

**A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXAMINATION ON THE  
IMPACT OF ADVISING ON THE DECISION TO STUDY ABROAD**

A Thesis

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Agricultural students are falling behind when it comes to competing in the global marketplace. To help prepare students to compete in the global marketplace, participation in a high-impact experience such as study abroad is recommended. In order to increase high-impact experiences for agricultural students, it is important to understand advisor and peer advisor perspectives. The purpose of this study was to understand departmental advisors' and peer advisors' perceptions related to a student's intent to study abroad through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University. Qualitative research methods were used to complete this study. Azjen's Theory of Planned Behavior provided the framework to explore advisors' and peer advisors' perceptions related to a student's intent to study abroad.

The first phase of the study was a qualitative phenomenological examination of the shared experiences of High-Impact Practice (HIP) Advisors in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University who hold advising roles and participated in a high-impact experience through the college. This study focused on the advisors' perceptions and experience in study abroad. Data were collected through interviews. Departmental culture, personal connections, mass communication, and generating awareness emerged as themes. The results suggest influences such as departmental culture, personal connections, and mass communication influence whether students participated in study abroad. In addition, it became evident that advisors need to be better informed about available resources.

The second phase of the study was a transcendental phenomenological exploration of the shared experiences of peer advisors in the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad Program who have participated in study abroad through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, plus their perceptions related to a student's intent to study abroad in the college. Data were collected through interviews. Educating peers, personal connections, mass communication, and generating awareness emerged as themes. The results suggest educating peers, personal connections, mass communications, and generating awareness influenced how peer advisors informed students and learned about study abroad in the college.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, first-generation students, and those still trying to find their path in this world. I am beyond grateful for all those who have made an impact on my academic journey. I am truly blessed. Thank you.

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“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” –Jeremiah 29:11

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## INTRODUCTION

“Why study abroad?” Many wonder about the importance and type of impact that traveling abroad will have on their present lives, futures, and careers. The Texas A&M Study Abroad Programs Office (2012) states that a study conducted by TAMU Measurement and Research Services (MARS) found that “graduating students who had an international experience are provided with more job offers and higher starting salaries than those without international experience” (p. 23). Supporting the importance of globalization, Texas A&M University adopted a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) including an institutional goal to “strengthen” and encourage students’ participation in high-impact learning experiences such as study abroad (global learning), internships, and service learning. As part of the QEP, this exposure to different cultures supports the value “Aggies Commit to Learning for a Lifetime” (Texas A&M University, 2012).

Texas A&M University requires each student to complete six credit hours of what are designated as International and Cultural Diversity courses (Texas A&M University, 2014). The question is whether these courses actually focus on international content (Moore, Williams, Boyd, & Elbert, 2011). Moore et al. (2011) examined approved courses such as urban sociology and music that are available for International and Cultural Diversity credit, concluding that the courses “were culturally diverse, but have no international aspects” (p. 122). It is necessary for students to be open to new experiences in order to survive and succeed as global leaders as individual and national

callings progressively unify in this diverse and globally aware world (Texas A&M University, 2014).

“The necessity of advancing global and cross-cultural competencies for U.S. students has become increasingly apparent as the global community becomes more interdependent and diverse (Zhai & Scheer, 2002, p. 23). According to Moore et al. (2011), “the current level of involvement of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences students and faculty in international experiences is not commensurate with [the university’s] ambition to become a top 20 university by the year 2020” (p. 118). Study abroad programs in colleges of agriculture are an “important component for educational activities” since agriculture students “are future leaders in that area” (Zhai & Scheer, 2002, p. 28). Agricultural students need to understand the dynamics of a globalized world and “how the change is going to affect a global agricultural industry” (Zhai & Scheer, 2002, p. 28).

Briers, Shinn, and Nguyen (2010) stated that the “university can serve as an incubator to nurture experiences that prepare students for global leadership roles” and “faculty members and advisors often regulate the incubator” (p. 18). Briers et al. (2010) contend it is essential to integrate international experiences, on and off campus, into the curriculum. Early planning and preparation is imperative for an international experience; however, it is best to keep things simple for students (Briers et al., 2010). This area is one in which advisors and peer advisors can assist students.

Texas A&M Study Abroad Programs Office (2012) states: “70% of students indicate that their primary source of encouragement to study abroad is from other

students, faculty, and academic advisors” (p. 23). Zhai and Scheer (2002) found personal interests, peer influence, desire to experience something different, timing, and cost were factors that motivated students to study abroad. The *Open Doors* report provided national statistics that agriculture and science majors, males, and non-Caucasian students were underrepresented undergraduates when it came to studying abroad (Institute of International Education, 2007). Student participation from agriculture majors was 1.3% while science majors, such as “physical or life sciences,” “health sciences,” and “math and computer sciences,” represented 12.2% (Institute of International Education, 2007, p. 67). Less than 35% of males participated in a study abroad versus 65% of females while Caucasian students represented 83% of U.S. study abroad students (Institute of International Education, 2007, p. 68). Twenty percent of graduating students, however, claimed they “did not study abroad because they did not understand how the experience would fit into their degree plans,” and they believed it would delay graduation (Texas A&M Study Abroad Programs Office, 2012, p. 23).

Most students do not study abroad due to barriers: affordability and financial constraints, fear of new experiences, or the fact that they do not know the options available for international experiences that will fit in their degree plan (Briers et al., 2010; Texas A&M Study Abroad Programs Office, 2012). Herein lies the positive influence of faculty, departmental advisors, and peer advisors. Briers et al. (2010) assert, “faculty and advisors should be committed to organizing experiences that open windows to a global world” (p. 17). Research has shown consistently that academic advisors play an integral role in “the retention, persistence, and success of college students” (Paul,

Smith, & Dochney, 2012, p. 53). When faced with academic difficulties, students often turn to advisors (Paul et al., 2012). Advisors can have the strongest influence on students since they are the ones to direct the future of the students' degree plans. On the other hand, peer advisors provide greater influence compared to faculty advisors since they are able to relate their experiences with peers (Diambra, 2003, p. 27).

Briers et al. (2010) examined College of Agriculture and Life Science students' perceptions towards international educational experiences, and they discovered that "70% of students felt that participating in a study abroad program would improve their competitiveness in the global marketplace" (p. 17). The report, *Globalizing Agricultural Science and Education Programs for America*, outlined that college graduates or any educated person "will need to function effectively and responsibly in a global environment both in day-to-day work and in social interactions" (Moore et al., 2011, p. 117). Moore et al. (2011) affirms "globalization" is a priority for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences [with Texas A&M University], and they believe that college students must "learn foreign languages, experience other cultures and societies, and have an understanding of how the international system functions" if they are to "thrive in the global market" and/or "lead effectively in a global context" (p. 117).

Texas A&M University has taken into account that one benefit of studying abroad is that it produces successful graduates that have international experience, so they may have a stronger appeal to employers in today's competitive job market. Study abroad has significant impact because it prepares students to be able to adapt to any new situation such as to function effectively and responsibly in a universal situation (Moore

et. al, 2011; Briers et. al, 2010; Crossman & Clarke, 2009; Paus & Robinson, 2008; Hadis, 2005; Zhai & Scheer, 2002). Students develop the skills to understand their own culture and values as well as to evaluate and appreciate having a diversified perspective of our world. In addition, students' global perspective and intercultural sensitivity enhance as well their confidence to accept new challenges (Zhai & Scheer, 2002). "Study abroad programs have become the most visible and popular international activity to enrich and broaden students' global competency at college and university campuses across the United States" (Zhai & Scheer, 2002, p. 23).

Texas A&M University's QEP plan supports efforts to encourage students to study abroad. In the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, advisors and peer advisors in the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad (A&M – SA Team) can help bridge the gap between students and advisors when it comes to initiating participation in study abroad (Lo, 2006). It is important to examine the existent or nonexistent working relationship between both groups since it will provide insight as to how they reach students. The purpose of this study was to understand departmental advisors' and peer advisors' perspectives related to a student's intent to study abroad in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University.

### **Context of the Study**

The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M provides many different tools in preparing students for various aspects of their future, chief among them being High-Impact Practice (HIP) Advisors and the Ambassadors and Mentors study abroad (A&M – SA Team) program. These two groups were created based on assessing

the need to strengthen and encourage students' participation in high-impact learning experiences such as study abroad (global learning), internships, and service learning, based on Texas A&M University's Quality Enhancement Plan (Office of the Provost, 2011).

The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University had 48 advisors who served in one of fourteen departments during the time this study was conducted. There are six HIP advisors from various departments who have participated in a high-impact experience, such as study abroad, research, internship, or service learning, and advise students in the college. The Associate Dean for Academic Operations, administrator, is the creator of the program.

The Action 2015: Education First program was established as a plan for the university to follow in pursuit of integrating teaching, research, and service to achieve academic excellence. The Action 2015 program had leftover funding available for advisors, which the Associate Dean for Academic Operations thought would be useful for in promoting high-impact experiences. The idea was to fund advisors to participate in a high-impact practice experience, so that they could relate to students as well as inform them about HIP opportunities when they register for courses. These advisors are instrumental in promoting high-impact practices for the college's students due to their personal experiences with these activities.

The HIP advisors have four different types of HIP program experiences to choose from and can choose to do one or all of them; however, only one experience per advisor is funded each year. Advisors can choose to participate in one of the four

programs: Study Abroad/Global Learning, Honors Program/Undergraduate Research, Internship/Work-Related Experience, or Service Learning/Community-Based Learning. The advisors participate based on specified criteria. Only one advisor, per department, may participate per year. The advisors are required to submit appropriate travel forms and follow all participant guidelines for the program. After participating in the chosen experience, advisors are required to make a formal presentation to college advisors. They must outline their experience and goals for promoting the experience by reaching out to students and colleagues about their experience. The ultimate goal of the HIP Advisor program is to promote the importance of high-impact practice experiences.

Established in Fall 2011, the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad (A&M – SA) program is for students to share their study abroad experience with other students and faculty, as well as to build a strong network within the college. The program has been operating for six semesters, just over a two-year period.

The establishment of the program was based on information collected by the program administrator who attended four NAFSA (National Association of Foreign Student Advisers): Association of International Educators sessions. Over the years, the sessions focused on or mentioned the role of other students influencing a student to study abroad. Out of curiosity, the program administrator found information from the study abroad office correlated with her own personal experiences about students influencing peers about study abroad. Sparking interest, the program administrator drafted a proposal for a peer-advising group for study abroad when she attended NAFSA [in Vancouver, Canada] during 2011. The last presentation she attended was about “the



nuts and bolts” of starting and managing a peer advisor group for study abroad. She then edited the developed proposal and submitted it to the Executive Associate Dean in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. She received approval, and the first team was recruited and selected to serve in August 2011.

Each student on the A&M – SA Team is selected based on multiple criteria. The criteria include: a student must have participated in an international academic experience and must have maintained a 2.7 GPA or higher. A reward for maintaining above a 3.0 GPA is a \$500 scholarship per semester. Membership on the A&M – SA Team provides growth of students’ leadership skills and public speaking skills, and involves them more with their university community.

Each semester, ten to twelve students serve on one of three teams, (Outreach and Advising, Events and Planning, and/or Media Development), students attend a “beginning of the year” training workshop and additional training sessions such as “how to present effectively,” “spring welcome back training,” and “professional development.” The students hold office hours for two to three hours a week and participate in at least three events per semester. Office hours are Monday through Friday from 10am to 3pm. Students are able to meet with the peer advisors through appointment or on a walk-in basis. The peer advisors have bi-weekly meetings with their specified team, team leaders, and with the A&M – SA Team as a whole.

The A&M – SA Team’s goal is to increase student participation in international academic programs along with helping students broaden their horizons from study abroad participation (such as personal and professional benefits). For the college to

advertise about their services, the peer advisors use social media, posters, and fliers as well as participate in three classroom presentations per semester. During 2012, the A&M – SA Team created financial and cultural workshops to help prepare students who are about to study abroad and/or inform students who are curious about participating in a program abroad. Peer advisors are the key to implementing new ideas and/or explaining details that advisors may not be able to communicate to students due to lack of personal experience.

### **Individual Study Purposes and Methodologies**

Qualitative methods were utilized to carry out the research purpose in this thesis. The purpose of this study, as a whole, was to describe the impact of advising in students' decision to study abroad. The study aimed to provide understanding of departmental advisors' and peer advisors' perspectives on a student's intent to study abroad in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University. Methodological triangulation was used to collect information about relationships from different perspectives since it was "the best way to elicit the various and divergent constructions of reality that exist within the context of this study" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 31). "Between-method triangulation" was achieved through interviews with the advisors, interviews with the peer advisors, and persistent observation (Erlandson et al., 1993).

### **Article One**

The purpose of phase one of the research was to describe the essence of the shared experiences of High-Impact Practice (HIP) Advisors who hold advising roles and

have participated in a high-impact experience through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences as well as their perspectives on a student's intent to study abroad in the college.

This study used qualitative research methods to develop a transcendental phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology helped to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” and provided a shared lived experience among several individuals (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). I gained access to the HIP advisors through a gatekeeper (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The gatekeeper and I, both, informed the participants that they could choose to participate or not to participate in the study; there were six participants in this phase of the research.

HIP Advisors' perceptions on high-impact experiences, specifically study abroad, represented an opportunistic sample (Patton, 2002). Before data collection, a gatekeeper contacted the HIP advisors, which allowed me to gain access and to schedule interview dates. The HIP advisors were coded HP 1-6; to ensure confidentiality, no identifying information was collected from the participants.

A flexible, in-depth, semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the interviews (Merriam, 2009). The interviews were conducted on location with the participants; no audio recordings were used. The interviews lasted between twenty and forty-five minutes, and participant's responses were typed, edited, and sent back to them for verification. The data were analyzed using *Horizontalization*. When spread out for examination, data was equally weighted and then systematically grouped into clusters or themes (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were utilized to establish trustworthiness in this phase of the research. Credibility was established with member checks as well as a peer debriefing session, and the consultation of a neutral party (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted to verify data analysis and to identify my personal bias. In addition, data was submitted to the gatekeeper for review and verification. Purposive sampling and the use of participant quotes found throughout the study established transferability (Erlandson et al., 1993). Audit trails, peer audits, and a reflexive journal were used to establish dependability and confirmability (Erlandson et al., 1993). The reflexive journal supports all facets of the research quality tests (Erlandson et al., 1993).

## **Article Two**

The purpose of the second phase of research was to discover the essence of the shared experiences of peer advisors in the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad Program who have participated in study abroad through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and their perceptions on a student's intent to study abroad in the college.

Qualitative research methods were used to develop a transcendental phenomenological perspective in this phase of the study. Merriam (2009) defines phenomenology as "a study of people's conscious experience" of their "everyday life and social action" (p. 25). The Ambassadors and Mentors were accessed through a gatekeeper (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as well as with my personal involvement with the program. The participants were informed of their right to participate or not to participate in the study. Ten participants participated in this phase of the study.

The Ambassadors and Mentors represented a criterion sample (Merriam, 2009) of agricultural students who participated in a study abroad and served as a peer advisor due to their experience and knowledge with the study abroad process. Before data collection, the gatekeeper and I spoke with the peer advisors about my intention to interview them. I later scheduled meeting times with each Ambassador. The peer advisors were coded PA 1-10. To protect privacy, no identifying information was collected from the participants.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam, 2009). The participants were interviewed in the AGLS (Agriculture and Life Sciences) building, and to encourage openness no audio recordings were made. Depending on the participant's responses, interviews lasted between twenty and forty-five minutes. Participants' responses were typed, edited, and checked immediately for accuracy. The participants received a copy of their individual responses in person or through email. *Horizontalization*, the process of spreading data across for examination was used since the data was treated with equal weight, then "organized into clusters or themes" (Merriam, 2009, p. 26).

To establish trustworthiness in this study, I utilized Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checks, the consultation of a neutral party (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and peer debriefing sessions established credibility and identified personal bias. The gatekeeper verified data interpretation and provided additional information for understanding. I established transferability using purposive sampling and participants' quotes discovered throughout

the inquiries (Erlandson et. al, 1993). Dependability and confirmability were established through the implementation of audit trails, peer audits, and a reflexive journal (Erlandson et. al, 1993).

**A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION: THE ESSENCE OF THE LIVED  
EXPERIENCES OF HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICE ADVISORS IN THE  
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UNIVERSITY**

**Overview**

Due to globalization, international study is “the next step in the evolution of American higher education” to enable students to “compete in the global marketplace and ensure a successful international exchange for future generations to come [*sic*]” (Presley et al., 2010, p. 228). Texas A&M University has the desire to become a top 20 university by the year 2020; however, Moore, Williams, Boyd, and Elbert (2011) stated that “the current level of involvement of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences students and faculty in international experiences is not commensurate” with the university’s ambition (p. 118). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to discover the essence of the shared experiences of High-Impact Practice (HIP) Advisors who hold advising roles and have participated in a high-impact experience through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences as well as their perspectives on a student’s intent to study abroad in the college. This study found departmental culture, personal connections, mass communications, and generating awareness influenced how HIP advisors informed students about international experiences such as study abroad.

## **Introduction**

Briers, Shinn, and Nguyen (2010) state that more than 70% of students in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University “felt that participating in a study abroad program would improve their competitiveness in the global marketplace” (p. 17). Most students, however, do not study abroad due to barriers: affordability and financial constraints, fear of new experiences, or the fact that they do not know options available for international experiences that will fit in their degree plan (Briers, Shinn, & Nguyen, 2010; Texas A&M Study Abroad Programs Office, 2012). Herein lies the potential influence of faculty, departmental advisors, and peer advisors. Texas A&M University desires to become a top 20 university by the year 2020. In order to achieve that goal, an increase of student participation in high impact learning experiences (study abroad) through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences must occur (Moore et. al, 2011). To increase participation, starting in 2011, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences created two specialized groups: High-Impact Practice (HIP) Advisors and the Ambassadors and Mentors (peer advisors) Study Abroad Program (A&M – SA Team). This article focuses on the HIP Advisors program and their contribution to students interested in study abroad.

## **Literature Review**

Moore et. al (2011), stated, “the current level of involvement of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences students and faculty in international experiences is not commensurate” with the University’s ambition (p. 118). Briers et. al (2010) stated the “university can serve as an incubator to nurture experiences that prepare students for



global leadership roles” which “faculty members and advisors often regulate the incubator” for students (p. 18). Briers et al. (2010) suggests that “integrating international experiences into the curriculum is essential – both on and off the campus” (p. 18). “Simplifying planning and preparation for an international experience is crucial” (Briers et al., 2010, p. 18), in which academic advisors and faculty can assist students. Advisors can have the strongest influence on students since they play an integral role in directing the future of the students’ degree plans and usually remain with the students throughout their academic careers (Lowenstein, 2005; Texas A&M Study Abroad Programs Office, 2012; Young-Jones et. al, 2013).

Young-Jones et. al (2013) “evaluated academic advising in terms of student needs, expectations, and success rather than through the traditional lens of student satisfaction with the process” (p. 7). A group of 611 undergraduate students completed a survey exploring their expectations of and experience with academic advising, which is a “point where student behavior and institutionally controlled conditions meet to potentially influence student achievement” (p. 9). According to Young-Jones et al. (2013), the advising process can help students identify personal strengths and interests such as “academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, achievement motivation, and social support and involvement,” that relate to their educational and career goals (p. 9). This study demonstrated “academic advising does impact student academic performance” and “can vitally impact all facets of a student’s academic experience, ranging from development of self-efficacy to practical applications of study skills” (Young-Jones et. al 2013, p. 15).

Presley, Damron-Martinez, and Zhang (2010) built upon previous research in understanding the “motivations of students to study abroad by using Azjen’s Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as a theoretical basis for identifying the factors which might influence their intention to study abroad” (p. 227). More than 180 business students were administered an online survey which was “designed to collect the participant’s attitudes toward study abroad programs” (Presley, Damron-Martinez, & Zhang, 2010, p. 236). Due to globalization, international study is “the next step in the evolution of American higher education” to enable students to “compete in the global marketplace and ensure a successful international exchange for future generations to come [*sic*]” (Presley et al., 2010, p. 228). As anticipated, the results mirrored previous TPB research concluding, “students’ behavior belief combined with the outcome evaluation influences their attitudes toward the intention to studying abroad” (Presley et al., 2010, p. 242). In addition, the three-predictor variables *attitude toward the behavior* (A), *subjective norm* (SN), and *perceived behavioral control* (PBC), “each amplified the prediction of student intention to participate in study abroad” (p. 242). The factors proved students sought out their referent groups’ (parents and future employers) approval or disapproval in making decisions along with consideration of benefits in line with future career opportunities. Literature, however, still does not support the idea that American students have embraced the importance of studying abroad compared to students from other countries (Presley et al., 2010, p. 244).

With the rapid growth of globalization, employers have noted the significance of the relationship between employability and international experience [study abroad] of

recent graduates to be successful future employees (Crossman & Clarke, 2009; Santoro & Major, 2012). According to Santoro and Major (2012), the perceived value of international experience was the ability to handle intercultural communication, which those individuals understood, knew about, and appreciated the sensitivities surrounding “culture, religion, language, laws, and economic issues” as they impact business practice (p. 605). Students must be culturally aware, responsible, and culturally competent global citizens as our nation continues to work with major business corporations that are located globally, such as the Asia-Pacific (Crossman & Clarke, 2009; Paus & Robinson, 2005; Santoro & Major, 2012). It is up to faculty (as well as advisors) to be competent global citizens since “*their* ethnic positioning, and the cultural knowledge, beliefs, and values” they bring will have an educational impact on their decisions and relationships with students (Santoro & Major, 2012). Particularly, individuals tend to surround themselves with others who share views similar to their own; therefore, educators are “obligated to provide experiences” that expose students to the diversity of the world, even if it makes them uncomfortable” (Younes & Asay, 2003, p. 141).

Through the rise of new study abroad programs in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, it is notable that students are able to confront their ethnocentric beliefs and behaviors when challenged with experiencing a culture that is more pronounced versus their ethnic background (Younes & Asay, 2003). Jung (1971) identified introverted and extroverted learners as two basic operational modes of learning. An introverted learner works best through his own creativity and expands knowledge through independent reflection while an extroverted learner continuously interacts with

the world to influence others and learn from his environment (Jung, 1971). In order for these types of individuals to have a successful international, learning experience, it is up to the leader (faculty) to maintain a “delicate balance” between task and maintenance roles, “while encouraging self-discovery, openness to the unfamiliar, and the internalization of new perspectives” (Younes & Asay, 2003, p. 142). Students who participated in a study abroad stated their appreciation for “prepared and knowledgeable leaders,” had increased awareness of other cultures, gained clarity of career goals, and developed an increased sense of personal efficacy (Hadis, 2005; Younes & Asay, 2003). “Open-mindedness has no direct effect on academic focusing,” yet Hadis (2005) determined that “the higher the open-mindedness, the higher the global-mindedness; and the higher the global-mindedness, the higher the academic-focusing will be” (p. 68).

Hadis (2005) found parental encouragement, and especially, faculty encouragement to be “statistically significant determinants of a Mount Holyoke College student’s decision to study abroad” (p. 44). Interestingly, “the role of faculty encouragement in a student’s study abroad decision has mostly been neglected in the literature; but increased involvement of the faculty may well hold the key to tackling barriers to student participation” (Hadis, 2005, p. 45). It is known that foreign language courses, expectedly, promote the benefits of study abroad, yet a science course would lack the same encouragement. Science majors, however, would benefit from the same global experience as any other student. According to Hadis (2005), if faculty were “convinced of the value of learning abroad” and “how it would fit into their students’

course of study,” and the opportunities available, then they would more likely encourage students to pursue such possibilities (p. 47).

Research has shown the importance of global citizenship and growth of open-mindedness (Briers, Shinn, & Nguyen, 2010; Crossman & Clarke, 2009; Hadis, 2005; Santoro & Major, 2012; Younes & Asay, 2003), yet none has focused on the [individual] influences that would help increase agricultural student participation in a study abroad. In order to internationalize a university, the faculty must be internationalized (Paus & Robinson, 2008). Studies show faculty are supportive of study abroad, but they fail to see the importance within the curriculum and do not feel it is their responsibility to relay information to students about the opportunities available (Hadis, 2005). Advisors have the same encouragement, and influence, as faculty, yet studies have not documented their impact on students’ decision to study abroad.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to discover the essence of the shared experiences of High-Impact Practice (HIP) Advisors who hold advising roles and have participated in a high-impact experience through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences as well as their perspectives on a student’s intent to study abroad in the college. The study aligns with Priority Four, Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments, and Priority Five, Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs, of the National Research Agenda for the American Association for Agricultural Education (Doerfert, 2011). Three research questions guide the study:

1. What factors influence how HIP advisors inform students about study abroad in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (COALS)?
2. What do HIP advisors perceive to be effective tools in promoting study abroad in COALS?
3. How can COALS help advisors better utilize tools in promoting study abroad?

### **Methods**

The design used to pursue the research questions for this study was phenomenology since it provided a unique opportunity to capture the essence of the shared experiences of HIP Advisors who hold advising roles and have participated in a high-impact experience through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences as well as their perspectives on a student's intent to study abroad in the college. The study of people's conscious experience of their "everyday life and social action" or "life-world" is phenomenology (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). In this study, "phenomenology is [used] to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" and provide a shared lived experience among several individuals (Creswell, 2007, p. 58).

According to Creswell (2007), hermeneutical and transcendental are two types of phenomenology that exist. Transcendental phenomenology was employed for this study since I was interested in discovering the essence of the shared experiences of HIP Advisors who hold advising roles and have participated in a high-impact experience through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. In transcendental phenomenology, the researcher "analyzes the data by reducing the information to significant statements or

quotes and combines the statements into themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). To understand this phenomenon more completely, the researcher is required to put aside prior knowledge, experiences, judgments, and everyday understandings through a process called *epoche* (Merriam, 2009). A transcendental perspective is one in which “everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34) while *epoche* “is a process that the researcher engages in to remove, or at least become aware of, prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions” to “enable the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open viewpoint” (Patton, 2002, p. 485). To negate previous knowledge or experiences, bracketing was used to suspend the researcher’s own belief in reality (Patton, 2002). Bracketing is beneficial in reducing bias by putting aside, or bracketing, prior ideas or emotions regarding the phenomenon of interest, to describe the participants’ experiences to true form (Merriam, 2009). Throughout the research process, it was imperative for me to bracket out my experiences as a peer advisor and a student who has studied abroad, especially when it came to my biases regarding the tools available for advisors to utilize for promoting study abroad and their perceptions of their high-impact experiences. To attain *epoche*, this research is reported from an *emic*, or insider’s, perspective, telling the story through “capturing” and “being true” to the participant’s perspective (Patton, 2002).

### **Reflexivity**

In order to uphold integrity, self-reflexivity is a highly valued practice in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). According to Patton (2002), “being reflexive involves self-questioning and self-understanding” as well as “to undertake an ongoing

examination of *what I know* and *how I know it*" (p. 65). "Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one's own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports" (Patton, 2002, p. 65). To uphold the integrity of this research, I maintained a reflexive journal to record my biases toward the study. In addition, I attempted to bracket out my own personal ideals, so that I was able to focus solely on the participants' experiences.

According to Tracy (2010), self-reflexivity is one of the most celebrated practices due to "honesty and authenticity with one's self, one's research, and one's audience" since it "encourages writers to be frank about their strengths and shortcomings" (p. 842). Honesty and authenticity includes disclosing my personal experiences to the reader. As a current A&M – SA Team member, I have my own biases about what advisors currently do or should do to improve their working relations with students and peer advisors as well as my thoughts toward study abroad since I have participated in one.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Englander (2012) recommends interviewing between five and twenty participants to allow appreciation for variation of the phenomenon experienced. Through a gatekeeper, the administrator of the program, I was able to gain accessibility to the advisors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The gatekeeper and I both informed the participants that they could choose to participate or not to participate in the study. To ensure confidentiality, I did not collect identifying information from the participants. I



purposely selected six departmental, specifically High-Impact Practice (HIP) advisors in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Purposive sampling allows participants to be grouped according to preselected criteria which directly reflect the purpose of the study and are “information rich” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77; Patton, 2002, p. 230). The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University currently has 48 advisors who serve in one or another of the fourteen departments. These six HIP advisors from various departments have participated in a high-impact experience, such as study abroad, research, internship, or service learning, and have advised students in COALS. Five out of the six HIP Advisors were females. Four HIP Advisors have participated in a study abroad opportunity. It is hoped that these advisors are instrumental in promoting high impact practices for the college’s students due to their personal experiences with these activities. In this study, I have chosen to focus primarily on their perceptions and experiences with study abroad.

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, I conducted a flexible, in-depth, semi-structured interview with each participant, which was guided by the three research questions (Merriam, 2009). This format allowed me to respond to the situation at hand as well as understand the “emerging worldview of the respondent, and [be open] to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). If necessary, I asked additional questions to clarify or help gain an understanding of a participant’s answers. The interviews lasted from twenty to forty-five minutes depending on the participant’s responses. Each participant’s responses were typed, and then their transcript was sent to them within two days to allow them to verify their responses. No audio recordings were

conducted in this study in order to encourage openness, which is a recognized limitation of the study. I, as the human instrument, might have failed to capture all data accurately.

After all transcripts received confirmation for their edits and accuracy, data were highlighted or color-coded when information became repetitive. I used a process called *Horizontalization*, in which data is spread across for examination and is treated as having equal weight (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002), meaning, “all pieces of data have equal value at the initial data analysis stage” and are “organized into clusters or themes” (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). Four themes emerged and were utilized to develop a textural portrayal, a description of *what* was experienced, and then structural descriptions were provided to describe *how* the group (in whole) experienced the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The essence of the shared experiences of HIP Advisors who hold advising roles and have participated in a high-impact experience through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences as well as their perspectives on a student’s intent to study abroad in the college provided insight from the union of my textural and structural descriptions (Patton, 2002).

### **Establishment of Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were utilized to establish trustworthiness in this study. Credibility was established with member checks as well as a peer debriefing session, or the consultation of a neutral party (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was conducted to verify data analysis and to identify my personal bias. In addition, data was submitted to the gatekeeper to be analyzed and verified. Purposive sampling and the use of participant

quotes found throughout the study established transferability (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Audit trails, peer audits, and a reflexive journal were used to establish dependability and confirmability (Erlandson et. al, 1993). Before going through analysis, the data were coded (HP1-HP7) to ensure the confidentiality of the advisors. An audit trail was developed through the inclusion of individual data codes after each respected documented quotation. In portraying each respondent's voice, I made a strong effort to remain neutral and ensure accuracy. To be noted, I, as the human instrument, recognize that it is impossible to avoid all my biases/assumptions during this study (Merriam, 2009).

### **Results/Findings**

The purpose of this study was to capture the essence of the shared experiences of HIP Advisors who hold advising roles and have participated in a high-impact experience through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences as well as their perspectives on a student's intent to study abroad in the college. The themes developed through our conversations related to what factors influenced how they informed students about study abroad, what they perceived to be working, and how the college can help them better utilize tools available to promote study abroad. Four themes emerged which addressed the research questions: departmental culture, personal connection, mass communication, and generating awareness. These elements determined how students were educated about study abroad opportunities.

## **Departmental Culture**

Depending on the department, the student's major had an impact on what type of high-impact experience was promoted within the curriculum. The advisors' role in informing/advising about study abroad opportunities and ranking of high-impact experiences made a difference in how they approached students in looking for an opportunity for growth.

**Role in informing/advising.** When it comes to advising or informing students about study abroad opportunities, each advisor takes an approach to educate students "based on interest," (HP6) conveyed to them. If a field experience is required, then the advisors will tell them about opportunities such as study abroad. A majority of the advisors expressed that if a student displays interest such as, "I want to study abroad" (HP5) then they find out "how it would apply to their degree" (HP4). "First thing I do is find a spot in how/where the credit will fit in their degree" (HP5). Advisor HP3 takes the same approach.

Basically, I try to help them figure out what their credits will count for towards their degree program, whether they need an ICD [International and Cultural Diversity credit] or can obtain credits abroad for other degree requirements. I had one student do an independent study abroad, which the student was able to take more classes there. I was able to apply all the courses to the student's degree.

(HP3)

Advisors HP1 and HP6 believe it is their job to "make them aware" (HP1) and point out that it is a "cost-effective experience" (HP1) that they may "never get this opportunity

(or highly unlikely) to go abroad in the future” (HP6). In addition, advisor HP6 “believes departmental culture is a factor.” Overall, the advisors agree that they inform students based on their [students] interests/curiosity as well as play-by-ear when to bring up the topic.

**Ranking of importance.** Each advisor held a certain disposition on where study abroad ranked in importance compared to other high-impact experiences such as internships, research, capstone courses, fieldwork, and/or service learning. How each advisor ranked each experience determined what learning experience they felt their student/s needed to participate in. One advisor felt “experience is experience” (HP2) while another felt “it just depends on the student and career path” (HP5). In addition, the advisors agree it is important “students do at least one high-impact experience” (HP5). Although the advisors believe that any high-impact experience is all on the same playing field, they each held one or two high-impact experiences above the rest. “Internships are more important, especially, for students in my degree” (HP5). Similarly, HP3 stated, “study abroad is below research or internship opportunities due to the type of department we are.” Even though they are not required, it is necessary to “encourage experience” (HP3). In addition, “if a student is thinking about grad school, then research gives them an idea of what to expect” while “an internship counts as work experience, it’s like test driving a car” (HP3). Advisors HP1 and HP2 held different perspectives compared to the rest but nonetheless were in agreement. Advisor HP2 believes students should not limit their experiences since “the more you have, the better you will be” (HP2). Overall, this advisor believes “experience can override a degree, if you don’t go above and

beyond the minimum, you won't climb that ladder" (HP2). Advisor HP1 believes in expressing multiple options and tries to find what piques each individual's interest.

A degree does not guarantee a job. What they do at school is what makes them competitive for the job, if they are able to study abroad, internship, or whatever, we help set them up for college and the job market. As current leaders or citizens, being globally aware or culturally aware, it gains more experience. (HP1)

Advisor HP1 believes that all high-impact experiences "have their places in relevance because of barriers;" however, tries "not to make it just about study abroad" (HP1).

Advisor HP3 agrees that experience is important; however, strongly believes that, "study abroad is number one" (HP3).

### **Personal Connection**

The advisors truly believe the face-to-face contact expressing personal experiences has the largest impact when it comes to influencing students about study abroad. These testimonies provide a reality of the experience as well as reassurance. In addition, personal engagement provides a sense of trust and can be a quick tool in spreading word to others.

**Personal testimonies.** All of the advisors concur that personal testimony has the strongest impact when it comes to informing students since students are able to have "first-hand knowledge of what to expect" as well as to "find that connection" (HP1-HP6). Advisor HP1 expressed that when an individual "shared their experience, hearing the personal experiences with excitement about the specific program . . . it just drives people" (HP1). Advisor HP1 continued to say that,

How the presenter engages the students in the classroom can have a huge impact.

. . . During my and a professor's presentation, we each told about a real life anecdote and shared a story, where anyone can visualize themselves going abroad, by providing a visual story that we gave... Personal testimony all the way! My colleagues' testimonials got me excited about other programs and it helped that the experiences were personalized. (HP1)

In summary, all the advisors find personal testimonies to be useful in creating an image for students to see themselves participating in a study abroad. Advisor HP2 noted, "it helps when they provide pictures."

**Word-of-mouth.** Advisor HP5 claims there are many "reliable resources" available except "student word-of-mouth" since information can "be limiting based on the [student's] lack of knowledge of the program." He notes, however, many students participate in study abroad due to word-of-mouth of a friend telling a student, "you should come with me" (HP5). On the other hand, advisor HP2 finds faculty "word of mouth" is "reliable in relaying information."

**Planting the seed.** The advisors agree that they influence a student's decision to study abroad and hold the most influence versus all other individuals in a student's life (HP1, HP2, HP3, HP4, HP5, HP6). "I think that having an advisor or someone that plants the seed" (HP1) is one of the biggest factors that influence a student to study abroad. Advisor HP1 recalls,

I, personally, had the seeds planted by my advisor during freshman year in college. My advisor told me that I needed to spend one of my summers doing a

study abroad, preferably after my sophomore year, and participate in an internship the following summer after my junior year. I did not study abroad or intern in the order specified but participated in both experiences suggest by my advisor. (HP1)

In an effort to plant the seed, some advisors speak to incoming freshman during New Student Conferences (HP2, HP3) or classroom presentations for freshmen/sophomores (HP1) to educate students about study abroad opportunities, especially if they have a “field experience requirement” (HP2).

**Faculty influence.** Advisors believe the faculty who lead the study abroad programs definitely draw in students (HP1, HP2, HP3, HP4, HP5, HP6). Advisor HP2 states that the faculty-led professors in their department “does a good job, they always hit 20 students,” meaning “the presentations in classes are working” since they always make their quota of students signing up for their study abroad program. Advisor HP4 states that the “instructors, of the study abroad, go speak to our classes.” This advisor finds that,

Instructors are able to talk to students, first-hand about their experience. The instructor would have first-hand knowledge of the study abroad and what the students would be doing. (HP4).

“Faculty-led speaking about invitation influences students to go abroad” (HP1) while another advisor mentioned that she is “seeing more freshmen interested in study abroad since Dr. [name] runs two freshman courses” (HP6). Advisor HP5 claims that “when a program leader or previous participant speaks to a class (biggest recruiting tool for



program leaders),” students will “choose programs based on enthusiasm of the professor who leads it” (HP5).

**Family influence.** Half of the advisors found parents influence whether or not a student will study abroad (HP1, HP3, HP5). The advisors mentioned that parents fear for their child’s safety (HP1, HP5) and they must overcome this barrier by expressing to the parents that their child will be in a “controlled environment” (HP1). Advisor HP5 mentions, “When dealing with the parent/culture barrier, they talk about the safety of the region they are going” and has “talked to parents, and even had his own mom talk to the parents” (HP5). Basically, “personal connection” (HP5) will help overcome this barrier by expressing that “you’re going to ensure their safety” (HP5).

### **Mass Communication**

Advisors have different outlets when it comes to providing information to students about study abroad opportunities. A theme that emerged during my interviews with the HIP advisors was the reliability of “one-stop-shop” emails and websites when relaying such information to students.

**“One-stop-shop” e-mails.** When it comes to learning about new programs and relaying the information out to students, advisors find it highly effective to reach students through emails. All the advisors feel that that this method is the easiest when it comes to contacting a large number of students within their department. Advisor HP4 states, “I know, we, as a department send information out to the students by email” (HP4) which they “forward from the study abroad office, and [Coordinator for International Academic Programs]” (HP3, HP2, HP6), Advisor HP6 states she will “send

out on the listserv a notification about study abroad . . . that draws quite a bit of attention.” The advisors note that students are “bombarded” (HP1, HP6) with so many emails that to stand out, advisor HP6 notes “they use a flyer in the email to catch students’ attention” as well as, specifically, stating on “the subject head” (HP6) the department/major study abroad as a title. To help prevent students from being overloaded with emails, advisor HP1 takes a different approach.

I need to be careful and consolidate emails with study abroad, such as a “one-stop-shop” email. I limit how many emails I send to students since students receive so many emails, you cannot bombard them or they will not check any of the emails. (HP1)

In addition, advisor HP1 mentions that she “receives emails of different programs but will not look at those types of emails during pre-registration times,” She recommends that “the emails be sent out during off-peak times during the semester” (HP1). When it comes to forwarding emails from faculty members, advisor HP2 feels the email “lacks information and advisors are left to do things based on assumption.” Advisor HP2 suggests,

If faculty did a better job at shooting an email [a semester in advance] with specific information, such as noting when the study abroad is going to happen, the costs, and deadlines. . . Advisors would advertise if a program is struggling to meet their quota.” (HP2)

As long as emails are informative and consolidated, the advisors feel that they will remain reliable and effective when reaching out to students. Some of them would like the emails to be a “one-stop-shop” (HP1, HP2).

**Websites.** A majority of the advisors feel websites are the best place to find information and answers to any questions that students may have when being educated about a specific study abroad program (HP1, HP2, HP4, HP5, HP6). The advisors felt the TAMU study abroad website was their source when searching for programs and referencing students to review their options (HP1, HP2, HP5, HP6). Advisor HP4, however, states, “[using] our [department] website” on which they post information about their study abroad programs students are able to learn about major-specific programs. Advisors HP1 and HP2 prefer looking at the TAMU study abroad website to “look for certain options if a student needs help narrowing down a program” (HP1). Generally, the advisors found that the TAMU study abroad website was the best choice when referring students to learn about study abroad opportunities as much as educating themselves (HP1, HP2, HP5, HP6).

### **Generating Awareness**

When it comes to the college helping advisors better utilize tools in promoting study abroad, the advisors provided suggestions. In the interviews, the advisors identified two areas that needed improvement: peer advisors and updated websites.

**Peer advisors.** The college has a Mentor and Ambassador for Study Abroad (A&M – SA) Program, which students act as peer advisors to help advise students interested in studying abroad. A majority of the advisors are aware of the peer advisors

(HP1, HP2, HP5, HP6); however, they have little knowledge of what they do (HP1, HP2, HP3, HP4, HP5, HP6). The advisors believe that it would be helpful if the college educated the advisors about the peer advisors' knowledge and what they can offer students (HP1, HP2, HP3, HP4, HP5, HP6). Advisor HP6 mentions, "I do not interact with them," so that leaves "a lack of experience of knowing what they inform." Advisor HP1 knows the peer advisors have "office hours" (HP1), but "highly suggests that advisors get an update" (HP1). The advisors agree, however, that the "peer advisors give a realistic expectation to students of what they are going to do or what will really happen" (HP3). In addition, the advisors believe the peer advisors' "personal testimonies" (HP1, HP2, HP4, HP5, HP6) would help students. Advisor HP2 feels the role of a peer advisor should be:

Each peer advisor has a different experience, can present answers, and their sole responsibility should be, to know how to use the study abroad website and our personal website. Peer advisors should help students be proactive but don't guide them. They should use a laptop; show students how to use the study abroad website then help them narrow down programs to what they like. Ask them questions based on their interests, major, or when they graduate. Be a place to give general info. Help them out. (HP2)

Advisor HP3 noted that she would rather send students to peer advisors so that they could help them out. If more information were available, then she would present it to students. "If the peer advisors can narrow down a student's interest to a couple of programs, and present the credits available, it would possibly be convenient for me"

(HP3). The overall thought shared was that peer advisors “should provide personal testimony, such as finance, assurance, or help determining a program” (HP5), and it is up to the college to provide education to the advisors about these peer advisors.

**Updated websites.** Although a majority of the advisors did not have suggestions concerning updated websites, two advisors noted an improvement that was necessary for all the advisors. HP1 and HP2 mentioned they are in need of an updated list of study abroad programs specifically catered to the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Advisor HP1 states, “I want a new system to show AGLS study abroad programs, for example something condensed such as a one-stop website.” Advisor HP2 agreed that she wants a “one-stop shop” and that advisors “need a list of what they [study abroad programs] are and what it is” (HP2). In addition, she recalled, “a few years back, [name] gave a list of every study abroad that the college offers,” for which “an update is needed” (HP2).

### **Conclusion/Implications/Recommendations**

Due to globalization, international study is “the next step in the evolution of American higher education” to enable students to “compete in the global marketplace and ensure a successful international exchange for future generations to come [*sic*]” (Presley et al., 2010, p. 228). In order to internationalize a university, the advisors must support an internationalized curriculum (Moore et. al, 2011) since they hold the most influence over students’ academic careers (Lowenstein, 2005; Texas A&M Study Abroad Programs Office, 2012; Young-Jones et. al, 2013). The essence of the shared

lived experiences of HIP advisors found that study abroad was favorable compared to other high-impact experiences and is key to influencing a student's life choices.

Consistent with Presley et. al (2010) Theory of Planned Behavior, the three-predictor variables *attitude toward the behavior* (A), *subjective norm* (SN), and *perceived behavioral control* (PBC), “each amplified the prediction of student intention to participate in study abroad” (p. 242). The *attitude toward the behavior* (A) refers to the degree to which the person either has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior in question (Presley et al., 2010). The data reflected that advisors, faculty, and peers had a favorable perspective on a student's decision to study abroad. *Subjective norm* (SN), a social factor, refers to the perceived social pressure either to perform or not to perform the desired behavior (Presley et al., 2010). Departmental culture determined whether a student would participate or not in a study abroad. *Perceived behavioral control* (PBC), the ease or difficulty to perform a behavior, reflects past experiences along with predicted weaknesses and obstacles (Presley et al, 2010). Personal testimonies provided by faculty, advisors, or peers gave reassurance to students as well as provided ideals of what to expect during their experience. Presley et al. (2010) states “as a general rule, the more favorable the attitude and subjective norm with respect to behavior, and the greater the perceived behavioral control” (p. 233), the stronger an individual's intention to perform the behavior under consideration will be. If the department that the student is enrolled in maintains a favorable outlook on study abroad, students are more likely to participate in study abroad and thus the university is likely on the right track to becoming a top 20 university by the year 2020. The university has

greater potential to achieve that goal if student participation increases in a high impact learning experience (study abroad) through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

The first objective of this study was to determine the factors that influence how HIP Advisors inform students about study abroad opportunities through COALS. Departmental culture and ranking of the importance of high-impact experiences were factors that influenced how HIP advisors inform students about study abroad. Individuals tend to surround themselves with those who share the same viewpoints (Younes & Asay, 2003). It is recognized that the advisors' ethnic positioning and cultural knowledge may have an educational impact on their advising and relationships with students (Santoro & Major, 2012). Advisors did not go out of their way to advise or inform students about study abroad opportunities unless a student was interested in a program or their degree required a field experience. Depending on how each advisor ranked a high-impact experience reflected their department's views. A majority of the advisors felt any experience was beneficial, yet it depended on a student's interest and career path. Though study abroad was favored, it was not considered the most important experience due to the departments' views of its relevance to their curriculum; therefore, research is necessary to understand the culture of all fourteen departments in the college. It is imperative to discover why one science-related department finds a study abroad experience highly rewarding while another finds the experience is inadequate for their students. The same goes for social science-related departments.

The second objective of this study addressed what tools HIP Advisors perceived effective in promoting study abroad. Based on the findings, it was concluded that the

HIP Advisors perceived personal connection and mass communication to be effective tools in promoting study abroad in COALS. Using personal testimonies, word-of-mouth, planting the seed, faculty influence, and family influence had an effect on students' intent to participate in study abroad. The personal connection helped students identify personal strengths and interests (Young-Jones et. al, 2013). Personal connection provided a clear representation of the experience in question and reassurance while providing a sense of trust between students and their referent groups (Presley et. al, 2010).

Advisors used different methods to provide information to students about study abroad opportunities, and "one-stop-shop" emails and websites were rated as reliable. The advisors found that it was highly effective to reach students through emails; however, they noted that emails must be consolidated since students are "bombarded" (HP1, HP6) with many emails. To stand out, some advisors try to catch students' attention using a flyer in the email and/or stating in the subject head, specifically, department/major study abroad title. The advisors referred to the TAMU study abroad website or their departmental website (if available) when they had questions about programs and/or needed to answer questions about a particular program. In addition, they found the websites to be effective in educating students who had questions or needed help on deciding a study abroad program.

The findings provided a look at how each group held an influential role and what methods of communication were effective in relaying information. With that said, HIP advisors can have an influential role over students' intent to study abroad. The HIP



advisors believe what they are currently doing is effective but more research is needed to determine the validity of this information. There are, however, a small number of HIP advisors in the college, and the program needs to be promoted to departmental advisors each year. If the program is able to generate an advisor in each department and alternate between advisors within each department, more students will feel inclined to join when it comes to making a decision about participating in a high-impact experience.

The last objective of this study addressed how COALS can help HIP Advisors better utilize tools when it comes to promoting study abroad. The findings concluded that generating awareness of peer advisors and the creation of an updated website were areas that COALS needed to address. A majority of the HIP advisors are aware of the A&M – SA Team (HP1, HP2, HP5, HP6) but have little knowledge of what they do (HP1-HP6). The advisors believe that the peer advisors’ “personal testimonies” (HP1, HP2, HP4, HP5, HP6) would be helpful in informing students about their experiences abroad. It is recommended that the college educate the advisors about the peer advisors’ knowledge and what they can offer students. The college and A&M – SA Team need to provide updated information about the events held by the A&M – SA Team as well as their office hours. A working relationship needs to be established between the advisors and peer advisors since everyone must be on the same page. By working together, the advisors would have more time to work with students that know specifically what type of high-impact experience that they want to participate in. In addition, the advisors’ positive personal testimony about the A&M – SA Team would give merit to the organization, so more students would trust the advice given by the peer advisors.

Mentioned earlier, the creation of an updated website is recommended since a couple of advisors felt it was necessary to make improvements. A specific website catered to COALS study abroad programs would be beneficial. Providing a central channel consisting of every program available and what the program is about would save research time for advisors. A few changes can be beneficial and go a long way.

**A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION: THE ESSENCE OF THE LIVED  
EXPERIENCES OF AMBASSADORS AND MENTORS (PEER ADVISORS) IN  
THE COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND LIFE SCIENCES AT TEXAS A&M  
UNIVERSITY**

**Overview**

Globalization has revolutionized educational standards, and international study is the next step in higher education for Americans (Presley et al., 2010). The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University is below the university's standards for international experiences (Moore et al., 2011). Essentially, agricultural students need to be prepared to "compete in the global marketplace" to ensure their ability successfully to communicate with future, globalized generations (Presley et al., 2010, p. 228). This study examined peer advisors who have participated in a study abroad program through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and their perceptions on students' intent to study abroad through the college. To capture the essence of the shared experiences of peer advisors in the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad Program, a transcendental phenomenological study was conducted. This study found that educating peers, personal connections, mass communications, and generating awareness influenced how peer advisors learned about study abroad opportunities and informed students in the college.

## **Introduction**

With less than six years to go, Texas A&M University is inching closer to its goal of becoming a top 20 university. *Vision 2020: Creating a Culture of Excellence* pinpoints the importance of promoting diversity; an “educated person must appreciate and interact with people of all backgrounds” as well as “engage ideas that challenge his or her views” (Texas A&M University, 1998, p. 43). The university believes “global perspectives must be infused into all curricula” and that “programs for students and faculty that support travel [and] international study” will increase their rank as an “excellent university” (Texas A&M University, 1998, p. 45). According to Texas A&M University (1998, p. 45), “the best universities in America are world universities” that serve citizens of their state along with citizens of the world. To increase faculty and student participation in international experiences, in 2011 the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences created two specialized groups, the Ambassadors and Mentors (peer advisors) for Study Abroad (A&M – SA) Program and High-Impact Practice (HIP) Advisors. The Ambassadors and Mentors (peer advisors) for Study Abroad Program will be the focus of this article along with the contribution they have provided to students interested in a study abroad program.

## **Literature Review**

When challenged with facing a distinct culture versus a student’s ethnic background, students are able to confront their ethnocentric beliefs and behaviors (Younes & Asay, 2003). Introverted and extroverted learners were identified as two basic operational modes of learning (Jung, 1971). According to Jung (1971), an

extroverted learner learns from his surroundings as he continually interacts with the world and influences others while an individual who expands knowledge through independent reflection and works best through his own vision is an introverted learner. The [faculty] leader is responsible for providing introverted and extroverted learners a fruitful global, learning experience while abroad by sustaining a “delicate balance” between task and maintenance roles, that encourages “self-discovery”, openness to unaccustomed practices, and “the internalization of new perspectives” (Younes & Asay, 2003, p. 142). Study abroad experiences have provided students with clear career goals, increased cultural awareness, and increased self-efficacy, which students credit “prepared and knowledgeable leaders” (Hadis, 2005; Younes & Asay, 2003). Research determined that the higher global-mindedness a student has then their academic focus would increase, while higher global-mindedness would increase due to higher open-mindedness (Hadis, 2005). It should be noted, “open-mindedness has no direct effect on academic focusing” (Hadis, 2005, p. 68), meaning, a student’s openness to new experiences does not affect their academic pursuits.

Elliott (1985) sought to describe an active and successful peer program that provided freshman students with the necessary tools and support for “academic survival.” To serve as peer advisors, approximately 15 interested, selected upperclassmen participated in a semester-long training program to acquire skills essential to help their freshmen peers (Elliott, 1985). The student advisors’ duties included “arena registration, pre-registration, mid-semester checks, and individual advising sessions with freshmen” that averaged two hours per week (Elliott, 1985, p. 4).

Freshmen commented that the peer advisors in the advising program “were helpful, friendly, and showed a better understanding of their level of academic competence than faculty advisors” (p. 2). According to Elliott (1985), “the most effective and efficient advising program would provide a combination of faculty, peer, and professional advising” which “could maximize the use of appropriate resources by permitting three [faculty, peer, and professional] levels of intervention, with successive referral and backup resources” (p. 3). The *Program for Advising Students Successfully* (PASS) aimed to promote behaviors, or activities, which insured beginning students succeeded in their academic environment at the university (Elliott, 1985). Assisting beginning students to gain a “sense of control over the planning and decision making tasks” was the “most important developmental activity” necessary to become a successful college student (Elliott, 1985, p. 3). The program met its short-term goal of successful, passing grades for freshmen during their first year as well as increased confidence to declare a major (Elliott, 1985); however, the long-term goal of “promoting behaviors that insured student success” was still undetermined (Elliott, 1985, p. 7). Overall, PASS proved successful, the peer advisors gained a positive advising experience and the needs of entering freshmen were met (Elliott, 1985).

Diambra (2003) explored the success of peer advising [students delivering advising services] in the Human Service Program at The University of Tennessee. The article addressed barriers interfering with student progress, being sensitive to students’ unique needs, and working to effect change; “building students’ professional competence; and expanding the role of peer advisors in a manner consistent with the

culture, values, and practices of the University of Tennessee” (Diambra, 2003, p. 26). Diambra (2003) noted faculty members have limited time available to provide adequate advising support (from a student perspective) as well as empathizing with their students’ problems and pressures, which suggests the lack of devotion toward advising. Herein lies the integral role that peer advisors provide for their peers. “Literature suggests that the role of peer advisors can be multifaceted; arranged to assist faculty, programs, and students; and a significant learning experience for peer advisors” by which they may act as a “natural bridge to help span the gap between teaching, learning, and advising” (Diambra, 2003, p. 26). The Human Service Program (peer-advising program) was comprised of three junior or senior standing students during a semester. All were female. The peer advisors were able to provide support and service to their respective department as well as gain knowledge about their own academic pursuits (Diambra, 2003). Due to their personal experiences, the peers were “able to instinctively remain aware, sensitive, and empathic to student concerns,” and could provide greater influence compared to faculty advisors (Diambra, 2003, p. 27). Lastly, peers were able to address multicultural counseling issues due to their diverse backgrounds and interests (Diambra, 2003).

Stephanie Lo (2006) conducted a pilot study to determine how a peer advisor is perceived by study abroad offices across the United States as well as determining how those suggestions hold true. According to Lo (2006), Pimpa validated that peers can and do have a significant impact on the student’s choice to study abroad. Eighteen qualified respondents (director and advisor of a study abroad office) were surveyed by either

email or phone. *Peer advising* (peer education and/or peer counseling) in a study abroad context is defined by Lo (2013) as “a former study abroad student whose age is similar to other prospective students and whose role, through advising and outreach activities, is to serve as a resource for such students” (p. 183). A PA (peer advisor) is “regarded as a valuable supplement” because they can “help generate excitement about a particular program” and provide assistance in defining another student’s needs/goals or “confront personal problems or struggles” (Lo, 2006, p. 174). “PAs act as a bridge between the student and advisor” (Lo, 2006, p. 175). Personal characteristics deemed appealing included openness, responsibility, maturity, and a willingness to commit, while being friendly, enthusiastic, and having solid communication skills. PAs receive a large amount of power since they hold some of the same responsibilities as a regular full-time staff advisor, advising and assisting students with the study abroad process (Lo, 2006). PAs are involved with the student throughout the entire process: information/recruitment sessions, assistance/guidance in choosing a program, guidance through the application process and financial aid, and finally, pre-departure orientations. As expected, the study pointed out that more females are PAs compared to males due to females being more open to studying abroad (Institute of International Education, 2013; Lo, 2006).

To understand the motivations of students’ decision to study abroad as well as factors that might influence their intention to participate, Presley et al. (2010) used Azjen’s Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Presley et al. (2010) notes that “the next step in the evolution of American higher education” is international study since it will ensure students to compete in the global marketplace and provide a “successful



international exchange for future generations” (p. 228). Over 180 business students participated on an online survey “designed to collect” participants’ attitudes toward study abroad programs (Presley et al., 2010, p. 236). Compared to previous TPB research, the results proved to mirror prior outcomes that students’ attitudes/intentions to study abroad were influenced by students’ behavior belief and outcome evaluation (Presley et al., 2010). “The prediction of student intention to participate in study abroad” was “pre-determined by three-predictor variables, *attitude toward the behavior* (A), *subjective norm* (SN), and *perceived behavioral control* (PBC)” that amplified the behavior (Presley et al., 2010, p. 242). When making decisions, the three-predictor variables proved students look to their referent groups’ (parents and future employers) approval or disapproval as well as considering benefits that have an impact on their future career opportunities. As expected, money and financial assistance were a big concern for students. Research also found that females were more likely to consider study abroad and were open to new cultural experiences. Presley et al. (2010) affirms, compared to globally competitive students from other countries, literature is not available to encourage the idea that American students embrace the importance of study abroad.

Little research has focused on the individual influences that would assist in increasing agricultural student participation in an international experience. Global citizenship and growth of open-mindedness are traits gained through an international experience enabling students to work effectively in multinational teams throughout their careers (Briers, Shinn, & Nguyen, 2010; Crossman & Clarke, 2009; Hadis, 2005;

Santoro & Major, 2012; Younes & Asay, 2003). Internationalized peer advisors help internationalize a university. Studies show peer advisors provide a sense of connection, or universality, to students due to their similar experiences through unbiased relationships (Elliott, 1985). Peer advisors provide encouragement and personal testimonies, yet there is limited literature to provide examples of their influence on students' decision to study abroad.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This transcendental phenomenological study sought to establish the essence of the shared experiences of peer advisors in the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad (A&M – SA) Program who have participated in study abroad through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University and their perceptions on a student's intent to study abroad in the college. The study aligns with Priority Four, Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments, and Priority Five, Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs, of the National Research Agenda for the American Association for Agricultural Education (Doerfert, 2011). Three research questions guided this study:

1. What factors influence how peer advisors inform students about study abroad in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (COALS)?
2. What do peer advisors perceive to be effective tools in promoting study abroad in COALS?
3. How can COALS help peer advisors better utilize tools in promoting study abroad?

## Methods

Phenomenology was the design used to pursue the research questions in order to capture the essence of the shared experiences of peer advisors in the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad Program who have participated in study abroad through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, plus their perceptions on a student's intent to study abroad in the college. Merriam (2009) defines phenomenology as "a study of people's conscious experience" of their "everyday life and social action" (p. 25). Providing a shared lived experience among several individuals, "phenomenology is [used] to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon" developing a "description of the universal essence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 58).

Two types (hermeneutical and transcendental) of phenomenology exist (Creswell, 2007). Interested in discovering the essence of the shared experiences of peer advisors who have participated in a study abroad through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, I chose to utilize transcendental phenomenology. During the data analysis process, and referencing transcendental phenomenology, I narrowed information by establishing "significant statements or quotes" and combining statements into themes (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Through a process called *epoche*, I was required to put aside prior knowledge, experiences, judgments, and everyday notions to understand this phenomenon completely (Merriam, 2009). *Epoche* enables the researcher to examine a phenomenon from a new perspective through a process in which the researcher engages to "remove, or at least become aware of, prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions" (Patton, 2002, p. 485) while a transcendental perspective provides a "freshly perceived"

view of everything, “as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). To suspend my own beliefs, I utilized bracketing to negate previous knowledge and experiences (Patton, 2002). To describe the participants’ experiences to true form, bracketing, or putting aside prior thoughts or emotions regarding the phenomenon of interest, was beneficial in reducing bias (Merriam, 2009). As a peer advisor and student who participated in a study abroad, it was crucial for me to bracket out my experiences throughout the research process, especially since I was involved with the experiences shared with the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad. This research enabled the peer advisors’ story to be told by “capturing” and “being true” to the participants’ perspectives through reporting from an *emic*, or insider’s, perspective, which helped me to attain *epoché* (Patton, 2002).

### **Reflexivity**

A highly valued practice in qualitative research, self-reflexivity is favored in upholding integrity (Merriam, 2009). Self-questioning and self-understanding as well as pursuing an “ongoing examination of *what I know* and *how I know it*” is being reflexive (Patton, 2002, p. 65). According to Patton (2002), reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be aware and mindful of one’s “cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins” as well as the perspective and voices of the interviewees and “those to whom one reports” (p. 65). I recorded biases of the study using a reflexive journal to sustain the integrity of this research. To focus solely on the participants’ experiences, I bracketed out my own personal ideals, when detected.

One of the most celebrated practices due to “honesty and authenticity with one’s self, one’s research, and one’s audience” is self-reflexivity, according to Tracy (2010), since it “encourages writers to be frank about their strengths and shortcomings” (p. 842). I disclosed my personal experiences to the reader to safeguard honesty and authenticity. Given my own personal biases about the working relations with advisors, peer advisors, and students as a current Ambassador and Mentor (peer advisor) for the Study Abroad Program in COALS, my thoughts toward study abroad were noted as well since I participated in an international learning experience.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

To allow for variation of the phenomenon experienced, it is recommended to interview between five and twenty participants (Englander, 2012). I was able to gain access to the peer advisors through the administrator of the program, the gatekeeper (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To obtain access to a desired group of people, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest using gatekeepers, individuals in official or unofficial positions that can give researchers immediate contact. Participants had the option to participate or not to participate in this study, and the gatekeeper and I both assured the participants’ confidentiality by not collecting identifying information. Ten peer advisors, former or current, that served as Ambassadors and Mentors during the 2013-2014 school year were purposely chosen. Based on preselected criteria, I grouped participants to reflect directly the purpose of the study since the purposive sample would prove “information rich” (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). These peer advisors were Ambassadors and Mentors for the Study Abroad Program in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas

A&M University. Out of the ten peer advisors [7 females and 3 males] chosen, eight were current members while the other two were members during the fall 2013 semester. As expected, more females were peer advisors than males (Diambra, 2003; Lo, 2006). Each student came from one of the fourteen departments in the college, and had participated in a high-impact experience (such as study abroad, research, internship, or service learning) and advised students interested in participating in a COALS study abroad. Study abroad is the focus for this study, for which the peer advisors' perceptions and experiences toward the specified high-impact practice provided the topic of investigation.

Guided by the three research questions, I conducted a flexible, in-depth, semi-structured interview with each participant after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (Merriam, 2009). While trying to understand the "emerging worldview" of each respondent and learning "new ideas on the topic," I was able to respond to the situation at hand based on the arrangement of the interview (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). To clarify or help guide a participant's answers, I asked additional questions when needed. Depending on the participant's responses, interviews lasted twenty to forty-five minutes. I sent out transcripts to each participant for review and verification after each participant's responses were typed and grammatically edited. I, as the human instrument, may have failed to capture all data accurately since I did not audio record the interviews in order to encourage openness.

Data analysis followed the constant-comparative method (Merriam, 2009). When repetitive information occurred, I highlighted or color-coded the data after all transcripts

received confirmation for their edits and accuracy. Data was examined and treated as having equal weight through a process called *Horizontalization* (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) since “all pieces of data have equal value at the initial data analysis stage” and are later “organized into clusters or themes” (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). Textural portrayal, a description of *what* was experienced, developed after the emergence of four themes (Patton, 2002). Thereafter, the depiction of *how* the group experienced the phenomenon was provided through structural descriptions (Patton, 2002). The union of my textural and structural descriptions (Patton, 2002) gave light to the essence of the shared experiences of peer advisors who have participated in a study abroad through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, plus their perceptions on a student’s intent to study abroad in the college.

### **Establishing Trustworthiness**

To establish trustworthiness in this study, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were utilized. Member checks, the consultation of a neutral party (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and peer debriefing sessions established credibility as well as identified personal bias and verification of data analyzed. The gatekeeper analyzed and provided verification of data collected. I established transferability using purposive sampling and participants’ quotes discovered throughout the inquiries (Erlandson et. al, 1993). Dependability and confirmability were established through the implementation of audit trails, peer audits, and a reflexive journal (Erlandson et. al, 1993). To ensure the confidentiality of the peer advisors, I coded the peer advisors (PA1-PA10) before the analysis process. After each documented

quotation, individual data codes were included to develop an audit trail. During this study, as the human instrument, the possibility of failing to identify my personal biases/assumptions could have occurred (Merriam, 2009). A strong effort was made to stay neutral and safeguard accuracy, so that I could may represent each respondent's voice.

### **Results/Findings**

The purpose of this study was to capture the essence of the shared experiences of peer advisors who have participated in a study abroad through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, plus their perceptions on a student's intent to study abroad in the college. Through our conversations, four themes emerged: educating peers, personal connection, mass communication, and generating awareness, which addressed the factors that influenced how students informed their peers about study abroad, what methods are working, and how the college can help the peer advisors reach more students to promote study abroad.

#### **Educating Peers**

The peer advisors' role in informing/advising the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences' students and ranking of high-impact experiences guided how they approached students looking for an opportunity for growth through a study abroad opportunity. The peer advisors believe it is their duty to "educate students" (PA1-PA10) and "share personal experience/insight" (PA1-PA10).

**Role in informing/advising.** When dealing with students, the peer advisors believe it is important to "connect COALS students to study abroad resources" (PA8) as



well as “make students aware” (PA1-PA10) that “study abroad is very practical and not as difficult to do as some may think” (PA5).

We are a source of information to make sure that they know what they are getting into, in a way of what courses they will be taking or what different activities (excursions) they will be exposed to or get to see. We help them figure out things financially, where do you want to go, what courses can you get credit for, or what to expect. We show them the bigger picture of why to study abroad. (PA1) “*I’m a springboard for students’ ideas*, where I can listen to what their goals are and where they want to go. I can give them feedback on their options and answer questions from there” (PA9). “I think for some students who have already made up their minds to study abroad, that I’m meant to guide them with specific answers to questions regarding finances” (PA7).

All the peer advisors agreed that they felt it was important to let students know that “studying abroad is financially feasible” (PA5). They suggested use resources such as “scholarships, grants, loans, and attend workshops that we, as ambassadors, put on” (PA9) to combat the financial barrier. One peer advisor overcame the financial challenge on her own; she “wrote letters for sponsorship, received donations, and got monetary funding [\$1500] from the college” (PA7). She feels her story, lets students know they can do it. Many of the peer advisors note that students need to know the positives of study abroad, such as personal growth.

Explain the positives, and explaining about being open to different things. I, for one, am shy, or introverted. It was hard for me to come out of my shell but

afterwards, I felt like I could jump out of a plane. I was open to new things but it was hard for me to just be out there. (PA3)

The peer advisors agree that they inform students based on their personal experiences and what options they believe will benefit a student's academic and future career.

**Ranking of importance.** All the peer advisors maintained the disposition that study abroad ranked high compared to other high-impact experiences such as internships, research, and/or service learning. More than half of the peer advisors concurred study abroad was the most important high-impact experience (PA1-PA5, PA9), while a few others (PA6, PA8, PA10) felt study abroad ranked the same as internships. One peer advisor thought high-impact experiences “are all on the same level” and it depended “on the student and their career path/preference” (PA7). The student noted, “others who are good at research may succeed but may not have a good experience with study abroad” (PA7). Peer advisors also point out that there is a “different reward system” (PA6) for each student.

I think it ranks above every one of the learning experiences listed. At a graduate school interview, I recently had the interviewer ask me, specifically, about my study abroad experience more than anything else; and I have completed three internships, a capstone, and service learning trips. Study abroad helps you grow tremendously and grad schools and future employers see that. (PA2)

Many of the peer advisors expressed that “employers look at studying abroad as the next big thing in relation to internships” (PA9) since it requires “commitment” (PA9) and the ability to go “out of your comfort zone” (PA5, PA9).

I think that study abroad is the most important or in the top, for sure. You are not just learning about the course you're taking but you're learning about yourself, people, and a new environment. Maybe you'll learn a new language. You learn how open, organized you are, and how open you are to complete strangers. You are out of your comfort zone. I choose study abroad because "BOOM", it's everything right in front of you. Your life is completely different, such as diet, exercise, communication, the way you dress, etc. (PA1)

In summary, the peer advisors agree that "it really depends on your program and career path, whether what [type of] learning experience is most important, as some internships and educational programs are more job-pertinent than others" (PA5).

### **Personal Connection**

The peer advisors value face-to-face contact since it has the largest impact when expressing personal experiences to students interested in study abroad. The testimonies provide a picture of the experience and reassurance to go out on a learning adventure. Personal engagement is a quick tool to spread the word to others as well as provide a sense of trust.

**Faculty influence.** A majority of the peer advisors said faculty members who led specific programs had the most influence on their decision to study abroad (PA2-PA8, PA10). "The outreach that the faculty does to reach out to students, such as give out brochures, and are able to fill you in on everything that you need to know, or talk about their experiences" (PA3) provides clarity for students. The professor's enthusiasm helped the peer advisors feel "more prone to go on the trip" (PA4).

The professor that I went on the trip with during a classroom presentation influenced my decision. When I met up with him at a specific presentation for it, out of class, is when I really decided to go abroad because they were so excited and eager about the trip they were going on. (PA4)

One peer advisor said, “I only listened to my professor since he had firsthand experience in the country and had run the program,” (PA7) and she did not look to other resources. Sometimes, it took several classroom visits for the peer advisors to make a decision to study abroad. For example, one peer advisor mentioned, “he talked about study abroad at least five times in class, which the fifth time finally made an impression on me” (PA7).

I always thought I wanted to study abroad in Europe until I talked to Dr. [name] and Dr. [name] in the [name] department. They encouraged me to look into Namibia and Guatemala, [they] told me of the countries’ unique cultures, and how special it was to get to go to these places. In the end, this is why I wanted to go to Namibia and Guatemala – to tread somewhere unique, that no else gets to go. (PA8)

The peer advisors agree that professors, “especially those in one’s major/minor are extremely helpful in connecting students to study abroad opportunities” (PA8).

**Family influence.** This study found a majority of the peer advisors’ families had a significant influence over whether to participate or not in a study abroad (PA1-PA3, PA5, PA7-9). An example of family encouragement: “my sister influenced me since she studied abroad” (PA3) and “had gone on the Costa Rica trip” (PA3). A few of the peer advisors noted that they “grew up travelling a bit” (PA1, PA8), and some of their parents

“encouraged” (PA2) their child to go abroad when they expressed interest. Almost half of the peer advisors, however, claimed their parents did not want them to study abroad due to fear for their safety (PA1, PA5, PA7, PA9, PA10).

My mom did not want me to go the other side of the world. She freaked out because of security/safety (the unknown); she did not like that I went somewhere that she was not familiar with. We had an earthquake there and that freaked her out. She would have been more comfortable with me going to Europe. (PA1)

One of the peer advisors suggested, “Some people need to deal with their parents’ consent if it’s their first time out of the country since they worry about child safety” (PA5). Another peer advisor noted, “One of my good friends did not study abroad because his mother did not want him to go” (PA9). Overall, “family approval” (PA7) is a major factor since it can possibly be a barrier for some students when “parents refuse to let their son/daughter leave the country” (PA7). On the other hand, “some families don’t care of the amount to pay for some students to study abroad” (PA7).

**Peer influence.** Like family and faculty, the peer advisors’ friends, classmates, or peers had a significant influence on whether to participate in a study abroad (PA1, PA3-PA7, PA9, PA10). The majority of peer advisors all said, “peers who went abroad” (PA1, PA3-PA7, PA9, PA10) persuaded them to look into study abroad options. “I was influenced by peer students who have done study abroad” (PA10).

One of my best friends, he went on the program the semester before I did, and he just expressed how amazing it was, the food, culture, opportunity to learn a new

language, the new friends you make, and all the doors that open for you when you get back. (PA9)

One peer advisor mentioned that her roommates influenced her decision since one went abroad to Poland, and the other went to Germany. The same peer advisor also claimed, “[Name] influenced me; she basically told me to, ‘Go for it! even though I was unsure about finances” (PA1). Essentially, the peer advisors decided to study abroad because a peer “expressed what a great experience” (PA9) they had had, which provided “reassurance” (PA9) since the student was “able to relate” (PA6).

**Advisor influence.** Less than half of the peer advisors said that their academic advisors influenced their decision to participate abroad (PA5, PA6). One advisor said she learned about study abroad because of the “University’s push for studying abroad” (PA7). “The departmental advisor influenced my decision to study abroad since the course satisfied my degree requirements” (PA5). Interestingly, over half of the peer advisors said that their academic advisors had no influence over their decision to go abroad (PA2-4, PA7-9). The peer advisors did concur that once they were educated about their study abroad program and the credits received, they would go to their academic advisor to “confirm the information” (PA2, PA4, PA7, PA8). On the other hand, two peer advisors had a different experience. “I informed and researched credit information on my own” (PA3). “I knew about ICDs from NSC when I came to A&M but I didn’t understand it until [the Coordinator for International Academic Programs] explained it”; “she explained everything” (PA9).

## **Mass Communication**

During my conversations with the participants, the theme of mass communication related to resources emerged. The peer advisors provided different resources when it came to relaying information to students about study abroad opportunities. The peer advisors have found social media, poster/fliers, presentations, and emails as effective resources.

**Social media.** Half of the peer advisors found “social media” (PA1-3, PA6, PA9) to be an effective tool to reach students. One peer advisor mentioned that she learned about study abroad opportunities because of social media. “I liked the College of Ag Study Abroad page on Facebook, prior to joining the Ambassadors” (PA3). “Social media has been reliable in relaying this information” (PA1), such as the use of “Facebook pages, twitter, instagram, etc.” (PA1). One of the peer advisors, part of the Media Development Team [in the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad Program], excitedly said,

At the beginning of the semester, we thought we would take advantage of the social media websites the group has. What a better way to reach Millennials!

This semester, the social media team that I am a part of posts regularly. We try to advertise a specific trip each week. (PA2)

The peer advisors support social media as a viable resource to learn about new programs, promote study abroad programs, and inform students about different study abroad opportunities (PA1-3, PA6, PA 9).

**Posters/Fliers.** The majority found that posters and fliers were just as reliable as social media but considered it more effective since it reached a larger group of individuals (PA1, PA2, PA5-10). The Ambassadors and Mentors claimed that “posting information in the buildings on west campus” (PA2) such as “fliers” (PA2, PA5-7, PA10) around campus is what caught their eye about different study abroad programs. “Students learn about opportunities when they look for information or are in surroundings of where we put posters” (PA1). Two peer advisors had differing opinions on how they received information, yet they still supported the reliability of the posters/fliers. “The resources that I trusted were those handed to me by professors and those that were on Texas A&M letterhead or had the TAMU logo on them” (PA8). One peer advisor learned “from bulletin board postings” (PA9), and she attended “an advertised meeting about the program” (PA9) where she was “able to talk to the program advisor and other participants” (PA9). It seems that the students prefer hard copy advertising versus information online since the information received is official.

**Organization/Classroom presentations.** Almost all of the peer advisors agree that organization and classroom presentations were highly effective in relaying study abroad resources to peers (PA1-9). Students in the college learn about study abroad opportunities “through organizations, like us, and through presentations” (PA4) in classes.

I, we, provide classroom presentations, financial workshops, a cultural workshop, study abroad open house, present to student organizations, and office hours,



where we speak with students about options using our study abroad program binder and the study abroad website. (PA4)

“I was involved in the horticulture club and the students, who went abroad, gave a presentation which motivated me to go on the study abroad trip” (PA6). One ambassador learned “from organizations, such as the College of Ag & Life Sciences study abroad, since they give classroom presentations” (PA3); “they have a study abroad open house and a financial workshop” (PA3). On a personal level, one peer advisor mentions, “I really wasn’t aware of any other programs” until “joining the Ambassadors and Mentors team,” in which “I learned about all the study abroad programs” (PA2).

**Websites.** More than half of the participants used the TAMU Study Abroad website to learn information about programs (PA1-4, PA7, PA10). “Personally, I use the study abroad website a lot to check out the programs at specific times, that is how I learned about my second program that I went on” (PA4). “Sometimes, I would find information on the study abroad website about new programs” (PA3). The peer advisors agree, “Exactly what to do [about study abroad] was on the study abroad website” (PA2), which is “pretty interactive” (PA7). They feel the study abroad website is useful for students in learning about study abroad opportunities (PA1-4, PA7, PA10).

**Emails.** Less than half of the peer advisors felt emails were a reliable tool in reaching students (PA2, PA5, PA6, PA10). A couple mentioned they learned about opportunities from advisors (PA5, PA6). “Information sent from your advisor or professor through email” (PA6) is effective in informing about study abroad. “I think the emails that [the Coordinator for International Academic Programs] sends out are

reliable” (PA2). It seems emails can reach students but it can be limiting since most students are bombarded with emails daily.

### **Generating Awareness**

The peer advisors have a couple of suggestions for the college when it comes to generating more awareness about their group. The interviews identified two areas that needed improvement: working relations and marketing tools.

**Working relations.** More than half of the peer advisors did not know about the A&M – SA program, and they thought faculty and advisors should inform students about the group (PA1, PA3, PA4, PA6, PA7, PA9, PA10). Only a few of the peer advisors knew about the program from either a peer, faculty advisor, or their departmental advisor (PA2, PA5, PA8); however, all the peer advisors thought departmental advisors should inform students about the program and believed a working relationship with advisors would prove beneficial for the program (PA1-PA10). “I believe the advisors [peer and departmental] should work with one another while advising students” (PA10). The ambassadors felt that each person is “unique” (PA1, PA10) and that “everyone combined is better than two different views” (PA1) since they “complement each other in the advising process” (PA10). Yet, some of the peer advisors have a few reservations about the working relationship.

I think for sure that advisors and peer advisors would benefit working together.

However, if they [advisors] don’t tell us, or we are not on the same page where to get information, or where to go, then working together will not work. The advice

that students are receiving will then become pointless if we are working on two different pages. (PA2)

Some of the advisors mentioned they were worried about “competing” (PA6) and “not replicating efforts” (PA6) with advisors and felt that establishing a relationship was crucial since providing “time management” (PA7) “would save advisors a great deal of searching and asking” (PA8). One peer advisor said, “I don’t want students to think they can come to us thinking we are advisors when we are not” (PA7). One ambassador, however, had a different view of advisors.

The regular academic advisors really do not push study abroad. I suggested study abroad to my academic advisor, and she did not seem too intrigued with the conversation. Of course, if my academic advisor is not motivating, how am I supposed to feel? Personally, I would love a positive relationship between peer [advisors] and advisors, but from my experience, that has not been the case.

Academic advisors should be more open to suggestions made by students and be motivational. (PA3).

With that said, “Many advisors do not have the time to research about programs” (PA9). “By ambassadors working with advisors, we can keep them informed and increase the number of programs that they know about, so that we can increase participation in programs” (PA9). All the ambassadors agreed that participation would increase by working together with advisors (PA1-PA10).

**Marketing tools.** The majority felt that the A&M – SA program needed to make a better effort to inform students about their program and “higher-up people, such as

advisors and faculty leaders” would create more awareness (PA1-PA10). “I know there is a limited amount of peer advisors, but like I said, I feel like the program leaders should participate in more outreach” (PA3). Half of the advisors felt that “word of mouth from faculty and advisors” (PA1, PA4-PA7) is imperative since “others will be referenced to come see” (PA4) them and the “resources” (PA4) they provide. To “better market themselves” (PA6), the ambassadors said they would generate “more visibility” (PA6) through “events” (PA1, PA5, PA8, PA10) and talking to “more classrooms, advisors, and professors about what we do” (PA7).

One thing, we need is a debriefing meeting after study abroad, a depolarization, talk to students who just came back from study abroad when they are still fresh from their experience ... and ask them to come join our program to help others. (PA9)

The Ambassadors feel that they need to “generate awareness” (PA1-PA10) to achieve organizational growth and establish credibility for the A&M – SA program.

### **Conclusion/Implications/Recommendations**

Internationalized peer advisors can help internationalize a university; studies show peer advisors provide a sense of connection, or universality, to students due to their similar experiences through unbiased relationships (Elliott, 1985). In addition, peer advisors provide encouragement and personal testimonies to their peers about similar situations. This study provided influential information on how peer advisors and their peers make decisions about study abroad opportunities. This study about the essence of the shared lived experiences of the peer advisors found that study abroad was favorable

and held significant value in their eyes. Based on the findings, peers, faculty, and family have shown to be influential in students' life choices.

The “prediction of student intention to participate in a study abroad” grew due to the three-predictor variables *attitude toward the behavior* (A), *subjective norm* (SN), and *perceived behavioral control* (PBC), based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (Presley et al., 2010, p. 242). The degree to which the person either has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior in question is the *attitude toward the behavior* (A) (Presley et al., 2010). The data reflected the peer advisors had a favorable outlook on a student's choice to study abroad. The perceived social pressure either to perform or not to perform the desired behavior is *Subjective norm* (SN), or a social factor (Presley et al., 2010). A student's career choice, degree plan, and family influenced whether a student decided to participate in a study abroad. The ease or difficulty of performing a behavior, reflected from past experiences along with predicted weaknesses and obstacles, is *Perceived behavioral control* (PBC) (Presley et al., 2010). The peer advisors provided personal testimonies of how they overcame certain obstacles. They also provided reassurance and gave a detailed, mental image of what to expect. “As a general rule, the more favorable the attitude and subjective norm with respect to behavior, and the greater the perceived behavioral control,” the stronger the consideration with which an individual will perform the intended behavior (Presley et al., 2010, p. 233). Based on the establishment of the A&M – SA Team, the university's ambition to become a top 20 university by the year 2020 is on a good path. It is necessary for peer advisors to continue to reach out to students in the college. As long as the College of Agriculture

and Life Sciences continues to increase student participation in study abroad, they can achieve the university's goal.

This study addressed the factors in how peer advisors informed students in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences about study abroad. Educating peers and ranking of high-impact experiences influenced how members of the A&M-SA Team approached students looking for a study abroad opportunity. The peer advisors believe their duty is to “share personal experience/insight” (PA1-PA10) and “educate students” (PA1-PA10) about study abroad. Due to the peer advisors' personal experiences, they provided greater influence compared to faculty advisors since they were “able to instinctively remain aware, sensitive, and empathic to student concerns” (Diambra, 2003, p. 27). More than half of the peer advisors felt that study abroad was the most important high-impact experience while a few felt that internships were ranked at the same level. Overall, the peer advisors agreed that it depends on a student's degree and career path when it comes to determining what high-impact, learning experience is most important.

One of the objectives of this study was to determine what tools peer advisors perceived to be effective in promoting study abroad. Based on the findings, the A&M – SA Team perceived personal connection and mass communication as effective tools in promoting study abroad in COALS. The peer advisors noted that faculty, family, and peers had the greatest influence on their decision to participate in a study abroad experience while a small few said that their advisor influenced them. It should be noted that over half of the peer advisors revealed that their academic advisor had no influence

over their decision to participate in a study abroad (PA2-4, PA7-9), but they went to their advisor to confirm credits they would receive from the program chosen. Through their referent groups (Presley et. al, 2010), the peer advisors felt they were able to identify personal strengths and interests (Young-Jones et. al, 2013). The peer advisors said through an unbiased relationship that students are able to connect with them due to their similar experiences (Elliott, 1985). It is recommended that a workshop or meeting be created that educates and emphasizes the importance of globalization to academic advisors and faculty. In addition, the importance of study abroad opportunities and other high-impact experiences in every department in COALS should be stressed. Academic advisors and faculty need to comprehend the necessity and importance of global and cross-cultural competencies of U.S. students as the global community becomes interdependent (Zhai & Scheer, 2002).

The A&M – SA Team found social media, posters/fliers, classroom/organization presentations, and websites as effective resources when relaying information to students about study abroad opportunities. Peer advisors send emails but feel that they are limiting since many students do not check all their emails due to the high-volume that they receive. The Media Development group of the A&M – SA Team claimed that twitter, instagram, and their Facebook College of Ag. Study Abroad page were effective ways to reach Millennials. Posters/fliers were another resource that effectively reached COALS' students on west campus since students were able to see direct, hard copy advertising versus information received online. Students felt that the information was official and made it possible to attend a meeting at which they were able to talk to the

program advisor and other participants. Building on meetings, peer advisors felt that classroom/organization presentations were effective since students were able to hear personal experiences and ask questions directly. The presenter's enthusiasm made a big impact since it motivated a student to participate. Finally, peer advisors recommended using the TAMU study abroad website or departmental websites since they provide information about available programs. In addition, the TAMU study abroad website is able to provide information explaining step-by-step the study abroad process to students if they are unable to talk to a faculty member, advisor, or peer about participating.

Obviously, there is no issue for peer advisors when promoting study abroad to students; however, it is recommended to find out what departments that the peer advisors come from. This would assist with understanding department culture. It would be interesting to see if a number of peer advisors came from a specific department or if the mixture of the team is varied. If the peer advisor's department promotes study abroad programs, it would make sense as to why a peer advisor participated in a study abroad program. In addition, it should be studied if student participation in study abroad increased in a specific department that a peer advisor is from. Does this mean that the peer advisor is focusing their promoting efforts on their department, other departments, or both?

The last objective focused on how COALS can help peer advisors better utilize tools in promoting study abroad. The findings suggest that COALS helps generate awareness through two areas: working relations with advisors/faculty and marketing tools. More than half of the peer advisors did not know about the A&M – SA Team



(PA1, PA3, PA4, PA6, PA7, PA9, PA10), and they felt faculty and advisors failed at informing students about the program. All the peer advisors agree that the departmental advisors should inform students about the program and establish a working relationship with the A&M – SA Team (PA1-PA10). The benefits of working together would be “time management” (PA7), since they would be able to help advisors save a great deal of time searching, and asking questions about study abroad programs. Some peer advisors, however, are worried about competing and not replicating efforts with academic advisors. Based on the findings, it is recommended that the college provide aid to the peer advisors to generate more awareness through the creation of an informational meeting where peer advisors can educate advisors and faculty about their services.

The members of the A&M – SA Team feels they need to improve their outreach efforts by word-of-mouth through “higher-up people, such as advisors and faculty leaders” (PA1-PA10) since it would generate more awareness. The peer advisors feel that advisors and faculty leaders will help give the A&M – SA Team credibility. To market themselves more effectively, the peer advisors feel it would be beneficial to create more visibility by attending more events and talking to more classrooms, organizations, advisors, and faculty about their services. It is recommended that the A&M – SA Team analyze what methods for outreach are most effective and put more effort into those currently successful marketing tools. In addition, case studies are recommended to document the effectiveness of the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad Program after implementations of the suggestions for improvement is in effect.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **Summary/Conclusions**

The overall purpose of this study was to understand departmental advisors' and peer advisors' perceptions of a student's intent to study abroad in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University. This was accomplished using qualitative methods that resulted in two articles.

The first article applied the use of an interview protocol to capture High-Impact Practice (HIP) advisors' perceptions of the importance of high-impact experiences and students' intent to study abroad. The findings led to the conclusion that departmental culture, personal connections, and mass communication influenced a student's intent to participate in a global learning experience such as study abroad. It was further concluded that the college needs to assist the advisors when it comes to generating awareness of resources available to them. Although all the HIP advisors had participated in a high-impact experience, they each held a different position when it came to participating in a global learning experience such as study abroad. A majority of the advisors felt that any experience is important, and sometimes an experience depends on the student and his/her career path. In addition, the advisors agree it is important that "students do at least one high-impact experience" (HP5).

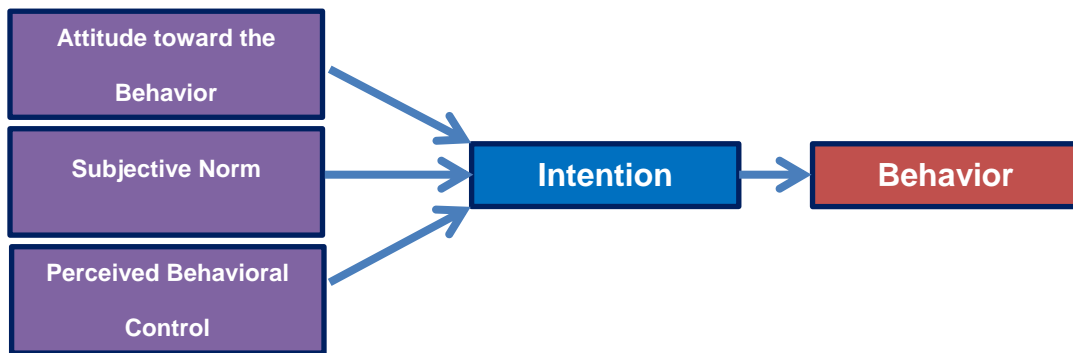
The second article was a transcendental phenomenology study that explored peer advisors' (in the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad [A&M – SA] Program) perceptions on their peers' intent to participate in a study abroad as well as what factors

influenced their decision to go abroad. The findings led to the conclusion that educating peers, personal connections, and mass communication were deciding factors that influenced their peers' choice to participate in a study abroad experience. It was concluded that the peer advisors found it necessary to develop a working relationship with advisors in the college as well as develop better marketing tools for outreach. The peer advisors agreed departmental advisors should inform students about the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad program (PA1-PA10). The ambassadors felt each person is "unique" (PA1, PA10) and that "everyone combined is better than two different views" (PA1) since they "complement each other in the advising process" (PA10). It was concluded the working relationship between the advisors and peer advisors would reach more students, bridging the gap between the three (Lo, 2006).

It was concluded that both studies mirror the findings of Azjen's Theory of Planned Behavior, a tool used to determine a student's intent to participate in a global learning experience. Figure 1 displays a pictorial representation of the three-predictor variables, *attitude toward the behavior* (A), *subjective norm* (SN), and *perceived behavioral control* (PBC), as it predicts a student's intent to study abroad (Presley et al., 2010).

*Attitude toward the behavior* (A) measures the behavior in question as favorable or unfavorable (Presley et al., 2010). *Subjective norm* (SN) measures the social pressure of whether an individual should perform or not perform the desired behavior (Presley et al., 2010). *Perceived behavioral control* (PBC) is the ease or difficulty of performing a behavior based on past experiences and/or obstacles (Presley et al, 2010). These three

ideal factors predict the student's intention to study abroad based on their referent groups' attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm (or social pressure) to perform the activity, and perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior (see Figure 1; Presley et. al, 2010).



*Figure 1.* Graphic depiction of the three-predictor variables adapted from the Theory of Planned Behavior Model (Presley et al., 2010) that determine a student's intention to participate in study abroad.

The data reflected that the faculty, advisors, and peer advisors hold a favorable position on a student's choice to study abroad, and showed that the student had support in participating in the specified high-impact experience. Depending on the departmental culture, a student's career choice, degree plan, and family values determined whether a student decided to participate in a study abroad. These factors could be considered barriers if the student does not have a positive social pressure to perform the desired behavior. Interestingly, the HIP advisors felt that advisors have great influence over

students while the peer advisors felt that advisors have little to no influence on a student's decision to participate in study abroad due to personal experiences with their advisors.

Personal testimonies given by faculty, advisors, or peers gave reassurance to students as well as provided ideals on how to overcome certain obstacles. These personal testimonies provided a detailed, mental image of what to expect and presented the ease or difficulty of the behavior at hand. Theory of Planned Behavior provides assistance in predicting agricultural students' behavior to participate in a high-impact experience in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

## **IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE**

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Considering the study as a whole, it can be inferred that peer advisors in the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad Program at Texas A&M University have the potential to bridge the gap between departmental advisors (including high-impact practice [HIP] advisors) and students in the college. There is a lack of awareness when it comes to promoting study abroad opportunities to agricultural students. Advisors and peer advisors are not fully aware of one another's duties and capabilities. It is recommended that the college provide assistance in educating advisors about the services and competencies of the Ambassadors and Mentors Study Abroad Program. Based on the population of both groups, more females participated in a study abroad as well as held a position as advisor or peer advisor. Other studies (Diambra, 2003; Lo, 2006) have also found that more females study abroad than males. There is an apparent gender gap. Research is necessary to understand why more females study abroad and participate as peer advisors than males. It is crucial to understand how to reach the male population since male peer advisors could be the answer to increasing male participation in a study abroad experience. If not, what motivating factors reach the male population to participate abroad? Could possible factors be challenges, thrill-seeking activities, or competition (The University of Texas at Austin, 2013)?

Departmental culture had a significant impact on whether advisors promoted study abroad opportunities to their students. It is essential to understand the culture of all fourteen departments in the college. The findings provided by the HIP advisors' responses revealed that one science-related department strongly supported study abroad while another in the same field felt that it was an unnecessary experience. It is imperative to discover why one department found a study abroad experience highly rewarding while another found it to be impractical in their field. With the small number of HIP advisors, it is recommended that the program be promoted to all departments and that the departments be informed about the opportunity to participate in a high-impact experience. In addition, it should be required that advisors (per department) alternate participation in the HIP program per year. Although this study focused on study abroad, it is crucial for all departments to promote a high-impact experience to students since the experience/s will promote growth and preparation for their future endeavors.

Each school year varies when it comes to analyzing the effectiveness of the A&M-SA Team since different students may be representing the team. Each peer advisor represents a specific department in the college. It is recommended to measure student participation of each peer advisors' respective department. Research should also focus on the promotional efforts of that department such as determining if advertising increased after a peer advisor joined the A&M-SA Team. The results over time should possibly produce information that will inform if increased participation is the result of the peer advisor. This information will provide confirmation if the A&M-SA program is effective and achieving its duties/goals.

Both studies analyzed whom students found to be influential in their decision to study abroad. Study one produced results that advisors have the most influence over students' intent to participate in a study abroad program while study two discovered that parents, faculty, and peers had the most influence. It is suggested for future research to analyze agricultural students' perceptions of advisors' influence on their intent to study abroad. Both quantitative and qualitative methods should be used, such as administering a survey and creating questions that explore students' knowledge of HIP Advisors. The research should examine if HIP Advisors have more influence versus departmental advisors. In addition, research should verify the influence of parents, faculty and peers.

Based on the findings, new and current methods for outreach should be created and/or updated for both the A&M – SA Team and HIP Advisors. Per the recommendation of advisors, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences needs to create an updated version of the current website to provide immediate access to all the study abroad programs offered through the college. A study should be conducted to see what resources students in the college use the most when it comes to being educated about study abroad opportunities. From those results, marketing tools should be developed and implemented.

Based on findings, it can be inferred that there is a disconnect between HIP Advisors and the A&M – SA Team. The HIP advisors and peer advisors believe they would benefit from a working relationship. I believe a global disconnect is the culprit for the different perspectives about studying abroad. It is noted that advisors and educators are not substantially diverse, and they are falling behind the global changes in this world



(Paus & Robinson, 2008). Advisors and “faculty members may not be well-informed about study abroad opportunities” or taught about the importance of learning abroad (Paus & Robinson, 2008). It is imperative for advisors to understand the importance of global learning. Per the suggestions of both groups, it is recommended to present information at one location to the advisors, such as the UAC (University Advisors and Counselors) Symposium. The advisors believe it would be effective for the Ambassadors and Mentors to introduce themselves and what services they provide each semester. It is recommended that the peer advisors attend the advisors’ yearly breakfast or luncheon meetings where they can speak with all the advisors at one place. This could help alleviate confusion or misunderstandings about the peer advisors. Future studies should be done to evaluate the effects of these changes.

It is hoped that these implemented changes will increase agricultural students’ participation in a study abroad or high-impact experience as well as find out if the services provided to the advisors are beneficial. With the implementation of the recommendations suggested, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences’ current level of involvement by students and faculty should increase (Moore et al., 2011). In turn, the college has a greater opportunity to correspond with the University’s ambition to be a top 20 University by 2020 (Moore et al., 2011).

### **Educational Importance**

It is important for universities continually to evolve when it comes to education and academic growth for students. The importance of reaching agricultural students to participate in a high-impact experience such as study abroad was highlighted in this

study. Faculty and advisors have a duty to educate students about different outlets available for personal, academic, and future career growth. Peer advisors, too, must relay the same message to students as their superiors. This study supported the variables of Theory of Planned Behavior when determining a student's intent to participate in a specified behavior (Presley et al., 2010).

This study aligned with Priority Four, Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments, and Priority Five, Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs, of the National Research Agenda for the American Association for Agricultural Education (Doerfert, 2011). Priority Four focuses on “learners of all agricultural education learning environments” being actively and emotionally engaged in learning, which will lead to “high levels of achievement, life career readiness, and professional success” (Doerfert, 2011). Faculty, advisors, and students are all learners and teachers. Through the HIP Advisor program, advisors have participated in some type of high-impact experience, in which they are able to educate students about their learned experience and stress the importance of participating in a high-impact experience. The members of the A&M – SA Team is able to relate with their peers by educating and supporting their peers to participate in a study abroad experience. This study provides data which “describes the quality and impact” of the HIP Advisor and A&M – SA programs as well as their outreach efforts (Doerfert, 2011). In addition, the study provides data that emphasizes the power of personal connection; and influential individuals were highly motivated, engaged, and enthusiastic about their experiences, which engaged students to be prospective participants in study abroad. Most students

returning from a global learning experience had some type of transformation such as greater self-confidence, improvement in international leadership skills, need to share personal experiences, and hunger for new experiences (Moore et. al, 2011; Lo, 2006; Zhai & Scheer, 2002). Most importantly, students were motivated and had a “higher than average curiosity and interest in academic matters” (Hadis, 2005, p. 57).

Priority Five focuses on “highly effective educational programs” that meet the “academic, career, and developmental needs of diverse learners in all settings and at all levels” (Doerfert, 2011). The HIP Advisor and A&M – SA programs are effective educational programs that support, emphasize, and promote the importance of high-impact experiences such as study abroad. These programs provide opportunities for COALS’ students to be prepared for the global marketplace. Participating in a global experience can teach students to acquire travelling, coping, and non-verbal communication skills (Zhai & Scheer, 2002). Study abroad is imperative to our future since our world is becoming globally interdependent (Zhai & Scheer, 2002). The results/findings in this study about the effectiveness of high-impact experience advising in COALS can be distributed to respective decision groups (Doerfert, 2011). Increasing high-impact experiences such as study abroad will prepare agricultural students to understand the dynamics of a globalized world and “how the change is going to affect a global agricultural industry” (Zhai & Scheer, 2002, p.28). This study sought to provide information helpful in achieving these goals through the understanding of HIP advisors’ and peer advisors’ perceptions on a student’s intent to study abroad in COALS.

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**APPENDIX A**

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR HIP ADVISORS**

## **A Qualitative Evaluation on the Impact of Advising in the Decision to Study Abroad: HIP Advisors**

### **Interview Protocol –**

*The protocol that follows includes open-ended questions and a number of areas to keep in mind. The purpose of these guiding questions is to enable individuals to be as informative as possible in their responses. The questions are neutral and encourage additional information, but do not suggest specific answers. Encouraging questions such as “Why?”, “Why not?”, “How is that?” or “In what ways?” will be used to support conversation. Follow-up questions will be employed to obtain further information and should touch on whatever the participant has already shared, thus these are only suggestions.*

### **Guide**

#### **Introduction:**

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ at Texas A&M University. This study is being conducted to better understand advisors’ perceptions on student participation in study abroad through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

To do this, as a graduate student in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education & Communication (ALEC) at Texas A&M University, I am conducting an in-depth evaluation of advisors’ perceptions to assess what methods are working (or not working) in promoting study abroad in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Thank you for taking the time to visit with me today. You were selected because you have participated in a high-impact learning activity such as study abroad and advise students. This interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes. As a reminder, all information shared will remain confidential. Your name will not be associated with any comments you make. Information shared will be reported in aggregate and your name will not be associated with the study.

#### **Guiding Questions:**

##### **Pre-disposition (Background, Attitudes, & Expectation of Participation)**

- Describe a student you know who personally changed from study abroad? How? Change in character?
- What do you believe are the factors that lead students to study abroad or begin to think about studying abroad?
- Who do you consider to influence a student’s decision to study abroad?
- What do you feel your role in in advising or informing students about study abroad?

##### **Awareness, Search, and Challenges**

- How do you think students in the College learn about study abroad opportunities? What resources do you observe are reliable in relaying this information? How do you learn about new programs?
- What are barriers (i.e. challenges students face) and benefits that you have observed for students who want to study abroad? How do students overcome these challenges or attain these benefits? What options do you present to them?
- Where can credit for study abroad count on a student’s degree plan?

##### **Evaluation**

- What resources would be helpful for you in informing students about study abroad? What do you currently do?
- Are you aware that the College of Ag Study Abroad Office has peer advisors who can help students with study abroad? If yes, have you sent students to them? If no, what are suggestions for them to generate more awareness?
- What do you think the role of peer advisors should be as far as mentoring for advising? How might these peer advisors better assist you and other students with study abroad information?
- Where does study abroad rank in importance in terms of a learning experience for students? I.e. Internships, Capstone Courses, Service Learning, etc.

##### **Conclusion:**

Thank you for sharing your thoughts, ideas, and experiences with me. My goal is to increase student participation in study abroad for current and future students that may be enrolled in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. I appreciate your participation. Again, your name will not be associated with the comments you have provided.

**APPENDIX B**

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PEER ADVISORS**

## **A Qualitative Evaluation on the Impact of Advising in the Decision to Study Abroad: Peer Advisors**

### **Interview Protocol –**

*The protocol that follows includes open-ended questions and a number of areas to keep in mind. The purpose of these guiding questions is to enable individuals to be as informative as possible in their responses. The questions are neutral and encourage additional information, but do not suggest specific answers. Encouraging questions such as “Why?”, “Why not?”, “How is that?” or “In what ways?” will be used to support conversation. Follow-up questions will be employed to obtain further information and should touch on whatever the participant has already shared, thus these are only suggestions.*

### **Guide**

#### **Introduction:**

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ at Texas A&M University. This study is being conducted to better understand advisors' perceptions on student participation in study abroad through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. To do this, as a graduate student in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education & Communication (ALEC) at Texas A&M University, I am conducting an in-depth evaluation of peer advisors' perceptions to assess what methods are working (or not working) in promoting study abroad in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Thank you for taking the time to visit with me today. You were selected because you have participated in a high-impact learning activity such as study abroad and peer advise students. This interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes. As a reminder, all information shared will remain confidential. Your name will not be associated with any comments you make. Information shared will be reported in aggregate and your name will not be associated with the study.

#### **Guiding Questions:**

##### **Pre-disposition (Background, Attitudes, & Expectation of Participation)**

- Can you describe how you personally changed or remained the same after your study abroad experience? How? Change in character?
- What do you believe are the factors that lead students to study abroad or begin to think about studying abroad?
- Who do you consider to influence a student's decision to study abroad? Who influenced you?
- What do you feel your role is in advising or informing students about study abroad?

##### **Awareness, Search, and Challenges**

- How do you think students in the College learn about study abroad opportunities? What resources do you observe are reliable in relaying this information? How do you learn about new programs?
- How did you learn about study abroad opportunities in the College? What resources do you believe were reliable and how did you learn about new programs?
- What are barriers (i.e. challenges students face) and benefits that you have observed for students who want to study abroad? How do students overcome these challenges or attain these benefits? What options do you present to them?
- What are barriers and benefits that you encountered when deciding to study abroad? How did you overcome these challenges or attain these benefits? What options were presented to you and by who?
- Where can credit for study abroad count on a student's degree plan? Where did credit count on your degree plan? Who informed you about this credit?

##### **Evaluation**

- What resources would be helpful for you in informing students about study abroad? What do you currently do?
- Before becoming an Ambassador and Mentor, were you aware that the College of Ag Study Abroad Office has peer advisors which can help students with study abroad? If yes, how did you learn about them? If no, what are suggestions for them to generate more awareness?
- What do you think the role of peer advisors should be as far as mentoring for advising? How would advisors and the ambassadors benefit or prevent from working with one another when it comes to advising students?
- Where does study abroad rank in importance in terms of a learning experience for students? I.e. Internships, Capstone Courses, Service Learning, etc.

**Conclusion:**

Thank you for sharing your thoughts, ideas, and experiences with me. My goal is to increase student participation in study abroad for current and future students that may be enrolled in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. I appreciate your participation. Again, your name will not be associated with the comments you have provided.