

# COVID-19 and US Higher Education: Impact on Student Mobility

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## Abstract

This paper presents results of a research study examining the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on US students' interests in and concerns about studying abroad. This paper takes the perspective that the pandemic was a disruptive event of an unprecedented nature with regard to education abroad, therefore comparing students' attitudes pre- and post-pandemic is important for determining the likelihood that education abroad will resume as a popular student choice within the curricular mainstream. There have been previous disruptive events over the past 30 years that are examined for context and comparison. Statistical analyses were performed comparing responses from students studying abroad pre-COVID with those interested in going post-COVID. Findings: Compared with pre-COVID students, post-COVID students, particularly females, indicated a more serious attitude towards education abroad, seeking out more authentic and immersive experiences in their housing preference, and recognizing the advantages of education abroad for their academic majors and careers. At the same time, students are concerned about uncertainties of the experience especially regarding their housing placement, which could impact participation if not managed properly. These findings can help international educators design and deliver effective post-pandemic programming, communicate with and prepare future students, and understand lasting impacts of the pandemic.

## Keywords

Student Mobility, Education Abroad, Study Abroad, International Education, COVID-19, Pandemic, Student Engagement

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## 1. Introduction

Among the questions international education practitioners and scholars have

coming out of the global COVID-19 pandemic is: will students from the United States resume studying abroad at the levels seen before March 2020? Among the questions educators throughout US higher education have, is: how can colleges and universities address worrying trends in student attendance and disengagement on-campus since the resumption of more normal post-COVID operations?

The pandemic was a disruptive event for education abroad without precedent. For US students it meant the near cessation of all outward mobility for nearly two years. For institutions of higher learning it meant financial challenges, pedagogical transformations, and realizations that students' sense of belonging and overall mental health were at risk. For communities and countries receiving US students it meant the loss of sizable economic contributions to local and national economies spent by or on behalf of US students abroad.

This article seeks to continue the ongoing analysis related to the pandemic's impact on student mobility worldwide. Particularly whether students will return to traditional forms of education abroad, and how institutions will need to respond to, and possibly restructure, international experiences because of the pandemic's disruption (Leask, 2020). Previous studies have shown that students' academic and social integration decreased during the pandemic, and thus their satisfaction with their studies overall (Resch et al., 2022), making this article's focus on the conditions under which students would like to return abroad important as a high impact practice that can contribute to positive change. Further, previous studies show how the pandemic impacted students' confidence in their own ability to learn, that not all students experienced the pandemic similarly based on identity and social conditions (Guppy et al., 2022), and that overall sense of belonging became a major concern for institutions of higher education, particularly for some marginalized students (Barringer et al., 2022).

### 1.1. Historical Comparisons

This challenge to education abroad is but the latest in a series of shocks and disruptions going back more than thirty years. Education abroad as typically defined in the United States (programs of varying duration that are credit-bearing but not leading to a foreign degree) has suffered multiple traumas, setbacks, and declines in enrollment due to geopolitical, economic, and now public health disruptions. In the 1989-1991 period, for example, the terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 blew up the innocence and shared experiences of 38 study abroad students on their way home from Europe. That was followed by a year of social and political upheaval across Eastern Europe and Asia as the Cold War geopolitical order crashed down. Then, just a year later, America went to war in its largest military operation since Vietnam against Iraq in the first Gulf War. Nonetheless, after a brief period of pause, education abroad grew steadily in the 1990s.

Similarly, a little over a decade later, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and Pentagon in Washington, DC on September 11, 2001 caused a temporary slowdown of Americans studying abroad as disrupt-

tions in air travel and fears of further terrorist attacks dominated US policy and media discourse. Heady growth quickly returned afterwards during a period of global leadership by the United States in an era some call *hyper-globalization* (Rodrik, 2011). This lasted until the global financial crisis less than a decade later disrupted the job market and sense of financial security for families in the United States leading to an outright numerical decline in participation (see **Table 1**).

What the three disruptions to education abroad over the preceding generations have in common is that they were all caused by events and conditions explainable in the context of globalization that, while leading to initial slowdowns in study abroad participation, eventually were overcome by young Americans continued interest in studying and exploring the world beyond US borders. These events highlighted the changing nature of the world in terms of democratic openness and violent terror, and in terms of opportunities and perils of economic interdependence, but they can also be seen as having served emblematically as drivers to encourage expanded education abroad. These events highlighted shortcomings in US graduates' understanding of world affairs and ability in languages, and reflected an overreliance on free market yet insecure global financial relationships that had grown uncritically without necessary safeguards.

Above all, these previous disrupters impacting education abroad reflect, as

**Table 1.** US Education Abroad Growth Rates in Context, 1989-present.

Years	Average Annual Growth Rate*	Context During Time Period
1989-1992	0.6%	Pan Am Flight 103 bombing over Scotland Fall of Berlin Wall in Germany Gulf War against Iraq.
1993-2001	10.2%	US triumphant in Cold War, <i>End of History</i> (Fukuyama, 1992) Technology boom, dawn of internet age.
2001-2002	4.4%	September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in US Global War on Terror begins in Afghanistan Heightened air travel security and restrictions.
2002-2008	8.5%	<i>Era of hyper-globalization</i> US-led Global War on Terror expands to Iraq war China's economic growth rate exceeds 11% annually.
2008-2009	-0.8%	Global Financial Crisis <i>Great Recession</i> in the United States.
2009-2019	2.9%	Slow economic growth rates worldwide Britain votes to leave European Union (Brexit) Nationalistic and autocratic political trends worldwide.
2019-present	-95.8%**	Border closures, travel and supply chain disruptions Murder of George Floyd, Capitol insurrection in US Russia invades Ukraine, high inflation.

\* Source: IIE Open Doors (not collected in 1990-91), \*\* Latest data available: 2020-21.

with globalization overall, a sense that complex world events are beyond any individual person or government's control. Yet, far from diminishing American students' appetite for worldwide study, service, work, and adventure, they seemed to propel them as evidenced by participation growth in the aftermath. *Will this happen again?*

## 1.2. The Pandemic's Unique Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic was different from previous disruptions in important ways, and international education professionals and researchers should be careful not to assume that initial enrollment rebounds or previous excitement about and support for education abroad will resume easily, as has already been shown in limited research on education abroad during the time of COVID (Harder & Mullaney, 2021) and in enrollment data seen to date. Starting in March 2020, national borders were closed outright and, along with enrollment restrictions from universities and other logistical barriers, the legal and practical ability for US students to travel were closed off too. Considerable risks and uncertainties related to health, air travel, housing, testing and quarantine requirements, and the ability to finish programs and receive credit for them remain.

Also different from previous disruptions, this time the entire higher education sector in the United States was forced to alter dramatically the ways in which students learn and how they live on campus, resulting in an uncertain, disappointing, and distinctly stressful college experience for many students. This raw and disruptive period is still fresh in students' minds, both for those in college and those in high school during the worst of the pandemic, denied rites of passage like proms, graduations, and the much-anticipated freshman year of college.

For education abroad, the pandemic was an existential threat. As an activity it is almost always optional for students, and must include international travel regardless of the variety of models and offerings, making it uniquely vulnerable. For nearly two years from spring 2020 to fall 2021 there was a near cessation of education abroad activity. Not only were professionals, institutions, organizations, and companies serving education abroad thrust into crisis, the very nature of the activity was brought into question. Never before in contemporary history, short of world wars or economic depressions (Hoffa, 2007), have borders been closed or travel restricted with such thoroughness, and with it the realization of personal vulnerabilities, even by young people, of health, safety, family well-being, and general stability resulting from the pandemic era's profound uncertainty. What's more, it coincided with school closures, societal lockdowns, turbulent and at times violent national politics, and challenges to existing social orders particularly regarding racial justice. As US society emerged from the worst of the pandemic, increases in mass shootings and violent crime occurred, as did economic dislocation and record inflation. In short, the post-COVID era has been fraught with uncertainty, tension, and anxiety, leading to what many consider a student mental health crisis generally (Spiner, 2022)

and in particular for underrepresented students for whom utilization of mental health services is known to be lower (Lipson et al., 2022).

In summary, this study seeks to contribute to our understanding of US students' interests in and concerns about studying abroad in this challenging, unprecedented time. Further, it analyzes different students' experiences and expectations for education abroad and does not assume that all students pursuing it are the same. Lastly, it examines what specific aspects of the education abroad experience need to be addressed for it to resume at its pre-COVID levels of participation with recommendations for practitioners.

### 1.3. Purpose of Research Study

In order to rebuild, and possibly reinvent, education abroad post-COVID, this study seeks to answer critical questions:

- In what ways will education abroad resume and transform?
- Who will participate in education abroad and where will they go?
- What will interest US students to go abroad now, and what concerns do they have?

Answers to these questions should help international educators design and deliver programs suited to the next generation of US higher education students. This study seeks insights about not only whether education abroad will resume but in what ways it might change. Few assumptions were made about the popularity of education abroad with students or its support from parents, friends, and institutional colleagues.

A close look at previous disruptions and challenges to education abroad (Table 1) shows that the slowdown in participation growth began well before the pandemic. There may be a number of possible factors explaining this. The decade leading to March 2020 was characterized by increased skepticism of the post-Cold War US-led global order including in the United States itself. Retrenchment from international institutions, heightened trade barriers even among allies, borders closed to immigrants and refugees (particularly in Europe and North America), and a general wariness of globalization sometimes fueled by nationalist rhetoric from political leaders grew steadily and in all regions of the world. The prolonged crises of the pandemic years following this foreboding decade make it possible that post-COVID education abroad will more resemble the slow growth period coming out of the global financial crisis than the boom years of the 1990s and 2000s. Despite its healthy rebound from those earlier setbacks, education abroad is at a critical juncture; its many benefits should no longer be assumed as self-evident, nor its place of prominence in higher education assured.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The survey questions are presented in their entirety in Appendix A. The study was conducted during summer and fall 2021. The sample included students who

had participated in education abroad programs in 2018 and 2019 prior to the pandemic (hereafter referred to as *pre-COVID*), and students who had applied to or expressed interest in studying abroad between summer 2020 and fall 2021 (hereafter called *post-COVID*, which is only meant to convey that these students sought to study abroad after the pandemic travel restrictions went into effect). It is important to note that at the time of taking the survey the post-COVID students had not yet undertaken a study abroad experience. The entire spring 2020 semester was excluded from the study so as to compare pre- and post-COVID students, primarily their *interests in* and *concerns about* studying abroad.

A total of 2230 invitations to participate in the survey were sent using email addresses from available databases. 357 survey responses from students attending 20 different public and private institutions mostly in the northeastern US were received for a response rate of 16%, which is respectable for a survey distribution of this magnitude and, as will be shown, the respondent demographics represent well what is known about education abroad participants nationally from the latest data (Open Doors). Participation in the survey was completely voluntary. Students could choose to enter a raffle to win prizes of nominal value (gift cards). The survey was distributed using Qualtrics. The survey was designed so that not every question was required to be answered, and not all respondents answered every question. Data analysis was performed using SAS. The study was approved by the institutional review board of the lead author's home institution.

## 2.1. Descriptive Statistics and Comparison to National Data

Survey respondents were representative of what is known about education abroad participants from national data, allowing some generalizations to be made about the larger population (see **Tables 2-6**, **Figures 1-3**). Demographic data were collected from student participants in an attempt to ascertain representativeness of the study sample. The most recent pre-COVID annual Open Doors report from the Institute of International Education (IIE) was chosen as the benchmark. Additional data showed that more pre-COVID respondents than post-COVID participated in the study. Also, post-COVID survey respondents were disproportionately later in their academic level than pre-COVID respondents (see **Table 7**). Finally, post-COVID respondents had previously traveled abroad less frequently than pre-COVID students (see **Figure 4**).

**Table 2.** Gender.

Gender	Study	Open Doors (IIE) 2018-19
Female	75.3%	67.3%
Male	22.1%	32.7%
Non-binary/third gender	1.9%	-
Prefer not to say	0.6%	-

**Table 3.** Race.

Race	Study	Open Doors (IIE) 2018-19
White	71.9%	68.7%
Black or African American	11.2%	6.4%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander	9.9%	8.9%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.2%	0.4%
Prefer not to say	5.6%	-
Multiracial	-	4.7%

**Table 4.** Study abroad destination.

Continent or Region	Study	Open Doors (IIE) 2018-19
Africa, Sub-Saharan	6.6%	3.9%
Antarctica	0.0%	0.0%
Asia	14.8%	11.7%
Europe	53.5%	55.7%
Latin America & Caribbean	6.9%	13.8%
Middle East & North Africa	0.6%	2.3%
North America	0.6%	0.6%
Oceania	6.6%	4.4%
Multiple Destinations	7.5%	7.5%

**Table 5.** Students' majors.

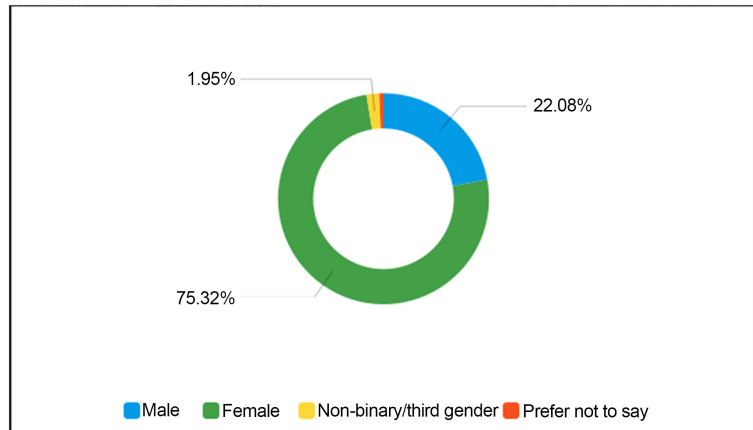
Major	Study	Open Doors (IIE) 2018-19
STEM disciplines	23%	24%
Business disciplines	15%	21%
Social Sciences	18%	19%
Foreign languages	7%	8%
Arts disciplines	7%	7%
Communications disc.	6%	6%
Humanities disciplines	7%	4%
Education	10%	2%
Other/undeclared	7%	9%

**Table 6.** Students' academic level.

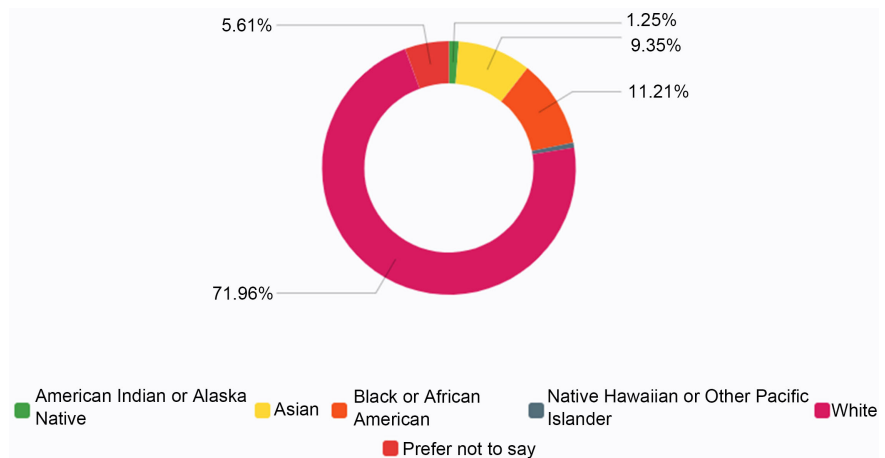
Academic level	Study	Open Doors (IIE) 2018-19
Freshmen	2.8%	2.7%
Sophomores	18.8%	12.3%
Juniors	34.8%	42.7%
Seniors	35.4%	27.0%
Graduate students	8.2%	9.3%
Other/unspecified	-	6.0%

**Table 7.** Post-COVID survey respondents were disproportionately later in their academic level than pre-COVID respondents.

Academic level	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID
Freshmen	3.9%	0%
Sophomores	24.3%	4.5%
Juniors	35.9%	31.8%
Seniors	31.6%	45.5%
Graduate students	4.3%	18.2%



**Figure 1.** Gender.



**Figure 2.** Race.

Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin:

Study:	13.3%
Open Doors (IIE) 2018-19:	10.9%

Age: Median age of respondents: 24

**Figure 3.** Additional demographic data.



Pre-covid:	68.8% had traveled abroad prior to studying abroad
	31.2% had not traveled abroad prior to studying abroad
Post-covid:	51.1% had traveled abroad prior to studying abroad
	48.9% had not traveled abroad prior to studying abroad

**Figure 4.** Prior travel abroad.

To summarize the comparison with national education abroad participant data, survey respondents in this study were generally representative. Particularly for the variables of gender, race, destination of study abroad, and academic majors, the study sample was representative of national data for this student population allowing for some generalizations to be made.

## 2.2. Statistical Methods

Tests for association were used to analyze frequencies of responses to the survey questions and to determine what relationships existed, if any, between study variables and student responses. The study was particularly focused on the *interests in* studying abroad and the *concerns* students had about it in relation to demographic and other variables, and what changes may have occurred for the pre- to post-COVID groups. Using SAS, determinations were made first to see if there were such relationships between variables and responses; this first step did not identify what specifically was chosen by students taking the survey, only if the responses to that question showed relationships with certain variables.

The second step was to use a series of tests for two proportions to isolate the variables of interest and determine specifically which ones showed significant change (with 95% confidence,  $p < 0.05$ ) from the pre- to post-COVID groups. In this way, the multitude of responses from the survey, most of which allowed students to choose as many as applied to them, could be organized coherently first to identify if relationships existed, and then to determine specifically for which ones significant change occurred.

## 3. Results

When asked about their interests in studying abroad and concerns they had about it, **three areas of interest and two concerns showed statistically significant change** from pre- to post-COVID (see **Table 8** and **Table 9**). The three interests were:

- Studying abroad would be good for my career (positive change);
- Studying abroad is a good fit for my major (positive change);
- My friends were doing it (negative change).

The two concerns were:

- Living arrangement;
- If the program would run as planned.

**Table 8.** Student responses regarding what interested them in study abroad.

Interests	Pre-COVID (%)	Post-COVID (%)	Significance
Learn a Language	7.35	8.87	
<b>Good for Career</b>	<b>8.22</b>	<b>15.27</b>	<b>Significant increase</b>
Parents Encouraged	5.15	4.43	
<b>Friends Doing It</b>	<b>3.40</b>	<b>0.99</b>	<b>Significant decrease</b>
Learn Cultures	18.64	18.97	
Would be Fun	19.19	15.76	
Wanted to Travel	21.27	18.47	
Professors Encouraged	5.70	4.93	
<b>Good Fit for Major</b>	<b>8.88</b>	<b>11.58</b>	<b>Significant increase</b>

**Table 9.** Student responses regarding what concerns them about study abroad.

Concerns	Pre-COVID (%)	Post-COVID (%)	Significance
Financial Concerns	34.39	29.67	
Concerns from Parents	2.98	2.39	
Flying	1.99	0.48	
Public Transportation	3.18	2.39	
Earn Credit/Complete Degree	14.91	11.96	
<b>Living Arrangement Abroad</b>	<b>8.95</b>	<b>13.88</b>	<b>Significant Increase</b>
<b>Program Will Run as Planned</b>	<b>7.16</b>	<b>14.83</b>	<b>Significant Increase</b>
Crowded Places	2.39	3.83	
Safety	9.54	6.70	
Health	7.75	6.70	
No Concerns	4.97	5.26	

Statistical analysis is presented later. First, some observations: while both pre- and post-COVID groups of students expressed diverse interests for studying abroad, several noteworthy patterns can be observed:

- Post-COVID group indicates more that it is good for their **careers and majors** (increase from 17.10% to 26.85% combined);
- Post-COVID group indicates **friends, fun, and travel** are less important (43.86% to 35.22% combined);
- Post-COVID group indicates less influence by **parents, friends, and professors** (14.25% to 10.35% combined);
- Interest in learning **language and culture** is little changed (25.99% to 27.84%) pre- to post-COVID.

Taken together, the observations above about interest in studying abroad suggest students are citing more **purposeful, independent, and serious** reasons for choosing study abroad post-COVID, however they are not necessarily more focused on language and culture (two traditional reasons for studying abroad).

Instead, it appears the students tie it more clearly to their career prospects and chosen majors. As noted earlier, as a group the post-COVID students are **older and less well-traveled** than the pre-COVID group when they studied abroad, and they indicate having a clearer purpose for seeking this experience.

Regarding concerns, again statistical analysis is presented later. First, some observations: while both pre- and post-COVID groups of students expressed varying concerns for studying abroad, several noteworthy patterns can be observed:

- **Financial concerns** dropped numerically for post-COVID group, as did **credit/degree completion concerns** though neither were significant;
- Concerns about **living arrangement abroad** increased significantly for the post-COVID group;
- Concerns about the **program running as planned** increased significantly for the post-COVID group;
- Situationally risky spaces and activities for health concerns during COVID (**flying, public transportation, crowded places**) decreased as a concern (7.56% to 6.70%) but were small to begin with;
- General concern expressed by students for their **safety and health** both decreased.

Taken together, results suggest post-COVID students still have sizable **concerns about financing study abroad** and ensuring it contributes towards **degree completion**, but not as much as pre-COVID students. This could suggest that more affluent students, and ones more secure in their plan for graduation, are the ones more likely to consider studying abroad now. This would present a major challenge going forward, since education abroad had grown steadily more accessible and inclusive pre-pandemic based on diversity of participants nationwide. Other factors, such as age and seriousness of purpose, may help explain this result as well.

The largest increases were seen in concerns about **living arrangement** (which exceeded degree completion as a concern post-COVID) and that the program itself would **run as planned**. Students appear to be concerned about uncertainties in their programs especially regarding **where they will live and with whom**, and if the **program will be disrupted**. These could reflect COVID-era concerns about disrupted experiences generally. Considering that the post-COVID group had overall less international travel experience, it seems likely that for students graduating high school and in college during COVID it has forestalled previous opportunities for global travel, but perhaps has heightened both the desire to go abroad and also worries about it. However, students' concerns for their actual health did not increase post-COVID per se. Particular aspects of traveling to and studying in an unfamiliar place that might be more prone to COVID concerns (crowded areas and transportation confines, for example) are generally not of concern to them, but larger extra-curricular programmatic elements and structures seem to be.

Selected student quotes captured through the survey's open-ended feedback

sections highlight their state of mind:

- “Every time I’ve signed up to go abroad, I’ve been accepted and then the programs got canceled due to COVID. I’m ready to go abroad!”
- “I was supposed to study abroad in Japan but due to COVID it was canceled.”
- “Not being able to study abroad due to COVID and running out of time to do so before I graduate. Who knows how long this pandemic will last.”
- “Is it safe to travel with COVID still being around?”
- “It has been my dream for years.”

### 3.1. Tests for Association and Two Proportions

Initial tests for association identified relationships among the responses and particular study variables, namely there was a significant relationship observed for:

- Gender and interests (Chi-Square DF = 18, Value = 34.9521, Prob = 0.0096);
- Gender and concerns (Chi-Square DF = 10, Value = 24.6724, Prob = 0.0060);
- Gender and living arrangements (Chi-Square DF = 4, Value = 12.8288, Prob = 0.0121);
- Race and living arrangements (Chi-Square DF = 4, Value = 18.7852, Prob = 0.0009);
- Academic level and concerns (Chi-Square DF = 40, Value = 64.7577, Prob = 0.0079).

Further tests for two proportions determined which of those variables were significantly linked to the pre- to post-COVID shifts in student responses, however not all of the initial relationships proved significant upon further analysis (a statistical phenomenon known as *Simpson’s paradox*). The following five proved statistically significant:

#### 1) *Post-COVID education abroad, career, and gender*

The largest shift on the question of what made students interested in studying abroad was the response that **it was good for their careers** (see **Table 8**). Two proportion tests showed that, overall, the post-COVID group more frequently replied that they were interested in studying abroad because they thought it was good for their career ( $z$  value =  $-3.8704$ ;  $p$  value =  $0.0001$ ; significant at  $p < 0.05$ ).

Upon close examination of the data, further two-proportion test analysis revealed that the proportion of **male students was not significantly different pre- to post-COVID**, whereas the proportion of post-COVID female students **increased significantly** ( $p = 0.0003$ ) on this question. In fact, the survey proportion of pre-COVID males answering that study abroad was good for their careers was 30.7%, post-COVID it dropped to 21.0%; compared with females who increased for this question from 68.0% to 72.6%.

#### 2) *Post-COVID education abroad and the impact of friends*

Post-COVID students less frequently said they want to study abroad because their **friends are doing it**. In fairness, very few post-COVID students in this study indicated friends were doing it overall and only male students indicated they were doing it because friends were. In fact, no (0) female or non-binary/

third gender students indicated this, likely accounting for the significant decrease pre- to post-COVID (z value= 2.5165;  $p$  value = 0.01174; significant at  $p < 0.05$ ).

### 3) *Post-COVID education abroad and fit with major*

**Females** answering that study abroad would be **good for their major** increased significantly from pre- to post-COVID as a proportion of the total response. For male students they did not. Non-binary/third gender responses were too small of a sample to draw meaningful conclusions (z value = -2.0357;  $p$  value = 0.04136; significant at  $p < 0.05$ ).

### 4) *Post-COVID education abroad programs running as planned*

Concern that the **programs would run as planned** was the largest shift in concern from pre- to post-COVID and was statistically significant. Overall, the post-COVID group was more concerned than the pre-COVID group that their program would run as planned (z value= -3.1944;  $p$  value= 0.00142; significant at  $p < 0.05$ ).

However, upon further analysis, **males did not show a significant increase** in frequency of this concern. The proportion of **females increased significantly** from pre- to post- as a proportion (z value = -2.9678,  $p$  value= 0.00298); others were too small of a sample to draw meaningful conclusions.

Further, students responding that they were **seniors** (z = -2.3795,  $p$  value = 0.01732) **and graduate students** (z value = -3.4812,  $p$  value = 0.0005) **indicated significantly greater concern for their programs running as planned** as a proportion of the whole. Neither juniors nor sophomores changed in their proportion indicating this concern; freshmen were not present in the post-survey so were excluded from this analysis.

### 5) *Post-COVID concern about living arrangements abroad*

Just as students on-campus struggled with adjustment and had concerns about roommates and residence halls during COVID, overall students considering going abroad post-COVID indicate **significantly greater concern about their living arrangements abroad** (z value= -1.9627;  $p$  value= 0.025; significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). Further, post-COVID students' intent **not to live with students from the US was significantly higher** than pre-COVID students did (z value= 1.8804;  $p$  value = 0.03005; significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). Upon further analysis this was the case for all genders and race was not a factor on this question.

## 3.2. Limitations

As with any analysis of human behavior this study involved complexities and limitations, among them are the disproportionately high number of responses from pre-COVID students. Also, the study relied on student recollections from pre-COVID times and projections during post-COVID uncertainties; it is possible that student motivations and plans were not reported perfectly. Additionally, the results about race were drawn from small sample sizes, any observations should be understood with that limitation in mind. Lastly, it should be noted that this study looked for *associations* which are not necessarily cause and effect

relationships. The authors were careful to identify only *patterns* of student behavior that could be observed; while useful for collective understanding, they should not necessarily be seen as predictive of future action.

## 4. Discussion

Returning to our initial questions: will students from the United States resume studying abroad at the levels seen before March 2020? And, how can colleges and universities address worrying trends in student attendance and disengagement on-campus since the resumption of more normal post-COVID operations?

The early data are promising that the anticipated number of American students studying abroad and the number of US universities planning for programs abroad are both increasing:

- 65% of universities plan in-person study abroad programs for fall 2022 while 58% reported in-person programs for summer 2022 (vs. summer 2021 when 43% reported cancelled programs);
- 83% anticipate increased study abroad participation in the 2022-23 academic year (IIE, 2022).

Yet, professional organizations serving the field note that the profound changes occurring since the pandemic make it too early to tell, and that it may be years before professionals in the field are sure where education abroad is going (NAFSA's *International Education*, 2022). While it is never a good idea to predict human behavior, there are nonetheless patterns emerging from this study that can be useful to international education practitioners.

### 4.1. Emphasis on Career and Major

Students surveyed indicated a clear and positive connection between education abroad and their **careers**, significantly more so than their pre-COVID peers. The impact of education abroad on careers has been considered somewhat mixed and inconclusive, particularly on its value to employers (Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2021) and its perception by underrepresented students (Pruitt, 2021). However, post-COVID students seem to be making the connection, perhaps confirming what international educators and researchers of education abroad alumni (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017) have consistently emphasized.

Similarly, there was a significant shift in seeing education abroad as good for students' **majors**. From this study it seems clear that post-pandemic students are being purposeful in pursuing their academic priorities abroad and are now focusing on the bigger picture of how education abroad fits into their careers and lives overall, not just having fun with friends and traveling. These findings are consistent with what is known about students going abroad in the years just after September 11, 2001 (McKeown, 2003). At least in the initial years following traumatic and disruptive events, including now the global pandemic, it seems that students choosing to go abroad show greater **seriousness of academic and career purpose**.

Student **engagement** with higher education in general has been damaged since March 2020. This study's finding that students see education abroad as an activity that is a good fit with their major is therefore an encouraging sign of hope, and contributes to the accumulating evidence that education abroad is positively associated with retention and degree completion (Bhatt et al., 2021). As the profession rebuilds from the trauma of COVID-19, international educators can look to this finding to restate the academic relevance of intentional and well-designed education abroad, and to reposition it as part of the solution to rebuild the relevance of higher education to disengaged students overall.

#### 4.2. Uncertainties Continue

While more serious and purposeful in their decision to study abroad, post-COVID students display a significantly heightened **concern about their programs running as planned**, with a particular concern for their **housing**. On the one hand, it seems obvious that after its prolonged cessation students would be frustrated at the delay and false starts of many colleges and universities' education abroad efforts. But as stated earlier, the context of student mental health issues post-COVID must be taken seriously (Pedersen et al., 2021). New threats to travel and global student mobility have emerged since the study was conducted, including the war in Ukraine, volatile flight costs and inflation overall, and continued reports of new COVID variants and other health concerns, making this study part of an on-going review and analysis of international education that would benefit from additional research.

International educators, who in the past may have valued developing in their students qualities like tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, and resilience, may need to take a step back to understand and appreciate the amount of disruption, cancellation, shock, and disappointment many students endured during the pandemic. The emotional impact of this recent experience may be more pronounced post-pandemic than has previously been observed for education abroad (Goldstein & Kim, 2005) and higher education overall (Kim et al., 2020). While no program abroad runs entirely as planned, post-COVID program planning should emphasize as much as possible the destinations and components able to be delivered confidently, solidifying as early and clearly as possible the particularly sensitive question of **housing** arrangement, out of respect for students' concerns that may negatively impact their participation.

#### 4.3. Seeking Authenticity and Meaning Post-Pandemic

Of note was a significant intent by post-COVID students **not to live with other students from the US**, a finding that builds upon the significant decline in their wanting to go abroad because their friends were doing it. The housing preference does not seem to be driven by concerns for health and safety. In fact, health and safety concerns did not increase for students in this study pre- to post-COVID, a noteworthy "non-finding finding" that has been observed in

studies done of education abroad even during COVID (Harder & Mullaney, 2021). Taken together, the findings from this study suggest that students more than ever want an **authentic experience** abroad, on their terms, **not influenced by friends** or others, and **not necessarily to learn culture and language** any more than their pre-COVID peers.

International education research on global patterns emerging from the pandemic give insight into what may be a search for **authentic and meaningful experiences** that post-COVID university students want. Regarding career benefits, for example, students globally cite less concern for rankings and university prestige and more on gaining the education and skills they need to succeed in life. Further, students globally cite high concern for social issues, especially climate change, discrimination, and other pursuits broadly grouped under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (INTO University Partnerships, 2021) as important that their programs and institutions address. It is possible that in this changed landscape, education abroad students are seeking the company of like-minded young people with whom to associate. As US students emerge from the pandemic, these pressing domestic and global concerns will likely be more prominent in their pursuit of education abroad. Research on students of this generation (Twenge, 2017) would support this claim, namely that students crave authenticity, are comfortable acting as individuals less influenced by friends, yet seek to have and also share important experiences (often which appear on their social media).

They are also now less travelled than their pre-COVID peers. From what is known about less experienced international travelers (McKeown, 2009), education abroad can have a particularly strong impact on those with little or no prior international experience. It is possible, then, for post-COVID education abroad to assume a unique place in these students' higher education experience going forward, one they see with strong career and academic benefits while also providing personal meaning that can be shared with others in the larger world.

#### 4.4. Conclusion

Education abroad is as multi-faceted and nuanced as all of higher education. Its models and varieties are limited only by the professionals responsible for them, and its participants as ambitious and diverse as the best of US higher education. Education abroad is a mainstream curricular higher education program, neither solely an awesome and life-changing experience nor a privileged party for the affluent. At its best it is not only about changing the world or other well-meaning personal goals students may have, it is confrontation with other people, cultures, and ways of life that, with time and reflection, can lead to more confident, intelligent, and open-minded young people more aware of who they are, what they are doing academically, and where they fit into the larger world (McKeown et al., 2021). Yet the pandemic cessation and the fits and starts of its resumption have placed a layer of uncertainty on the activity not previously experienced



even by earlier disruptions. Nevertheless, patterns are emerging to build upon for the next iteration of education abroad.

Results from this study indicate that students interested in studying abroad since the pandemic are motivated by their own belief in its contribution to their academic and career success, not necessarily motivated by friends or others, and, like their generation overall, are ready to embrace larger meaning from the experience beyond traditional language and cultural learning. For it to fulfill its promise, however, education abroad should be as accessible and diverse as America, trends which were going in positive directions prior to the pandemic but are uncertain coming out of it.

If the latent anxieties many students carry with them result in lower participation or less diversity of student and location, then this important academic program risks reproducing educational and social inequalities rather than helping overcome them. Researchers had warned of this tendency prior to the pandemic (Brooks & Waters, 2021), the education abroad field should be vigilant not to allow this to go on long even if, temporarily, there may be a retrenchment towards traditional program models, destinations, and participant demographics as uncertainties allow those with greater social and cultural capital advantages to overcome their concerns more readily (Bourdieu, 1986).

Results from this study confirm both the power of education abroad to be meaningful for students' academic and career goals, and for them to engage with their education positively on their own terms. In the post-COVID American higher education landscape often characterized by uncertainty, tension, and disengagement, education abroad—if its purpose is restated to a new audience and if it can be accessible to students needing it—may provide renewed hope for international and higher education communities yearning for it.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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## Appendix A: Survey

Before beginning the survey, please confirm that you agree to the terms of the study and to participate.

- I agree
- I do not agree

Thank you for your willingness to complete this short survey!

If you have any questions regarding the survey, please contact the Principal Investigator (name omitted)

1) Please select the option that best describes you: (insert branch in survey)

- I have already studied abroad.
- I am hoping to study abroad in the future.

2) In what semester did you (or do you plan to) study abroad? (ex. "Fall 2018" or "Summer 2019" etc.)

3) Check the option that best describes you when you studied abroad or when you are hoping to study abroad:

- Graduate Student
- Senior
- Junior
- Sophomore
- Freshman

4) What is your major?

- \_\_\_\_\_

5) In which country did you study abroad or do you plan to study abroad?

- \_\_\_\_\_

6) Prior to studying abroad, had/have you traveled abroad before? -insert skip logic-

- Yes
- No

7) If yes, how long was your longest trip abroad?

- \_\_\_\_\_

8) What got you interested in study abroad? (check all that apply)

- I wanted to learn another language
- I thought it would be good for my career
- My parents encouraged it
- My friends were doing it
- I wanted to learn about the world/other cultures
- I thought it would be fun
- I wanted to travel
- My professors encouraged it
- It was a good fit for my major
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

9) A lot of students don't study abroad because of certain concerns they have about it. What were/are some of your concerns about study abroad? (check all

that apply)

- Financial concerns
- Parental concerns
- Concerns about flying
- Concerns about public transportation
- Concerns about credit transfer or degree completion
- Concerns about living arrangement
- Concerns if the program would run as planned
- Concerns about being in crowds or densely populated areas
- Concerns for my safety (crime, terrorism, war)
- Concerns for my health (mental, physical)
- I have/had no concerns
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

10) Check the option that best describes your living arrangement when you studied abroad or when you are hoping to study abroad (check all that apply):

- With a host family
- In a residence hall or apartment with host country students or people not from the US
- In a residence hall or apartment only with US students
- ("Don't know yet" - for those having not gone yet)
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

11) Did you/will you have your own room?

- Yes
- No
- ("Don't know yet" - for those having not gone yet)

12) What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary/third gender
- Prefer not to say

13) Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

14) Which of the following best describes your race? (check all that apply)

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Prefer not to say

15) What year were you born?

- \_\_\_\_\_

16) Please share any other thoughts you have on your interests and concerns about study abroad:

○ \_\_\_\_\_

17) Would you like to enter the raffle to win a \$25 Amazon gift card? Your response will still remain anonymous.