
the people who can speak English. They add a different aspect of the language that I do not get in class . . . They teach us what is most common and informal to say in everyday conversations.

*Children.* Because seven of the service sites are organizations for children, the participants have frequent contact with younger Spanish speakers. Although the smaller children become impatient when the participants cannot communicate quickly, the older children are eager to serve as language aides. The help from older children can be invaluable, as it facilitates communication with the younger children at the site and promotes personal language acquisition for participants. Lisa says that the children are “very willing to speak slowly and repeat words” and “don’t make fun of poor Spanish . . . They giggle and then correct you—a hundred times over if necessary.”

*Other Language Learning Strategies*

If students are unable to obtain the necessary help from people around them, many resort to a secondary means of communication, such as gesturing, observing, or circumlocuting, in order to understand. Speaking of her experience near the beginning of the program, Bethany says, “I do know that my ability to communicate has increased through learning how to get around the words I do not know . . . and practicing my acting abilities!” Because Mike cannot always understand what his mamá wants by simply listening to her, he says, “Observation has become very important. A lot can be learned even if what is spoken isn’t directly understood.” When teaching swimming lessons to blind children at Helen Keller, Jane uses touch and circumlocution to communicate the ideas for which she has no Spanish vocabulary:
It was a little difficult at times because I didn’t know enough Spanish vocabulary for swimming words. So I did what a blind child would: relied on touch. I held Marta and helped her swim. Whenever I didn’t know how to say something, like “move your arms,” I would guide her with my arms. I even taught her how to swim on her back in the “chicken, airplane, soldier” style. I changed the words to “gallo, avión, hombre” and she loved it!

Final Language Impressions

During the last two weeks of the program, students solidify their final impressions of language. The two themes that emerged from the data relating to these impressions were difficulty of language learning and success with language.

Difficulty of Language Learning

In the final stages of the program, 17 participants made positive comments about language or language progression in their journal entries, interviews, and post-questionnaires. Even though they have positive feelings about language, numerous students concede that language is not as easy as they had imagined at the commencement of the service study abroad program. Matt describes learning Spanish as “very difficult.” Jared says it is “overwhelming at times.” Lisa explains:

I kind of assumed speaking Spanish would come quickly because we were “immersed” in it and had some background . . . NO. If you want to be good at it, it takes a ton of work and practice, and you’ll never be fluent in eight weeks because there’s too much to learn.

These students demonstrate a more complete understanding of the time and effort it takes to acquire language skills that lead to fluency.
Success With Language

Though complete Spanish fluency eludes participants over their two-month stay in Mexico, many students notice progression towards fluency. In their interviews, Candice and Scott demonstrate that maintaining an optimistic attitude among the disappointments of language learning requires identifying aspects of language with which they have had success. Even though dissatisfied with her inability to speak Spanish fluently, Candice identifies the progress she has made with her listening skills. “I became used to the language and I started to be able to pick things out that I wouldn’t have ever been able to pick out before. I feel really comfortable listening to most conversations in Spanish now.”

Scott explains that language learning is “much more of a process” than he originally anticipated. Although he does not speak perfectly, displaying an encyclopedic knowledge of all Spanish grammar rules, he does celebrate the fact that he can converse and connect with people in Mexico. Speaking of his progression during the program, Scott says:

When I came on this program, it was “¿Cómo estás? ¿Cómo te llamas?” We had our oral exams that lasted ten minutes and I was maxed out at my ten minutes, whereas now, I can sit at a table and have a conversation about life for one or two hours with my mamá talking about why I have a headache, or why that test was hard, or what’s going to happen tomorrow, or what did we do all day . . . from the school to the service to the basketball we played, to the fact that I was sweating so hard, and the fact that I was hungry, and what I ate.
Language influences many aspects of participants’ experiences in the native culture. It is the means by which students communicate with those whom they serve, as well as all members of the host culture. As students learn to speak Spanish, it allows them to make connections, understand their surroundings, and communicate on various levels.

Service

Service sets this program apart from traditional study abroad programs that focus solely on language and culture. In addition to supplementing the acquisition of both linguistic and cultural knowledge, service provides a meaningful way to connect students with members of the host culture through sustained interaction. Through increased contact with members of the culture, students experience Mexico on a much more intimate level than otherwise possible. This section addresses participants’ initial, developing, and final impressions of the service component of this study abroad program.

*Initial Service Impressions*

Students’ initial impressions of service in Guadalajara depend upon various factors. I identified five central themes that influence participants’ perceptions at the beginning of the service experience: (a) discovering purpose, (b) administrative contact, (c) expectation versus reality, (d) personality, and (e) getting a feel for service.

*Discovering Purpose*

The formative phase of service is marked by learning respective roles and understanding the purpose of participants’ presence at the sites. Although very unsure of what to expect when she reached the Centro Cultural de Corea, Candice quickly learned of her responsibilities. “We didn’t know what their expectations were; we didn’t know
what we were going to do . . . I thought we would be assisting teachers . . . However, much to our surprise, we are the teachers.”

Other students’ roles are less clearly defined. Tammy says, “We had a quick walk through at the Casa Hogar . . . I’ll be really honest and say that it wasn’t really clear what the nuns or Magdalena wanted from us.” Others identify their purposes as showing love to those served, giving workers a break, being glorified babysitters, playing with kids, and spending time with the people they serve.

Administrative Contact

Another factor influencing the perception of purpose at the service site is the amount of contact students have with personnel from the service organization. At many of the sites, administrators help students understand their roles. Michelle explains, “We always went into the staff room and put our stuff there, and we’d kind of wait around for instructions.” Although some students receive regular guidance from personnel, other students have limited contact with those in charge. Participants desiring guidance from administrators in order to understand their roles can become frustrated when they do not receive this guidance. Lindsey says that at Casa Hogar, “We are pretty much in charge of the kids for the time we come, with no instructions or advice as to what to do.”

Expectation Versus Reality

Some students quickly discover that the vision of service they had prior to their departure is very different from the situation they encounter upon their arrival in Guadalajara. Paige says of her first few days, “I was extremely frustrated because while I had been asked about types of service I would like to do . . . my preferences were ignored.” Working with the elderly at the Asilo Juan Pablo II, she finds herself in
situations she considers to be rather uncomfortable. She writes, “I often don’t know what to say, but I think that the more I experience [those situations] the better I will know how to react.” Thinking about service at MAMA, Michelle says, “I don’t know what I was expecting. I think part of this is just me being ethnocentric and expecting people to come with a program, and a list of activities to do, and keeping everyone entertained.”

Expectations about the physical service setting itself also influence how students perceive their initial service experience. Chelsea and Emily, who had braced themselves for less-than-ideal circumstances, are pleasantly surprised. Chelsea notes, “I was impressed at how clean and well kept it was.” Emily adds, “I was honestly quite impressed because Casa Hogar looked pretty tidy and clean, especially clean if it was done by little kids.” Jamie, who found that her service site was different from what she expected, describes the difficulty of adjustment. Talking about Asilo Juan Pablo II, she says:

This place is dirty, stinky, and not very inviting. Many times I look around and I think, if I could just have one day, I could have all of these chairs clean, or I could wash the walls and then it would be better; or, if only the sofas were clean. However, the more I am there those things have faded into the dark and the things that I am most concerned with are the people . . . There are times when it is hard, but as we forget ourselves and remember our purpose in these different services, then the service we are rendering will become much more meaningful.

**Personality**

Individuals’ personalities play a major role in the way students interpret their initial service experiences. Through observation, it became evident that students often
experience similar situations, but respond in diverse ways. Laura talks about an experience with the elderly:

I helped a little old lady to the restroom but upon leaving the bathroom she clutched my hands, then my arm, with her dripping wet—definitely unwashed—hands . . . Then, when I sat down next to her, I sat in pee . . . . It was thoroughly disgusting and I left early that day.

Jamie had a similar experience, but after sitting on a soaked couch cushion, retrieved a plastic bag to sit down on the next couch cushion. Paige went home, while Jamie tried to remedy her situation. Much of students’ initial impressions of their service sites hinges on their personalities.

_A Feel for Service_

Getting the “feel for it” describes what students do to become more comfortable serving at the sites during the initial stages of the program. The newness of the experience is sometimes accompanied by feelings of unfamiliarity and disorientation. Megan comments, “I didn’t know where anything was, what to say, or what to do, especially at my service site.” As participants better understand their responsibilities and become acquainted with the people they serve, familiarity gradually replaces confusion, and formation of a routine provides a roadmap for the day’s activities. Lisa says, “I am getting more accustomed to how things work down here, finding a sort of comfortable routine amid all the new things.”

_Developing Service Impressions_

During the first two weeks of the program, students are introduced to their service sites, identify their roles, and begin a routine. In the weeks following, there is a
noticeable shift from acclimatization to the formation of a deeper understanding of opportunities and responsibilities at the service site. Six themes emerged from the data relating to participants’ developing service impressions: (a) increased comfort level, (b) recognizing challenges, (c) making a difference, (d) meaningful experiences, (e) coping mechanisms, and (f) mental adjustments.

**Increased Comfort Level**

Continued presence at the service organizations makes it possible for participants to become more comfortable serving in their roles. As comfort levels rise, students express positive feelings about their experiences. Jared explains, “The service is usually the best part of my day. I have come to love going there.” Tammy adds, “I feel like more and more that service is not a boring thing that I do because I have to.” Even though enthusiasm does not remove all difficulties from the service sites, it can facilitate the cultivation of positive feelings between those serving and those being served. Katie explains:

Things aren’t easy now, but now that we have an idea of what to expect each day, they are a lot more fun. Plus, now that the kids know us, and we’ve created a semblance of a routine, they are much more agreeable.

**Recognizing Challenges**

Regular service can boost comfort levels and lead to positive feelings, but sustained time serving also increases awareness of the challenges associated with service. Participants recognize numerous challenges, including: (a) staying motivated, (b) feeling effective, (c) disciplining children, and (d) facing the reality that life is hard for those they serve.
**Staying motivated.** One challenge is the ability to stay motivated and upbeat. Reflecting on going to the plaza to play with street children, Michelle explains, “Some days we were just like, ‘I don’t want to go play in the street!’ But . . . it was always fun when we were doing it.” Lindsey concedes “I felt this past week that we (or at least I) haven’t been putting as much effort into the service project as I could.” The tasks at each site, as well as the level of personal initiative, test student motivations to serve.

**Feeling effective.** Some students question their effectiveness in their service responsibilities. After forming bonds with the elderly she serves, Jamie comments, “The people there have really grown on me. I am not really afraid of most of them anymore, but I still wonder if I am always doing the best things for them.” Michelle also questions her usefulness at MAMA:

> Our service has been enjoyable, but again it has its ups and downs. Some days I feel like we are really helping out a lot and building good relationships with the main workers at MAMA. Then other days, I feel like we don’t really have that much to do, or that we could be doing more than we are doing.

Even though these students have cultivated relationships through service, they also recognize the challenge to feel effective.

**Disciplining.** One challenge that arises for participants serving with children is filling the role of disciplinarian. Describing her experience teaching English to younger children, Melissa says:

> I think the most difficult thing is not actually teaching them but trying to discipline them. Many of the younger kids are very easily distracted and like to
run around the street and lock other students in classrooms. The younger kids are really smart but need to constantly be entertained and prodded in order to behave.

The combination of linguistic barriers and their status as volunteers makes it difficult for participants to discipline the children they serve. Andrea admits, “I am not quite successful being an authoritarian with the kids.” Rather than fill the role of disciplinarian, Alicia identifies an alternate responsibility she feels precedes disciplining. She explains the difficulties of helping one little girl with her homework:

Marta wanted to play instead of work. She would roll her eyes at me and that was pretty much frustrating, not knowing how to respond appropriately in Spanish. I thought about what I could do to get her more interested but then I decided that I was there to love her and not discipline her, so I just let her color on my notebook. That went really well.

Facing reality. Participants find it difficult to accept the reality that daily life is hard for the individuals they serve and is unlikely to improve. After listening to one boy talk about his home situation, Doug recognized the influences pervading the lives of the children at Casa Hogar.

One of the kids brought up the topic of pornography, and how much he liked it. That was a bit of a reality check for all of us . . . [It is] more obvious than ever that these kids come from much tougher backgrounds than I have ever dealt with or could imagine being raised with.

Alicia experienced a similar reality check after listening to a song about fathers with Lilia, one of the girls from Casa Hogar. Alicia writes, “At the end of the song [Lilia] laid on my lap and said, ‘You know, I don’t have a daddy.’ Wow! That really hit me.”
Making a Difference

Eradicating the troubles service recipients face is unlikely, but many participants still seek to be a positive influence during the brief time they serve. Michelle says that though she is unsure of the lasting impact she will have on the street children with whom she worked, she thinks, “They really liked to know that somebody cared about what was going on in their lives . . . I think, for a day at least, you can make them feel better about themselves.”

Just as Michelle senses that the impact her service has on someone’s life may be temporary, Doug questions the permanence of his influence in the lives of the children he serves. He feels that participants need a longer period of time serving to make a lasting impact. Doug says, “[I’m] not saying [our] being there isn’t doing anything, but I feel it would take more than two hours a day, four days a week with a couple of good influences to make a really big difference in these boys’ lives.”

Meaningful Experiences

In their journals, the majority of students highlighted specific service experiences that helped validate their efforts at each site. After weeks of visiting Mario, an unresponsive elderly man at Villa Hogar, Megan says, “He usually just lies there, but on Wednesday, when I went in and sat with him and began singing, he smiled. I promise you, he really smiled. I felt that he understood, and that I had done something great.” When participants’ efforts are rewarded with a positive response, most note that they feel their service is worthwhile. Reflecting on an experience at Asilo Juan Pablo, Paige adds:

An older man who I spend a lot of time with there bought me a present of apples. [This] was so touching to me because I know that he can’t have much money and
that it is difficult for him to move about. I felt so useful, appreciated, and lucky that I could touch someone’s life that much even though I can’t always understand what they are saying.

**Coping Mechanisms**

The developing stage of the service experience is also characterized by participants’ efforts to cope with less-than-ideal circumstances encountered at the onset of their service. Participants use a variety of methods to remedy their situations, including setting a schedule, planning organized activities, bringing additional materials, and simply figuring out what works. Rachel recounts her feelings of frustration at the beginning of the program, and then details the methods she and fellow participants used to deal with their situation at Corea:

At the beginning it caused us all an unreal amount of time and stress, since we didn’t know what was expected of us, or how to start, or how to control the kids, or how lenient we should be, or if we should test the kids, or if we needed to have individual plans for each student . . . Each day we tried something new—having someone new do the teaching, splitting into different groups, timing and spacing out activities, [using] worksheets, focusing on specific topics, [and] trying to get to know and understand each kid.

**Mental Adjustments**

The challenges also necessitate evaluation of personal attitudes toward service situations. Imperfect circumstances test participants’ abilities to cope with the incongruence of their personal thoughts about service and the actual experience of service.
The ability to adjust their mental approach to service impacts feelings of accomplishment.

Andrea explains:

I just have had to get over the disappointment and be patient with the fact that I don’t click with these elderly people as quickly as I have in my past experiences in the States. I am going to have to learn how to show compassion and . . . serve in different ways then I am used to. My [strength] is understanding how people feel and communicating with them, but at the Asilo I am having to find other ways to connect, like with touch and smiles and things like that. It’s out of my comfort zone, but I think I just need to keep trying and give it time before I will feel the amplitude of love that I have felt in the past towards those that I have served.

Final Service Impressions

In the last two weeks of the program, the degree of fulfillment students feel at their service sites influences their final impressions of the experience. For some, it has been a gratifying way in which to spend their time abroad; others feel disillusionment and wish for something more.

Sensing Fulfillment

As students give of their time and talents, they build relationships and get to know those whom they serve. The formation of relationships contributes to a sense of fulfillment at the end of the program. Doug explains that knowing the children in a more personal way has helped increase his desire to serve daily. He says:

I look forward to going to service regularly and I’d say more so now than when I first arrived in Mexico. I am comfortable with the surroundings and familiar with
the individuals and their characters and personalities, so I can interact with them in a better manner.

Other participants expound on factors that contribute to their feelings of fulfillment. Alicia says, “I am really enjoying my service. I look forward to going more now than I did at the beginning because I feel that I am making a difference, even if it is a small one.” Becca echoes these words:

Before, it was somewhat challenging to go to service everyday . . . but now I look forward to it because of the relationships that I have made . . . At first the service seemed pointless, but in the end it’s the experience that means the most to me.

**Disappointments**

For those who feel less fulfilled, the final stages of the experience can be disappointing. Rachel reflects, “At the beginning I was terrified, in the middle I loved it, and now at the end, I am somewhat disappointed. I don’t feel like I really did any service.” Disillusionment often sets in as students reconcile the differences between expectation and reality. Jane, a volunteer at the Instituto Helen Keller, hoped to have regular contact with the blind children at the school, but instead spent much of her time working on art projects assigned by the staff. She explains, “I love going to service on Wednesdays, but I have to admit that that is the only day I look forward to going. That is the only day we get to even talk to the kids. I am a little disappointed about that.” Matt, who also served at the site, expressed similar sentiments. At the prospect of painting another cardboard guitar for the end-of-school program, he says “I don’t get much out of cardboard.”
A Need to Feel Needed

In their journals, more than half of the participants reflected a desire to feel needed at their service sites. Students who feel there is great need for the service they render and ample work to do at each site express more positive attitudes. Conversely, participants who feel superfluous to the service scene have more negative attitudes toward their service. These students express frustration and disappointment about feeling unneeded at their service sites, sensing a lack of appreciation for service rendered, or feeling that their time and talents are not well utilized.

Sensing need. Natalie feels that the elderly she serves at Villa Hogar are in great need of her assistance. She explains that trying to meet their needs helps her feel useful:

We usually end up staying 30-40 minutes over our assigned two hours because it's hard to just walk away from someone who needs to talk. The thing I like the most about serving here is that I really feel like I am needed here. I really feel like I can make a difference in their lives by just giving them my time and attention. The ladies who work at the Asilo . . . physically cannot possibly give these elderly people the kind of one-on-one attention and the listening ear that they are starving for.

Having sufficient work. Having ample work to do onsite can contribute to satisfaction in service. Nathan says, “As long as I have something to do while there, I can feel good about the service activities.” He recalls the day a woman at Instituto Helen Keller assigned the participants to enlarge the headings from a stack of papers. He overheard the woman conversing with a colleague, explaining that even though the task...
could have been done by a copy machine, she had assigned it to the participants so that they would have something to do.

*Feeling unneeded.* Frustrations may surface when participants perceive that they are not meeting a need. Talking about her experience teaching English to upper-middle class children at the Centro Cultural de Corea, Candice says, “I thought I would be with kids who have nothing—kids who wouldn’t receive the opportunity to learn otherwise. I thought I’d be making a worthwhile difference and, frankly, I know I haven’t.” Because she feels that the children she teaches are not in need of her assistance, she thinks her service does not make the difference she hoped it would.

*Feeling unvalued.* Some students express that the lack of need makes them feel their presence is not valued at the service organizations. Even though Doug is more excited to go to his service at the end of the program than he was at the beginning, he laments:

I wish we felt like we were more needed. If we don’t show up it doesn’t seem like anybody really cares. I feel appreciated at my service but I feel that my capabilities could be better used at a different service organization where I feel like I am meeting a greater need.

*Underutilizing time and talents.* It can be wearisome to recognize that time is not well spent, or that talents are not put to use. Two students serving at MAMA reflect on their desires for the organization to give them worthwhile tasks and to make use of their talents. Ryan says:

Last week was not so great…they didn’t give us much to do at all so we did a lot of sitting around and talking. This week they realize that they only get us for one
week [more] and they want us to finish four projects before then. . . . It’s nice to have things to do.

Michelle adds, “I think they could have taken more advantage of our talents and abilities than they did.” At times when there was nothing to do, she thinks, “Well, this is kind of useless. If you didn’t have anything for me to do today, why did I come?” Resentment festers when she feels her time and talents are not used constructively.

Recognizing a need. Natalie sums up what numerous participants sense when volunteering at sites where they identify a lack of need, or think that the organizations fail to use the volunteers to meet needs. “A lot of times, [with] service . . . it’s more like, ‘You need to do service, and so, here’s a place you can go serve,’ but they don’t really need you.” Generally, need is present at each service site; the challenge is recognizing and identifying the need. Tammy comments:

At Casa Hogar, I don’t feel extraordinarily useful because the kids have recreation, food, shelter, school, and beds; but what I realized is that I needed to identify the need that the children have. For instance, when we go and all we do is play, it’s not very effective, or fun, for that matter. I realized that the need at Casa Hogar is there are many children and not many leaders—the need is for attention and someone to talk to.

Bittersweet Endings

Because of the relationships participants form with those they serve, the end of the service experience can be bittersweet. The students’ departure draws attention to friendships that participants have developed but, simultaneously, marks the end of the experience. Reflecting on the children at Hogares de Nuevo Mexico, Lisa says, “It’s
really amazing how much you bond with these little kids you knew nothing of, and how awful it feels when you realize you are going to have to leave them.” Alicia describes the difficulty of her departure from Casa Hogar:

Leaving was really hard . . . When I saw how upset the girls were I started struggling. I had three girls with arms wrapped around my waist. They honestly wouldn’t let go and were hysterical, saying, “¡No te vayas!” over and over again. In the end I was bawling, just like the girls, and the boys had to lead us out . . .

The thing that hurt the most was that I felt like I was . . . in their life . . . temporarily and just like everyone else, I was leaving. However, I am so glad for the relationships that were developed.

Despite the hardships of saying goodbye, many students explain that they value the relationships they have developed with the service recipients. At the end of the program, 15 students refer to the service they render and the love they feel for those they serve as the most rewarding aspects of their experiences. Becca cherishes “playtime with children who anticipate your arrival, shower you with hugs, and give you every chance to learn to love them.” Katie says that it is rewarding “working with the kids, seeing their smiles, hearing their laughter, and knowing that I had something to do with that.” Summer feels that working and playing with the children at Zapopan is most rewarding and explains, “Even though I didn’t understand everything they said, everyone understands love.” At the close of the service experience, these participants recognize the ties they have developed with those they serve.
Program-Related Factors Influencing Students’ Experiences

Though culture, language, and service are the three major components of service study abroad, failure to recognize other program elements would result in an incomplete picture of the experience. To understand the experience more fully, it becomes necessary to discuss other aspects of the program, including: (a) formal academic study, (b) group structure, and (c) excursions.

Formal Academic Study

Formal academic coursework plays a major role in study abroad programs. Although study seems to take a secondary role to service in this program, students hold strong opinions about the educational element of the experience. Many participants express that they want the Spanish university courses to challenge them at their level. After her first week in Mexico, Emily comments that she is happy to be challenged on a level she can understand. She says that she is “pleased” with her classes because “everything just felt like a big review and I was happy that I [understood] a lot.”

Other students became frustrated when sensing incongruence between the level of course instruction and their level of competency in the language. Scott often thought that the courses were undemanding and a waste of time. He reflects, “I just feel like if you’re going to spend two months down in Mexico, and spend all that money, you might as well stretch yourself as far as the class stuff goes.” When Paige finally does feel challenged at her level, she says, “School has been a lot more enjoyable these last few days. I think it’s because we have moved out of review and into new territory and I feel like I am finally learning . . . the language.”
Group Structure

Being in a group of 35 students presents both advantages and disadvantages for service study abroad students. The group creates a network of people with whom to associate but can limit privacy as well as interaction with others outside of the study abroad program.

Advantages

Participants identify numerous advantages to having a base of fellow students with whom to associate during their stay in Mexico. Some identify the group as enjoyable, close-knit, safe, and a medium for friendships and participant interaction. When viewed as a sort of safety net in the new culture, many participants have positive feelings toward the group structure. Becca explains that being in a group makes “navigating our way through the idiosyncrasies of Mexican culture” less shocking. When students view the group as a support system, they appreciate the structure it provides.

Disadvantages

If students see the group structure as a hindrance to their experience, negative feelings arise. One disadvantage of having a large group is that it limits personal privacy. Concerning privacy, Michelle says, “I had a really hard time . . . Even if I went shopping, everyone knew when I bought something new . . . or if I’m sick everyone knows I’m sick because I wasn’t at school.” She continues explaining that there are many people who are “very close in my life that I didn’t necessarily choose . . . to be close to my life.” Because participants find themselves in close contact with one another on a daily basis, familiarity can become wearisome for those seeking privacy.
Another disadvantage some students associate with the large group is that they feel it restricts opportunities for interaction with natives from the host culture. Scott says, “We were kind of in a bubble just because we were always with our group.” Candice explains:

I really love everyone as individuals, but when you get us all together, we’re this mass group of Gringos. We’re completely unapproachable . . . We were so “touristy,” and I didn’t want to be a tourist. I wanted to feel [what] the country was really like, and see what the culture was . . . I think it’s really hard to do that when you’re in that big of a group.

These participants feel that the group entity prevents interaction with, and understanding of, the culture and subsequently resent the boundaries the group size creates.

**Excursions**

This service study abroad program includes a number of excursions to cities and towns outside of Guadalajara. Most students respond very positively to the opportunity to travel to other parts of Mexico and consider travel as a means of acquiring a more comprehensive view of the culture. Emily comments that visiting other places helps participants “really experience Mexico and learn more about the culture here.” Through the excursions, students gain exposure to history, art, peoples and culture. Speaking of the trip to Mexico City, Paige says, “I really enjoyed the architecture, and . . . I was completely enthralled for the majority of the time.”

Exposure to an array of places, lifestyles, and customs inspires some participants to contemplate life and their surroundings. Amanda says, “Our excursion . . . provided me with many opportunities for inward reflection and contemplation.” Tammy explains
that leaving Guadalajara allowed her to witness and ponder other aspects of life in Mexico. She writes:

> Probably the thing that impressed me the most was passing the pueblos on the way to and from the city. I was just thinking about what those people’s lives are like. I wonder if they think about issues in the country, or if they think where they live is beautiful. I wondered how their relationships with their families are, and I had an extreme desire to play soccer with the kids I saw playing in the rain.

**General Outcomes of Service Study Abroad**

In closing this section on the qualitative findings of the study, it seems appropriate to make a few general observations about the outcomes of the service study abroad program, including (a) students’ attitudes toward the program, and (b) their realizations about self, the benefits of service, and the nature of culture.

**Attitudes Toward Program**

At the conclusion of the program, most participants have positive feelings toward their experiences in Mexico, but attitudes concerning the structure of the program itself differ. Sarah says, “I think there is a really good balance between school, service, and free time.” Nathan reflects, “I love the variety of experiences that we had . . . I enjoyed the combination of activities [and] I realize how much I love this experience.”

Michelle, on the other hand, thinks that although the opportunities she has had in Mexico are invaluable, she feels that the program is “too structured” to “really open people to other cultures and countries.” She says, “I feel like a lot of the rules and a lot of the program stuff was kind of arbitrary . . . They can still have a structured program that gives you more freedom and encourages more intercultural interaction.”
Regardless of whether or not participants feel that the program structure directly contributes to the experience, all 33 students surveyed note that they appreciate the opportunities afforded by service study abroad.

**Realizations**

**Self**

The data show that the service study abroad experience encourages self-reflection and contemplation. For some, being in a new environment, speaking a different language, and trying to navigate through an unfamiliar culture unearths feelings that might otherwise have remained hidden. Candice says that the experience allowed her to see “a lot of sides of myself and of other people come out that I didn’t expect.” After critically contemplating her character, she explains, “I definitely saw things that I didn’t want to see . . . I was definitely my worst self in Mexico . . . but it was really good for me, and it’s good to look back and see what I was and what I don’t want to be.”

Another student reflects that her experience has made her more aware of personal changes she would like to make and has helped define who she is. Jamie writes:

> I am not sure if I have necessarily changed in any dramatic way, but I definitely have a clearer view of how I do want to change . . . With every slip up I have defined myself more and more and I am so grateful that I have had the chance to experience those things [so] as to strengthen my character. I don’t think I [otherwise] could have learned many of the things I have learned as fast as I have learned them.

Other students express that as they have participated in service study abroad, they have come to notice personal change and growth. In their journals and post-
questionnaires, numerous students noted an increase in patience, self-confidence, and personal levels of independence as a result of the experience. Lisa says she realized, “I can do it—I can survive more or less in a place far from home, with people very different from me, who speak a different language, and . . . be fine.”

Culture

Personal contemplation can lead to realizations about culture. Amanda explains what she has learned as she has experienced life in a different culture:

I suppose when we discover such a different way of life than we have always been used to, then we have to turn within ourselves and examine why we believe or think what we do. Culture is so deeply ingrained within a person that I think it is nearly impossible to separate one’s culture from one’s self.

Because the service study abroad experience prompts participants to examine cultural beliefs, some students come to see common threads that run through all cultures. Chelsea says, “People are just people, wherever [they] are in the world, and whatever culture they may be part of.” Tammy adds, “I never thought about people from other countries in personal ways, but now I know how everyone has dreams and fears, and [how] everyone needs love and comfort from knowing they are valued and loved.”

Identifying similarities between cultures helps students see common needs and desires among people, even if each culture engages in diverse practices to fulfill those needs.

Service

The service element incorporated into the program can encourage students to pursue future service opportunities. James says he has noticed, “The most rewarding days are those that are focused on others. I’ve noticed that I need to do this a lot more.”
Because a service study abroad attracts students who are disposed to performing service, most students have the desire to serve before the experience, but this desire can be renewed through the experience. Doug explains:

Being actively engaged in daily service feels good. In a way [it] rejuvenated my desire to serve regularly. . . . At BYU I’m so preoccupied with my schedule, my social life, [and] my calling, that rarely do I make time to serve on a regular basis. So I feel that this program has been very beneficial to my life in improving not only the daily lives of others but definitely [mine] as well.

The act of serving allows students to understand the nature of service and the way in which it benefits lives. Tammy and Katie identify love as a key element in making service meaningful. Tammy feels that “service isn’t just about actions; it’s about actions you do for someone out of love, and that love is the motivation.” Katie expounds further:

I have learned that the most important aspect of service is love. I can sit in front of the group of students and dictate to them all about notes and rhythms, but that misses the point. Service is not one person doing something for another. It is about loving the other person and working together.

This concludes the qualitative data. The next section will present data from the quantitative data analysis.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Responses to six questions (Q1-Q6) from the pre- and post-questionnaires were used for quantitative analysis. The questions were as follows:

Q1. How prepared do you feel to interact with natives from the Mexican culture?
Q2. How confident are you in your ability to speak Spanish with native Spanish speakers?

Q3. How self-reliant do you consider yourself to be?

Q4. How comfortable would you be going to a social event at which only Mexicans were in attendance?

Q5. How likely are you to enroll in another Spanish course when you return to the United States?

Q6. How likely are you to travel to other Spanish-speaking countries in the future?

Equal interval scales were created by assigning point values one through six to participants’ responses from the pre- and post-questionnaires. Each question was compared using a two-tailed, paired $t$ test, with the alpha level set at $p<.05$. Results are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1

*Pre-Post Comparisons of Students’ Responses to Attitudinal Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudinal Questions</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1 Preparation: Pre-Questionaire</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q1 Preparation: Post-Questionaire</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2 Speaking Abilities: Pre-Questionaire</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2 Speaking Abilities: Post-Questionaire</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3 Self-reliance: Pre-Questionaire</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3 Self-reliance: Post-Questionaire</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4 Socializing: Pre-Questionaire</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4 Socializing: Post-Questionaire</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5 Continued Study: Pre-Questionaire</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5 Continued Study: Post-Questionaire</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6 Future Travel: Pre-Questionaire</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6 Future Travel: Post-Questionaire</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=31
Table 2

*Pre- Post Comparisons Using a Paired t Test*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudinal Questions</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1 Preparation</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>-5.66</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.00*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2 Speaking Abilities</td>
<td>-1.19</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>-5.56</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.00*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3 Self-reliance</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>-1.96</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4 Socializing</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>-1.90</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5 Continued Study</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6 Future Travel</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>-2.50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Difference is statistically significant (p<.05).

As can be seen from the tables, Q1, Q2, and Q6 showed a significant increase from the pre- to the post-questionnaire. For Q1, the mean student response increased from 4.29 to 5.32, which represented a statistically significant increase ($t(30) = -5.66$, $p = .00$). This shows that students feel more prepared to interact with natives from Mexican culture after their participation in service study abroad than they did before their participation.

For Q2, the mean student response increased from 3.48 to 4.68, which represented a statistically significant increase ($t(30) = -5.56$, $p = .00$). This increase demonstrates that after service study abroad in Mexico, students feel more confident in their ability to speak Spanish with native Spanish speakers.

Student mean response to Q6 showed an increase from 5.61 to 5.87, indicating a statistically significant increase ($t(30) = -2.50$, $p = .02$). This indicates an increased likelihood of future travel to other Spanish-speaking countries.

Although the increase on Q3 is not statistically significant, it does approach the level of significance ($t(30) = -1.96$, $p = .06$), indicating that students seem to increase in self-reliance during their time abroad.
In summary, it appears that at the end of the program, students believe they are more prepared to interact with natives from Mexican culture, speak Spanish with native speakers, and visit other Spanish-speaking countries. Levels of self-reliance also seem to increase, though this increase is not statistically significant.

This chapter has presented the results from the study. Chapter Five will discuss the results and conclusions, state limitations of the study, explain implications for practice, and give recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Study abroad and service-learning are valuable tools for education and personal growth. Extensive research enumerates the benefits of study abroad (Carsello & Creaser, 1976; Kitsantas, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Kaufman & Kuh, 1984; McCabe, 1994; Williams, 2005; Sell, 1983) and service-learning (Astin & Sax, 1998; Smith-Paríolá & Gökè-Paríolá, 2006; Grusky, 2000; Sax & Astin, 1997; Webster Hale, 1997). Both programs provide a practical forum in which to apply classroom instruction to real-world settings.

Although educators have researched the effects of study abroad and service-learning, they have not concentrated their efforts on researching the development of perceptions and attitudes during the course of study. Additionally, little research has been conducted on the combination of service-learning opportunities with study abroad. As explained in Chapter One, this study was designed to provide insight into the service study abroad experience by answering the following questions:

1) How do students interpret their experiences as participants in a service study abroad program?

2) What feelings, perceptions, and attitudes develop as students participate in a service study abroad program?

The results presented in Chapter Four answer both research questions. They show that students go through an extensive process of discovering, formulating, and then solidifying their attitudes and perceptions as they interpret their experiences while serving and studying abroad. This chapter discusses qualitative and quantitative results of
the study, gives implications for practice, specifies limitations, and provides
recommendations for further research.

Discussion of Results

Complexities of culture shock. As students participated in service and study
abroad, they often did not perceive feeling elements of culture shock. When asked on the
post-questionnaire if they experienced any culture shock upon their arrival in Guadalajara,
the majority of the students responded they did not. They mentioned issues that required
personal adjustment, but overall, they did not feel “shocked.” This response was
contradicted by other sources of data in which students expressed discontent with the
disparities between their native cultures and the new culture.

Through my field observations as well as the participants’ journal entries, I found
that these students did indeed experience culture shock to some degree. It seems that
some of those who felt they did not, simply shied away from defining what they
experienced as “shock.” The responses to this specific question on the post-questionnaire
may be more an indication of students’ negative response to the terminology itself, rather
than an accurate reflection of what students experienced.

American influences. Many service study abroad participants expressed feelings
of dissatisfaction at seeing what they perceived to be American influences in Mexico.
They felt that American influences diluted the essence of genuine Mexican culture, thus
inhibiting their ability their ability to really experience Mexico. For these students, true
immersion in another culture meant complete separation from one’s native culture and all
native cultural influences. Abiding by this definition, participants who identified evidence
of their native culture in Mexico felt they could not experience true immersion. If
participants expected immersion in the culture to be void of all cross-cultural influences, they were disappointed by the reality.

*Language as a new system of meaning.* Communication in a foreign language represents a rebirth of sorts for service study abroad participants. Students bring with them a recollection of their former life experiences, but after arriving in Guadalajara, language causes entire systems of meaning to change. What participants have always considered a child is no longer a child, but a niño; school is now escuela; home is now la casa; and life is now la vida. Language is an outward manifestation of an internal renaissance. Students transform their conceptions of what defined life before to the words that describe life now. For the participants, Spanish is much more than communication; it embodies the dawning of a new system of meaning through which students interpret their world. Language represents the essence of functioning in a new setting, with new people, having a new life experience.

*Goals and expectations.* Goals and expectations largely determined participants’ ultimate perceptions of the service study abroad experience. Students cited various reasons for participating in the program. These reasons formed the foundation of their expectations of what the experience would help them accomplish. If students expected to increase their Spanish fluency, feelings of success were directly correlated to increased language fluency. If their goal was to develop personal relationships with members of another culture, the formation of these relationships, or the lack thereof, had a major impact on their attitude. When students accomplished what they expected to accomplish, they viewed the experience as successful. Conversely, if accomplishments did not coincide expectation, participants left disillusioned.
**Personality.** As Bacon (2002) points out, personality affects the degree to which participants benefit from study abroad. Some students’ personalities facilitated adaptation in the new environment, whereas others’ made adjustment more difficult. Personal characteristics aided or impeded progression throughout the entire service study abroad experience. Even though many students had similar experiences, the way they interpreted these experiences depended heavily on their personalities.

**Conception of need.** At their service sites, some students felt they were not needed, or that they were not fulfilling a need. In analyzing the data, it became apparent that students had very specific conceptions of what need means. If what participants did at the service site did not coincide with their notion of need, or what it means to meet a need, they felt their service was futile. Some equated need to poverty, so if they were not helping impoverished people, they felt they were not meeting a need. Others equated need to underprivileged children, so if they weren’t working with these children, they thought their service was unnecessary. Some equated filling a need to the organization taking full advantage of their talents, so if their talents were not maximized, they felt unneeded.

If participants’ conception of need differed from assigned service responsibilities, they had difficulty recognizing their helpfulness at the sites. When students filled smaller roles, such as increasing opportunities for interaction, helping to ease burdens, or giving others a break from the monotony of daily life, and their efforts were not concentrated on activities that aligned with their own conception of need, they felt unneeded. Ultimately, students did encounter and did meet needs at each service site, but often experienced a disparity between their definition of need and what they were asked to do.
Implications for Practice

This section details the implications for practice in the field of foreign language education. A variety of factors hinders or contributes to a successful service study abroad experience. Factors influencing success are as follows: (a) attending preparation courses, (b) preparing for service responsibilities, (c) aligning assignments and interests, (d) understanding duties, (e) having meaningful responsibilities, (f) identifying need, (g) and encouraging native contact.

Attending preparation courses. Brigham Young University requires all students participating in a study abroad program to enroll in a preparation course prior to their departure for a foreign country. These courses help inform students of program goals and schedules, give historical information about the country in which they will be residing, and discuss linguistic and cultural components of the experience. Even after enrolling in a preparation course, participants in this program seemed unprepared to function in their service responsibilities. Because service presents different challenges and opportunities than are expected in more typical study abroad programs, greater attention should be given to the service aspect of this program. Program directors should dedicate a significant portion of the preparation course to addressing issues related to service. One way this might be accomplished is by inviting past program participants to discuss their service experiences in the preparation course.

Preparing for service responsibilities. Participants did not know which organizations they would serve until their first week in Mexico. Many students expressed that they would have felt better prepared and been more effective at their respective sites had they had an idea of their service responsibilities before arriving in Guadalajara. To
help students be more effective, service assignments should be made during the preparation course several weeks before departure. This gives participants time to prepare for their service assignments and to gather materials, when needed, to aid in fulfilling their responsibilities.

*Aligning assignments and interests.* It is also important to match students to service organizations based on their talents and interests. Participants who had little or no interest in the focus of their assignment had a more difficult time adjusting to their service responsibilities and staying motivated at their service sites. These same students might have been more effective at sites where they felt qualified or excited to serve. Even though students did fill out a talent/interest survey, service assignments did not always coincide with the preferences stated by the participants. Careful attention should be paid to making assignments, as they will greatly influence the experience of each participant.

*Understanding duties.* To maximize effectiveness at service sites, it is critical that participant duties be clearly communicated. Because most of the students participating were not fluent in Spanish upon their arrival, many had difficulty understanding what was expected of them at each site. Service and program administrators should work together to provide explicit instruction detailing service duties. Each service organization could send a representative to Universidad Autónoma during the first week of class to explain student responsibilities in breakout groups. The program director could then be present to translate or clarify as needed. Each organization could also provide students with a written outline of responsibilities prior to their first site visit. Both participants and service organizations would benefit from a clear understanding of expectations.
Having meaningful responsibilities. In order to help students feel that the service they render is useful, it is necessary to assign participants meaningful responsibilities. Participants expressed that it was hard to dedicate their time and talents to completing tasks that seemed to be created for the sole purpose of giving them something to do. Although it may be difficult to integrate volunteers into an organization for such a short period of time, one step that can be taken to ensure a more meaningful experience is to hold regular meetings between participants and service personnel at each site. It would be helpful to dedicate a few minutes one day each week to answering questions, resolving concerns, and planning activities for the following week.

Identifying need. Students expressed a great desire to feel needed at each site. Therefore, it is imperative that participants recognize how their service helps meet a need. At some service sites, need is obvious; at other sites, participants must look more closely to identify the need they are meeting. Because students feel more successful when they perceive they are fulfilling someone’s needs, strategies for identifying needs should be discussed during the preparation course. After the commencement of the program, it would be wise to follow up with regular focus group discussions about the service experience. This would allow participants to share ideas about how to recognize and fulfill needs at their respective service sites.

Encouraging native contact. Although service and home-stays connect participants with members of the host culture, much of service study abroad revolves around group activities carried out exclusively with program participants. Students spend time with English-speaking peers in class, after service, and on excursions. Extended time spent with fellow participants promotes friendships within the group, but limits
contact with native speakers. To make students’ experience more successful, it is important to design activities that foster interaction with native Mexicans, rather than limiting organized activities to the group of participants. One way to encourage interaction would be to assign students to complete specific communication tasks with native speakers. This would motivate participants to associate, converse and connect with native from the host culture.

Limitations of Study

Researcher biases. I was interested in doing research on service and study abroad because of positive experiences I have had with both elements during my academic career. Although I sought to bracket any pre-conceived notions about service-learning and study abroad during data analysis, I recognize that I value both service and study abroad in education. In my own experience, I have witnessed that each promotes learning and growth.

Adjustments made in study. Three students were not present to fill out the pre-questionnaire on the last day of the preparation course. One of the students who was absent responded to the questionnaire by e-mail before departure, but the other two never completed the pre-questionnaire. While in Mexico, two students left the program early for personal reasons and were not present to fill out the post-survey. Because I could not compare the pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaires responses of these four students, I discarded the quantitative results from their questionnaires. Only 31 of the 35 students’ results were compared in the paired $t$ test. It is doubtful that the responses of these four students would have changed the results of the $t$ test.
In the original conception of this study, I had planned to visit only four service sites to understand the service study abroad experience. As time passed in Guadalajara, I determined that the picture of the experience was incomplete without observation at each site. The data from pre-questionnaires and journal entries reflected the experience of all participants, but my field notes initially reflected only the experience of students at the four service sites. It became apparent that observing the breadth of all participants’ experiences was more useful than examining the depth of a few. Because all students had signed a consent form allowing me to observe them, I decided to conduct observations at all of the sites. Two-and-a-half weeks into the program, I received approval from my thesis chair, Dr. Bateman, to extend my observations to all nine service sites in order to get a broader view of the experience.

I had also planned to carry out focus group discussions in order to get additional insight from participants about the themes that emerged from the data. This task proved to be very difficult because of time constraints on students’ schedules. During the week, they were in class for three hours in the morning and then returned home for lunch or dispersed to the service sites. The weekends were filled with excursions to other places as well as religious activities. On the first trip, I had little success conducting a discussion on the bus en route to our destination. I substituted formal focus group discussions with informal conversations with individual participants and relied on the data provided through field observations, journal entries, and the interviews for my analysis.

In the beginning stages of my field observations, I brought a small notebook in which I recorded notes at the service sites. People at the sites were often more curious about what I was writing than what the service participants were doing. I realized that
recording observations on-site disrupted the natural flow of activity, so I quickly discontinued the practice. Notes were recorded after I returned from the service site. Though this time delay may have affected the exactness of my field notes, I determined that it was more important to maintain the natural setting of the service site.

Program participants. The participants in this study may not be representative of service study abroad students at other universities. Because Brigham Young University is an institution that urges students to “enter to learn and go forth to serve,” many students enrolled there are predisposed to participating in service. Furthermore, students seeking additional opportunities for service have character traits that make them even more inclined to serve. As evidenced by responses to the self-reliance question on the pre- and post-questionnaires, students who sought out this program are self-motivators who actively seek learning and opportunities that promote growth. Results from this study may vary if carried out on a different student population.

Because the program director also had access to student interviews, it seems that students were hesitant to discuss different aspects of experiences they had, especially those experiences that did not align with program objectives or rules. Although the journal entries had no bearing on the students’ grades, students did not seem to be as candid in their journals as they were during informal conversations with me. Knowing that the director could access the reflections, some participants seemed more prone to cast their experiences in a positive light or exclude discussions about some of their most significant experiences.

As is often the case with university students, not all participants completed the assignment to write weekly journal responses with the same degree of consistency. Some
students submitted journal entries regularly, whereas others lagged behind or made up for missed weeks by sending multiple entries at one time. Ideally, every participant would have submitted each entry on the assigned date. Regular, on-time submissions may have created a more accurate picture of the phenomena being studied, but I feel that data from other sources compensated for the occasional absence of journal entries.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This study was conducted over an eight-week period during a spring term. Because study abroad programs typically take place over the course of an entire semester, it would be beneficial to conduct a similar study on a semester-long program. Smith-Paríolá and Gökè-Paríolá (2006) point out that short term programs present different risks and challenges for students than a program that is carried out over a longer duration. In order to determine if results would be similar over a longer period of time, it is recommended that a related study be conducted on a semester- or year-long program.

Because students were only at a second-year university level of Spanish, their ability to communicate and make connections was more limited than would be expected at higher levels of Spanish. Students often mentioned that they could not understand much of the communication at their service sites. Participants with greater language proficiency might have a very different experience than that of students who are less proficient. It would be wise to study how much of students’ experience is determined by language proficiency level, and how much of the service study abroad experience is common among all participants, regardless of their language proficiency.

Study abroad research commonly uses a pre-test/post-test design to measure gains. Though the current study did address initial and final attitudes and perceptions, it also
studied the formative phase that led to resulting viewpoints. It would be beneficial to study the developing attitudes and perceptions among study abroad students who do not participate in service while abroad. Comparing results from the current study with those from a more typical study abroad program would help educators understand attitudes that are common among both sets of participants, and attitudes that are unique to the respective programs.

This study was designed to give a broad overview of the experience of being a service study abroad student. In order to get an accurate picture of what the experience is like, it is important to conduct research at all stages of the program. Basing results solely on pre- and post-questionnaire responses does not make it possible to understand the depth of the experience. This study showed the necessity of conducting different phases of research throughout participants’ experience as service study abroad students. Because this study gives only a basic understanding of the service study abroad experience as a whole, it is recommended that further research be carried out to address more specific aspects of the experience. Researching specific facets over an extended period of time would help provide a deeper perspective and greater understanding of the service study abroad experience.
REFERENCES


Kitsantas, A. (2004). Studying abroad: The role of college students’ goals on the development of cross-cultural skills and global understanding. *College Student*
Journal, 38, 441-452.


APPENDIX A

Pre-Questionnaire
Pre-Questionnaire

Please complete the following information:

**Personal Information**
- Sex: M  F
- Age:
- Nationality:
- Year in school:
- Major:

**Language Experience**
Experience with Spanish (Please list length of time studied at each level):
- Elementary school:
- Jr. high school:
- High school:
- College:
- Other:__________

1. Why did you enroll in Spanish at BYU?

2. Do you speak any foreign languages other than Spanish? If so, please list the language(s) and your experience with each language.

3. Please list the language(s) spoken in your home growing up.

4. In what settings do you anticipate using Spanish in the future?

**Program**
1. Why did you decide to participate in the International Volunteers program to Guadalajara, Mexico?

2. What goals, if any, do you have for your stay in Guadalajara?

3. What are you most looking forward to regarding this service study abroad program?

4. What are you most apprehensive or nervous about regarding this service study abroad program?
Personal Characteristics
Please put an “X” in one of the six blank boxes below to indicate your feelings about each question. Mark only one box per question.

1. How prepared do you feel to interact with natives from the Mexican culture?

| Very-unprepared | | | | | Very-prepared |

2. How confident are you in your ability to speak Spanish with native Spanish speakers?

| Very-unconfident | | | | | Very-confident |

3. How self-reliant do you consider yourself to be?

| Dependent-on-others | | | | | Very-self-reliant |

4. How comfortable would you be going to a social event at which only Mexicans were in attendance?

| Very-uncomfortable | | | | | Very-comfortable |

5. How likely are you to enroll in another Spanish course when you return to the United States?

| Very-unlikely | | | | | Very-likely |

6. How likely are you to travel to other Spanish-speaking countries in the future?

| Very-unlikely | | | | | Very-likely |

Culture
1. Have you ever taken any courses related to the study of culture(s), multiculturalism, or intercultural communication? If so, please list.

2. Have you ever visited or lived in a foreign country? If so, please list the purpose and length of your stay(s) as follows:

| Country: | Purpose of visit: | Length of stay: |
APPENDIX B

Post-Questionnaire
Post-Questionnaire

Please complete the following information:

1. In what settings do you anticipate using Spanish in the future?

2. Did you set any goals for your stay in Guadalajara? If so, what were they and how successful were you at accomplishing them?

3. What most surprised you about your experience as a service study abroad student in Guadalajara?

4. What changes, if any, have you noticed in yourself during your participation in this program?

5. What did you like most about being a service study abroad student?

6. What did you like least about being a service study abroad student?

7. What was the most rewarding aspect of participating in this program?
8. What was the most challenging aspect of participating in this program?

9. In what ways, if any, have your feelings changed since you started this program?

10. Do you feel like you experienced any culture shock upon your arrival in Guadalajara? If so, describe the experience and how you handled the situation.

11. Have your attitudes toward Mexican culture changed since the beginning of this program? If so, in what ways?

12. How has this experience affected your perceptions of Mexicans?

13. What have you learned from this experience?
Personal Characteristics
Please put an “X” in one of the six blank boxes below to indicate your feelings about each question. Mark only one box per question.

1. How prepared do you feel to interact with natives from the Mexican culture?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very</th>
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<tr>
<td>unprepared</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>prepared</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2. How confident are you in your ability to speak Spanish with native Spanish speakers?

| Very        |          |          |          |          |            |
|_____________|----------|----------|----------|----------|------------|
| unconfident |         |         |          |          | confident  |

3. How self-reliant do you consider yourself to be?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent on others</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Very self-reliant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4. How comfortable would you be going to a social event at which only Mexicans were in attendance?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>uncomfortable</td>
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<td>comfortable</td>
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</table>

5. How likely are you to enroll in another Spanish course when you return to the United States?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very</th>
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<tr>
<td>unlikely</td>
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<td>likely</td>
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</table>

6. How likely are you to travel to other Spanish-speaking countries in the future?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unlikely</td>
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<td>likely</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

Interview Guide: Sample Questions
Interview Guide: Sample Questions

1. Where are you from?
2. What is your experience with Spanish?
3. Why did you decide to participate in this program?
4. What is it like being a service study abroad student in Guadalajara, Mexico?
5. What is the most challenging aspect of participating in this program?
6. What have you liked/disliked most about being a service study abroad student?
7. What adjustments have you made since coming to Mexico?
8. If you could change one thing about this program, what would it be?
9. Suppose it is my first day at your service site. What kind of activities can I expect to do?
10. Have your attitudes toward Mexican culture changed since the beginning of this program? If so, in what ways?
11. What do you feel is the most/least rewarding part of your experience?
12. How has this experience affected your perceptions of Mexicans?
13. In what ways, if any, have your feelings changed since you started this program?
14. What advice would you give to a student interested in participating in this program next year?
15. What have you learned from this experience?
APPENDIX D

Student Informed Consent
Student Informed Consent

Service and Study Abroad in Guadalajara, Mexico

You are invited to participate in the research project entitled “Service and Study Abroad in Guadalajara, Mexico.” The principal investigator in this study is MA Spanish Pedagogy student Jennifer Grandy, and the co-investigator will be Dr. Robert Anderson. The purposes of this research project are to understand BYU students’ experience as participants in a service study abroad program and to identify the feelings, perceptions, and attitudes that develop as students participate in a service study abroad program.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to a) allow the researcher to observe your activities at your regular service sites one day a week for two to three hours; b) allow the researcher to read your journal reflections submitted to Dr. Anderson, as well as your responses to the “Guadalajara International Volunteers Questionnaire” administered by Dr. Anderson on the last day of the preparation course, and use this information as data for the study; c) answer questions on a post-program questionnaire; and d) participate in a half-hour focus discussion group on a weekly basis.

Toward the end of the study abroad program, five students will also be invited to participate in a half-hour interview, followed by a second half-hour interview during Fall Semester 2006, regarding their experiences with the program. If you are one of the students invited to be interviewed, you will have the opportunity at that time to sign a separate form giving your consent to be interviewed.

Anticipated risks of emotional discomfort in this study are minimal. If at any time during the course of the study you become uncomfortable with being observed in your service assignments, with having the researcher read your journal entries, or with any other aspect of the study, you are free to withdraw without any negative effect on your academic grades in the program. All data will be destroyed at the end of the study. If the results of this study are published or presented publicly, all participants’ names will be changed to maintain anonymity.

No direct benefits are associated with this project. However, the results of this project will help others gain an increased understanding of the experience of being a student in a service study abroad program.

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact the researcher, Jennifer Grandy (jjg34@email.byu.edu), or Dr. Blair Bateman (blair_bateman@byu.edu). If you have any questions you feel uncomfortable asking the researcher, you may contact Dr. Renea Beckstrand, Chair of the Institutional Review Board at 422 SWKT; Brigham Young University; Provo, Utah 84602: phone (801) 422-3873.

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Please check one box below:

You may use my data and review my journal reflections for this study.
Do not include my data in your study.

I have read and understand the above information, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project. I understand that I may keep a copy of this form.

________________________  ________________________
Signature     Date
APPENDIX E

Student Interviewee Informed Consent
Student Interviewee Informed Consent

Service and Study Abroad in Guadalajara, Mexico

As part of the study in which you have been participating, Service and Study Abroad in Guadalajara Mexico, you are invited to participate in two half-hour interviews. The purpose of these interviews is for the researcher to elicit more in-depth information from you about your experience in the program.

The first interview will be conducted during the last two weeks in Guadalajara. The second interview will be conducted during Fall Semester 2006 after you have returned to BYU.

Anticipated risks of emotional discomfort in this study are minimal. Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. If at any time during the course of the study you become uncomfortable with the interview, or with any other aspect of the study, you are free to withdraw without any negative effect on your academic grades in the program. If you are asked any questions that you do not wish to answer, you will not be required to answer them. All data will be destroyed at the end of the study. If the results of this study are published or presented publicly, all participants’ names will be changed to maintain anonymity.

No direct benefits are associated with this project. However, the results of this project will help others gain an increased understanding of the experience of being a student in a service study abroad program.

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact the researcher, Jennifer Grandy (jjg34@email.byu.edu), or Dr. Blair Bateman (blair_bateman@byu.edu.) If you have any questions you feel uncomfortable asking the researcher, you may contact Dr. Renea Beckstrand, Chair of the Institutional Review Board at 422 SWKT; Brigham Young University; Provo, Utah 84602: phone (801) 422-3873.

**************************************************************************************

I have read and understand the above, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project. I understand that I may keep a copy of this form.

_________________________________________   ___________________________
Signature                          Date

_________________________________________   ___________________________
Signature of Investigator          Date
APPENDIX F

IRB Letter
May 10, 2006

Jennifer Grandy
c/o Blair Bateman
3157 JFSB
Campus Mail

Dear Sir or Madam,

Thank you for your recent correspondence concerning your protocol entitled "Service and Study Abroad in Guadalajara, Mexico." The proposal has been assigned the following number: 06-0139. The research appears to pose minimal risk to human subjects and meets the Federal guidelines.

You are approved to begin your research. This approval is good until 5/9/2007 (a year from the date it was approved). A few months before this date we will send out a continuing review form. There will only be two reminders. Please fill this form out in a timely manner to ensure that there is not a lapse in your approval.

Enclosed is a date stamped consent form. No other consent form should be used.

Please notify Nancy Davis, (801) 422-2970, A-285 ASB, of any changes made in the instruments, consent form, or research process before instigating the alterations, so that we can approve them before the change is implemented.

If you have any questions, please let us know. We wish you well with your research!

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Renea L. Beckstrand, Chair
Nancy A. Davis, CIM, Administrator
Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects
RLB/cfc

Enclosure