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“Expect the Unexpected:” Experiences of U.S.-Trained Student Affairs Professionals Working Abroad

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Opportunities for student affairs work outside of the United States continue to increase because of the value of the U.S. student affairs model in the growing number of branch campuses and U.S.-inspired institutions. This qualitative study explored the student-focused and institutional experiences of 29 student affairs professionals abroad. The findings include a recognition of the universality of student needs, the applicability of student development theory in a global context, and unique positions and organizational structures abroad.

The U.S. approach to education is inspiring many national and Western universities throughout the world (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Lawton & Katsomitrou, 2012; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013). With many developing countries unable to supply a qualified workforce to support their expanding higher education structures (Austin, Chapman, Farah, Wilson, & Ridge, 2014), in order to operate the institutions and educate students both curricularly and cocurricularly, opportunities to work abroad for faculty, academic leadership, and student affairs professionals trained in the U.S. perspective of higher education also increased (Cai & Hall, 2016). The current state of student affairs in higher education is largely an U.S.-based concept, and many student affairs approaches around the world find inspiration from the U.S. model (Dalton, 1999). While the number of U.S.-trained student affairs professionals working abroad is unknown, student affairs professional opportunities abroad are on the rise (Yakaboski & Perozzi, 2018) due to the popularity of the U.S.-based student services model (Dalton, 1999), increased presence of branch campuses in international education (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Lawton & Katsomitrou, 2012; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013), perceived value of international work experience, and heightened mobility caused by technology and globalization.

Expatriate work of faculty and academic managers in higher education, living and working outside of their culture and native country, has been well-explored (Austin et al., 2014; Cai & Hall, 2016; Chapman, Austin, Farah, Wilson, & Ridge, 2014; Romanowski & Nasser, 2015), but the exploration of global work experiences of student affairs professionals specifically is limited to a single case study approach (Cicchetti & Park, 2018), individual reflection (Roberts,

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2015), and recommendations for preparing to work abroad (Stensberg, Silva, & Medina, 2016). As opportunities to work abroad in student affairs increase, an understanding of the experiences of U.S.-trained student affairs professionals working abroad is necessary to better prepare educators for these roles. The exploration of the experiences of U.S.-trained student affairs professionals abroad benefits those interested in similar professional opportunities, student affairs preparation programs (SAPPs) responsible for their training, and supervisors abroad.

This worldwide constructivist study of 29 U.S.-trained student affairs professionals, with representation of work from five continents outside of North America with higher education institutions, sought to understand the lived experiences of those in formal internships and professional positions in student affairs outside of the United States. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the similarities and differences U.S.-trained student affairs professionals perceived in their work with college students outside of the U.S. relative to students in the United States?
2. How do U.S.-trained student affairs professionals view the applicability of the U.S.-based theoretical underpinnings of student affairs work outside of the United States?
3. How do U.S.-trained student affairs professionals manage unique structural experiences in their positions and at their institutions abroad (new positions, new institutions)?

Review of the Literature

As this is a new area of exploration related to the experiences of student affairs professionals, the review of literature draws generally from expatriate experiences in a variety of professional fields as well as the more related experiences of expatriates with traditional academic/classroom-based and academic management positions abroad.

The Expatriate Experience

Working and learning in new cultural contexts significantly impacts participants' lives and professional practice (Scoffham & Barnes, 2009). Research has explored all aspects of the expatriate experience, including selection and training (Gabel, Dolan, & Cerdin, 2005), adaptation and adjustment (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004; Zhu, Wanberg, Harrison, & Diehn, 2016), and reentry (Szkudlarek & Sumpter, 2015). Additionally, extensive research focuses on the skills and abilities that promote expatriate success in different cultures (Stein, 1966; Stone, 1991). Beyond job competence and specific professional, technical, or manual skills necessary to thrive as an expatriate (Byrnes, 1965; Stein, 1966), various intercultural skills, such as cultural empathy (Ashamalla, 1998) and flexibility (Varner & Palmer, 2005) were found to contribute to expatriates' professional and personal success. Another common outcome of work and travel abroad is cognitive complexity (Fee, Gray, & Lu, 2013) and a change in perspective from local to global (Hamza, 2010; Osland, 1995).

U.S. Expatriates in Higher Education

Because of complexities related to understanding cross-cultural experiences, the majority of studies related to expatriates in higher education are, like the present study, qualitative in design. Additionally, while notable differences exist between the academic staff, academic managers, and student affairs educators' work experiences, their experiences with students in non-U.S. classrooms are worthy of discussion. Using a single-nation case study approach, aspects

including expectations of teaching, research, and service, equity, academic freedom, and collegiality for academic staff in the United Arab Emirates were explored (Austin et al., 2014; Chapman et al., 2014). Another study based in the Gulf Region discussed how academic staff adapted to their students' learning styles and behaviors in the classroom (Hamza, 2010). The perspective Hamza (2010) took is that "when teaching in a new culture, faculty need to adjust to who is in the classroom, the students should not have to adjust to who teaches the class" (p. 59).

The experience of U.S.-trained student affairs professionals working abroad has been highlighted in recent literature specific to expatriate workers in student affairs, including a reflective piece by Roberts (2015) based on experience in Qatar and a case study of three student affairs practitioners at an offshore branch campus in Korea (Cicchetti & Park, 2018). Roberts (2015) explored the various types of motivations leading professionals to work abroad, and both contributions to and distractions from, productivity and resilience. Cicchetti and Parks' (2018) study found that their three participants felt like they were providing services in their Korean institutions, as opposed to working with students from a developmental approach. These studies provide context to student affairs educators working experiences abroad but on a limited scale. The limited literature not only further demonstrates the need to explore the experiences of U.S.-trained student affairs professionals' work abroad but also indicates that this population may find commonalities with expatriates in other fields in relation to their motivations to work abroad, transitional experiences, and perceived preparation for their work abroad.

Organizational and Professional Socialization Frameworks

Both organizational and professional socialization theories inform the exploration of the experiences of U.S.-trained student affairs professionals abroad. Tierney's (1997) theory of organizational socialization in higher education developed from a study of higher education faculty rejects traditional views of socialization as simply gaining knowledge about an organization from others in it (Van Maanen, 1978). Rather, Tierney (1997) presented a postmodern perspective of socialization as a two-way process whereby those entering the organization are influenced by the culture just as they influence the culture with their new membership. The organizational socialization occurring while abroad is preceded by their professional socialization during graduate preparation. Student affairs professionals receive formal training through SAPPs to contribute to their professional socialization whereby "individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career" (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001, p. iii). While student affairs professionals abroad have been socialized in preparation for U.S.-based student affairs work, their experiences described in the findings demonstrate two-way organizational socialization based on their new cultural and organizational contexts.

Methodology

Due to the limited exploration of the experiences of U.S.-trained student affairs professionals working abroad, I used constructivism as the guide for this inquiry (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism asserts the social construction of knowledge throughout the research process. The goal of constructivist research is to understand the lived experience of the research participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Schwandt, 2000), which may lead to reporting differences in the experiences as reality is constructed. Constructivism aligns with the purpose and scope of this study because cross-cultural experiences, particularly extended and immersed ones where participants must extend beyond their culturally engrained attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions (Hall, 1976), are a complex human phenomenon (Broido & Manning, 2002). The purpose of this

exploratory study was to provide an understanding of the multiple perspectives of U.S.-trained student affairs professionals working abroad to develop ways to better prepare them for the experience.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

The call for participants included two criteria for study participation: (a) possess a student affairs graduate degree from a U.S. institution, and (b) have experience working abroad in a student-affairs related position (past or present). I sent a graphic of a globe, the criteria, and my contact information to the listserv of SAPP faculty (CSP-Talk) and ACPA's Commission for the Global Dimensions of Student Development listserv, as well as posted the call for participants on the Student Affairs Professionals Facebook page that boasted over 30,000 members. From that outreach, I received 48 interested participants, of which 29 responded within the data collection timeline. After completing a demographics sheet and informed consent, I contacted professionals to participate in a semi-structured interview protocol either in person or via a computer-mediated video conferencing tool. Interviews ranged from 52 to 73 minutes. Twenty-five of the 29 interviews occurred via WebEx because of the scope of the study and lack of financial and time resources to travel throughout the world to collect data (Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). Regardless of the medium of communication, I built positive rapport as participants shared in-depth about their experiences in both venues. While not a replacement for face-to-face interviews, video conferencing provides an alternative that is useful for studies such as this one that targeted a worldwide sample (Iacono et al., 2016). The interview protocol included 20 questions geared toward exploring participants' experience abroad, motivations for pursuing the experience abroad, transitional issues while abroad, applicability of their professional preparation for the experience abroad, and skills utilized and developed in their work abroad.

Participants

Table 1 presents the most relevant aspects of participants' experiences and identities as they relate to their professional experiences abroad. None of the participants shared cultural identities with the cultures in which they worked abroad. The average time spent working abroad was approximately 3.4 years. More than half of the participants had all or part of their experience working abroad in the Middle East and 8 of the 29 participants had experience working in multiple cultural contexts. Participants spanned the variety of student affairs and academic support roles found in the United States and held roles at varying institutional types, including national universities, U.S. branch campuses, private institutions, and a private higher education organization.

Data Analysis

I conducted interviews with participants over a four-month period and utilized memos and a researcher journal throughout data collection to record initial thoughts, potential codes, and additional questions and considerations for future research. Once all interviews were transcribed, I utilized an inductive data analysis approach inspired by the work of Creswell (2002). Initially, I read all transcripts for understanding and noted participants' responses that emerged as impactful experiences relevant to the research questions. Using a combination of in vivo and process coding (Saldaña, 2016), I created a separate document with codes as they emerged and then participants' quotes were noted when they related to the codes. Then, I re-read all transcripts to ensure participants' words connected to relevant codes and that the emergence of

Table 1
Participants

Pseudonym	Total Years of Professional Student Affairs Experience	Years Working Abroad	Abroad during Data Collection	Area(s) of the World		Functional Area(s)	Institutional Type(s)
Abigail	2.5	1	Yes	Middle East	Residence Life	U.S. Branch Campus	
Amanda	9	3	No	Middle East	Leadership Dev.	National University	
Amber	7	3	Yes	Middle East	Student Dev.	U.S. Branch Campus	
Amelia	5	2	No	UK, South America, Europe	Study Abroad Program	U.S. Campus Program Abroad	
Aspen	10+	5	No	Europe	Student Engagement/Housing/Wellness	American University	
Ben	7	5	Yes	Asia/Europe	Student Life	Local Private Liberal Arts	
Chris	10+	1	No	Middle East	Residence Life	National H.E. Foundation	
Collin	3	2	No	Asia/Europe	Student Affairs	U.S. Campus Program	
Devon	7	3	No	Africa	Student Engagement	American University of ...	
Elliott	5	4	No	Middle East	Student Engagement	National H.E. Foundation	
Greg	10+	10+	Yes	Africa	Student Affairs	American University of ...	
Hans	8	1	No	UK	Deans Office	Private College	
Jeff	9	3	No	Middle East	Residence Life/Campus Life	National H.E. Foundation	
Jessica	3	1	Yes	New Zealand	Residence Life	National University	
Kaleb	10+	6	Yes	Asia/Middle East	Dean of Students Office, Study Abroad, Graduate Programs	National University/U.S. Campus Study Abroad Program	
Kassie	10+	8	Yes	Caribbean/Middle East	Student Services/Student Affairs	U.S. Branch Campuses	

Keith	10+	8	Yes	Middle East/ Europe	Residential Education	U.S. Branch Campus
Kiera	2	2 months (intern)	No	UK	International Students Office	Private College
Layla	13	4	No	Middle East	Campus Life	National H.E. Foundation
Madeline	12	8	Yes	Africa/Middle East	Advising/First Year Exp.	National Universities
Marcus	1	2 months	Yes	UK	Student Activities/Residence Life	U.S. Branch Campus
Monica	1	1	Yes	South America	Service Learning	National University
Nadia	7	2	Yes	Middle East	Advising/First Year Exp.	National University
Nolan	9	3 months (intern)	No	Australia	Student Affairs/Various	National University
Nora	6	1	Yes	Asia	Dean of Students Office	National University partnering with U.S. Institution
Reese	5	2 months (intern)	No	UK	Housing	Private H.E. Organization
Taylor	5	3 months (intern)	No	Middle East	Student Affairs/Various	American University of ...
Thomas	2	1	Yes	Middle East	Residence Life	U.S. Branch Campus
Trent	10+	10+	Yes	Europe/ Middle East	Student Affairs/Various	American University

later codes did not exclude previous transcript data from connecting to a new code. Next, I combined codes to reduce overlap. Finally, I developed themes from the coding process as the phenomenon of working abroad in student affairs emerged. The findings utilize the rich descriptions of experience from the participants and the connections between their experiences.

Researcher Reflexivity

In constructivist research, creating connections between the researcher and the participants allows for a unique data gathering approach as well as incorporates the researcher's values and biases from research design through data analysis (Mertens, 1998). It was imperative that I shared my positionality with participants before collecting data. As a former expatriate English teacher in Japan and current White American, woman faculty member in a SAPP, the exploration of the experiences of this population of student affairs educators brought together my two most impactful professional experiences. While I resonated with the experiences of the participants in terms of their overall expatriate experiences related to learning a new culture, being a cultural outsider, and navigating day-to-day experiences in an unknown culture, their specific perspectives related to the professional aspects of their experiences in student affairs and higher education abroad were new to me because while I have student affairs professional experience in the United States, I have not had it abroad. Throughout data collection, I utilized a researcher journal to note similarities between participants' experiences and perspectives different from my own. Following data analysis, I referred to the journal to ensure salient aspects of my experience were not promoted more than experiences I did not have myself as an expatriate.

Trustworthiness

I employed member checking throughout the study to support trustworthiness. First, throughout data collection, I recounted interview data from previous participants when relevant to connect with participants' experiences during the interviews. During each of those exchanges, participants validated my interpretation of previous participants' perspectives and provided even deeper responses in that exchange.

Additionally, member checking supported internal validity following the development of themes and quotes used to support the themes. Once all interviews were complete and findings developed, all participants received their demographics and the findings with feedback requested with two weeks via e-mail. Eighteen of the 29 participants responded to the member checking process request. I made corrections to seven participants' demographic information to ensure anonymity and accuracy. Three participants requested quotes be updated for clarity. Many participants specifically shared how they resonated with the findings.

Limitations

As the first worldwide study of its type, the number of eligible participants was unknown as well as the aspects of the experience that would create for differences in experiences. While the sample was ultimately large for a qualitative study, narrowing the scope of the study may allow for more specific findings and recommendations based on experience in different cultures and institutional types. The pivotal nuances of experiences included the extent of a participants' previous experiences living outside of the United States and learning to adapt to a new culture, length of time abroad, the extent of the difference between the country's culture and U.S. culture, and whether or not participants had experienced reentry into a student affairs position in the United States.

Findings

“A Student is a Student is a Student:” The Universality of Student Needs

As participants shared their experience working within another culture, they discovered a universality of the needs of students. While the cultural context changed students' values, expectations, and perspectives, the professionals realized that their students' needs were not so different from the needs of U.S. students. Abigail shared:

I think no matter where in the world you're from, 18- to 22-year-olds have a similar experience. And I think that's one of the things that's been cool about working with my RAs so closely is that their development and experience is just like young people, [and it] kind of transcends culture.

Abigail's experience led her to view young people with similar developmental issues regardless of their culture allowing her to work with students from a familiar approach because of shared needs. Keith's perspective of student needs resonated with Abigail's view:

Even some of the theories may not be universal, the essence of them are, and they're still 18 or 20 years old. They're still going through the same obstacles in life and identity development. They're still trying to figure out who they are and how they fit in this world.

Amanda echoed these perspectives:

When we talk about different student populations and their challenges, we still also come back to the idea of a student is a student is a student no matter where they are. Culturally, things are going to be different. Different dimensions of diversity that you may be having in your life will make you unique, but at the same time, all students need certain things.

An overarching developmental focus remained at the forefront of the approach of practitioners abroad as they also recognized the specific issues and needs of students related to mental health issues and overall student success. Trent used the same wording as Amanda related to the universality of student needs: “A student is a student and that carries true for the most part around the world. Students deal with mental health and access and financial issues around the world. Just they manifest themselves in different ways in different settings.”

Abigail also noted the mental health needs that transcend cultural contexts.

Just because they're from somewhere different doesn't mean they can't have the same sort of student experience. When it comes to stuff like being stressed out about classes and being in a competitive environment and trying to figure out what has to happen after graduation, that happens everywhere, no matter if they're from India or Texas.

While Amanda, Abigail, Keith, and Trent agreed on the universality of student needs, upon returning to the United States, Jeff reflected on the differences in work with U.S. students and those in the Middle East:

But then it also was a change and a challenge to come back and work with students that had different capabilities than the students I worked with in [the Middle East]. So, [the Middle East] was a lot of handholding, because students were just in different places when it came to autonomy and self-authorship, because that's a very American concept.

Student affairs professionals abroad used the “a student is a student” perspective to set expectations for their work while also keeping culture at the forefront of their interactions and approaches to student development.

Applicability of Student Development Theory in a Global Context

Participants found the knowledge of theory useful to their work with students because of the idea that “a student is a student” but applied their understanding of theory in drastically different ways. Overall, participants held the ambiguous view shared by Thomas: “And I think that a lot of [theory] does [apply] and it doesn’t.” Jeff echoed that sentiment stating, “Some of the content was transferrable, but a lot of it was very different, as far as whatever the students needed, what stages they might be at, and some of those stages didn’t align with what we were seeing.”

The known issue of foundational student development theories relates to the lack of diversity among the participants upon which the theories were developed. In the United States, and outside of the United States, using these theories with caution remains a responsible approach. Student affairs professionals working abroad employed an additional level of caution because their students were from different cultural and national backgrounds as well. Chris stated that “the values of autonomy and some foundational theories, which we certainly know don’t always hold true now because much of that work was done on affluent white males with Christian backgrounds when folks were studying that at Harvard.” Thomas critiqued the foundational theories as well: “One of the challenges is that the seminal foundational theories do not necessarily account for the cultural context. That is where the model of multiple dimensions of identity and all that stuff comes in, but it is a challenge.”

Participants shared they recognized commonalities among students regardless of cultural context, which promoted a more direct application of student development theory. Several participants focused on the inability to apply the U.S.-centric developmental goals of self-authorship and autonomy, specifically when working in collectivist cultures. Thomas stated that “Their needs, wants, and desires are the same. But, when you get into the cultural pieces, like how they came to self-authorship, it’s completely different because of the way that culture and our privilege shapes how you are.” Chris also noted this idea and discussed how he managed the conflicting knowledge of theory and appropriate cultural application of theory:

Much of the early student development theories were based on getting to autonomy, and that’s not really an emphasis of Middle Eastern culture or tribes. Group mentality is there, and the way that students would be challenged, or think about the ultimate goals of what self-actualization might look like or mean for them took on new meaning. So, those are some of the places where I had to work to not impose my values, but still align with the nature of the work, but in an entirely different cultural context.

Monica also altered her approach to career development theory and practice abroad:

I have to adapt career counseling to a new context because culture norms around, for example, salary negotiation and gender norms, are different. A lot of my students are engineering students so many of the women have different fears around where they’ll be able to be hired and things like that. So, trying to adapt to different cultural norms has definitely been a part of the student development theory application, but also I’m not a native of this culture, so just taking the time to try to understand those norms has been a learning curve for me.

Abigail also shared how her thinking about identity development was rooted in U.S.-based concepts, which required a transformation in her thinking to be relevant in her work abroad:

The things I learned about identity development were valuable and have helped me in my work abroad, but I have to do my own work and changing how I thought about those things. Because this mindset I had in my [SAPP] was this very U.S.-centric, U.S.-focused mindset in terms of identity development and not so much global.

In terms of cognitive development, Monica and Thomas focused on how they could apply cognitive theories directly in the non-U.S. context:

I've been surprised that [cognitive theories] are so applicable across different cultural standards. The cognitive theories that show how students respond to authority and things like that really do show up in different student groups, regardless of where you are in the world.

Thomas agreed: "And so, I think [student development theory] applies to a certain extent. I think that the cognitive theories apply because they are in that age range regardless of where they come from." From Monica and Thomas' perspectives, of all developmental theories, cognitive development crossed cultural boundaries most as they worked with their students.

The majority of participants who highlighted challenges with applying U.S.-based theories in their work abroad had professional experience in the Middle East. This experience may be due to heightened cultural differences between the U.S. and Middle Eastern cultures. An understanding of basic tenets of development theory, while not directly applicable in content, was utilized by participants to seek out what development issues students experience and then allowed them to alter their work accordingly.

New Institutions and New Positions in a New Culture

Contributing to the start-up and development of a new institution is not a common experience in the United States as most institutions have much longer histories than ones where participants worked. For participants, that opportunity was common and part of the appeal of working abroad. Professionally, participants experienced new opportunities and challenges to utilize their student affairs knowledge, skills, and abilities because of the growth occurring in higher education abroad. The structural experience of participants required flexibility and a comfortability with ambiguity, as they started in positions not only new for them as professionals, but in many cases, new for the institution.

Several participants noted the value of the opportunity to contribute to the development of their positions and institutions. Keith, who arrived on his campus six months prior to the institution's first students' arrival, was responsible for students having a positive experience, not only for their sake but for the sake of the institution's reputation.

We did things that will blow your mind. The entire first year class got VIP tickets to a concert. While at the same time, it was actually to their detriment because we were on a very much of a student satisfaction model versus a student development model. So when you're trying to make every single student say this is the best thing in the world, you can never tell that student "no," or you can never really have a true teachable moment with them, because you wouldn't want to put them in a position where they're wrong.

Keith had the opportunity to contribute to the institution's transformation from a start-up to an established, respected institution in the region in less than a decade. For Ben, he experienced being able to "[wear] a lot of hats ... and make a lot of change really quickly." Because his campus sought a more supportive student environment with the ability to respond to students' developmental and personal needs, his position was created. Within the position, he was able to create new policies, procedures, and opportunities to influence students' educational experience. Similar to Ben's experience, Madeline shared the position abroad provided her with opportunities she would not have had otherwise within a typical student affairs position.

I was working with incoming and outgoing international students helping people get visas. I was doing all these different trainings for staff. I was starting programs and writing proposals. Those are experiences I probably could not have gotten in the U.S. unless I was at a really small institution. So, I got to be involved in all kinds of things that I wouldn't normally.

New institutions provided the opportunity for participants to utilize their knowledge and preparation about higher education and student development to innovate.

Devon shared how his position expanded from a director to executive director position that allowed him to focus on student engagement on a broader scale. With this expansion of responsibilities came unique professional opportunities:

I created that entire program from scratch. What does large scale programming look like? What does a programming board look like? What are the cocurricular experiences I can provide them? How can I connect this to the purpose of the institution and have an educational component to it? All that was developed [while] I was there.

Trent also shared the ability to develop processes and structures at a new institution. "One of the first things I did was to start creating structure, processes, timelines, and forms." Nora shared Trent's experience: "I think that's what's unique. It's really a true start-up university, so there's a lot of real flexibility and room to really build well."

Kaleb shared a contrasting view in terms of his ability to be effective in his role. His ability to create change and contribute to the institution was not a clear path; he fought resistance at the institutional level.

This is true of a lot of the start-ups in the Middle East, where it's a university that's trying to be a Western university, but it's never going to be one. When I talk to colleagues at other [Middle Eastern] universities, they have all of the same issues. But the difference is that, at their campuses, they can talk about those issues, and here, we have to hide those issues. And so, we often pretend we're doing things a different way, but we're really not. I would say it's taken me much longer to find ways to be productive and to achieve things.

The experience around innovation and openness to change may vary across institutions, but in both settings, participants brought critical thinking skills to understand how to navigate creating structures and initiating change appropriate for the institutional type and cultural context.

According to participants, the U.S. approach to student affairs work is valued at many of the institutions, which is why they extend opportunities to U.S.-trained professionals. Participants shared times when their expertise and unique approach to working with students provided opportunities to contribute to the institution. The professionals utilized innovation and cultural sensitivity as they sought to understand the local context. Elliott shared:

I feel like I was part of conversations that I wouldn't be a part of on a non-international campus because I had some level of subject area expertise when other people around the table hadn't studied higher education or were interested in the American model.

As Elliott applied his knowledge of the American model, he did so with a focus on the culture within which he worked:

It was just having that sense of humility to be able to throw it out the window and almost just start over and start with, "Okay, here's how things could work. How do we adapt that to be able to work in the local context?"

Madeline shared how her student development theory background was valued:

They don't have any student development theory background. They don't have any formal training. And students are noticing that. And they're complaining because they're unhappy with what's happening when they get out of their first year. So, I was asked to come up with a proposal for how to re-design the way that we do advising ... it was like the [leadership and students] recognize that what we're doing is really positive.

Participants were challenged, yet appreciated, unique opportunities for professional growth in their positions abroad.

Discussion

Living and working in a different culture than one's own leads to rich and challenging experiences that cause cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and requires deep reflection to understand and put into context with their own culture. Participants' experiences highlighted how their student affairs professional preparation socialized them for work in higher education in the United States, but how socialization continued while working abroad. Expectations of how to work with students, apply theory, and approach organizational challenges required new ways of thinking to be effective in their new cultural contexts.

While participants recognized a universality of student needs based on the time in their lives as young adults, they were also clear that student development theory learned for U.S. higher education approaches could not be applied similarly in non-U.S. contexts as Chris and Thomas shared because of the differing cultural values, such as the value placed on autonomy, between the Western and collectivist cultures. When entering a new culture, and more specifically a workplace in a new culture, there was a steep learning curve. These experiences resonate with the concept of organizational socialization (Tierney, 1997; Van Maanen, 1978) as participants needed to learn the student cultures in their positions abroad. Their professional socialization through graduate education involved learning student development theory, but in some ways, participants unlearned what they knew about college students and student development theory in order to be effective in their non-U.S. institutions with students from around the world.

Participants found that the structures of U.S. institutions could not be replicated in non-U.S. cultural contexts. While participants' skills and knowledge may have been valued, a direct application of U.S. structures was not. This finding resonates with Wang's (2008) statement that "the U.S. concept of professionalization of student affairs management and its model of graduate student personnel preparatory programs may not be appropriate for Asian countries and their students" (p. 5). Combined with the challenges and lack of direction in new positions and at new institutions, participants developed and demonstrated skills of cultural empathy and flexibility commonly found in expatriates' experiences (Ashamalla, 1998; Varner & Palmer, 2005). The two-way descriptor of socialization (Tierney, 1997) was present in participants' work in institutions abroad as they first assessed how their U.S.-based professional socialization to student affairs philosophies and work applied to their roles abroad before instituting changes and determining approaches to work with individual students. After assessing both the national and higher education institutional cultures, participants either confirmed or altered the approaches to their work. Because of the desire for U.S.-trained professionals, given Tierney's (1997) conceptualization of socialization, participants inherently influenced the culture of their institutions as well.

While cultural challenge varied based on participants' location in the world with the Middle East and Eastern cultures being most distinct from U.S. culture and length of time in a position with participants fulfilling internships experiencing less challenge in implementing change because of the time in country, the themes that emerged were applicable in the various contexts of work and affirmed by the participants who reviewed the findings.

The findings from this study provide an initial understanding of the experiences of this unique sub-group of student affairs professionals, those trained in U.S. SAPPs but who expand their professional opportunities beyond U.S. geographic borders. Participants' experiences inform the professional, curricular, and supervisory approaches of three groups in the student affairs profession: student affairs professionals who desire to work abroad by providing insight into expectations of the experience and how to prepare for cultural differences in this work, SAPPs who prepare students for global professional opportunities, and supervisors abroad.

Recommendations

Because the majority of SAPP graduates currently pursue work in the United States, intentional incorporation of new approaches to SAPP education should be considered for programs which seek to prepare students well for career opportunities abroad.

Exposure to Non-U.S. Systems of Education and International Students

From an organizational perspective, a comparative approach to learning about educational systems, which includes structures, values, and philosophical approaches to education, would be beneficial for work in different educational systems. Campuses abroad often draw students from both within and outside of their country, so understanding systems that educated students on their campus would allow professionals to better support students during their transition between education systems.

From the relational perspective, exposure to international students in the United States prepares professionals for their work abroad. Many participants worked with students from the country they were working in and also international students in that country. Hosting international student panels and exploring the needs of international students through SAPP coursework provides a personal connection to understanding the challenges faced by students who pursue higher education outside of their country of origin.

Understanding Culture and Developing Intercultural Competence Skills

SAPP curriculum should focus on developing professionals to interact and communicate effectively across cultures. Intentional exploration of their national identity and culture along with exploration of their other social identities already occurring is a necessary addition to student affairs training. Once students understand their own cultures, they can make sense of other cultures as well as their place in those cultures. Teaching students about culture through coursework can focus on exploring personal identities and discussing how personal identities influence student affairs work. Expanding and enhancing cultural diversity and counseling courses to focus specifically on intercultural communication skills prepares students for the myriad of cultures they could interact with outside of the United States, and in their work domestically.

Applying Student Development Theory in a Global Context

Participants realized the usefulness of student development theory as a framework for understanding development of their students abroad but also critiqued its applicability due to differing cultural values laden in the U.S.-based theories. As the theoretical underpinning of student affairs, if SAPPs are to prepare students to work internationally, the teaching of student development theory must incorporate a global perspective. Like the critique of theory applied to the diverse student population in the United States developed from research with homogeneous White, male samples, from a global perspective, employing student development theory outside of the U.S. context becomes equally problematic.

Concerns about the end goal of specific developmental theories not aligning with cultural values challenged participants as they sought to work from a developmental perspective without culturally inclusive theories to guide their practice. Critiquing theory beyond their limitations with other U.S. populations to include how the theories may need alteration when working abroad can be a useful exercise to understand whether or not to use student development theory with students outside of the United States.

Global Perspective-Taking and Experiential Global Opportunities

Providing situations for students to take a global perspective throughout their coursework would prepare them to think beyond the U.S. context, which is necessary in our increasingly global context and growing connections with higher education outside of the United States with the expansion of branch campuses, continued student mobility, and the need to prepare students for careers without geographic boundaries and limitations. The content in SAPPs is heavily guided by what is written for the field of student affairs and much of that content is U.S. based. Breaking the cycle of U.S.-focused SAPPs is challenged by the lack of research conducted from a student affairs perspective and approach outside of the United States. Given the frequent use of case studies in SAPPs, altering the location to a non-U.S. country or the culture of the characters from U.S. to Egyptian or Japanese provides opportunities for professionals to explore how a situation may require different approaches because of the setting or cultures involved.

Beyond traditional classroom-based learning, students can be encouraged to participate in learning opportunities in other settings to enhance their global perspective. Incorporating study abroad into course offerings or allowing students to transfer in a study abroad course provides opportunities for immersion into a new culture different. Completing internships abroad or participating in international professional conferences can also expose SAPP students to the higher education global stage.

Directions for Future Research

As an initial exploration into the experiences of U.S.-trained student affairs professionals working abroad, the following recommendations for future research emerged from data collection. First, a further narrowing of the participant criteria may be of value to learn more in depth about the unique types of experiences abroad. Second, factors, such as, length of time abroad, extent of interactions with host nationals and other non-U.S. staff and students, and whether a participant was abroad or had already reentered the United States during data collection influenced participants' perspectives. Third, researchers exploring this population should focus more specifically on different nuances of the expatriate experience in student affairs work, such as the reentry experience and the experiences of specific populations in specific cultures (for example, U.S. women in the Middle East). Additionally, perspectives of the non-U.S. students

and supervisors in institutions abroad would provide a holistic understanding of how U.S.-trained student affairs professionals are perceived by those in other cultures.

Conclusion

Working abroad provides a transformational experience to contribute to internationalization around the world. While challenges abound, there is value in how abroad experience improved participants' professional knowledge, skills, and ability to explain their developmental approach abroad and upon their reentry to the U.S. SAPPs should consider how to best prepare student affairs educators for opportunities outside of the United States as well as share the value in the experience in terms of contributing to internationalization abroad and at home.

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