“We turned big rocks into little rocks”: A phenomenological study of the experience of college students who participated in a Spanish service-learning community program as freshmen

by

Angélique Courbou

B.A., Université Blaise Pascal, 1995
M.A., Kansas State University, 2002

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling and Student Affairs
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

Although becoming more common, research on first-year programs for college students that combine several high-impact practices (HIP) are assessed at the institutional level, but not always published in peer-reviewed journals (Andrade, 2007). Research is being conducted, albeit mostly quantitatively, regarding individual HIP (e.g., impact of freshmen seminars on retention, benefits of study abroad), but little research has been devoted to multi-HIP programs (e.g., study abroad + service learning, learning communities + freshmen seminar). Following a constructivist approach, a descriptive phenomenological study was conducted to uncover the essence of the experience of having participated in a multi-HIP program (integrating learning community, service learning and faculty-led study abroad) at a large Midwestern public four-year institution. Fourteen participants, purposefully sampled, recounted their experience, through in-depth interviews and written reflections. The analysis of the data revealed five different yet related themes, evolving in parallel throughout the program. The first two revolved around the sense of community, while the last three centered on what the participants learned about service learning, themselves, and college. Unique to this study was the richness of the data which allowed to more comprehensively explain how the sense of community was built throughout the program, using Szreter and Woolcock's (2004) concepts of *bonding, bridging* and *linking*, and McCabe's (2016a, 2016b) work on *friendship networks.* Furthermore, as this multi-HIP program offered two meaningful group service-learning projects spaced out throughout the program, the data collected enabled a comparison of each activity using Engeström (2001)'s Expended Activity Theory Model. As more programs integrate various HIPs, the results of this qualitative study, focused on *how* students experience such programs, in conjunction with other existing research

can assist institutions of higher education in evaluating current programs and designing new ones.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

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Dedication

To my mother and sister, and all the powerful women in my life who have paved the way for me to be where I am today.

À ma mère et ma sœur, et à toutes les femmes exceptionnelles dans ma vie qui m'ont inspiré à devenir la personne que je suis aujourd'hui.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In this introductory chapter, I briefly explain what high-impact practices are in higher education, the origin and reasoning behind their implementation, and their impact on college students, as these are at the core of the Spanish Service-Learning Community (SSLC) Program studied here. This chapter also identifies issues in current research regarding high-impact practices programs, describes the purpose of the current study, the questions addressed by this research, and the significance of this study for both higher education and the student learning experience. The chapter concludes with a description of the SSLC program, an explanation of the researcher's interest in this study, as well as definitions of relevant terms used in this study.

High-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs)

High-impact practices (HIPs), programmatic interventions designed to support students in college, are the results of decades of work and research. In 1994, Boyer remarked that the goal of higher education should be to educate students not only to prepare them for a career but also to help them become responsible citizens. By connecting theory to practice, Boyer argued that students can be ready to face life's challenges at the personal and global level. Between 2000 and 2006, the American Association for Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) established the Greater Expectation Initiative, which surveyed employers, asking them to evaluate recent graduates' skills and abilities to succeed in the global economy. They found that graduates were not well prepared with regards to global knowledge, self-direction, writing, critical thinking, and adaptability; all skills these employers deemed essential for promotion (Brownell & Swaner, 2010). The employers also commented that, while the lack of preparedness might not impede entry-level jobs, it could negatively affect promotion. To address these concerns, the AAC&U established four goals for liberal arts education:

- Fostering broad knowledge of human cultures and the natural world
- Strengthening intellectual and practical skills
- Deepening personal and social responsibility
- Practicing integrative and applied learning

With these goals in mind, the AAC&U, in conjunction with the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), established a list of essential student learning outcomes (SLOs) considered to be the most pragmatic and all-encompassing to enable students to succeed beyond college in their various roles: economic, societal, civic, as well as in their personal lives. These SLOs have been adopted in one form or another by almost all institutions of higher education in the United States, with a strong emphasis on "global and intercultural learning, technological sophistication, collaborative problem-solving, transferable skills, and real-world application -- civic and job-related" (Kuh, 2008, p. 3). These SLOs, as defined by Kuh, are:

- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world;
- Intellectual and practical skills (inquiry & analysis, critical & creative thinking, written & oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, teamwork & problem solving);
- Personal and social responsibility (civic knowledge & engagement, intercultural knowledge & competence, ethical reasoning & action, foundations & skills for lifelong learning)
- Integrative and applied learning (synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies)

With the AAC&U goals and Kuh's (2008) SLOs, the focus then turned to implementation. The AAC&U determined that ten practices, known as high-impact practices

(HIPs): first-year seminars, academic learning communities, writing-intensive courses, active and collaborative learning, undergraduate research, study abroad, service learning, internships, and capstone courses or experiences were conducive to the achievement of these goals and SLOs when done well (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kuh, 2008). In recent years, the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts conducted a study about the effects of participating in these HIPs and concluded that it positively impacted retention and graduation rates while encouraging the development of personal and social responsibility (Kuh 2008; NSSE 2015; Nelson Laird et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). These programs have also been shown to provide substantial academic benefits pertaining to the students' success and development (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Soria & Johnson, 2017). As such, HIPs contribute to a) the goals of liberal arts education as established by the AAC&U and b) address the concerns employers expressed in the survey conducted by the AAC&U between 2000 and 2006. According to several studies, HIPs promote critical thinking, personal and practical gains, engagement and involvement, collaborative learning, as well as greater student-faculty, student-student interaction (Astin et al., 2000; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Kilgo et al., 2015), as well as leadership and multicultural competence (Soria & Johnson, 2017). They also stimulate deeper learning, and foster a higher level of academic challenge for the students, while experiencing diversity, reflecting and integrating learning, connecting theory (classroom experience) to practice (real-world application), and providing an overall more supportive environment (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Butler & Christofili, 2014; Hart, 2015; Kuh, 2008, 2009; Tinto; 2012; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Of all ten HIPs identified by the AAC&U, learning communities, service learning, and study abroad are of particular interest to this research, as they are the three components of the

Spanish Service-Learning Community (SSLC) program studied. Learning communities are programs that link together a minimum of two courses with a common theme to promote transformative learning through the development of a community (Astin, 1985; Tinto, 1997). Service-learning programs endeavor to connect the academic experience of students with real world applications through volunteerism domestically or abroad (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Study abroad refer to stays of various lengths in a host country while participating in activities for academic credit, either individually, in groups or faculty led (Education abroad glossary, 2011). The following sections present current research on HIPs (specifically learning communities, service learning, and study abroad), as well as the purpose and significance of this study.

Statement of the Problem

Research about each of the three HIPs relevant to this study – learning communities, service learning, and study abroad – shows a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Brownell & Swaner, 2009, 2010; Butler & Christofili, 2014; Hart, 2015; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Soria & Johnson, 2017; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Furthermore, preliminary research on multi-HIP programs, an integrated approach combining various elements of HIPs (e.g., learning communities + first-year seminar, service learning + study abroad) – show greater positive outcomes than any single approach in isolation (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh, 2008, 2009). However, most of the research regarding individual or multi-HIP has aligned with a positivist paradigm, which assumes patterns of cause and effect that can be predicted and controlled. Thus, the research tends to be more quantitative in nature, with a focus on identifying outcomes. Through extensive research on the effects of college on student development, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) explained that much research is

conducted regarding the effects and outcomes of institutions of higher education interventions, but few examine *how* or *why* a program produces the effects it does. Regarding HIPs in particular, Clayton-Pedersen and Finley (2010) further stressed the importance of understanding the experience of the students to ensure that these interventions are effective. Finley and McNair (2013) recommended further qualitative research be conducted on HIPs to better understand the students' involvement with their learning environments and collect valuable information that would assist administrators and faculty to improve student success. Quantitative research, only shows a facet of these programs and does not provide enough insight on other aspects such as the personal experience of the participants. This, in addition to quantitative research would yield an all-encompassing understanding of HIPs, to properly evaluate and/or modify current programs and create new ones.

Purpose of this Study

This study begins to fill the gap in the literature as identified by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) as well as Clayton-Pedersen and Finley (2010), or Kilgo et al. (2015) who noted that more research was needed to go beyond the anecdotal to assert the benefits for student learning. More specifically, there is a need for further research on the *how* and *why* students are affected by programmatic interventions, such as HIPs, and in particular multi-HIP programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to discover the essence of the shared experience, i.e., the meaning the students made of the experience of having participated in a multi-HIP program their freshman year, through their partaking in a Spanish Service-Learning Community (SSLC), a program combining three HIPs: learning community, service learning, and faculty-led study abroad. According to Creswell (2013), understanding the common experiences of students can prove invaluable to faculty and policymakers. In other words, understanding the meaning the

students make of the experience, not simply the quantitative impact of these practices, can help confirm or contradict the intended goals of these programs and shed light on how to improve them. They can assist administrators and faculty better understand the less quantifiable, yet equally important effect of these programs, to refine and improve them according to students' needs, address the pre-defined goals of these programs, and possibly uncover new goals that might not have been identified through other methods. Thus, knowing how the students themselves view their experience and how they make meaning of it will add to our understanding of how these programs work. This study will contribute to current research designed to assist faculty and administrators in creating similar programs. The goal was not to find an objective truth about the SSLC program; but rather what the experience was and what it meant to the participants, which is reflected in the research question presented next.

Research Question

In order to uncover the meaning of the experience of having participated in the SSLC program, a specifically designed multi-HIP freshmen program, a descriptive phenomenological approach (detailed in Chapter 3) embedded in a constructivist theoretical framework was selected. The following research question was the focus of this study: What is the essence of the shared experience of former students who participated in a Spanish Service-Learning Community program in their freshman year?

Significance of the Study

Not all students experience college the same way; some thrive while others simply survive. Early research on college student success related to access, retention, graduation, or GPA do not capture the "students' cumulative educational achievement across multiple levels of the college curriculum" (Kuh, 2008, p. 2). Nor do they show whether the learning acquired is of

societal value or a source of empowerment for the student. Student success encompasses many definitions and many influences, for which both the institutions and the students are responsible. Several factors are known to influence student success. Research shows that among other aspects, student success is clearly impacted by involvement, which is associated mainly with the student, with the understanding that it can be influenced by the environment (Astin, 1984; Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Mayhew et al., 2016; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Another influential factor is academic integration, which represents the degree to which the relationship between the institution and the students is reciprocal (Tinto, 1997). The institution needs to provide ways for the student to fully integrate into the school through formal and informal interactions with faculty, staff, and peers as well as academic and extracurricular activities (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Mayhew et al., 2016; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The student needs to fully participate in these to reap the benefits. Engagement and engaged learning are equally important. Creating an environment in which the students can connect material learned to real world experience and for the students to be interested in what they are learning is crucial to their success (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Mayhew et al., 2016; Schreiner, 2010; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Finally, academic determination – the motivation to succeed; as well as a positive perspective – being proactive in their lives; diverse citizenship – interest and respect of others; and social connectedness – relationships with others, are also contributing factors to student success (Schreiner, 2010).

Therefore, in order to measure student success, it is important to look beyond the quantitative outcomes of any programmatic intervention, and learn about the students' experience, in their own words. The Spanish Service Learning Program (SSLC, described in the following section) reflects some of the factors influential in student success listed above, by integrating multiple aspects of HIPs: learning community, service learning, and faculty-led study

abroad, which include active and global engagement, involvement, integration, connectedness through community building, as well as application of learning. The study of this multi-HIP program may provide a deeper understanding of integrated approaches from the students' point of view. In doing so, it will offer more information to faculty and administrators to evaluate these programs and ensure that the students' experience matches the intended goal and purpose of the program itself, as well as the SLOs established by the AAC&U and LEAP (see section titled "High-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs)" for details, earlier in this chapter). As we learn more about how students experience these programs, we may be able to evaluate them from a different yet complementary perspective to ultimately allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of these programs. Information about students' experiences can provide valuable insights into the best way to structure future opportunities.

Spanish Service-Learning Community Program (SSLC)

The Spanish Service-Learning Community (SSLC) was a multi-HIP freshman program on par with the AAC&U's definition of HIPs, created in 2012 at a large Midwestern public four-year institution. The SSLC combined a learning community, domestic and international service learning, and faculty-led study abroad. Through this specifically designed learning community, a small group of 10 to 16 freshmen participated in campus social and educational activities related to common interests, and was divided into two parts: fall semester and winter intersession. The fall semester provided common courses, which served in part as preparation for the service learning/faculty-led study abroad during winter intersession, when the group traveled to Costa Rica with a faculty member.

During the fall semester, the students were part of a learning community comprised of two courses linked together by a third:

- a fourth-semester level Spanish course comprised of only SSLC participants;
- an Introduction to Leadership course embedded in a larger lecture course which grouped SSLC participants together for academic or community service group projects and utilized the support of two Learning Assistants (peer undergraduate students, who had previously taken this course); and
- a linking course: Connection Hour, dedicated to discussing the connection between leadership and Spanish, involving participation in service-learning activities in the local community, and preparing the students for the service-learning abroad component of the program during the winter session. This was a weekly formal meeting with a Spanish faculty member, and a Spanish Learning Assistant (SLA). The SLA was a peer undergraduate student, senior who had participated in this or a similar program, and/or had extensive experience with the language and study abroad.

The second part of the SSLC program was an 11-day faculty-led service-learning study abroad immersion in Costa Rica. The group traveled with the Spanish faculty member (from the fourth-semester level Spanish course), and the SLA (from the Connection Hour), and worked on a service project identified by the local community (e.g., painting a school, building a playground). While abroad, the students lived with host families and attended a few Spanish classes focused on language use and Costa Rican culture and history. They wrote short daily reflections incorporating vocabulary learned and descriptions of their experiences. They also participated in a few excursions (e.g., San José, a coffee plant). Furthermore, one or two local professors accompanied the group on daytrips and were generally present at the work site. At the work site, the group needed to communicate with local community members in Spanish and

organize themselves to complete the assigned project, all while resolving issues of language, group dynamic, and service project completion.

As part of the program, at the beginning and end of the fall semester, and upon return from Costa Rica, students were asked to reflect on the experience through an online survey, as well as a debriefing session post-return. These focused on how they defined service learning, how they felt as students at the institutions, their goals for participating in the program, their concerns about the program, and the experience(s) that made the greatest impression on them.

The SSLC Program and HIPs

The objective of the SSLC program was to foster an active learning environment and global learning. This was achieved through hands-on learning, group discussions, problem solving, inquiry-based learning, and activities encouraging and developing various skills such as critical thinking, communication, community building. Furthermore, the SSLC encouraged collaboration and interaction with peers and faculty, as well as the application of learning to empower students to succeed at the university. Several studies conducted at the institution have also shown that participating in freshmen communities in general increases retention and leads to more timely graduation as well as to higher GPAs.

The SSLC program studied in this research responds to the essential goals and SLOs identified by the AAC&U and LEAP by integrating various HIPs specifically designed for freshmen, such as learning community, service learning, and faculty-led study abroad. By combining Spanish, Leadership Studies, and domestic service-learning culminating in a community service project abroad, the program aimed to foster linguistic development, personal development, service and leadership skills, provide a global learning experience, as well as

encourage involvement and engagement. The remainder of this chapter explains the researcher's interest in the topic and provides definitions to key terms used in this study.

Researcher's Interest in the Topic

My personal interest in this research stems from my experiences as both a student and a teacher. Having arrived in the U.S. as an international student years ago, I benefited from study abroad in terms of personal growth, understanding of global issues, further developing my own critical thinking skills, self-direction and self-reliance. As a faculty member and advisor, I have wholeheartedly supported and encouraged students to broaden their horizon through study abroad. However, I had little to no knowledge or experience of first-year programs.

Nevertheless, I had observed, in my capacity as a faculty and advisor that these programs seemed to benefit the students. When the opportunity arose for me to lead the SSLC, I gratefully accepted. This allowed me to witness firsthand the experiences of the students. I then became more interested in how the students themselves perceived these experiences, rather than simply relying on my own observations. I believe that such programs positively affect students; however, I also believe that we need to listen to students' perceptions of their experiences in their own voices. This would enable us as faculty, staff and administrators to develop similar programs and/or adapt the current ones to provide greater benefits to the students for personal growth, self-direction, self-confidence and reliance as well as to better prepare them for engaging in the global economy.

Definitions of Terms

- High-Impact Practices (HIPs): "High-Impact Practices (HIPs) represent enriching educational experiences that can be life-changing. They typically demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful

interactions with faculty and other students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback" (NSSE, 2015, p. 1)

- Spanish Service-Learning Community (SSLC): Title given to the program studied in this research, which combined domestic and international service learning with learning community and faculty-led study abroad.
- Multi-HIP: HIP programs integrating two or more high-impact practice programs, also known as "integrated approach" (Brownell & Swaner, 2010).
- Service Learning: "Service-Learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Service learning can be international (in another country) or domestic (within the United States).
- Learning Communities: Learning Communities are "integrated, comprehensive programs in which transformative learning takes place through a community process as students develop professional, civic, and ethical responsibilities" (Brower & Dettinger, 1998, p. 21).
- Study Abroad: "An education abroad enrollment option designed to result in academic credit" (Education abroad glossary, 2011, p. 13). The length of such programs may vary from short term (less than 8 weeks) to long term (an academic year).
- Faculty-Led Study Abroad: "A study abroad program directed by a faculty member (or members) from the home campus who accompanies students abroad. Usually, though not always, brief in duration" (Education abroad glossary, 2011, p. 14).

Summary

In 2016, the NSSE published a report on high-impact practices indicating that over 50% of college and university students participate in one or more HIPs. These types of programmatic interventions are challenging, as they are demanding in both time and effort. HIPs endeavor to foster student' learning outside the classroom, provide purposeful interaction between students and faculty, promote a diverse and collaborating environment, while dispensing substantial and frequent feedback (NSSE, 2016). Much of the research on these practices indicate that these experiences are life-changing for the students (Kuh, 2008). They foster development in several domains such as critical thinking, stimulate deeper learning, promote personal and practical gains, provide a higher level of academic challenge, and better integrate practice and theory (Astin et al., 2000; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Butler & Christofili, 2014; Hart, 2015; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014).

The objective of these practices is to enhance the academic experience of the students and foster their success, so that they can flourish in their future life and careers. To ensure that these interventions are effective, they need to be evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively (Finley & McNair, 2013; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In particular, research focused on the students' own perspectives, their own understanding of the *what* aspect of these programs, as well as *how* these programs are beneficial, is needed (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Clayton-Pedersen & Finley, 2010; Finley & McNair, 2013; Kilgo et al., 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature surrounding the topic of HIPs, focusing on the three relevant to the program investigated in this research: learning communities, study abroad and service learning. That chapter also briefly describes multi-HIP programs, which are

programmatic interventions combining two or more HIPs, and concludes with a brief overview of the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter 3 focuses on a description of the methodology and procedures used in this research. Included in that chapter is detailed information regarding participant selection, data collection and analysis methods, and a description of the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Chapter 4 reports the results of the study through the exploration of themes encountered via the descriptive analysis of the data collected. Finally, Chapter 5 aims at offering a reflection on the research, a discussion of its implications to current research as well as suggestions for the future.

Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

This research attempted to uncover the experience of students who participated in a first-year program combining three high-impact practices (HIPs): learning community, service learning, and study abroad. The goal was to discover what that experience was from the participants' own perspectives and remain as faithful to their reconstruction of the experience as possible, therefore descriptive phenomenology was deemed the most adequate research approach (further explained in Chapter 3), which affected the scope of the review of literature, as explained below.

Merriam (2002) and other researchers classify qualitative research as inductive. Information flows from the data collected rather than unilaterally from theory or previous research. In essence, the goal is to make sense of the data and context without interference from preconceptions of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990). Bogdan and Taylor (1975), Creswell (2013) and Moustakas (1994) cautioned researchers of qualitative method regarding prior knowledge collected ahead of conducting research. When discussing descriptive phenomenology, Giorgi (2009) explained that "the attitude of description is one that only responds to what can be accounted for in the description itself" and that descriptive phenomenology therefore does not "require the taking up of nongiven factor that may be arbitrary, such as an assumption, hypothesis, or theory" (p. 127-128). Creswell (2013) further indicated that the literature may be fully reviewed, reviewed later as the analysis begins to take place, or succinctly presented to show the importance of the study. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) added that beginning research with assumptions might inadvertently create both preconceptions and misconceptions over the object of the research. Entering into qualitative research with little review of the literature, beyond the

basics needed to justify the study, allows the researcher to be receptive to the participants, thus enabling them to recount their stories free of expectations (Creswell, 2013).

In the spirit of limiting the influence of theory and other assumptions on the analysis of the data collected, this chapter presents a brief literature review of what HIPs are in general and research on the three practices relevant to this study: learning communities, study abroad, and service learning. This chapter also includes an overview of current information and research on multi-HIP programs, programs combining two or more HIPs. Finally, a basic theoretical framework centered on student development theories related to involvement, is presented.

Overview of High-Impact Educational Practices

According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2015), HIPs, as defined in higher education, are programmatic interventions designed to enhance the academic experience of the students. As explained in Chapter 1, ten of these practices have been identified and studied by the American Association for Colleges and Universities (AAC&U): first-year seminars, academic learning communities, writing-intensive courses, active and collaborative learning, undergraduate research, study abroad, service learning, internships, and capstone courses/experiences.

Council for the Advancement of Standards

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in higher education (CAS) and the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), established standards regarding the learning outcomes of HIPs. These stem from the AAC&U's established four goals for liberal arts education, i.e., fostering broad knowledge of human cultures and the natural world, strengthening intellectual and practical skills, deepening personal and social responsibility, and practicing integrative and applied learning (see introduction chapter for details). In 2015, CAS

updated the series of student learning and development outcomes to enrich programs and services offered by higher education and to better assess and reflect the AAC&U's goals for liberal arts education. These standards fall into six distinct domains with some overlapping characteristics (CAS, 2015):

1) knowledge acquisition, construction, integration and application: the ability of a student to understand and connect knowledge from a range of disciplines, ideas and experiences, construct knowledge and relate it to daily life;

2) cognitive complexity: centers on critical and reflective thinking as well as effective reasoning and creativity;

3) intrapersonal development: refers to the "realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-respect, identity development, commitment to ethics and integrity, and spiritual awareness" (CAS, 2015);

4) interpersonal competence: the development of meaningful relationships, interdependence, collaboration, and effective leadership;

5) humanitarianism and civic engagement: the "understanding and appreciation of cultural and human differences, global perspective, social responsibility, and a sense of civic responsibility" (CAS, 2015);

6) practical competence: "pursuing goals, communicating effectively, technological competence, managing personal affairs, managing career development, demonstrating professionalism, maintaining health and wellness, and living a purposeful and satisfying life" (CAS, 2015).

Research on HIP

The AAC&U found that HIP practices enhance student development and learning through greater interaction with peers and faculty, and the creation of a more supportive environment (Brownell & Swaner 2009, 2010; Butler & Christofili, 2014; Hart, 2015; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh, 2008; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Tinto, 2012). Furthermore, although each of these practices is different, they all share common goals. Collaboration and interaction are key words used in most of the research about HIPs (Astin et al., 2000; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). First-year seminars and experiences, for example, allow students to take classes in small groups thus enabling greater interaction with faculty and among each other. For their part, learning communities foster "integration of learning across courses" and encourage students to consider what matters beyond the classroom by taking two or more classes as a group, while closely working with faculty and each other (Kuh, 2008). Service learning and community-based learning focus on "field-based 'experiential learning' with community partners" giving students firsthand experience with issues discussed in the curriculum and presenting them with an opportunity to analyze and problem solve collaboratively and directly within the community (Kuh, 2008).

Research also shows that students who are actively engaged in such programs have a higher degree of persistence to completion (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Keup (2005) found a positive relationship between first-year HIPs, in particular first-year seminars, service learning, and learning communities, and second year enrollment. She noted that, while service learning is a better predictor of subsequent enrollment than first-year seminars and learning communities alone, all seem to facilitate student-faculty interaction, and increase academic engagement and performance. Other studies

such as Kilgo et al., 2015, have confirmed that HIPs promote critical thinking and overall student learning, thus promoting student success. According to several studies, HIPs promote critical thinking, personal and practical gains, engagement and involvement, collaborative learning, greater student-faculty and student-student interaction (Astin et al., 2000; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Butler & Christofili, 2014; Hart, 2015; Kilgo et al., 2015). HIPs have also been shown to promote deeper learning through a higher level of academic challenge, while students experience diversity, and opportunities to reflect and integrate learning in part by connecting theory to practice, all the while being in a more supportive environment (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Butler & Christofili, 2014; Hart, 2015; Kuh, 2008, 2009; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Overall, research suggests that HIPs are beneficial and serve as a contributing factor to student development and student success. The following three sections of this chapter will detail the three HIPs of particular interest to this study, as they are the main components of the program studied in this research: learning communities, study abroad, and service learning.

Learning Communities

Learning communities emerged from the work of John Dewey (1859-1952) and Alexander Meiklejohn (1872-1964). At the core of Dewey's and Meiklejohn's work was the need to create an environment in which students could interact not only with each other, but also with faculty across disciplines. The goal was to enhance their learning and to emphasize strong beliefs in a democratic society, collaboration, inquiry, active learning and student interaction. Based on these values, Meiklejohn established a two-year Experimental College within the University of Wisconsin in 1927, which ran for six years, until 1932. In 1965, Joseph Tussman (1914-2005), a former student of Meiklejohn, further expanded on Meiklejohn's concept and created the Tussman Experimental College at the University of California, Berkeley, which

lasted for four years and was centered on connectedness of disciplines and people. This was followed in the 1970's by the creation of the Evergreen State College in Washington State, which offered team-taught integrated programs eventually known as learning communities (Smith et al., 2004; Tussman, 1969).

Engaging students in interdisciplinary liberal arts education is still the driving force behind today's learning communities. Astin (1985) and Tinto (1997) defined learning communities as small groups of students taking two courses plus a connection class to link them. The goal of this connection class is to create a thematic context to promote collaborative learning, and foster a sense of belonging, thus ultimately encouraging engagement, involvement and retention, by providing a supportive environment (Tinto, 2012). In their contemporary form, learning communities, which are primarily designed for first-year students, have evolved into five different, yet related models: Linked Courses, Learning Clusters, Freshman Interest Groups, Federated Learning Communities, and Coordinated Studies (Kellogg, 1999). In more recent years living- or residential-learning communities have been added. These offer the opportunity for students to not only take classes together, but also to live in the same residence halls or floors. However, the basic definition behind all these models, according to Gabelnick et al. (1990), is

> any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses--or actually restructure the curricular material entirely--so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (p. 19)

Research on learning communities shows that the main focus of these programs is to better integrate and deepen academic content, as the structure of a learning community revolves around a combination of courses in various areas of interest, as well as fostering relationships (Andrade, 2007, Zhao & Kuh 2004). The implementation of learning communities have been linked to better GPA, higher retention (Andrade, 2007; Baier et al. 2019; Gonzales et al., 2015; Hill & Woodward, 2013; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), greater involvement and engagement in extracurricular activities (Pike et al., 2011; Tinto, 2012), and civic engagement (Fatherly et al., 2020). These programs are also linked to greater motivation, increased growth, deeper critical thinking, improved learning, further engagement with and within the community, as well as fostering a positive opinion of the institution on the part of the student (Astin, 1985; Kellogg, 1999; Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Furthermore, learning communities contribute to a stronger sense of community, belonging, and inclusivity (Dodd, 2002). Kuh (2008), Love (2012), and Pike et al. (2011) further stated that learning communities foster more student-student and student-faculty collaboration through curricular coordination. Additionally, the use of peer mentors, common in this type of HIP, enable further student development, which combined with the social aspect of learning communities has also contributed to self-efficacy (Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002), college transition and campus integration (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Morales et al., 2016), as long as the interaction between the students and the peer mentors is frequent and positive (Leidenfrost et al., 2011). Learning communities also contribute to as a sense of empowerment and an energizing experience for the faculty as they provide opportunities for them to think more creatively about their subject (Kellogg, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). However, Browne and Minnick (2005) cautioned that outcomes such as student satisfaction, GPA, or retention are not sufficient to measure intellectual development in these forms of HIPs. Research on learning

communities, although growing, is still predominantly focused on student outcomes (e.g., retention, persistence) and student development. Despite this focus, there is a lack of research on *why* and *how* these learning communities promote these outcomes, especially in their different forms (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

In evaluating research on learning communities and their positive impact on persistence, academic achievement, involvement, and satisfaction, Andrade (2007) found that even though all learning communities are based on the same idea of integrating and connecting learning within a supportive learning structure, the implementation of such programs vary across institutions (e.g., curriculum design, varying combination of linked courses and pedagogical strategies, coordination of assignments, mentoring). Therefore, she noted, it is difficult to isolate the component(s) of these programs that are linked to positive outcomes. Andrade also remarked that self-selection is an often overlooked factor of learning communities in relationship to positive outcomes. She argued that it is difficult to differentiate between program effects and self-selection effect, thus noting that it is possible the positive outcomes of learning communities may be related to the type of students who participate in them (e.g., highly motivated, tend to be involved, high achievers) making it more conducive for them to fully embrace and thrive in a learning community than the structure of the programs themselves. She also noted that institutions assess these programmatic interventions but tend to report results internally rather than through peer-reviewed publications as they are more looking at implementing practices that fit their needs. It is, therefore, difficult to identify the specific features across these programs that make them successful. Andrade suggested that the effects of specific program features need to be studied and that qualitative data is also needed to assess depth of learning.

Study Abroad

In an effort to engage students in a more global world, and realizing the need to better understand other cultures, the U.S. began to support the internationalization of higher education after World War I. In 1919, the Institute of International Education (IIE) was created to begin to gather information about international education (Gingerich, 1998; IIE, 2014a). Critical programs were established that spearheaded study abroad opportunities, such as the University of Delaware's American Junior Year Abroad in 1923, and The Fulbright program in 1946, both of which intended to further American knowledge of other cultures and vice versa (Hoffa, 2007). According to the IIE (2014), as globalization increases the need for the U.S. to be educated about other cultures and proficient in languages other than English, possessing international experience has become critical for students in the 21st century. Research on these programs shows that the great majority of students studying abroad are undergraduates, with 37% in their junior year, 22% in their senior year, 14% in their sophomore year, and only 3% in their freshman year (Farrugia et al., 2013). Furthermore, the various studies conducted on study abroad often divide these programs according to length of stay: long-term study abroad programs which range from one semester to a full academic year; and short-term, generally less than eight weeks. Each type is detailed in the sections below.

Long-Term Study Abroad

Dwyer (2004a) and Ginsberg (1992) indicate that students who study abroad long-term (up to a year abroad) benefit in terms of global knowledge and understanding by making lifelong connections and forming more diverse friendships. They also explain that students become more involved with the community and are more tolerant, as they increase their knowledge and understanding of their own cultures and that of others. Long-term study abroad also increases

students' self-confidence, maturity, and linguistic abilities, which generally leads to the addition of a major or certifications to their academics, or even to the pursuit of graduate studies (Dwyer, 2004a; Ginsberg, 1992).

A longitudinal study about long-term study abroad conducted by the University System of Georgia, Indiana University, and the SAGE Research Project between 2000 and 2007, compared randomized groups of "domestic" students with students who studied abroad. They found that students who studied abroad earn better grades, experience less attrition, graduate from college at higher rates, and benefit from global engagement in their careers in terms of employment and earnings (IIE, 2014b). Research also shows that participating in long-term study abroad programs increases a student's ability to cope and problem solve, decreases prejudice and develops open-mindedness, enhances collaborative work and communication, and improves language acquisition (Savicki, 2008; Vande Berg et al., 2012).

Dwyer (2004b) further identified long-term benefits of study abroad for students' future careers through a 50-year longitudinal study. He found that these students are generally more involved in international and domestic volunteering, use another language at work, are mobile in their careers, and are employed by multinational companies or work overseas. Overall, study abroad has been shown to foster personal growth and development, linguistic abilities, maturity and adaptability, as well as broadening career exploration and increasing employment competitiveness (Barbour, 2006; DeKeyser, 2007; Dwyer, 2004a, 2004b; Kauffmann et al., 1992; McKeown, 2009; Zorn, 1996).

However, enrollment in long-term study abroad programs is declining in favor of short-term ones (Farrugia et al, 2013; McKeown, 2009). For example, in the 1950's and 1960's, 72% of students studying abroad were doing so through long-term programs, but these numbers have

declined ever since with 49% in the 1970's, 33% in the 1980's, 20% in the 1990s, all the way down to 3% in the 2011- 2012 academic year (IIE, 2013). On the other hand, in the academic year 2011-2012, 59% of students studying abroad opted for short-term programs (described next), which represents an 11% increase from the past 10 years; while 38% chose a mid-length sojourn (Farrugia et al., 2013; IIE, 2013).

Short-Term Study Abroad

Whereas long-term study abroad offers many well-established benefits due to the longer immersion time, critics of short-term programs suggest the latter may be viewed as vacation for the students, or a way for institutions to bolster their international engagement effort, without fostering the robust outcomes their long-term counterparts offer (Geller, 2005; Spencer & Tuma, 2002). However, since participation in long-term programs is decreasing, in part due to cost, short-term solutions attract more students. As a result, there is an increased interest in designing and researching shorter study-abroad programs that would provide the same benefits as long-term ones (McKeown, 2009; Savicki, 2008).

There are several quantitative research studies on learning outcomes, academic attainment, career impact, cultural development, and personal growth for students who study abroad. However, Dwyer (2004a, 2004b) and Vande Berg et al. (2012) suggested that very little empirical research attempts to explain what was transformed or the process through which it was transformed. Studies have also shown that to be as or more effective than long-term programs, short-term and faculty-led programs (explained next) need to be intentional and supportive by offering engaging activities, opportunities for reflection, and promoting critical thinking (Engle & Engle, 2012; Savicki, 2008; Vande Berg et al., 2012). Furthermore, research shows that students gain the most from their experience abroad when some type of service or experiential

learning component is integrated as it further connects the students to the host country (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Le et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2012).

Faculty-Led Study Abroad

Faculty-led study abroad program are a variant of short-term (up to 8 weeks) credit-bearing study abroad programs in which a faculty member from the home institution leads a group of students abroad, while providing academic support (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Kehl & Morris, 2008; Special Issue: Study Abroad in a New Global Century, 2012). Additionally, faculty-led programs increasingly seek to create connections with local communities and to enhance the students' experiences abroad through the addition of service-learning components (further discussed in the following section). In terms of the quality of these programs, a strong critique is their generalizability. Although the individual faculty member has more say over the content of study abroad and can create a syllabus with more specific learning outcomes in mind, there is no guarantee that the same program will achieve the same goal with a different faculty member (Bringle & Hatcher, 2013; Savicki, 2008; Vande Berg et al., 2012). There is also a need to ensure that the faculty members involved are invested (Engle & Engle, 2012; Savicki, 2008).

According to research, short-term faculty-led programs, encourage personal growth; promote transformative learning, and professional development (Di Gregorio, 2015; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Mullens & Cuper, 2012; Walters et al., 2017). Similar to their longer counterparts, these programs also foster global citizenship (Kehl & Morris, 2008), when they are embedded within relevant academic content (Perry et al., 2013; Tarrant et al., 2014), intercultural, personal and professional skills (Drnach et al., 2016; Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005), but to a lesser extent (Dwyer, 2004; Kehl & Morris, 2008). According to Di Gregorio (2015), short-term and faculty-led programs may provide less opportunities for deep interaction with

host communities; however, they do still promote linguistic development (Gaia, 2015; Martinsen, 2008) especially if the program provide homestays (Allen et al., 2007). When faculty-led study abroad is also coupled with service learning, it promotes connections with local communities and enhance the student's experience abroad by fostering global citizenship (Kehl & Morris, 2008; Mule et al., 2018), and furthering their understanding of the culture (Gaia, 2015). Although these programs may promote a better global understanding and intercultural awareness (Gaia, 2015; Gullekson & Tucker, 2012), Aktas et al. (2016) and Fisher & Grettenberger (2015) caution that they may perpetuate systems of power and privilege. Additionally, it has been noted that faculty-led study abroad leads to enrollment in other forms of study abroad (Coryell et al., 2016, Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005).

Much of the research regarding study abroad (short- or long-term) focuses on its overall benefits (Dwyer, 2004a; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Paige et al., 2009; Parsons, 2010), linguistic benefits (Allen & Herron, 2003; Dekeyser, 2007; Freed, 1995; Pellegrino, 1998), intercultural communication and proficiency (Clark et al., 2009), self-awareness (Gaia, 2015), and global competence and engagement (Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Paige et al., 2009; Stearns, 2009). However, most research focuses on outcomes and lack the understanding of the dynamic at play between the student, the program and the host country (Twombly et al., 2012). It lacks in the areas of understanding the experience from the student's perspective, especially when combined with other elements such as learning communities (discussed previously), or service learning, detailed in the next section.

Service Learning

Several factors have contributed to the development of service learning programs. First and foremost is John Dewey's (1938) philosophical assumption that experience and interaction

are the basis for acquiring knowledge, growth and development. Both David Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle theory – emphasizing the contribution of social interactions to enrich growth – and Led Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory – relating to the difference between what a learner is capable of doing with and/or without guidance, i.e, actual development vs. potential development, reinforce the idea that knowledge is acquired through social interaction. All of these have contributed to the development of the service-learning concept, which integrates a social engagement component enhancing personal growth and development as well as social awareness (Astin et al., 2006; Furco, 1996).

Service learning became popular in the 1990's following the creation of the Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship in 1988. The goal was to evaluate "the potential for promoting citizenship education through service learning" (Hepburn, 1997, p. 140). It is a form of applied learning, an all-encompassing educational practice, which includes community service, internships, field education, and volunteer work. It is designed to further student development through student-centered learning anchored in real-world experiences (Furco, 1996). In 1990, Congress passed the National and Community Service Act which differentiated service learning from other applied learning methods, as a:

> method under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of the community; […] and helps foster civic responsibility; and that is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students […]; and provide structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience. (National and Community Service Act, 1990, p. 5)

According to Boyer (1994), service can enhance learning and strengthen communities. Through the many connections with the community, faculty, staff, or curricular and extracurricular programs, higher education is in a unique position to assist in that effort. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) explained that through service-learning activities or programs, students help the community by providing needed services, generally related to the students' academic careers, where they can put in practice and see firsthand what they are learning in the classroom while also developing a sense of civic responsibility. As opposed to volunteering or participating in extracurricular activities, service-learning experiences are credit-bearing experiential learning courses, which are purposefully designed and academically rigorous (Zlotkowski, 2005), thus making the activity a HIP. The participation in service-learning activities enables faculty and students to share in the experience, students benefit from a wider access to a variety of viewpoints and perspectives, while being provided with ample feedback, allowing them to broaden their worldviews, values and beliefs. Service-learning programs include activities related to course material, discussions and reflections to better connect theory and practice, with the goal of improving performance, increasing students' interest in the course, developing problem solving and critical thinking skills, and including civic education (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Therefore, service learning is a combination of academic knowledge and community service, which enable students to apply the skills they learn in the classroom and connect them to the real world as they applied this new knowledge to real-life work (Bringle & Hatcher 1996; Butler & Christofili, 2014; Hart, 2015). This combination can happen in various ways through class projects, extra-curricular activities, or research projects.

Research into service learning has shown that it can benefit students, faculty, the institution, and the community. It provides a more enjoyable classroom environment resulting in

better course evaluations, instills positive values toward community involvement, improves academic performance leading to retention (Gallini & Moely, 2003; Nigro & Farnsworth, 2009) and persistence to graduation (Astin et al., 2000). It also appears to have a positive influence on personal growth (e.g., identity development, spiritual and moral development, and self-efficacy, McLeod, 2013), and the development of interpersonal relationships and leadership, as well as communication skills, working independently, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving (Barth et al., 2014; Bowie & Cassim, 2016; Fullerton et al., 2015). It enhances career choices, social and learning outcomes (Astin et al., 2000; Boss, 1994; Bringle & Kremer, 1993; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 2001; Markus et al., 1993). Astin et al. (2000) found that aside from having a positive impact on writing and critical thinking skills and GPA, service-learning programs promote racial understanding and activism, a better sense of social and civic responsibility and engagement, and moral judgement (Astin et al., 2000; Weiler et al., 2013). It also helps students develop social awareness and a sense of civic responsibility (Marshall et al., 2015). However, Butin (2003) also cautioned that service learning might perpetuate "the norms of whiteness" (p. 1682). This type of program is also associated with increased learning, problem-solving skills, and hands-on experience (Dienhart et al., 2016; Geller et al., 2016; Meyer et al., 2016). Furthermore, service learning offers a variety of benefits to the institution by building relationship between the institution and the community at large (Olberding & Hacker, 2015), as well as a higher level of institutional satisfaction (Rutti et al., 2016). The evidence suggests that service learning has positive effects on students domestically. Adding an international component to these programs (international service learning detailed below) further enhances these effects by contributing to the internationalization of students.

International Service Learning

International service learning can be viewed as "the intersection of three different educational domains: a) service learning, b) study abroad, and c) international education" (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011, p. 4). As service learning and study abroad have already been defined in previous sections, I will only briefly explain the term "international education." International education refers to the concept of developing global skills and knowledge through action in the international arena to enhance global citizenship. The most common terms used to describe international education are global awareness, global education, global learning and development, intercultural competence, world studies, cross-cultural competence, cross-cultural empathy, and cross-cultural understanding (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). International education could refer solely to the internationalization of the curriculum by incorporating international components in the classroom in the United States. On the other hand, study abroad goes beyond international education as it provides firsthand real-world experience. When service learning is included as part of study abroad and international education, it adds value to the experience through experiential involvement and engagement. It allows students access to "authentic and educationally meaningful opportunities […] to interact with, learn from, and contribute to an international community" (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011, p.15). Therefore, Bringle and Hatcher define international service learning as:

> *a structured academic experience in another country* in which students *(a)* participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; *(b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others*; and *(c)* reflect on the *experience* in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a deeper understanding of *global and intercultural* issues, a

> broader appreciation of the *host country* and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, locally and *globally*. (p. 19. Emphasis in original)

Through international service learning, students also gain personal and professional growth (Greatrex-White, 2008; Murray, 2015). However, Green et al. (2008) remarked that one area lacking in international service learning research relates to the long-term effects of such programs. They and others recommend exploring long-term effects by waiting an indeterminate amount of time following the students' experiences with ISL to get a better understanding of its effects on their professional and personal lives (Anderson & Iken, 2009; Green et al., 2008; Main et al., 2013). Parker and Dautoff (2007) also suggested that more research aimed at understanding learning outcomes from short-term international service learning and study abroad is needed to understand how these types of HIPs can "enhance students' feelings of personal connections to others and promote actions reflective of global citizenship" (p. 49).

Multi-HIPs

Multi-HIPs or integrated approaches (Brownell & Swaner, 2010) are program that incorporate more than one HIPs in their design. In 2006, Brownell and Swaner (2010) determined that 35% of the institutions they researched combined a first-year seminar with a learning community. The National Resource on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition found that 40% of the institutions they surveyed integrated learning communities with first-year seminars and service learning. In study abroad, it is also more common to add a service-learning component to a program, whether it be faculty-led or independent, as they seem to naturally fit together (Parker & Dautoff, 2007). In all cases, so far, research has shown that the benefits the students receive from individual HIPs (detailed in the previous sections) are

compounded when these practices are part of an integrated approach (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Henscheid, 2004; Hesse & Mason, 2003; Swing, 2004). However, most of the research again focuses on outcomes for students, not on the experience itself (Brownell & Swaner, 2010). As more positive results on student outcomes are presented for these integrated approaches, it is likely that more institutions will attempt to create additional multi-HIP opportunities. However, as previously discussed, outcomes are not the only measure of student success. Understanding *how* the students experience these integrated approaches (which is the goal of this research as it investigate the experience of a group of freshmen who participated in such a program) may be enlightening in terms of designing new and better programs that logically integrate various components for maximum effect.

Theoretical Framework

As qualitative researchers are cautioned about the extent of prior knowledge collected ahead of conducting research (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975: Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), developing a thorough theoretical framework is equally not always recommended in qualitative and particularly phenomenological research (Seidman, 2013). For example, Van Kaam (1959) explained that preconceived ideas and theories "may distort rather than disclose a given behavior through an imposition of restricted theoretical constructs on the full meaning and richness of human behavior" (p. 12; as cited in Polkinghorne, 1989). Cleary and Peacock (1998) added that prior research reviews may introduce doubt, may "taint, superimpose, or substitute what [the participant has] to say with the conventional wisdom on the subject" (p. 19). Therefore, the theoretical framework for this research was limited to Astin's (1984) theory of involvement (detailed below) to minimize pre-imposing and pre-determining the direction of the data, and to allow the researcher to remain as open as possible to the participants' answers. This theory

partially informed the content of the interview questions used to collect data for this research (detailed in chapter 3).

Involvement Theory

Astin's (1999) Involvement Theory, first published in 1984, asserts that students must be engaged in their environment to grow and learn. Astin also stated that this relationship is directly proportional: the more the student is engaged, the greater the growth. He defined involvement as both the "physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p.518), thus, according to Astin, the active participation in organizations as well as frequent interaction with faculty and other students contribute to growth and learning. Astin also emphasized that this involvement occurs along a continuum. He explained that the degree of involvement is unique to each student and that the involvement of said student will vary over time and subject. He further asserted that the amount and quality of student involvement is directly proportional to the student's learning and personal development. In other words, the more the student shows involvement and engagement in activities, the more growth and learning will occur. Finally, Astin suggested "the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (p. 519). Therefore, according to Astin, a curriculum, to be effective, should stimulate students' effort and investment in order to achieve learning and development. Astin also indicated that "all forms of student involvement are associated with greater than average changes in entering freshman characteristics" (p. 524). He also mentioned, among other factors, the frequency of interaction with faculty as contributing to a student's involvement and satisfaction with college. Citing the work of Coleman (1961) and of McDill and Rigby (1973) on secondary education regarding the influence of student peers on involvement and engagement, Astin surmised that

faculty and student peers could be “consciously used to enhance student involvement in the learning process” (p. 528).

Involvement Theory and the SSLC Program

By nature, HIPs promote student involvement. Once students commit to and begin the program, they become automatically involved. The extent of their involvement, however, may vary over time and subject (Astin, 1984). Programs such as first-year seminars or freshmen learning communities are prime environments to foster students’ involvement as they propose to help freshmen better navigate their first college semester or year through better access to campus resources, promoting activities which will require involvement through clubs, organizations, or in and out of class curricula. Incidentally, the SSLC program (further detailed in chapters 1 and 3) by nature encompasses many of these attributes: small classes, connection with other courses, involvement with local and international communities, service learning, benefit of senior peer mentors, and close contact with faculty. As the students become more involved in their environment, they are more likely to succeed.

Summary

HIPs have shown to benefit students and faculty. In particular, for students, HIPs positively impact academic performance, retention, persistence, engagement, involvement (Astin, 1985; Astin et al., 2000; Baier et al. 2019; Gonzales et al., 2015; Kuh at al., 2013; Tinto, 2003, 2012), greater student-student and student-faculty interaction, and a supportive environment (Butler & Christofili, 2014; Hart, 2015; Kilgo et al., 2015). They also encourage motivation, growth, sense of empowerment, personal growth and maturity (Boss, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 2001; Kauffmann et al.,1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Savicki, 2008; Vande Berg et al., 2012). Additionally, research shows that HIPs improve critical thinking, learning,

engagement with and within the community (Engle & Engle, 2012; Kellogg, 1999; Kilgo et al., 2015; Markus et al., 1993; McKeown, 2009; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), self-efficacy, leadership, and career choices (Bringle & Kremer, 1993; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Di Gregorio, 2015; Kellogg, 1999; Mullens & Cuper, 2012; Walters et al., 2017). They promote greater adaptability skills, linguistic abilities, broadening career exploration (Barbour, 2006; DeKeyser, 2007; Dwyer, 2004a, 2004b; Kauffmann et al., 1992; McKeown, 2009; Zorn, 1996; Vande Berg et al., 2012), as well as increasing employment competitiveness (Kellogg, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Finally, HIPs also contribute to intercultural, personal and professional skills (Drnach et al., 2016; Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005), and a better global understanding (Gaia, 2015).

However, further research is needed to understand *why* and *how* these outcomes are achieved. Particularly, *how* the students are transformed, *how* the students themselves view these experiences, and the nature of the long-term effects of participating in such programs (Anderson & Iken, 2009; Dwyer, 2004a, 2004b; Finley & McNair, 2013; Green et al., 2008; Main et al., 2013; McKeown, 2009; Vande Berg et al., 2012). Research shows that multi-HIP programs, such as learning communities and first-year seminars, or first-year seminars with learning communities and service learning further enhance the positive effects of individual HIPs (Henscheid, 2004; Hesse & Mason, 2003; Swing, 2004). The Spanish Service-Learning Community (SSLC) program used as context for this research, is a multi-HIP program, as it combines learning community with service learning and faculty-led study abroad. These components are all based on similar principles: the acquisition of knowledge and skills through meaningful social interaction in context; reflection to make meaning of a situation or event; linking theory and practice; and fostering student growth and development. Therefore, a program such as the SSLC, which integrates three types of HIPs, merits investigation as integration of a

variety of programs seems to be part of the future for HIPs. The following chapter details the methodology and procedures used in this research, detailing information regarding participant selection, data collection and analysis methods, and a description of the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The purpose of this study was to uncover the essence of the shared experience of former freshmen college students who participated in a Spanish Service-Learning Community program in their first year at a large Midwestern public four-year institution. The intent was to explore and describe how the participants viewed and internalized a common phenomenon, and the meaning they had made of their experience. Quantitative inquiry can indicate a correlation among variables (e.g., participation in a learning community and higher GPA); however, on its own, it does not uncover the in-depth, meaning making of the experience of having participated in a learning community (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990). By contrast, qualitative methods, such as a phenomenological approach, focus on the process of interpretation of an event, which allows the researcher to view a phenomenon directly from the participants' own reflections and reconstructed understanding of it (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Creswell, 2013; Englander, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). Therefore, to address my research question ("What is the essence of the shared experience of former freshmen who participated in a Spanish Service-Learning Community program in their freshman year?"), I framed my study within a descriptive phenomenological methodology. This allowed me to uncover rich in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2003; Giorgi, 1985, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 2014). This chapter describes the theoretical framework that determined the study design, as well as participants' selection, data collection, data analysis strategies, trustworthiness of the study, the role of the researcher, and the limitations of the study.

Theoretical Framework

Esterberg (2002) explained that social interactions are the cornerstone of meaning making. In other words, as individuals interact with one another in a similar social setting or culture, they make meaning of a situation or event out of the shared experience and their own interpretation of that experience. This understanding of the world is known as social constructivism, a theory of knowledge that originated with Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). Vygotsky's (1978) work led him to propose a sociocultural approach to cognitive development, in which he argued that the collaborative aspect of social interactions is at the core of meaning making. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the concept of mediation of the social environment through activities, cultural artifacts, language use, or organization, and connection with others, such as peers or more knowledgeable others, as key to development by facilitating meaning construction and internalization, leading to a higher cognitive level (Crawford, 1996; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Storch, 2002). This paradigm was further developed and adapted in other fields, such as sociology with Peter Berger (1929-) and Thomas Luckmann (1927-2016) influenced by the work of Austrian social phenomenologist Alfred Schütz (1899 –1959) who elaborated on Edmond Husserl's (1859-1938) philosophical phenomenology, and contended that the social sciences should center on how people experience the lifeworld (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000).

Philosophical phenomenology originated with German philosopher Edmund Husserl, and was carried forward by, among others, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). In the context of the post WWI ideological crisis and expanding on Franz Brentano's (1838 - 1917) work on intentionality, Husserl advocated for a return to the concrete, "back to the things themselves!" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26), and

developed phenomenology: the study of pure phenomena, a philosophical investigation of consciousness (Eagleton, 1983; Groenewald, 2004; Smith, 2013; Vandenberg, 1997). While Husserlian phenomenology focused on the pure description of the phenomenon, his student Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) expanded into the interpretive realm, using prior experiences and opinions to interpret a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Dahlberg et al., 2008; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Smith, 2013). Both influenced the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and his development of the phenomenology of perception and Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) existentialism. Phenomenology evolved into various forms, for example, transcendental, naturalistic, existential, generative historicist, genetic, hermeneutical, and realistic, yet its central tenet remains "the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view" (Smith, 2013). The philosophical concept of phenomenology was first adapted into a research methodology in the field of psychology.

Seeking to describe how a person experiences a phenomenon, psychology researchers built on Husserl's and Heidegger's work to develop methods to study the human experience focusing on the individual's perceptions and understanding of a lived phenomenon. The study of multiple perspectives from various participants enables the researcher to generalize the essence of a phenomenon from the viewpoint of the people who lived it. Therefore, phenomenologists developed distinct methods to explore phenomena based on the adoption of the phenomenological philosophical attitude, which refers to the bracketing of theory and one's own judgement or beliefs (Finlay, 2008), and taking into consideration the two main philosophical branches (Husserl – descriptive, and Heidegger – interpretive). *Descriptive* phenomenology focuses on pure description, emphasizing the withholding of the researcher's judgement, known as epoché, to focus on the participants' understanding of their own experiences. *Interpretive*

phenomenology embraces hermeneutics and the use of prior experiences, theories, or the researcher's own beliefs and values to interpret a phenomenon, primarily within a social and linguistic context (Finlay, 2008; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004). While overlapping is expected between these two main approaches, as interpretation can never truly be separated from description (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), the two diverge in how the data is handled from collection to analysis. Descriptive investigation only utilizes what the data provides, while interpretive phenomenology uses assumptions and theories to provide the best interpretation (Giorgi, 2009).

Phenomenology as a research methodology centers on human behavior as it is the result of the interpretation people make of their own world (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). By virtue of recognizing and understanding that individuals experience the same given situation differently and at different times, phenomenology allows for various perspectives to be taken into account to create a rich and complex image of how people see and interpret their world. The issue is not to find the "truth" of the event, but rather, understand the process through which individuals make meaning of the event and how the combination and comparison of various perspectives can lead to the essence of a shared experience (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990).

Phenomenology as a research methodology and social constructivism as a theoretical framework are inherently connected. Crotty (2003) emphasized the idea of the unique experience of the individual as he defined constructivism as how the mind makes meaning of an activity. Phenomenology, as it forces us to engage directly with the phenomenon and derive the essence of an event from the compilation of perspectives of the individuals who have experienced it, follows the tenets of constructivism, which also focuses on the interaction of the individual with

the object itself to make sense of it (Crotty, 2003; Hatch, 2002). Social constructivists' work examines the social reality people live in (Esterberg, 2002). Viewing the world as constructed through human interaction and the multiple perspectives that these interactions bring, constructivists recognize the existence of multiple realities as assembled by people through their own experiences of the world around them, giving meaning to one's experience, and helping individuals understand their world (Creswell, 2013; Esterberg, 2002; Hatch, 2002). Following a social constructivist paradigm enables a researcher to co-construct meaning with the participants. In other words, the researcher can examine and interpret multiple participants' views of an event to create a rich and comprehensive narrative of the participants' understanding of the object being studied.

Finally, Polkinghorne (1989) indicated that through a phenomenological study, the researcher collects "naïve descriptions" from individuals who have experienced a phenomenon. Because different people derive different meanings from a common event, the analysis of these multiple descriptions lead the researcher to form a picture of the shared components of said experience, creating an all-encompassing and coherent account of it (Polkinghorne, 1989). The reader can in turn read the findings and feel that they understand and can relate to the lived experience of the individuals who lived it.

As the core of this study heavily relied on perceptions, and knowledge and reality are subjective, it was anticipated that the meaning of the same object (i.e., the SSLC program) would vary amongst the participants. From a constructivist perspective, in particular social constructivism, knowledge is co-built as the result of social interaction. Therefore, to make sense of the participants' perception of the program, this study was framed in a social constructivist framework. Furthermore, phenomenology as a research methodology and social constructivism

as a theoretical framework are inherently connected, as they both emphasize the social construction of meaning and in this case derive the essence of an event from the compilation of perspectives of the individuals who have experienced it. The aim of this study was twofold. Uncover the essence of the participants' shared experience, the meaning they had made of having participated in a Spanish Service-Learning Community (SSLC) program in their freshman year, and remain true to their own words and interpretation of reality (i.e., the focus of the study was on the participants own words and perspectives and I wanted to limit the interference of my own biases). Therefore, I framed my research within a descriptive phenomenological methodology as it focuses on pure description, emphasizing the withholding of the researcher's judgement, to focus on the participants' understanding of their own experiences.

The purpose of this research was to uncover the essence of the shared experience of former freshmen who participated in the SSLC program. Thus, I collected and analyzed data from former first-year college students who participated in the 2014-2015 SSLC program. Using a phenomenological research method, I aimed to bring the essential traits of the participants' experience to the fore through rich descriptions using natural language from the data collected to report results (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Giorgi, 2009; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). This was done through interviewing the participants and giving them an opportunity to further reflect on the program through a written reflection. To assist them in recalling and sharing their thoughts and experiences, I determined that setting up the data collection process to mirror the layout of the program itself could give them more opportunities to get re-acquainted with it, recall and share more. The intent was to enhance the reconstruction of the phenomenon for the participants, and give them license to tell

their own stories, in their own words, thus creating richer descriptions. Therefore, I opted to design a set of interviews for each part of the program that included some artifact-elicited questions, to be conducted a week apart, followed by individual written reflections of the overall experience. The combination of these methods was designed to provide data saturation and enable me to uncover the essence of the phenomenon through rich descriptions in natural language, whilst minimizing my assumptions. The resulting product is a comprehensive synthesis of the individuals' experiences, based on narrative about the event from the unique point of view of the participants. The following sections describe in detail the steps of this study, including a description of the SSLC program, the selection of the participants, the data collection methods, analysis strategies, and trustworthiness of the study followed by a discussion of the limitations of this research.

Program Description

The 2014-2015 Spanish Service-Learning Community (SSLC) program at the core of this research was a HIP program. Its structure made it of interest to this study as it combined multiple forms of HIP into one program for freshmen, which could potentially offer the opportunity to show the compounding effects of such programs or more information about how they work. As this was a qualitative research, the focus was directed toward a deeper understanding of how multi-HIP interact to the benefits or detriment of the participants. The program combined a learning community composed of two courses (leadership and Spanish) connected by a third, multiple service-learning projects (food drive, ESL), and a faculty-led service-learning abroad in Costa Rica. Through this specifically designed learning community, a small group of 14 freshmen participated in campus social and educational activities related to common interests, in this case Spanish and Leadership Studies. The program was divided into two parts following the

institution's calendar, and the location of the program: the fall semester, domestically, at the institution; and the winter intersession, abroad, in Costa Rica. The details of which are presented below.

During the fall, the group attended three classes together. A fourth-semester level Spanish course, which I taught; an Introduction to Leadership course embedded in a larger lecture course which grouped the participants together for academic or community service projects; and a Connection Hour, dedicated to discussing the connection between the two primary courses and preparing the group for the service-learning segment in Costa Rica. The Connection Hour was taught by a Spanish faculty member with prior experience of the program along with a peer undergraduate student. The peer student was a senior who had participated in the same program a year prior and had extensive experience with Spanish and study abroad. Throughout the semester, the group participated in various service-learning projects on campus and in the community, through the Leadership Studies course and the Connection Hour (e.g., food drive).

The second part of the program was an 11-day faculty-led service-learning study abroad immersion program in Costa Rica, during winter intersession in January, following a two-week long Christmas Break. I led the group with the assistance of the Connection Hour peer undergraduate. While abroad, the group lived with host families, in pairs, with the exception of one student, due to an odd number of male participants. The service-learning project, identified by the local community, was to build and clean a playground for a local nutrition center, which provides food assistance as well as daycare for low-income families. At the work site, the group needed to communicate with the local contractors and other community members and organize themselves to complete the project, while resolving issues of language, group dynamic, and workload. While in Costa Rica, the group also attended three Spanish classes focused on

language use and Costa Rican culture and history, and participated in several excursions (e.g., coffee plant, San José). As part of the overall program, a few weeks post Costa Rica; I met with the students for a debriefing session to discuss the overall program, their thoughts and suggestions, as well as some housekeeping matters.

Participants

The aim of a phenomenological study is not to generalize findings, but rather to discover the essence of a shared experience. Thus, purposeful sampling, allowing for the selection of individuals that would best represent the phenomenon studied (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990), was deemed the most appropriate participant selection method for this research, and I recruited the participants using a criterion-based selection (Creswell, 2013; LeCompte et al., 1993). The participants needed to have participated in a program in their freshmen year that offered multiple high-impact practices. The SSLC program offered a learning community by combining two classes together (leadership, Spanish) linked by a third, multiple service-learning projects (food drive, ESL, community project in Costa Rica), and a faculty-led study abroad opportunity to wrap up the program. Additionally, rapport is crucial for qualitative researchers as the aim is to encourage participants to open up and share their experience without reservation (Giorgi, 2009; Kvale, 1983; Patton, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989; Seidman, 2013). Although I could have investigated participants from any year, I chose to focus on the ones who had participated in the 2014-2015 SSLC program, as I had led the group then, thus had greater access to the participants. Through my involvement with the program (I taught the Spanish course in the fall and led the service-learning abroad portion in Costa Rica), I had an established rapport with the students. This connection enabled me to recruit 11 participants who experienced the phenomenon studied firsthand and obtain concrete and rich descriptions of its essence.

The 11 participants came from the 14 students who participated in the 2014-2015 program as freshmen. At the time the data were collected 12 of the 14 program participants were still enrolled at the institution, while the other two were no longer attending. I contacted all 14 participants via email (see Appendix A) and approached some in the hallways – since quite a few were taking courses in my building at the time – to discuss the topic of the research with them, explain the data collection process, and encourage them and each other to participate. I attempted to contact the students no longer enrolled at the institution and asked the other participants to reach out to them, to no avail. Of the 14 original participants in the program, 11 agreed to participate in the study.

At the time of data collection, all participants were juniors, 20 years old, who had completed the program two years prior. The group included eight women and three men. All but one had prior experience with volunteering within their own community. All had previously traveled abroad in some form, and four out of the 11 had extensive experience volunteering abroad. All noted that their original interest in the program was "going to Costa Rica". Beyond that initial draw, for two of them, the opportunity to make friends and connect with others attracted them to the program. Another two participants cited their interest in the structure of the program itself, and one wanted to relive a prior experience volunteering abroad. Finally, one participant was interested in the short length of the trip (see Appendix E for detailed participants' information).

It is important to note that there was a time lag between the program itself and the data collection phase. However, the constructivism paradigm and phenomenological approaches focus on "reconstructed understandings of the social world" via the collection of multiple views (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 184). The purpose is not to find an objective truth, but rather to

focus on the participants own truth, their understanding of the experience, their internalization of it, i.e. their own personal view of the phenomenon (Crotty, 2003; Giorgi, 2009). Merleau-Ponty (1962) acknowledged that perception influences the memory process and may produce a flawed recollection of an event. However, he argued that the goal of phenomenology is not to determine the accuracy of the event, but rather to focus on how the participants experienced the phenomenon, keeping in mind that the truth is in the eye of the beholder. Moustakas (1994) and Van Manen (1990) also emphasized the idea of looking back on the experience. Hycner (1999) further noted that the mere act of being interviewed implies reconstruction and retrospectivity. He argued that whether the data is collected in real time or retrospectively, the experience is still changed through the process of recounting, and language itself. The passage of time may alter memory, but it can also give time for the participant to fully integrate the experience as time allows the opportunity to look back and reflect. In the end, it is not a question of accuracy, but rather of what the participants make of the experience, what is left of it for them, their own truth and perspectives (Crotty, 2003; Giorgi, 2009; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The following section details the data collection process that facilitated the compilation of rich descriptions of the phenomenon using natural language from the data.

Data Collection

When conducting phenomenological research, Polkinghorne (1989) recommends gathering data from any of the following sources: 1) the researcher's personal self-reflections; 2) other participants' oral or written accounts of the experience; or 3) an outside representation of the experience. As I was most interested in the participants' own view of their experiences rather than my own single interpretation of it, I collected the data directly from the individuals who experienced the phenomenon studied, i.e., 11 participants of 2014-2015 SSLC program. To

collect and present multiple views of the experience, data were collected in two ways: individual face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews and individual written reflections, two methods that Giorgi (2009) recommended when looking for information about the lived experience of a phenomenon.

As discussed in the Study Design section, I organized the data collection to mirror the format of the program itself in an attempt to elicit more memories and get the participants reacquainted with their experience of it. I collected data through two in-depth interviews set a week apart, each corresponding to one segment of the program, i.e., the fall semester in the U.S. with two courses linked by a Connection Hour and local service learning projects; and the winter intersession in Costa Rica with an 11-day faculty-led immersion service-learning program. These interviews were followed by individual written reflection about the whole program. Additionally, since two years had passed between the program itself and the time of the study, to assist the participants in recalling the program, and trigger their memory of the experience, I asked them to look for and bring to their interviews, artifacts (e.g., photographs, assignments, short videos) that best represented the experience for them. Thus, the in-depth interviews were partially artifact-solicited. Based on the recommendations of the supervisory committee, prior to the data collection phase, I conducted a pilot study to polish my interview guides, delivery, and reflection prompt, which led to changes to my data collection protocols, as explained below.

Pilot study

To conduct the pilot study, I approached three students who had participated in the same program a year prior to the group selected for the study, and whom I thought, from knowing their personalities, would provide me with ample feedback. I verbally explained to them the nature and goals of the research and pilot study, and interviewed each volunteer individually following

the protocol I intended to use for my research. I read the preamble to the interviews, set up the recording device, interviewed the volunteers, and asked them to read the reflection prompt. Due to time constraint and availability, both interviews for each volunteer, were conducted back to back, followed by the reading of the reflection prompt. The interview process, formulation of the questions and reflection prompt were then discussed with each volunteer, which led to the modifications described below.

The volunteers first commented on both the preamble to the interviews and the questions themselves. As a result, I reworked parts of the preamble, deemed too wordy, into the formal email invitation to participate in the study, and simplified the beginning of the interviews with the research participants. Some of the interview questions were adjusted for clarification, and to better address the research question and obtain related and relevant information. For example, when asked about "formal" and "informal" activities they had participated outside of class yet related to the programs, the volunteers indicated they were confused by the distinction. These terms were removed to afford the participant more freedom to choose which activities and experiences they recalled and wanted to share. In addition, an interesting point arose during the interviews regarding the solicitation of artifacts. Following the same intended protocol, I had for my study, I had asked the volunteers to bring artifacts from each part of the program they had participated in. None of them produced anything related to the fall component of their program but did share some from the winter intersession in Costa Rica. This led to the addition of the question "If you did not bring anything, can you tell me why?" The modifications made to the interview guides allowed me to collect data in a more informed manner.

Aside from modifying the content of some of the interviews questions, conducting the pilot study allowed me to reflect on how I collaboratively managed my rights and responsibilities

as researcher and interviewer with my participants. This led to the realization that I was intruding in the participants' stories while interviewing them, through comments such as "Yes, I remember that too" or "Remember when…?" or "How about this…?" These unintentional interjections directed the participants towards some of my recollections rather than letting them follow their own paths. I thus made some notes to remind myself to not interfere with the participant's retelling of their experience but rather, let them speak, and to ask follow-up questions only when clarification or further development was needed.

Finally, I also edited the wording of the reflection prompt based on the discussion with the volunteers. Since the intent behind the written reflection was to provide a different platform for the participants to share their own personal experience of the event, the volunteers suggested that I ask the participants to discuss their experience as if writing a personal journal entry, instead of as if they were addressing their friends and family. As I also wanted them to focus this time on the overall program, I bolded words such as "whole experience" within the prompt. The specific prompt questions were also simplified and divided into four suggestions for the participants to think about as they wrote. The next three sections detail the reasoning behind the data collection methods for the study, as well as the procedures followed, i.e., the in-depth interviews, artifacts solicited interviewing, and individual reflections, ending with a table compiling information regarding length of transcripts and reflections as well as types and number of artifacts.

In-Depth Interviews

Equipped with a better understanding of the interviewing process, a revised list of questions resulting from the pilot study, and upon approval of the study's IRB application, I began to contact the participants and schedule interviews. The participants were interviewed

twice for 45 to 60 minutes each. At the beginning of the first interview, I reiterated the topic of the research as well as the data collection process, we reviewed, and they signed the Informed Consent I had emailed them (see Appendix F). At the end of the first interview, we checked the date and time of the next interview, while at the end of the second, I had them read the reflection prompt to see if they had any questions. I then emailed each participant with instructions, if any, and a copy of the interview guide, for them to review, and see if they wanted to add anything to their interviews. Only one participant, Naomi, sent an addendum to her second interview, which I noted and added to the corresponding transcript. While conducting the interviews, I took minimal notes. For example, I wrote certain words the participant mentioned that caught my attention in light of a question that would come later in the interview. I also jotted down some comments at the end of each interview regarding topics or aspects of the interview that surprised me or that reminded me of another participant' comments (e.g., "cans", "bonded", "uncomfortable"). I was careful to keep my interjections in check throughout the interviews to let my participants tell their own stories; however, some participants inadvertently pulled me into their recollections. As they were recounting their stories, some asked, "Do you remember…" or "When we…" To avoid directing them towards my own memories of the events, yet acknowledge I knew what they were referring to, I answered their inquiry as briefly as possible, and continued on with the interview, so as to not detract from their stories. As I had led the group throughout the 2014-2015 program, I had gained an insider status, which helped me build on the rapport we had established then and enabled me to move the conversation forward in regard to certain names, places and experiences unique to the program.

The content, formulation, and structure of the interviews questions were informed by two factors: the theoretical framework of the study based on the literature review (see Chapter 2), and

the phenomenological nature of the research. My theoretical framework highlighted Vygostky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which states that learning is social, and that the community assists with the meaning-making process; and Astin's (1999) Student Involvement Theory, which explains that the nature and amount of involvement is proportional to the student's learning and development. As a result, the content of the questions relied heavily on the activities the participants were involved in, as well as the relationships they formed. This being phenomenological research, I also designed the questions to maximize the opportunity for rich and comprehensive descriptions of the experience. According to Kvale (1983), to ensure breadth and depth in gathering qualitative data through interviews, these should be focused on the participant, attempt to make sense of the participant's world, be qualitative as well as descriptive and specific, avoid (a priori) assumptions, and be theme oriented. It should also be open to ambiguities and change, and the interviewer should be empathetic. Ultimately, the experience should be personal and positive. As my study aimed to uncover the essence of the phenomenon through the participants' own voice, the interview questions were contextualized and open-ended, within a semi-structured format (Bevan, 2014; Englander, 2012; Giorgi, 1989; Seidman, 2013). This configuration empowered my participants to make sense of their own experience through the process of telling their own story and reconstructing their experience rather than simply remembering the event (Bevan, 2014; Englander, 2012; Kvale, 1983; Seidman, 2013). I elicited context with questions such as "Can you describe some activities you participated in outside of class, but related to the program?" and "Can you recall a challenge you faced while in Costa Rica?" These questions were followed by experiential ones such as, "What was it like for you to live with a host family?" Such questioning resulted in a more in-depth examination of the participants' insights (Esterberg, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1989). In implementing this interview

method, I was able to let my participants recount their own individual experiences while ensuring I addressed the same general topics with everyone to gather relevant data. Simultaneously allowing for flexibility in follow-up questions specific to each participant within and across interviews, such as “So, what do you mean by 'experience'?” and “You said ‘loud voices.’ What did you mean by that?” thus highlighting their own personal experiences and creating a stronger foundation to discover the essence of the phenomenon of the group in the analysis process. Furthermore, the interviews questions allowed the participants to share various positive and negative experiences they had encountered throughout the program. Thus focusing on both Husserl’s *noema* (what is experienced); for example, the activities the participants took part in, the situations they chose to share, and *noesis* (how it was experienced); for instance, the feelings they had about these activities and situations, their reactions to them (Moustakas, 1994). The combination of the two created rich descriptions, from different angles, of what the experience of having participated in the 2014-2015 program had been for them, thus creating a more contextualized, in-depth sense of the phenomenon. See Appendices B and C for complete interview guides.

The interviews were audio recorded, and sent to a paid transcription service, for the sake of expediency, to be transcribed verbatim. I listened to, read and corrected the transcripts of the first interviews before conducting the second interviews, scheduled for the following week. This step enabled me to delve into the data right away. Although each interview was set to address a separate component of the program, i.e., the first interview was focused on the fall, while the second centered on Costa Rica; I noticed while listening to my participants and reading the transcripts of their first interviews that all cited “collecting cans” as one of the group activities related to the fall part of the program. They all indicated that it had mostly been a failure --

"didn't do a good job" (AJ), "struggle" (Becca, Lilian, Miriam), "failed/failure" (Cali, Reba). As the second interview, centered on the service-learning program in Costa Rica, also included a question about activities they had participated in, I decided to include a question designed to compare the can collecting activity to the one they would mention during our second conversation. I used their own words from the first interview to refresh their memory. For example, "You mentioned collecting cans in your first interview, and described it as 'an absolute mess,' was this activity different?" followed by "Can you explain why [it was different]?" Also, during the first interview, while discussing relationships and friendships, the idea of "forced to hang out" (AJ, Becca, Cali, Emma, Miriam, Reba), became a frequent leitmotif across all participants. I again elected to utilize the participants' own words from the first interview to go beyond the simple statement of their feelings and ask them to describe and explain how these had evolved, if they thought they had, and if they could explain why or how. The comparisons of certain elements through the interviews coupled with the written reflections enhanced the corroboration of the findings during the analysis of their overall experience of the program.

Artifacts Solicited Interviewing

To further assist my participants in remembering the events, I had asked them to bring artifacts from the program to each interview. John Collier (1967) pioneered the use of photography as a research method when, in the mid 50's, while a researcher at Cornell University, he suggested using photo interviewing to assess the quality of housing in connection with mental health in Maritime Provinces in Canada. Later, Cornell researchers compared the use of photo elicitation interviewing to surveys and in-depth interviews while investigating how the environment could affect psychological stress, and found that the use of photography enhanced the interviewing process as it focused the participants' memory and clarified

misunderstandings by engaging the participants' dormant memory, and generated more emotional responses (Collier, 1967). Harper (2002) argued that photo-elicitation interview (PEI) does not simply generate information; it generates a different type of information as images tap into deeper areas of human consciousness. The use of photographs engenders responses often beyond the informative level; they evoke emotions and prod deeper corners of our memories, allowing for richer descriptions (Douglas et al., 2015; Harper, 2002). The use of PEI has since been expended to include a variety of artifacts (e.g., photographs, drawings, video diaries, school assignments), albeit remaining generally visual.

Artifacts elicitation interviewing methods engage both the participants and the researcher. They can frame the interview, provide context, offer a more direct understanding and representation of an abstract topic, and empower the participants. In addition, they facilitate rapport and provide the researcher with visual support enabling them to create more adequate follow-up questions (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Douglas et al., 2015). As "the intended or unintended residues of human activity" artifacts offer alternate awareness and understandings of our lives (Hodder, 1994; as cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 25). Images used in photo elicitation interviewing technique can be created by the researcher or the participant and can have been generated prior to the research study or as part of the study. The quality or content of the image are not the focus of the interview, but rather its connection to the phenomenon studied, and the effect it creates on the participant (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Harper, 2002).

For the purpose of this research, prior to each interview, I asked the participants to look for and bring artifacts (e.g., photographs, assignments, short videos) that best represented the experience for them. It is important to note that these artifacts were not used throughout the interview. I did not conduct photo/artifact-elicitation interviews, implying all interview questions

be centered on one or several artifact(s). Instead, I incorporated the method *within* my in-depth interviews, as a way to assist the participants in re-acquainting themselves with the context of the program prior to and at the beginning of the interviews and trigger their memory of the experience. As these artifacts were not intended as a primary source of data, at the time of data collection, I had not thought about keeping these, I simply saw them as a way for the participants to re-engage with the events. Consequently, I only kept the ones the participants sent to me electronically of their own accord (e.g., Miriam emailed me six photos, Cedric attached the three photos he discussed during his interview to his reflection, AJ sent me the link to the video we discussed during his interview, and Naomi texted me five photos). All artifacts were added to each participant's file.

Each participant chose which personal artifact(s) to share and discuss for the interviews. They were asked to describe and explain them through questions such as "Can you show them to me and tell me about them/describe them?" "Why did you pick this/these particular photo(s)/artifact(s)?" and/or "If you did not bring anything, can you tell me why?" Some chose to share and discuss photos of people (e.g., AJ, Lilian, Miriam, Naomi), others had objects and places (e.g., Becca, Carlo, Cedric), some had some photos in common (e.g., Cedric/Miriam, Becca/Reba, Naomi/Cali). Each artifact, or absence of artifact, its description, and the reasoning behind why each was chosen or absent, revealed unintended information about each participants' connection and perception of the program, and the overall experience for them, adding another layer of understanding and reconstruction of the individual experience of each participant, thus enhancing my findings. See Table 3-1 for number and types of artifacts discussed.

Individual Reflections

As another data collection method, the participants were asked to write a short reflection over their overall experience, once the interviews were completed. This was done to assist with the data saturation process and corroborate the findings from the interviews. The intent of the narrative was to give the participants an opportunity to reconstruct the experience individually, i.e., to develop their understanding of their experience and what it meant for them as individuals on their own time, and in a different format with limited interference from the researcher. Allowing personal time for the participants to "return to things" as a whole on their own, away from the unintentional influence of the researcher, gave them the opportunity to investigate "entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggested that reflection enabled the comprehension and structuring of an event. Providing the participants with an opportunity to think about and process their experience in multiple forms led to data saturation and a richer corpus of information to understand the essence of the shared experience of the participants.

I gave the participants the opportunity to read the reflection prompt at the end of the second interview and ask questions if they had any. I emailed the prompt to each of the participants individually with information regarding the submission of their narratives (see Appendix D), also encouraging them to reach out if they had any additional questions. Since the interviews focused on separate parts of the program, the reflection prompt was designed to give them an opportunity, and a different format, to reflect on the experience as a whole, again mirroring the structure of the program itself which had ended with a debriefing session. The participants were instructed to think about the whole program: "If you were to write an entry in **your personal diary** about the **OVERALL EXPERIENCE** of participating in the Spanish

Service-Learning Community program, what would you say?" While conducting the interviews, I had noticed that the length of some responses and amount of details shared, had increased in the second interview, for example Naomi's description of the fall service project was 103 words long, while her description of the one in Costa Rica had 356 words. The majority had also brought artifacts to the second interview, while less than half had any for the first interview (see Table 3.1 below). Therefore, although implied, I purposefully did not mention or explain, "whole program" or "fall and winter" in the reflection prompt, but simply "overall experience" to let the participants decide what they wanted to share, what they wanted to focus on. Of the 11 participants, 10 provided a written reflection, allowing for data saturation and corroboration of the findings. See Table 3-1 below for details.

Table 3-1. Data Collection Summary

Participants	Pages of transcripts	Artifacts	Written reflection word count*
AJ	**28**	**1st interview: referred to one photo, not brought** **2nd interview: 1 photo + video sent via email after the interview**	**421**
Becca	**40**	**1st interview: referred to one photo, not brought** **2nd interview: 1 photo**	**Not submitted**
Brooke	**35**	**1st interview: none** **2nd interview: 3 photos**	**255**
Cali	**46**	**1st interview: 1 photo** **2nd interview: 5 photos**	**464**
Carlo	**54**	**1st interview: none** **2nd interview: 43 photos, 1 video**	**739**
Cedric	**50**	**1st interview: none** **2nd interview: 3 photos**	**399 + 3 photos**
Emma	**50**	**1st interview: none** **2nd interview: referred to 2 dozens**	**343**
Lilian	**43**	**1st interview: referred to a group text message app, not brought** **2nd interview: 2 photos**	**417**
Miriam	**35**	**1st interview: none** **2nd interview: 3 photos**	**253**
Naomi	**58**	**1st interview: 1 drawing** **2nd interview: 3 photos**	**584**
Reba	**44**	**1st interview: none** **2nd interview: 2 photos**	**95**

* Word count was used for the written reflections, as they were all submitted in different formats (single space, double space, different margins, etc.), as opposed to the interviews' transcripts which were all transcribed in the same format

Data Preparation and Analysis

Qualitative research generates a large amount of data that needs to be organized, reduced, and analyzed to find themes and patterns, with the goal of constructing a narrative that presents the essence of the shared experience from the participants' point of view (Creswell, 2013; Elliot & Timulak, 2005; Hatch, 2002; Patton, 1990; Seidman, 2013). To that end, I analyzed the data inductively to let patterns emerge instead of imposing a set of a priori categories (Hatch, 2002; Patton, 1990). The preparation and analysis of the data to achieve that goal is presented below.

Data Preparation

At the end of each interview day, I sent the audio-recordings to a paid transcription service to be transcribed verbatim. I then read the transcripts while listening to the audio-recordings and corrected any errors. As the transcripts came back within 24 hours of each interview day, I was also able to transpose the notes I had taken during the interviews and add clarifying notes in the margin of the transcripts. The audio files and transcripts files, along with the individual reflections the participants submitted, and artifacts they shared were kept on two different computers, printed copies of all materials were kept in a filing cabinet in my office, with a file for each participant including all the researcher's notes. I randomly assigned participants a pseudonym, to preserve their anonymity.

Coding and Analysis

The purpose of my study was to uncover the essence of the shared experience of former freshmen college students who participated in a SSLC program in their first year from the point of view of the participants. I intended to focus on their own perspectives, while limiting the influence of my own presuppositions and biases throughout the data collection (addressed previously) and analysis phase. It has been noted that phenomenologists are hesitant to

recommend a specific analysis technique as this could force the researcher to focus too much on the steps rather than the data. Hycner (1999), Holloway (1997) and Keen (1975) also argued that there is not one way to analyze phenomenological data, it is rather "an approach, an attitude, an investigative posture with certain set of goals" (p. 41). Colaizzi (1978), Giorgi (1985), and van Kaam (1959), the three leaders in descriptive phenomenology analysis, focus on emerging themes within the data, and striving to describe the meaning of the experience from the participant's perspective. As my goals were to capture the essence of the experience for my participants and ensure I would stay true to their perspectives, I endeavored to let the data dictate the analysis through the coding process.

I approached the analysis of the data based on the structure and nature of the interview questions as well as the written reflections. The participants were encouraged to share various positive and negative experiences from the program, focusing on the activities and experiences they chose to share, and the interpretation and feelings they had about these activities and situations. For example, when discussing the can collecting activities from the fall part of the program, which the majority perceived as a failure, their interpretation of it were different. Some felt there was a lack of guidance and instructions, while others focused on the size of the group involved, the indifference toward the activity, or the abundance of leaders, as explanations for the failure of the activity. These varied perceptions helped me organize the data into various categories, as explained next.

The coding and analysis process began with the first interview. As I listened to my participants and read their transcripts several times to get a sense of the whole experience for each of them, I pre-coded the data by highlighting significant statements, i.e., phrases, words or sections that spoke directly of their experience of the program, blending both the description of

the situation and their perception of it. I repeated this process for each participant's data, and further analyzed and coded these statements using a mix of descriptive codes, i.e., words or phrases summarizing the main idea of the data, such as "orientation", "community", and in vivo codes, which are words or phrases used by the participants such as "forced to hang out," "uncomfortable," and "train wreck" (Saldaña, 2015). The in vivo codes were placed in quotation marks. To organize the data in a more manageable way, I also clearly marked within the transcripts the number of the corresponding question, and created a table based on the interview questions (see Table 3.2), which led to a reduction of the overall data while assisting with the visualization of patterns.

Table 3-2. Data Organization Sample for Interview 1.

Participant	**APPEAL (Reasoning)**	
	Finding out about program (1b)	**Interest in program (1c)**
Brooke	Orientation, already planning on taking Spanish, suggested by advisor	briefness of study abroad + use Spanish in context
Becca	Orientation, suggested by advisor	CR, loves traveling, sounded fun
Carlo	Orientation + mother, already planning on minoring Spanish, suggested by advisor	"3 birds one stone"/connection between SPAN, LEAD, Study Abroad-CR
Cedric	Interested in Span Minor / Orientation, suggested by advisor	Study abroad early (archi, so no real time) + leadership

After several phases of reading, re-reading, and coding, the codes were refined, and eventually, patterns began to form to represent meaning, along with the underlying ideas that explained why these patterns were there, allowing for the grouping or categorizing of the data (Saldaña, 2015). For example, a category that emerged was "service project", accompanied by codes such as, "too many voices," "disorganized," "attainable goals," "teamwork," etc., which then created subcategories, as seen in Table 3-3 below.

Table 3-3. Codes and Categories Sample.

Category: Service Project

Subcategory 1: failure

Code: "too many voices"

Code: disorganized

Code: lack of responsibility

Code: too big

Subcategory 2: success

Code: teamwork

Code: strengths

Code: attainable goals

Code: division of labor

Categories began to overlap across participants and across interview questions and reflections, generating patterns. I further analyzed these to understand the connections between them, eventually leading to five themes representative of the essence of the experience for the participants. These themes will be explored and described in details, using the participants own words in Chapter 4, while the remainder of this chapter discusses the trustworthiness and limitations of the study.

Trustworthiness

Throughout this study, I have ensured that the findings provided an accurate and verifiable account of the essence of the shared experience of college students who had participated in a SSLC program in their freshman year, while remaining open and flexible to the data collected. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited that in qualitative research, trustworthiness assesses the rigor of a study. Trustworthiness encompasses the notions of *credibility, dependability, transferability,* and *confirmability. Credibility*, i.e., the confidence in the truth of the findings, whether or not they represent a correct interpretation of the data, is naturally

connected to and reinforced by *dependability* -- consistency of the findings, would the same data collection method yield the same or similar results. *Transferability* refers to the likelihood of the results being transferable to other similar context and participants; while *confirmability* is related to the corroboration of the results by other researchers (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Anney, 2014; Shenton, 2004; Collier-Reed et al., 2009; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I ensured the trustworthiness of this study using the following techniques: triangulation, thick description, audit trail, peer debriefing, and reflexivity (Anney, 2014; Collier-Reed et al., 2009; Guba, 1981; Korstjens et al., 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

Triangulation

I used method triangulation, the use of multiple methods of data collection to crosscheck and corroborate the data, which led to thick descriptions, thus strengthening the credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the findings (Denzin, 1978; Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Although different sources of data may lead to differences in the overall picture that the researcher needs to address, the variety of data also converges to present congruence in the patterns found in the data, thus contributing to the credibility of the findings (Patton, 1990). I collected the data from 11 participants through two in-depth individual interviews followed by individual written reflections. These interviews were partially artifacts solicited, meaning the participants brought and discussed artifacts they selected to represent what the program meant to them to be addressed toward the beginning of each interview. Each method uncovered different and complementing ways of explaining and sharing their experiences. For example, Miriam discussed at length the evolution of the friendships she established while on the program during the interviews. She did not bring any artifacts for her first interview, explaining that she did not feel comfortable or integrated with the rest of the group then. For her second interview, she

brought three photographs all showing different aspects of the relationships she had developed by the end of the winter segment of the program. Her subsequent narrative further elaborated on the importance and evolution of these relationships throughout the program as what stood out to her the most. The method triangulation allowed for saturation of data and rich descriptions of the participants' experience.

Rich Descriptions

Rich descriptions enable the reader to determine whether the findings ring true (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). While collecting data, I made sure my questions would allow my participants to both describe and reflect on the phenomenon, detailing not only their behavior or experiences, but also the context in which they occurred. For example, while talking about the service-learning activities they participated in throughout the program, the participants all discussed the same two group projects, the can collecting in the fall and the community project in Costa Rica. They each described in details the nature of these activities, what they did, why they perceived them to be failures or successes, as well as how they felt about them. The multiple data collection methods, the nature of the questions asked of the participants, and the number of participants contributed to the trustworthiness of the study by creating rich thick description of the phenomenon in natural language.

Audit Trail

The trustworthiness of the study was also addressed with an audit trail, the documentation of all research decisions and activities pertaining to the research. An audit trail provides an opportunity for the reader to assess the steps and reasoning behind the methodological or analytic decisions made by the researcher, thus offering an opportunity to evaluate the findings, and enhance the quality and trustworthiness of the study (Akkerman et al., 2006; Creswell, 2013;

Guba, 1981; Koch, 2006; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 1990; Seale, 1999). I maintained a log of all questions and decisions I took throughout the study. I documented all the steps I followed; for example, when and how the participants were contacted, the reasoning behind the modification of the interview questions, coding decisions. I kept all notes taken during the interviews, post interviews, while reading and analyzing the data. This allowed me to realize during the analysis process, that I was often mixing my own personal thoughts with the ones of the participants while taking notes and reading the transcripts. I thus began to note my personal thoughts in a separate notebook. This organization helped me identified more clearly my biases and presuppositions, while staying true to the data as much as possible. For example, since I was with the participants in Costa Rica, I witnessed their interactions while working on the community service project, my recollection of the events was at times different from theirs. I made a conscious effort to write down my personal reactions, to set them aside and focus on what the participants were saying instead, the words *they* were using, *their* recollection of the events, and *their* understanding of the experience.

Peer Debriefing

To assist with the coding and interpretation of the data, challenge my assumptions, and thus further establish credibility, I made use of peer debriefing in this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). Peer debriefing refers to the critical evaluation of the research process by asking a peer to review and evaluate the data collected, and the categories and themes uncovered (Anney, 2014; Lincoln & Guba 1985; Shenton, 2004). For this study, I met with a colleague several times throughout the coding process and result writing process to discuss various approaches to coding, as well as identifying categories, and grouping information into themes. We coded a couple of interviews separately, compared notes, discussed

and agreed on categories. Once all the data was coded, we discussed how to group the categories together, identify the overlaps as well as the distinct exemplars to correspond with the emergent patterns from the data. The process of working through the data with a colleague allowed me to stay close to the data and avoid imbuing it with my own personal interpretations.

Epoché

Descriptive phenomenology involves Husserl's concept of epoché, or the process of suspending judgement when looking at a phenomenon. The researcher is encouraged to be in the moment, actively listen to the participants, set aside preconceptions, be open and receptive to the participants' words, be more objective and truly reflect the participants' perspective in the interpretation of the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). It is important to note, however, that complete suspension of one's own judgement is next to impossible (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The researcher is also encouraged to disclose and reflect on the experience in an attempt to set aside prior judgements and prejudices, thus also allowing the reader to understand the researcher's position and to decide for themselves whether the findings are true to the participants' perspectives and free of the researcher's assumptions as much as possible (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). While conducting this research, I kept an audit trail technique (explained in the previous section), the notes recorded after each interview, and the personal comments and reactions that emerged while analyzing the data, which allowed me to reflect on my expectations, and separate myself from the participants' experiences. This information is not part of the data, and was not analyzed. However, it was condensed, and is recounted thereafter as the researcher's reflexivity.

Researcher's Reflexivity

As an international student myself, I had personally benefited from study abroad programs in terms of language development and personal growth. However, these had been individual programs and exchanges, where I was on my own. I had not been part of any program with a learning community or service-learning component. Twenty years later, I found myself part of the faculty leading the 2014-2015 SSLC program from beginning to end. I was curious about what I had anecdotally observed throughout the program, in particular the bond the participants seemed to have forged among themselves. I saw many of them in the hallways after the program was over, some took classes together, and they all seemed to have remained somewhat connected to each other. As a researcher, I was intrigued by that bond and their experience. Was the experience different from my own? Was the bond I had observed real or a figment of my imagination? Did it result from the program?

As a researcher, I was also interested in knowing more about their experience to see what aspects of the program could be enhanced or modified. I wanted to know directly from them, how they had experienced it, to understand what the experience had been for them, how they lived and experienced the program, and what meaning they had made of it. My interest in learning about their experience in their own words is also linked do my interest in developing more of these types of programs. I thought understanding how they felt about it, how they had internalized the experience, how they looked back on it, would be a good place to start to then devise more/other measures to evaluate the impact of such programs, especially since so little has been done qualitatively about multi-HIP programs (programs integrating 2 or more high-impact practices).

My role in the program and the rapport I had established with the participants was a double-edge sword. As I had developed a good rapport with the group, I thought I could

capitalize on that to get their insights on the program. Because the participants knew me, they felt comfortable and forthcoming during their interviews, and in their reflections. As I was conducting the interviews, we shared some inside jokes, and were able to quickly run through some descriptions of places or people, and while analyzing the data, I could picture them in the situations they were describing. At the same time, it rendered some of the analysis difficult, as their views of themselves in some situations seemed to differ from my memories. For example, the interpretations I had made from their interactions on the worksite in Costa Rica was different from theirs. I made several annotations while reading the data precisely noting this so as to be aware of my internal biases and attempt to remain focused on what the participants said rather than my memory or interpretation of it.

One participant in particular was difficult for me to work with. After several very positive interviews, I spoke with Emma. Her feelings about the program felt very negative. She did not remember a lot about the program, repeated that it had not been impactful, whether on campus or in Costa Rica, she seemed to only remember the broad strokes, but none of the details, and seemed very detached from it. I struggle through the interview and to read her data, I did not know how to handle her responses. I reached out to my dissertation chair, and asked if she could read this interview and another one that was more in line with the other participants. She pointed a few quotes and sections for me to think about in each, which helped me get unstuck from this negative feeling I had about Emma's interviews. As I delved deeper into all the participants data, codes and categories began to appear more clearly and themes began to emerge, I realized that Emma's interviews and reflection corroborated all the others. Her experience of the program was different from the others, yet the perception she had of it matched her peers'. For example, her perception of how the service-learning projects had been managed, or the sense of community

that was built throughout the program focused on the same issues, and gave me some of the strongest quotes.

Although I was no longer their professor at the time the data was collected, I had been one of the faculty in charge of the program, and I was the one conducting the study. Although I had established a rapport with them, there is a power differential that should not be overlooked. The participants were undergraduate students; I am a faculty and a researcher. I attempted to minimize that power differential by carefully wording my questions, directing the participants toward *their* own experience of the program, *their* recollection of what *they* did and how *they* felt about it. Thinking back on Emma, it was difficult for me during the interviews to not try to press her and steer her into a different more positive direction. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Naomi was overly positive about everything, which is part of her personality, so she may not have seen anything negative about the program to begin with, or she may have chosen not to share. I believe the rapport I had established with the participants and the power differential that exists between me and them, both facilitated and hindered the study. In light of the themes that emerged from this study, and the fact that the intent of this study was not to evaluate the program itself but rather to attempt to understand how they had experienced it, I believe I was still able to collect rich data from the participants due to our rapport. However, it is important to keep in mind, that this data may not fully represent their experience, as my role may have stirred them away from fully sharing their experience.

Limitations of the Study

As mentioned in the previous section, I believe the power differential between me and the participants, considering my role in the program and my role as researcher for this study, may have limited the research. Although the triangulation of data collection methods may have

minimized its effects, having another investigator, who had no role in the program, conduct the interviews might have yielded different results.

The current study is qualitative in nature, and thus the purpose is not to identify causation nor is the interest to generalize the findings; rather the goal is to report a variety of findings through rich descriptions of people or a phenomenon a group shared (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The findings of this research are therefore limited to a naturalistic generalization; that is to say that they can only be generalized to a similar group of individuals in a similar situation. Furthermore, this study only reports findings from one group of participants at one site.

Although this study made use of data collection method triangulation through the gathering of interviews and narratives, it did not offer methodological triangulation – use of multiple research methods – to study a particular problem or event. Further study should include ethnographical methodology, and observations recorded in the field, ongoing student reflections, follow-up with students at regular interval throughout their college career, as well as a comparative study of various groups.

Summary

This descriptive phenomenological research, embedded in a social constructivism theoretical framework, attempted to uncover and describe the essence of the shared experience of former freshmen who had participated in a SSLC program in their first year, using interviews and written reflections. The 11 participants were selected through purposeful sampling and were asked to participate in two audio-recorded individual face-to-face interviews partially artifact-elicited, as well as to write a personal reflection about their overall experience. The interviews were transcribed and later analyzed through a descriptive phenomenological data analysis lens.

The trustworthiness of the study was strengthened using triangulation, rich descriptions, peer debriefing, and the use of an audit trail including a detailed section on the researcher's reflexivity. The results of the data analysis are presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Lilian: "We also turned big rocks into little rocks as we made concrete by hand"

This chapter presents the results of the descriptive phenomenological research conducted with students who participated in a Spanish Service-Learning Community program (SSLC) in their freshman year spanning from the fall semester 2014 to the winter intersession of 2015. This high-impact practice (HIP) program, aimed to engage and integrate students by connecting with each other across a variety of topics, centered around Leadership Studies and Spanish, while combining domestic and overseas service learning. Three data collection methods were implemented, i.e., individual interviews addressing the fall part of the program, followed by a second set of individual interviews focusing on the winter intersession, culminating in individual written reflections aiming at describing the participants' sense of the overall experience. The questions focused on the recollection the participants had of the SSLC and activities for each segment of the program as well as their perceptions of events, people, and places. The interviews, personal reflections, and participants' selection of personal artifacts they chose to share, or lack thereof, during the interviews enabled the participants to share their own personal memories and perceptions of their experience with the program. The separate methods of data collection and the number of participants allowed for the emergence of categories and themes related to one another across participants, to form the essence of the experience. This chapter begins by introducing a brief group profile thus displaying the features shared by the pool of participants as a whole. This information is accompanied by an individual profile of each participant to facilitate the comprehension of the personal experiences that shaped their own views and how these evolved throughout the program. Following the profiles, I will present a

discussion of the shared experience of the group through a series of themes derived from the analysis of the data collected.

Participants Profiles

For the purpose of this study, 11 participants (3 men, 8 women) were interviewed twice. The first interview centered on the recollection the participants had of the first part of the program, i.e., the fall semester composed of two classes: Spanish and Leadership, connected by a third: Connection Hour. The second interview focused on the service learning abroad in Costa Rica while living with host families, attending language and culture courses as well as participating in excursions, and working on a service project identified by the local community. For each interview, the participants were asked to share artifacts that most represented the experience for them. Finally, the participants wrote a personal reflection about their overall experience of the SSLC program. At the time of data collection, all participants were 20-year-old juniors at a large Midwestern public four-year institution, and all were in-state students, with the exception of Reba. Prior to starting college, all had experience with community service and volunteering for a variety of activities through high school and church, such as fundraising for cancer, volunteering at a hospital, Make a Wish foundation, local theater, etc. All valued service personally “feels good to give” (Brooke, Naomi), “like being involved” (Becca), “meeting different people” (Cali, Lilian) “sense of purpose” (Carlo). In college, they have continued their high school community service activities and/or joined new ones and new organizations related to their career goals and interests.

The main difference between the participants was their prior experience abroad. This seemed to shape their perception of the overall experience slightly differently, yet along the same

themes (discussed later in this chapter), thus dividing the group into two: the "novices" and the "experts." Each group and their respective participants' profiles are presented hereafter.

The Novices

The "novice" group, comprised of Becca, Brooke, Carlo, Cedric, Naomi, Miriam, and Reba, had limited experience abroad, having all visited another country while on family vacation as tourists prior to college.

Becca – Making Connections

Becca values diversity, being involved, and learning, which is in part what led her to participate in the SSLC program. For her, learning comes from the classroom as much as it comes from the people around her, as long as she can make connections. She remembered struggling in the Connection Hour in the fall, because she could not relate it to the other two courses. She thought the material was relevant, she liked learning about "history," yet she did not quite see the connection with Leadership and Spanish at the time. While in Costa Rica, she felt excluded from the family saying, "So she would sit our breakfast at the bar and then her and her daughter would have breakfast at the table, and that just felt really odd. We felt excluded." Yet she characterized them as "very friendly and very welcoming." Although she seemed to have mixed feelings about the overall program, she recalled developing relationships with the group and the community as very important aspects of the program for her, as well as service and learning. From the fall component of the program, she shared a photo of the cans they collected, as part as a foodbank fundraising project linked to the Leadership course, because she felt they had "accomplished something," yet feeling they could have done "a lot better." From Costa Rica, she mentioned several times that her favorite part was "being at the school" working on the service project. Because through these two components she was able to connect with people

around her: the other participants in the program and/or the community. She recalled the day they went to the school, and the children they were building the playground for came by, “and we got to play in the field across from the school and, there was a girl who had a disability. She couldn't run around and stuff, and so I was one of the people that stayed with her.” Becca summarized her involvement with the SSLC program as a “process” that helped her grow and a learning experience that allowed her to learn about herself and different cultures, because it gave her the opportunity to “meet so many different people, learn more about your community here and a community so many miles away. You also learn about a different service aspect in both, and the way you're helping each.”

Brooke – There’s Another World out There…

Brooke was attracted to the SSLC program as a freshman because she thought it would help her develop her Spanish, and she viewed it as “a good tester” for study abroad as she was not ready to commit to a long program. Her positive experience with the SSLC, ultimately encouraged her to volunteer with International Buddies to support exchange students on campus, and embark on a longer study abroad program in Austria during her junior year. Most impactful for her were the experiential learning elements and the interactions she had with the local community, which made her realize that learning does not occur solely in a classroom setting:

> I learned the most while in Costa Rica, which surprised me because I thought I would learn the most in the classroom when I was first going into the program. I think the reason I learned the most in Costa Rica is because it was very much hands-on learning since we were living in the culture day to day. It wasn’t like class where you sit there for 50 minutes then leave and go right back to speaking English and being surrounded with American culture.

Looking at the overall setting of the SSLC, she realized that the program led her to spend a significant amount of time with the same people ultimately facilitating a deep sense of bonding, enabling her to grow as a student and as a person. Ultimately, for Brooke, participating in the SSLC, and in particular going to another country was “a learning experience” about “other cultures and yourself.” It pushed her out of her comfort zone and reminded her that, “there's a life after college and there's other people out there.”

Carlo – Photo Enthusiast

Carlo brought with him over two dozen photos from Costa Rica for his second interview, while he had none for the first one, due to an issue with his camera, but he was able to recall a few. The photos he brought and discussed were mostly people in different situations. To him, the SSLC program was about acquiring skills such as “Spanish, leadership and problem solving” that he could apply “in the real world.” It was also about friendships and relationships (he and AJ remained friends and roommates throughout college), but mostly he realized and was amazed at meeting people, getting to know them, their stories, the value of listening to others, and understanding multiple perspectives. This began for him in the Leadership class, where he found “what makes a person unique, this person is different but they bring these traits to the table because they have this knowledge, using those as strengths.” This continued in Costa Rica through the service-learning project and connecting with his host family and Cedric (his roommate in Costa Rica), where he learned to appreciate even more people’s individual values, embrace them, and begin a dialog rather than trying to stand your grounds. His takeaway from the program was “meeting people you wouldn't otherwise have the chance to meet” and to learn to be a “better player in the global community.”

Cedric – Discovering his Focus

Cedric always found service important, as he likes to make people feel "comfortable and happy." For him, the fact that the program offered an opportunity to do "something with helping people" was particularly appealing when he enrolled. As he went through the program, aside from making "a bunch of friends," he said it helped him focus as a student and as a professional. His first year in college was a "wake-up call" in terms of taking responsibility, and understanding what it meant to be a college student. He struggled with deadlines, keeping track of assignments and overall getting "time management under control." In that regard, having a group of friends taking the same courses and a structure that felt supportive yet relaxed (e.g., he particularly enjoyed the bantering back and forth during the Spanish class; he was amazed that the host family in Costa Rica "took Carlo and I in like we were their own children"), allowed him to overcome a bit of his shyness, open up and let people help him through it. He remembered being in awe of nature in Costa Rica, the photos he shared during his interview were mainly of scenery, which he described extensively. Combined with the service opportunities he had access to while on the program, be it locally or in Costa Rica, it helped him define himself and his professional ambitions. He indicated in his reflection:

> I didn't realize how much fun I would have and how much it would affect me farther down the road. It made me realize that I want to go into healthcare as an architect and design clinics and hospitals that will help people mentally and not just physically.

He went on to summarize the program as a "lifetime opportunity" for freshmen to meet people, open their eyes to what is out there, while feeling that everyone is "extremely nice and extremely helpful."

Naomi –¡Pura vida!

Naomi is a self-proclaimed "people-person." She loves "helping people and giving back to others," so for her being able to enroll in a program at the start of college that would enable her to both meet people and help others, was a no-brainer, and looking back, "there is no doubt in my mind that I made the right choice in joining." She spoke fondly of her experience and was marked the most by two aspects: the relationships they formed that lasted well beyond the SSLC program for her as she is still friends with some of the participants and in contact with her host family; and the skills she learned along the way, whether they related to Spanish or making cement. To her, the entire experience was positive, even the somewhat disappointing results of the first group service-learning project they participated in, or the fact they had no water the first few days they were in Costa Rica, all of it was a learning experience, "an adventure" that gave her "something to look forward to each week." Ultimately, she found the experience empowering as it taught her to "step outside of my comfort zone, take risks, be confident, and enjoy the little things in life. ¡Pura Vida!" as she was "developing relationships with my peers and my professors as the semester went along."

Miriam – Will I Mesh With Them?

Miriam wanted to do something on her own, gain some independence from her family, yet was not quite ready to be on her own. The SSLC program represented "a personal challenge to get outside my comfort zone," which led to a few struggles. Her recollection of the SSLC program was based mostly on the relationships she formed, but mainly how she did not think she would. She had no photos from the fall part of the program because at that time, she was afraid she would not "mesh" with the group, and felt that she had been "off-putting" with her classmates out of fear of rejection. However, she mentioned that being "forced to hang out" pushed her out of her comfort zone, and allowed her to developed long-lasting friendships, "I

didn't know that those friendships would continue once we got back. I still see a lot of them." It was only toward the end of the semester, and in Costa Rica that she fully embraced the group, opened up, and created these bonds, allowing her to establish a relationship with her roommate, host family and the local community much faster. Ultimately, she was thankful to the program for making her realize the importance of communication, which created a space for her to have "conversations" and spend time with people. Being part of the SSLC, "set me on a different tone and, put me on a different pathway. More like an independent pathway."

Reba – The out-of-State Student

Reba is an introverted person, who came into the program as the complete outsider, as she was the only out-of-state student to participate. For her, it was supremely important to find a way to not just meet people, but to make friends, as she knew only one person coming in. It was challenging and uncomfortable for her at first. She recalled being hesitant about "spending this time with these people I don't know and go to Costa Rica with them." She felt uncomfortable during the first group service-learning project and took a step back to let others direct the show. She also did not bond with her host family in Costa Rica. However, little by little she became comfortable with her classmates, which enabled her to come out of her shell, express herself more, and learn to trust and rely on them when needed. It also made her realize that she is comfortable being uncomfortable, that it is a necessary step toward learning, growing, and making friend. She credited her participation in the SSLC for enabling her to reach out to classmates in other classes to work together and get help, as she found that "when I have friends in classes, I do better." The pictures she chose to share also reflected the importance she placed on these relationships, as they were of the group, the ones that showed the most people in at the

same time, because to her, this was the "most memorable, just being with our class, having a good time." She closed her reflection of her experience, saying:

> The most important part of the SSLC experience for me was the people that I experienced it with. Throughout the semester, I got to know some truly kind and deserving people. There are many things that stick out in my mind when I reflect back on my time in the community, but all can be credited to the people I shared them with. I cherished the time spent in the SSLC and it was a major component of what made my first semester so great.

The experts

The "experts": AJ, Cali, Emma, and Lilian had several extensive immersive experiences abroad prior to participating in the SSLC program, all including community service involvement. AJ and Emma had both participated in Los Amigos de las Américas, a program offering cultural immersion experiences in Latin American countries coupled with a community service component. Cali and Lilian had joined various service programs emphasizing sports or language camps and mission trips in Latin America prior to beginning college.

AJ – Le Penseur

AJ was intrigued by the program. His experience helping the community in Panama through the Los Amigos de las Américas program had such a positive impact on him in terms of maturity that he wanted to make sure he would keep pursuing programs that involved helping the community in some way. He already knew he wanted to become an engineer like his parents, but was looking for a program that would allow him to "relive Panama" and "see the world from another perspective." The combination of Leadership, Spanish, and service learning, the SSLC offered captivated him. AJ is an introvert who enjoys when people get along, and makes sure that everyone is involved in any process or decision-making. He steps up when needed, (e.g., he

became the de-facto construction leader on the worksite in Costa Rica due to his background in construction and major in engineering), but he generally prefers to stand back and observe. While on the program he became close friends with Carlo, and at the time this research was conducted, was roommates with him. Several times throughout the interviews, he repeated or referred to the sense of community the SSLC provided, the relationships that were formed among all the participants and the support they afforded him in his first year as a college student. He also valued the opportunity the program granted him to meet "so many people from so many different backgrounds." He has very fond recollections of his time with the program both while in the U.S. and in Costa Rica (he was alone with his host family, due to an odd number of male participants) as it allowed him to make connections with a variety of people he would not have met were it not for the SSLC program.

Cali – Getting out of her Bubble

Although Cali had extensive experience volunteering domestically and internationally, primarily in Brazil and Honduras, she still felt very sheltered. She recognized her upbringing as belonging to a homogenous community and the major she chose kept her in a bubble that offered very little contact with people from different socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds. However, what Cali was craving most was diversity. To her, the SSLC program offered exactly that, a foot in the door of diversity, as it enabled her to "spend time with people I had something in common with, but in a different setting," which gave her the opportunity to meet a variety of people while being surrounded by a supportive group of friends. Following the program, she expended her academic career to include Leadership as to her "when you say diverse community, the Leadership School is the definition of diverse." Throughout the program, Cali recalled struggling to find her marks, she did not know what was ok to do or not do, know or not know. She credited

the program for giving her access to a group of people that helped her navigate her uncertainties and make her feel that she fit, she explained “I thought I was gonna be the weird one out of the group or something, but I fit in really well and got to meet a lot of people.”

Emma - The Critic

Emma did not quite think things through when she enrolled in the program. She was returning from Nicaragua and was enrolling the day before classes began. “It was sort of a spur of the moment thing,” she explained, but then she “became friends with people, and I just didn't want to drop out of anything.” Emma came into the program with a lot of experience in community service abroad through Los Amigos de las Américas, a program she discovered in high school. Throughout the SSLC, she recalled making comparisons with what she knew from her previous experiences, and felt confused, jaded, and unable to relate or feel engaged. For example while discussing a typical Costa Rican dish in the Connection Hour, she explained:

> In my head where it's like, she would talk about gallo pinto, and I remember once she said something about they were onions in gallo pinto, or, I don't know, it was, she mentioned another ingredient, that wasn't just rice and beans. Or the gallo pinto that I've always had, it's just rice and beans. And so I was very confused about that.

She did not seem to find the experience that relevant, indicating she had “tossed” all the materials from the fall semester. She felt bored “I can't remember anything that we learned so I assume I was a little bit bored,” she did not remember specifics while in Costa Rica, saying: “I don't know, it's one of the things that it's hard to pinpoint exactly what we did while we were there.” She did not bond with the host family in Costa Rica, and was disappointed with parts of the service project completed there, saying, “that still just bugs me a little bit. The fact that we just painted a wall.” Ultimately concluding in her reflection that:

> Looking back on my experience with the SSLC, I would have to say that it wasn't all that I thought it would be. I thought that I would go to Costa Rica and have another life changing experience and come out of it a better person with lots of knowledge of and appreciation for the Costa Rican culture and all that it has to offer. However it wasn't anywhere near that. The trip wasn't life changing, I barely remember the people with whom we worked while in country, I came back to the States relatively exactly the same as I left, and I learned that no matter what I will always like Nicaragua more than Costa Rica.

On the surface, and compared to the other participants, the program did not seem impactful for Emma; however, throughout the interviews and her reflection she explained that for her, "the whole point of the program is more for the individual growth." While she might not have learned anything in the more academic sense, what she gained from the experience is, similarly to the other participants, the sense of community, the support she needed and craved to get her through that first year of college. In her reflection, she said:

> As cheesy and cliché as it sounds, for me the program really was about connections made rather than lives changed. […] So while I may not remember anything we learned in the connection hour, and I may not remember much about what we actually did in Costa Rica, I will always remember the feeling of knowing that in an overwhelming university of 24,000 students, I had at least 13 people that I could consider my friend.

Lilian – The Traveler

Coming in to college, Lilian was on a mission "to make friends." She took advantage of every opportunity offered to her to connect with as many people as she could. The SSLC program fit right in for her with the added benefit that it offered a way for her to expand her

language skills, knowing she would live with a host family while in Costa Rica, introduce her to leadership which she knew nothing about, and allow her to give back by participating in community service projects. Participating in the SSLC confirmed her interest in Spanish as a career and her desire to ensure experiencing life abroad would remain a prominent part of her academic career. She later went to Spain on a semester-long program. To her the SSLC was a positive way to begin college as it enabled her not to just make friends, but to become close with the group and her host family, which then allowed her to fully enjoy the little things she experienced throughout the program (e.g., hanging out to study with the group, her host family's tortillas). She also discovered that she could overcome some of her fears (e.g., zip lining and fear of heights) and that not all Latin American countries are the same. She has been going on mission trips to Guatemala every summer since high school, and recalled a very different experience, saying "in Guatemala it's a little different. We're not really allowed to go anywhere without chaperones because it is so dangerous," whereas she was surprised at how free and safe she felt walking around the market in Costa Rica.

Summary of the Participants

When looking at all the participants individually, all had their own personal experiences and perceptions of the program, ranging from seemingly irrelevant to them to almost perfect. For example, Emma (*the critic*) did not see the program itself, the classes or the activities as memorable, especially compared to her previous experience with community service abroad and in light of her anthropological academic background. On the other end of the spectrum, Naomi (*¡Pura vida!*), thought everything worked together well, and she felt that she benefited from almost all aspects of it including academic and personal growth.

On the face of it, these individual perceptions of the same experience may suggest few commonalities among the participants. However, as Emma (*the critic*) herself concluded in her reflection, “At a glance it could be seen as somewhat of a failure, but the trip itself isn’t what I most took away from the experience, rather the friendships I made along the way.” As expected from the title of the program and its underlining goals, i.e., to engage and integrate students by connecting with each other across a variety of topics, the program led to the creation of a bond among the participants. As Reba *(the out-of-state student)* highlighted in her reflection, “The most important part of the SSLC experience for me was the people that I experienced it with.” However, the community they formed and the bond they forged throughout the program did not come naturally and was not the only aspect of the experience they shared, as is shown in the themes presented next.

Themes

The analysis of the data allowed me to identify recurring words, such as, “learn” mentioned 214 times, “experience” (199), “community” (143), “friend/friendship” (120), “together” (144), “hang/hang out” (89) throughout the interviews and reflections. These words led to concepts the participants used to describe their experience such as “building/creating a community,” “making friends and building friendships,” “acquiring skills,” “learning and growing,” among others, which later prompted the emergence of themes (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009). The experiences of the group converged around five different yet interconnected themes, evolving in parallel throughout the program:

1) The outer shell – From “forced friendships” to “tight-knit”
2) The inner circle: Standing together – From “What if I don't mesh with any of them?” to “close relationships”

3) A service-learning experience – From “train wreck” to “definitely better”
4) A journey of discovery – From “bubble” to “there’s another world out there”
5) College insights – From “being a mess of a freshman” to “diving into the waters of college”

The following sections discuss each theme using direct quotes from interview transcriptions and personal reflections to best present how the participants made sense of the phenomenon and begin to uncover the essence of the shared experience of former students who participated in a Spanish Service-Learning Community program in their freshman year, through their own voices.

Theme 1: The Outer Shell – From “Forced Friendships” to “Tight-Knit”

The analysis of the data revealed that the participants perceived *the structure of the program* (e.g., the classes and activities) to have allowed them to combine areas of interest while creating ample opportunities for them to spend time together, get to know each other and gradually connect with one another, thus going from “forced friendships” to a “tight-knit” community. Combined with the structure, the participants also credited the *embedded support* provided by the program (e.g., the peer mentors, the host families) as part of the building blocks for them to connect and thrive in a supportive environment, forming a protective *outer shell* around them. In Cedric’s words, “Everyone's there to help you and not tear you down and make you look like a fool.”

The Structure of the Program

All participants were able to describe in detail the structure of both parts of the program, classes and activities they took part in during the fall and while in Costa Rica, as well as the advantages that the combination of interests offered for them as students. They also understood

that this structure was meant to help them bond, by spending extended structured and unstructured time together both in the fall and in Costa Rica as it "forced them to hang out" (AJ, Cali, Emma), "forced them to get immersed into it" (Becca), or as Miriam recalled, "being forced to hang out with the same group of 12, 15 kids for a whole semester, that [she] probably wouldn't have met otherwise."

Purposeful Combination of Topics

The program provided the participants with a structure by connecting mutual interests, which created an opportunity for them to "just meet new people and people, who are like me and are kind of passionate about the same things was really interesting" (Lilian). The structure of the program comprised of courses in Spanish and Leadership with a Connection Hour and a faculty-led study abroad component, facilitated a combination of academic subjects that tied the program together for the participants. Brooke described the program as "a good way to kind of bridge the gap between two classes that you're interested in." Thinking of the program and in particular the fall component, Carlo recalled "leadership studies, get Spanish out of the way, and then also just go to Costa Rica, so it's kind of a win, win, win. Three birds with one stone kind of thing."

The participants shared an awareness not only of the components of the fall, but also of the interrelatedness of the three elements: Spanish, Leadership Studies, and the Connection Hour. As Naomi mentioned, "you take a leadership class and a Spanish class and then the extra hour of like a preparation, I guess? It was just kind of cool how it was all able to work together." However, not all were sure at first about how it all worked. Brooke explained that a group of them was enrolled in two classes (Spanish and Leadership) "that were related somehow" through a "bridge hour on Fridays, that connected the two." AJ also declared that he "wasn't really quite

sure how all the classes were intertwined, but that was actually one of my favorite parts, how they all connected."

Nonetheless, in the end, the participants realized how the structure of the program not only combined their initial interests; it also prepared them for their experience abroad. Cali described the program as "Spanish in one class, learn leadership in another, and then Laura's class was to blend the two and try to work together on getting ready for Costa Rica." Although Miriam remembered not being fond of the fall part, she did realize the necessity of it and how it prepared her for Costa Rica, as it gave her the tools, i.e., the support of her peers, she needed to succeed once there. She explained, "I did learn more during the fall semester than I give it credit for, [it] set us up to succeed in our projects in Costa Rica" as it allowed her to "get that base knowledge of the students I was going with, and that the Costa Rica experience kind of tied all of that together."

Structured "Forced Friendships"

Not only did the program combine various interests for the participants, which worked together to prepare them to go to Costa Rica, it also encouraged bonding among the participants through a structured schedule. Miriam explained that through the structure of the program, more specifically the schedule of the program and the classes they took together, "you're meant to become friends with the people around you, or you're meant to at least give it a chance." Cali further described the program as one designed for the participants "to make friends."

Since the participants took the same classes, "that was six hours together a week" (Cali), and participated in the same activities, it created an inordinate amount of time spent together, leading to "forcing" the participants to "hangout" (AJ, Cali, Cedric, Emma, Miriam, Reba). During the fall, the participants were enrolled in three courses that provided ample opportunities

for them to be together and get to know each other, and "get comfortable" with one another (AJ, Brooke, Cali, Lilian, Reba). AJ remembered the schedule as, "the Spanish class was probably on Monday, Wednesday at 8:30 AM; then we had Leadership 212 class on Tuesday, Thursday at 11:30 AM. Then on Friday, we had a 9:30 AM class." Miriam argued that due to this schedule, she "was kind of forced to hang out with them."

Lilian understood the goal of this structured schedule as a way for them to bond saying that the classes "were organized mostly just to keep us all together. So we would become closer and just know each other on campus, really helped connecting." She and Naomi further discussed the bond the group forged throughout the semester thanks in part due to the courses they took together. They explained that this structure led them to not only be in the same classes, but to also work together, saying "it was our time together as we did assignments, there was a community service event that we had to do so, different things like that" (Lilian). Carlo also realized how the group "seemed to come together more and more as the semester went on with classes." Having all these classes together also helped Reba, who reported becoming more comfortable with the group throughout the first part of the program, saying:

> I really liked being in class, two different classes, getting to see those people, I guess, it was only three times a week, but still, it was nice to have multiple classes with these people that I felt comfortable with. It just made the classes more enjoyable.

In the Spanish and Connection Hour classes, the group was only composed of the SSLC program students, while the Leadership class was embedded in a larger lecture course. However, within that class, the SSLC group remained together. As Emma stated, "we had our own little sub-group" and "we were all together with that." Cali added, "we would all sit together, we had a big lecture hall, and we all sat in the front two rows together. Like, every single class, we sat

together." Cedric recalled "we actually got to know each other more because we had to work in groups, and we always had that interaction going," adding that the class activities in that course were "small group activities, team building and get-to-know-each-other icebreakers." Carlo remembered, "if we didn't understand, then we could work in our small groups and kind of talk about it." Lilian described the Leadership course as one that brought them "closer together, really helped connecting," remembering a can fundraising activity they completed in the course as a "bonding" moment for the group.

Brooke credited the group projects in the various classes, as having helped her become acquainted with the other members of the group, "I liked to be able to work with everyone, get to know everyone better." Although she mentioned not remembering much about the content of the Connection Hour, what stood out the most for her in that hour was that it was "just another time for all of us to be together" and "get to know them more and, build friendships." Miriam, for her part, did not feel that she had connected with the group in the fall; however, she noted, "when we got closer, it was because of that class."

While in Costa Rica, the participants had a structured schedule as well. They participated in language and culture classes (Brooke, Cali, Naomi), excursions to San José, or the Poás Volcano National Park (Cali, Carlo, Emma, Lilian, Miriam), or working on the community projects (all). Becca remembered, "waking up really early. Eating breakfast and then going to the school to meet either to have class or to go to the volunteer site, and then doing service for a few hours." Miriam recalled the group at the worksite in Costa Rica explaining that they "spent a lot of time just in that little backyard" which was "a big way for us to get to know each other." Naomi also suggested that the time they spent together on the worksite allowed them to become

even closer, saying, “I watched as relationships developed among our entire group.” Finally, Brooke remembered vividly her dance class as another bonding moment:

> I really liked the dancing class. That was really fun, how we all switched up partners, and I don't know, I just thought it was really fun and a good team bonding experience. It was lighthearted, and no one was good at it so It wasn't like.... Not that it would be a competition, but it was just everyone.... It was just funny how we were all bad at it and we all got to, you know, learn together.

Unstructured “Forced Friendships”

The required time together due to the schedule of the SSLC program also permeated outside of class, as they began gathering informally throughout the program. Miriam stated that by being “forced to hang out” with her classmate in and out of class made her “definitely more comfortable around them towards the end of the semester” than she was at the beginning. AJ remembered simply hanging out and watching a movie after a study session one day and Claire (not a participant in the study, but part of the program at the time) snapping a picture of him:

> It's a picture of just myself and a Wildcat warm-up leader, laying on the ground during.... Watching a movie. To me it represents.... It's kind of hard because you can't see everyone else, but it represents just how well eventually as the classes enter.... Our single class was just so comfortable with each other.

This feeling was further accentuated in Costa Rica as they spent eleven days together, seeing each other daily (Becca, Brooke, Cedric, Naomi, Reba) due to the schedule, but also spending more time together in the evenings as a group (AJ, Cali, Carlo, Cedric, Emma, Lilian, Miriam, Naomi). As Emma indicated, “just at the end of the night whenever we would all get together and just talk, and hang out. I remember Naomi’s birthday, she was just dancing, it was

really funny," and enjoying "whenever we were all together in sort of a more relaxed environment." Lilian further recognized the bond that formed among the participants due to the time they all spent together during the fall and while in Costa Rica, explaining, "we became friends throughout the semester. But from seeing those people, I think it was three times a week to hang out with them 24/7 basically, that was really different and it was really kind of cool. I feel like the friendships were just a lot closer." Becca concluded that, "being with each other for a whole two weeks, definitely you're going to get close to those people." Naomi discussed her takeaway from the fall semester, explaining how the amount of time spent together -- the "forced friendships" (AJ, Cali, Cedric, Emma, Miriam, Reba) – created a bond that went beyond simple classmates (AJ, Becca, Cali, Cedric, Emma, Lilian, Miriam, Reba):

> I think it was just watching our relationships grow throughout the semester. I mean, my relationships grew more so than in any other class just because we were together so much. I guess we had more to, not more to talk about, but just we had more in common maybe. Since we were taking all of these classes together. And usually by Friday we were all talking about what happened during the week; we'd be just wanting to talk to each other. So I think that was really cool. Just having those relationships that I didn't really… I thought college is like, you go to class, and you find friends somewhere else or something maybe.

The Embedded Support

While the structure of the program combined topics of interests and created structured and unstructured opportunities for the participants to become acquainted with one another, it also provided a supportive environment. The program's design contributed to the personalization of the interaction with faculty, peer mentors, and the community abroad. These elements combined

with the perceived relaxed learning environment (AJ, Cali, Carlo, Cedric, Naomi, Reba) ultimately created a sense of approachability and support for the group. For example, Naomi expressed that beyond the bond she created with the other students, was also the connection she made "with our teachers and teaching assistants, with our guides and directors in Costa Rica, and with our host families."

Advisors - The Beginning of a Community

The support and guidance began before the program even started. The participants found out about the SSLC program during summer orientation and enrollment through their appointments with their advisors, who expertly guided them toward the program by appealing to their varied interests, past experiences, and desire to travel. Carlo recalled talking with an advisor about the program when he came for enrollment and thinking, "I just kept hearing more and more about it, and it just sounded like a lot, like a lot a lot of fun, so I was kind of interested." Cedric remembered meeting the "head coordinator" at that time, and being told about the program, and realizing that the combination of Spanish and Leadership into a "community that really opened up my eyes to something that I actually want to do." Emma mentioned discussing her recent trip to Nicaragua, and how she enjoyed Spanish, community service and traveling, so when she enrolled the day before school started, she recalled that her advisor "brought up the idea of doing the SSLC." Reba recounted meeting with her Biology advisor and telling her that she wanted to take Spanish. As she was in the process of enrolling, her advisor suggested "to come talk to the Spanish department" where she learned more about the program and decided to sign-up a few days later. Naomi remembered meeting with her Education advisor and discussing the program "since you're doing this [Spanish], and you have expressed an interest in taking a leadership studies class, we have a SSLC for that."

Faculty

Naomi discussed in detail her interactions beyond her direct peers and in particular faculty who participated in the SSLC. She, along with AJ, Becca, Cali, Carlo, Cedric, and Reba focused on the relationship with faculty, during the fall component of the program, in terms of class related material, and acknowledged their role when it came to the construction of a sense of community, by fostering and supporting their academic development. Naomi, for example, recalled her experience in the Leadership course, explaining that her professor would "walk around to each little group." This was important for her to both allow her to know her teacher and to make her feel that she was part of a smaller class, which she generally prefers, saying "even how in a leadership class with 200 people, we were still able to make it small, and get more personalization." Having closer contact with the faculty also empowered the participants to complete different assignments and find "creative solutions" to academic issues (Carlo), feel comfortable expressing themselves on a personal and linguistic level (Brooke, Cali, Naomi), thus boosting their personal, academic and linguistic confidence (AJ, Carlo, Lilian, Miriam). Cali also remembered their first Spanish class in Costa Rica. They were outside and they were all nervous, but the professors, to ease the tension and show them they could succeed, used "team building games, but we played them with the rest of the class and it was really fun" (Cali). AJ, Brooke, and Cali also mentioned Maria, the local faculty in charge in Costa Rica. Brooke, in particular, had fond memories of her saying, "she was awesome. I think we definitely got to know her a lot better, just because we had class with her and she would take us on the different excursions." Becca also connected with Maria outside of the classroom, and felt supported and understood when she sat with her while the rest of the group was zip lining, she recounted:

> She was a lot of fun. I really liked her. I know the one time we went to the zip line, I didn't zip line, but I got to talk to Maria for the majority of the time and I really enjoyed that. Because we were speaking in Spanish and the speaking part of Spanish is the most difficult part for me. Reading and writing I feel I have that, but speaking it is way harder. So I remember when I was speaking with her I was really nervous about it, and I kept telling her I'm so sorry, I keep messing up. And she's like no, no, at least you're trying, and she made me feel better about it. I think that also really helped.

Peer Mentors

Aside from the faculty who taught courses in the fall and in Costa Rica, the program had three learning assistants, two in the Leadership class, and one in the Connection Hour. The latter also went to Costa Rica with the group. The peer mentors were college seniors with experience in college, leadership, Spanish, and/or traveling abroad. The participants explained that the learning environment combined with the peer mentors' efforts to engage them in a variety of activities outside of the classroom, such as movie night, or study hour, also contributed to building a supportive community. Miriam discussed one of the leadership peer mentors and remembered feeling "pretty close with her." Cali described the leadership peer mentors as "big brother, big sister for all of us" as they helped them navigate nonacademic issues, such as getting a passport. She explained that the group at times "had no idea what we were doing at all," but since the peer mentors had experience; it "was really good for us as a group to have questions about what we were doing." Emma was thankful to the Connection Hour/Costa Rica learning assistant, whose prior experience as a student in the same program the year before helped the group understand what was going to happen. She said, "that was the main thing that all of us wanted to know about, was what is actually going to happen. And she has, or had, I guess- Still

has firsthand knowledge of what to expect." Naomi also appreciated the Connection Hour/Costa Rica learning assistant's efforts to "get us all together. We did it two or three separate times in this semester and I know we did one in the winter kind of before winter break," she reported the interaction as a "big positive" for her because she liked "to get to hang out with her as well, outside of a classroom environment."

Host Community

While in Costa Rica, the participants stayed with host families who further helped and supported them as they adapted to a new environment in a different language. Everyone within the program lived with a host family, and self-selected their roommate (Cedric/Carlo, Cali/Lilian, Becca/Reba, Miriam/Naomi, Brooke/Claire – the latter was not a participant in the study, but part of the program at the time). As there was an odd number of men and women, Emma and AJ, as they had the most experience abroad and with the language, volunteered for different living arrangements. Emma stayed with a host family with the Connection Hour/Costa Rica Learning Assistant, while AJ was alone with his host family. Although not all of them were able to connect with their host families (Becca, Reba), "we really didn't know them at all, I don't remember their names" (Emma), the majority of the participants declared having developed a deep bond that helped them feel at ease. For example, AJ recounted spending time with his host family, learning how to make ceviche with his host mother and connecting with his host dad and neighbor about cars:

> My host family asked me what I liked, and I talked about cars, and the person next door to me actually had, I think it was a Bentley from a race. It would be considered a formula 1, so top-notch racing Bentley from early 1900s, and then he took me out on his very well

> equipped off-road vehicle. And we just walked through all the cars that he had and he would talk to me about them and I just kept asking him questions, and it was so cool.

Brooke, Cali, Miriam, and Lilian also remembered connecting with their family, and feeling welcome and comfortable with them, making the experience more personable for them. When they struggled with the language, Brooke recalled, “they would try to say the English words that they know to catch us up.” The sense of welcome Cali felt made her feel “like you're not isolated from the community” and she appreciated that although they did not always understand each other, her host mom tried to work with them, to help them, she “met us where we were at. So that was really, really nice of her. She didn't have to take that time to understand us, but she did.” Miriam recalled her host mom being open with them and that her favorite part was their willingness to talk to them. She remembered feeling intimidated by the dad at first, “because he wasn't around as much, but he was so kind to us. He took us out in the yard and explained every single tree that was in the yard.” She had been very nervous about staying with a host family, but “they made it extremely comfortable to be there.” Naomi credited living with a supportive host family while in Costa Rica for developing her language skills as well as self-confidence in her speaking abilities. “if I said a few words wrong, they just corrected me, but they understood what I was saying. So, it helped me trust myself and it's not gonna be perfect but they're gonna know what I'm talking about.” Cedric, who was roommate with Carlo while in Costa Rica, was amazed by how their host family welcomed and took care of them, ultimately making him feel safe, and that he was among people he could trust:

> What stood out to me the most was the relationships and bonds that were built while we were in Costa Rica. I found it amazing how my host family took Carlo and I in like we were their own children. She even encouraged us to call her mom, they took us on a tour

and always wanted to know what we did that day. She sat down and got to know us which I find remarkable. I found the experience to be truly inspiring and a true once and a lifetime opportunity. Though I was scared in the beginning, I quickly learned that I could trust the place.

Finally, while at the worksite in Costa Rica, working on the service-learning project, the participants reported fond memories of Elvin, the onsite contractor and supervisor. They felt he not only directed and instructed them, but he did so in a supportive way, allowing them to try things out on their own, and always ready to lend a hand or explain how to do things when needed. Carlo described Elvin as "almost a paternal" figure for them, helping them on the site, "if we were stumbling like how do we make concrete without mixer, he was, 'Oh let me show you.'" Carlo enjoyed feeling free to troubleshoot ideas, but then have Elvin show them a different way "to be more effective." Naomi and Becca also recalled relying on Elvin and the faculty present at the worksite, for example when learning to make cement, "I wouldn't have known where to start with that. And so the workers would help us more with that" (Becca), "they made sure to go through and show us how to do what we were doing so we could successfully do it" (Naomi).

Summary of Theme 1

Throughout the SSLC program, the participants moved from "forced friendships" to become a "tight-knit" group, in part because of the structure and support the participants received from the program, which provided them with a protective *outer shell.* By combining a variety of interests, offering classes and activities that created structured and unstructured forced-time-together, the participant were able to become acquainted with one another, while feeling encouraged and supported by the people in charge of, or connected to the program, i.e., the

advisors, faculty, peer mentors, host families. The participants recognized the structure of the program and embedded support as means to facilitate the development of the community as a whole and to have helped them develop deeper connections among themselves than the ones they created with other classmates, a bond beyond simple classmates, as Cali described:

> Like people in your other classes, you don't really get to do that with all the time. You're spending more than just class time with them. You're spending time like working on a project in leadership class, and then you're spending time learning the language, Spanish. You see them multiple times a week, you build friendships. Forced friendships.

The sense of community was further developed among the group of participants themselves, through the new experiences and challenges they faced together throughout the program, which encouraged them to rely on one another, as presented next in Theme 2: The inner circle: Standing together – From "What if I don't mesh with any of them?" to "close relationships."

Theme 2: The Inner Circle: Standing Together – From "What if I Don't Mesh With any of Them?" to "Close Relationships"

The supportive environment embedded in the structure of the program (Theme 1 – The outer shell) created a foundation for the participants to build a community, which they cemented by sharing new experiences and working together through various challenges throughout the SSLC program. The sense of community and friendship among the participants did not happen overnight or naturally, as none of them knew each other prior to the beginning of the program, "I knew nobody coming in" said Cedric. Miriam also explained that she was worried at the beginning of the SSLC program because they were not friends, and she was "kind of nervous about being with the same kids because I was thinking, 'what if I don't like mesh with any of

them?' I have three classes with these kids." The group instead got acquainted with one another slowly, built their community with the help of the structure and support the program provided, i.e., the *outer shell*, as described in Theme 1, and bonded through the difficulties and challenges (e.g., communication, confusion, adaptation) they faced as a group, as they learned to help each other and rely on one another. They also connected over the excitement of sharing in new experiences, to form their own *inner circle*, thus developing, strengthening, and solidifying their bond.

Getting Acquainted: The Beginnings of the Inner Circle

The group did not "mesh" right from the start, as they did not know each other prior to the beginning of the SSLC program. Instead, they slowly became acquainted and learned to communicate, to slowly develop relationships, and began to create their own inner community.

A Slow Start

AJ stated that for him, "the most important things that made this experience so great was the sense of community that started to grow from day one of the semester." During the first interview, focused on the fall part of the program, the participants were asked to bring and discuss artifacts that represented for them the fall semester. Brooke, Carlo, Cedric, Emma, Miriam, Reba brought none, AJ, Cali, and Naomi described and discussed photos and drawings, while the remaining two participants, Becca and Lilian brought, described and discussed pictures from the fall semester (see Table 3-1, in the previous chapter, for details on the nature and number of artifacts). The six participants who did not share any artifacts cited a lack of interpersonal connection, a "lack of bond, we were all sort of pretty uncomfortable with one another" (Emma), "feeling uncomfortable" (Miriam), as well as a "lack of relevance or interest" at the time (Cedric, Reba). The five who discussed and/or brought artifacts shared that during the

fall segment of the program, they were in the process of "building a community" (AJ, Cali), and they became "tight by the end of the semester" (Naomi). The participants emphasized the slow process of building a community amongst themselves, and admitted that for most of them, it did not develop at their full potential until they went to Costa Rica (Cali, Emma, Miriam, Naomi), where it was reinforced and solidified. The *inner circle* began slowly through the fall semester as the group faced a variety of challenges related to communication and academics, which forced them to interact with each other, and learn to communicate and rely on one another for support and help.

Learning to Communicate With one Another

Since none of the participants knew each other prior to the beginning of the program, communication among the group began slowly. Emma recalled that they all "felt pretty awkward and uncomfortable with one another." Miriam was unsure she would "mesh with anyone." Cali explained that since "no one knew each other," they began using a group message as a way to break the ice. At the beginning Carlo, Cedric, Lilian and Miriam reported that these messages centered on assignments, "if we had questions on homework we'd text each other" (Carlo). However, Carlo stated that eventually these messages became a source of fun, saying that after a while they were "texting jokes and stuff." Cali further added that they were communicating with each other with pictures, and that they would "put memes on them all the time," explaining that it was "nice to just be able to joke, it was something that we had in common and could joke around with." Eventually, they became more comfortable around one another, but most of them recognized that they truly began communicating and bonding toward the end of the semester. Naomi described a picture she took at the end of the semester with everyone's name and social media written on the board in the Leadership course. She explained that to her, it symbolized the

emerging bond they had created, “we were really tight at the end of the semester, because we'd gone through the whole semester together and we had become such good friends.”

Academic Challenges

During the fall part of the program, the participants experienced some confusion and frustration with the courses they were taking. At the beginning of the Leadership course, for example, AJ, Brooke, Cedric, and Emma recalled having the SSLC group split into two, which made them feel disconnected from each other, “we felt like it became almost two different groups” (AJ). They did not understand why they were separated since they were together in the other two classes they were taking, i.e., Spanish and the Connection Hour, so they discussed it amongst themselves, and asked to all work together “we kept saying, ‘There's another group here, why aren't we with them?’” (AJ). They eventually were able to become one group, which enabled them to bond further, as they had themselves requested to be together, as Cedric stated, “that's how, as a class, we got closer and everything, and how we just eventually got along really well.”

Another source of confusion that led the participants to interact and connect with each other was the Spanish class. Cali recalled struggling to find her place among the various proficiency levels in the class, “I remember being weirdly in the middle” which led her to reach out to her classmates, “I was looking back through our group, and it was me and Claire being like, ‘When can we study together? When are we doing this? What are we doing?’” Cedric also reported being able to lean on other group members in that particular course to complete assignments, “if you got confused, someone could help us, help you out on that.”

The Connection Hour, which “was meant to connect Spanish and the leadership class” (Reba), created some confusion as it was perceived to be an unconventional class. There was a

shared misconception about the purpose of this particular segment, “we thought it was just to assimilate ourselves with Costa Rica, but it seemed like doing that for 16 weeks was a lot” (AJ). Particularly because it was only one credit worth, “This is one credit hour, I don't know about this” (Carlo). The participants expected that it would not represent too much investment on their part, and that it was only intended as a preparation for Costa Rica. They were “confused” / found it “confusing” (AJ, Emma, Cedric, Naomi), and some were frustrated, “the connection hour, that was my most frustrating part of [the program]” (Miriam), “we all sort of felt like the connection hour we didn't actually get much tangible knowledge” (Emma).

However, out of these misconceptions and sense of confusion or frustration came communication. As they did not fully understand what was expected of them for this portion of the program, they began talking, Becca remembered, “being able to struggle with it together” as a group, eventually leading to bonding over the issue. Miriam reported that it gave them something in common that they started talking about, “I think what bonded us was that we didn't enjoy that class so much,” and it gave them something to talk about. However, Miriam also recognized that it was this class that started them talking more, because this is where the idea of going to Costa Rica together became real “Hey, we're getting ready to go to Costa Rica together, we should probably, start talking to each other a little bit more." I think that's kind of what started us chatting a little bit more.”

The confusion and frustration with some aspects of the program in the fall, the struggle to relate the class content with their preconceived expectations of the courses motivated them to get together and share resources to make sense of the goals of the program as a whole, and its individual components. These issues brought the participants together, as they realized that “none of us had a clue what we were doing. It was cool to be on the same page and same level as

anybody," so everyone became "friendlier with each other" (Miriam). Carlo explained how the group had grown together, supporting each other while studying and relaxing, recalling an evening together studying for finals:

> …everyone [was] hanging out and studying for the final, so we got a bunch of chips and salsa or food and stuff. We were all just hanging out watching a movie, and just working on either Spanish homework or just getting ready for the final. It was just fun to do that.

Challenges were not the only way the participants bonded. They also came together as a group as they shared in the excitement of going through new experiences together abroad, as explained next.

"We're all in it Together": Solidifying a Bond While Adapting Abroad

Toward the end of the fall semester and while in Costa Rica, the group began to bond further over the excitement of the trip, its unknowns and uncertainties, and the new environment they were finding themselves in. As they realized the trip to Costa Rica was approaching. Miriam recalled having conversations with her classmates about what to bring on their trip because they "were all ecstatic to be going even though none of us had a clue what we were doing." Although she felt they were not "very close, but we didn't know what we were getting ourselves into at the same time." Going to Costa Rica together reinforced and sped up the bonding process. Emma stated that the group "didn't completely bond until Costa Rica."

Sharing in New Experiences and Challenges as a Group in Costa Rica

Lilian explained that she felt she had gotten closer to her classmates as she discussed various photos of the group she had taken in Costa Rica, while they were traveling on the bus every day to either go on excursions or go to the worksite and the shared excitement of everyone as they were discovering a new place together:

> Just any time we were, traveling to go do stuff, on the bus or just on the plane, you know, we were always talking about, "How cool is this?," "Oh my gosh, we're in Costa Rica, during winter break!" Everyone's freezing in Kansas and we're on the beach. So that was really cool.

Becca explained that "being with each other, working together" while "being in new situations," definitely helped further develop their bond. However, not everything was perfect. Becca, Cali, Carlo, Emma, Lilian and Reba recalled not having access to water the first week they arrived in Costa Rica, as a storm had destroyed a main pipe, and the town was in the process of repairing the system. The struggle of having to take "cold bucket showers" or no showers at all became a source of conversation and bonding for them. Reba and Brooke recalled having to take "bucket showers with freezing water," Becca added, "I mean you could still take a shower but we had a bucket to share with the whole family." However, the group took it in stride, Lilian and Cali recalled traveling on the bus saying "we were all gross because we hadn't showered because there was no running water" yet, they were "all just laughing."

For Emma, Costa Rica was a turning point in the group's relationship, when they truly formed a community of friends:

> I think it was always sort of awkward up until Costa Rica. And then once we got to Costa Rica, we just realized that you know we're all awkward, but we're all in it together. And then once we sort of let those barriers down, because you sort of always try to pretend like you have everything together, and you sort of try to act poised and then once you realize hey, we all smell super gross and we just got to all be, you know, just completely open with each other and let those barriers down. So once we did that, we were able to really bond a lot more.

Working Together

The inner circle was further strengthened at the Nutrition Center, as the group worked together and improved their communication with one another. Miriam and Brooke discussed the group's interaction at the worksite, explaining that it improved and grew, as they learned "how to work with others, and I mean, we had to learn how to communicate because we had to get something done" (Miriam). Brooke added that, in Costa Rica, not only did the sense of community they had built amongst themselves in the fall semester help them, as "everyone was willing to help out," it also further reinforced the bond they had already created as "everyone got a chance to get to know each other better and work with everyone." Brooke, Cali and Reba brought the same photo of the group from the Nutrition Center, "when we were posing by our little cement slab thing" (Reba), "a silly picture. Shows that we were having fun" (Brooke). Cali recalled the changes from previous group pictures, attributing it to knowing each other more and being more comfortable with one another, explaining that, "That one was at our site, the concrete we were pouring. It's funny because we all changed. Emma looks funnier. Cedric actually has some sort of facial expression this time."

Living Situation

While in Costa Rica, the participants stayed with host families (as explained in Theme 1), which gave them more opportunities to bond further amongst themselves. While discussing some photos Miriam brought to her second interview about Costa Rica, she recalled that before they left she did not really know anyone, but that the "trip just bonded us immediately, especially having Naomi as a roommate, [we] grew into close friends." Becca (roommate with Reba) corroborated saying, "I think the group got closer in ways. Especially with who you were with

when you were living there." Throughout his time in Costa Rica, Carlo remembered learning about his roommate Cedric and discovering who he was:

> I got to know Cedric so much better being roommates with him. I found out architectural engineering sucks. At least for me, it's a lot of work, but he's definitely the type of dude that's cut out for it, just from what he said, when we came from the bars we were just talking one time in the room and he was like, "Yeah, like I love to build things. Love to create things." And I was like, "All right, well you're definitely an architectural person," kind of thing.

Inside jokes that gave them even more of a sense of belonging to the inner circle, to which only they had access to as they grew closer, became more common. For example, Cali, who was roommate with Lilian, described "hanging on the fratio," a nickname that AJ and Carlo had given to the patio at Lilian and Cali's host family home, where they would spend time together, sometimes accompanied by AJ, Carlo, and Cedric. She recalled posting photos on Instagram with the caption "'Hangin on the fratio' and no one's going to understand on the outside world, but the few, the few of us in the joke had it."

Most of the host families were related to one another, which further enabled some participants to bond with one another. For example, Miriam/Naomi's host father was the brother of Carlo/Cedric host father, Becca/Reba's host mother was Emma' host mother' sister, which allowed for the group to interact with each other even more, and share in more new experiences together. Miriam, Naomi, AJ, Carlo, and Cedric, in particular, recalled a day when they "climbed up the finca." Carlo shared a picture of the group on a three-hour climb through his host family land, i.e., the finca, with his host dad showing them different trees and birds' nests. For Naomi, who shared a similar photo, it symbolized her experience in Costa Rica and the bond she had

developed with the other participants as they helped each other through the climb to share in the beauty of the area:

> I didn't know any of these people prior. I know, our relationships were able to build throughout the first semester but Miriam and I lived together. And then, Carlo and Cedric lived together and then AJ just came along cause you know, he always did. I thought it was cool just because it was after a long afternoon or something but we had really wanted to go up to the top of this mountain and so we just kind of decided, hey, let's go for it. And, so, I mean it was kind of difficult to get up there. It was pretty steep and, you know, I was freaking out, watching out for snakes and stuff like that. But, we got to the top and they had brought the flag and so I just thought it was really cool that, you know, it's kind of like the team work, you know. We helped each other, you know. Somebody would jump up and help the other person, so I thought it was a cool representation of the relationships we had made and the teamwork we used.

Communicating With the Host Community

Living together was not only another way for the participants to develop their friendships; it was also a source of comfort and support when communicating with their host families. Reba (roommate with Becca) recalled an instance when her host mother came into their room, saying, "she was asking us something and.... Neither of us, neither of us really.... Like we knew what she was kind of saying, but we didn't know how to respond." The language barrier was a common issue for the participants while in their host families' homes, but they helped one another to communicate. Lilian (roommate with Cali) explained that it "definitely helped because if I did not know what to say, she would know what to say, so we kind of helped each other a lot in that aspect." Cedric remembered, "I wasn't as good at speaking Spanish as Carlo

was. So then sometimes she would talk to Carlo and Carlo would relay the information back to me."

However, for some, communication in Spanish was easier (AJ, Emma), and in some instances created some discomfort. Emma for example, recalled her frustration with the group, as she became the de-facto interpreter for her classmates at the worksite in Costa Rica. She found it disrespectful to the local community when her classmates were either unwilling or unable to communicate in Spanish, and was annoyed that they claimed to want to learn the language but did not make the effort. She explained:

> It was difficult because I had started out by trying to just interpret and still speak to the other students in Spanish, so that way it wasn't uncomfortable with, I can't remember their names, because I didn't want them to be offended by us speaking English, but then the other students would be just like 'well, what did they say?' And they just wanted it in English, so at least for me that was probably the most challenging part, was just sort of the level of, I don't know…. Because there were multiple times where I was like 'no, I'm not going to speak to you in English.' Like this cannot happen, I'm sorry. I mean they all wanted to learn Spanish, and that's how they're going to learn.

Summary of Theme 2

The bond the participants developed through the challenges and new experiences they faced throughout the SSLC, created a deep connection that went beyond simple classmates. They learned to rely on one another and help each other. That bond "brought them even closer" (AJ, Becca, Cali, Cedric, Emma, Lilian), and created enduring friendships "not just, oh, you see them in class for an hour a week or something, and then you never talk to them again. I still consider myself to be friends with those people" (Reba). Miriam acknowledged that "you get very bonded

with your group, which is something that I knew as we were there that we were becoming friends and getting closer. I didn't know that those friendships would continue once we got back." Naomi also commented on the bond and relationships within the group (the *inner circle*) and outside (the *outer shell* – discussed in Theme 1) in her reflection, saying:

> To me, the essence of the program lied within the relationships I built with others along the way: first and foremost with the other students in the SSLC, with our teachers and teaching assistants, with our guides and directors in Costa Rica, and with our host families. It is crazy to look back and see all of the relationships I developed as a result of this SSLC.

In turn this community helped them apply their "leadership ability and knowledge of the Spanish that we had learned in the fall semester to put that to use, and to help other people" (AJ), in order to "learn" (all) and "grow" (Becca, Brooke, Cali, Carlo, Cedric, Emma, Miriam, Naomi). The building of a community presented in Theme 1: *The outer shell*, and Theme 2: *The inner circle*, created a foundation that enabled the participants to learn and grow as will be discussed in the next three themes.

Theme 3: A Service-Learning Experience – From "Train Wreck" to "Definitely Better"

According to the participants, the structure of the program as well as the challenges and new experiences they faced helped them bond as a group, as discussed in the previous two themes. The group also recognized that both parts of the program were intrinsically linked, i.e., the fall segment was designed to prepare them to succeed abroad linguistically, culturally, and with their understanding of leadership and service learning. For example, Miriam realized at the end of the second interview that she had learned "more during the fall semester than I give it

credit for" and that it had set them "to succeed in our projects in Costa Rica." Brooke, Cali, Cedric, and Naomi acknowledged that the 11-day faculty-led service-learning tour in Costa Rica gave them the opportunity to apply the leadership and linguistic skills they had developed the previous semester, and gave them the opportunity to "connect what you're learning and real life skills" (Cali). Carlo also stated that the program was "one of those times where I could apply my Spanish, leadership and problem solving abilities in the real world." Naomi further explained:

> It's the perfect culmination of all the skills we learned during the fall semester. There is a reason for everything that we do in the course. By the end of the trip, I realized that everything we did throughout the semester had a purpose. All of our activities in the leadership classroom, all of the Spanish we learned, and the connection hour that brought the two together and prepared us for the service learning we would complete abroad.

The participants recounted in detail being involved in two group service-learning projects. During the fall, as part of the Leadership course, the participants had to organize, advertise and carry out a can collection fundraiser to donate to a local charity. While in Costa Rica, the group worked at a local Nutrition Center (a center that provides food assistance as well as daycare for low-income families), where they cleaned the outside to put in a vegetable garden, painted various rooms, and built a cement playground for the children using the Center. The sense of community the group had developed (as discussed in Themes 1 and 2) in part influenced their approach to the group service-learning projects. However, the analysis of the data also suggested that the perception of the process and outcome of each project was affected by the *structure* of each (which differed between the fall and Costa Rica), which coupled with the group size, led to intertwined *organizational*, *leadership*, and *engagement* issues. Throughout these two group service-learning activities, a disengaged autonomous group of untrained strangers, who

considered their first group project a “train wreck,” a “disaster,” a “failure,” morphed into an involved supervised group of learned friends who viewed this second community endeavor as “definitely better,” an activity that “went a lot smoother,” in which they did a “tremendously better job.”

Structure of the Group Service-Learning Activities

Each group service-learning activity was structured differently. For both projects, the can fundraising in the fall, and the Nutrition Center in Costa Rica, the participants were told what the projects were, they did not select them. For the participants, the first service-learning activity gave them too much freedom while the second one forced them to keep their eyes on the prize.

Can Fundraising - “We Wanted Direction”

The goals of the first group project in the fall, i.e. the can fundraising project, embedded in the Leadership course, felt too broad and left the group directionless. Although the participants recognized that the Leadership class professor and peer mentors were available to support them during this service-learning project, the activity rested solely on the shoulders of the participants. Naomi explained that “ultimately it was kind of us working with each other to figure out what was best so they [community leaders] couldn't help us very much. We wanted direction.” She felt the lack of direction ultimately held them back as they were unsure as to where to go and how to go about it. Carlo also remembered that their peer mentors, who were juniors and seniors in leadership, “weren't telling us what to do,” which led the participants to feeling confused, “we're freshman and we have all this authority with this project and it was just like, ‘I have no idea what I'm doing’” (Carlo). Additionally, the scope of the project felt too broad for some participants, which left them feeling lost, and not knowing which approach to take, yet at the same time wanting to do it all. For example, Cali thought they had difficulties narrowing down the focus

and getting something done. She recalled, “Everybody’s ideas got way too big. It was eighteen of us in our class and they wanted to do all these things to change the world. And we were all going this many directions.” Reba echoed this sentiment saying that they simply ended up with too many ideas, and that because they were so many, they did not “execute them well. We wanted to do that, and we also wanted to do, like, where we’d go and stand outside of Walmart.” Becca added that the lack of direction made it “hard deciding what to actually do.”

Nutrition Center - “Attainable Goals”

The group service-learning project in Costa Rica felt more manageable to the participants, as it seemed to them to be more structured and present intermediate objectives meant to assist them in reaching the broader goal of the project. The local community had determined what was needed according to the group size and what could be accomplished in an 11-day timeframe. While the overall goal was the renovation of the Nutrition Center, the work was already divided into various tasks: cleaning the outside, painting, and building a playground. Thus, when they arrived on the job site, as Carlo explained, they “knew the objectives.” The purpose was “to help the school and do something to help the community” (Becca), but different from the can fundraising, at the Nutrition Center, the overall goal was already structured in a variety of manageable responsibilities, as AJ explained, “we did a tremendously better job at this project. I think it was a lot to do with we had a very attainable goal, and we also had very good direction.” Reba and Becca emphasized, “there was multiple things we could be doing,” and they had “a lot of different tasks” which made it easier for them to organize themselves into subgroups to accomplish each task.

The need for focused direction during the first group service-learning project was compounded by the lack of leadership within the group. Whereas the clear direction they

received for the project at the Nutrition Center allowed leaders to naturally emerge based on their strengths, as discussed in the next section.

Leadership

The leadership abilities of the participants evolved throughout the program as they learned about leadership concepts in their class, worked together on the service-learning activities, and became better acquainted with one another. All of which affected the perceived outcome of each project.

"None of us Really Took a Leadership Role"

When discussing the can fundraising project, AJ recalled that they "weren't really sure what to do and it was just kind of strange going around neighborhoods and asking, "do you have cans?" The group felt directionless (as previously discussed) but also could not establish a clear leadership structure to assist them with the task. Emma recalled, "none of us really took a leadership role in it. No one really started delegating anything." While Emma saw no leaders, Becca, Cali and Reba saw too many. Reba and Becca emphasized that participating in the collection of the cans, proved complex given their personality traits, as both of them identified as introverted and shy individuals who were placed in a situation to negotiate with extroverted and outspoken classmates. Becca recalled the group having to decide how they were going to carry out the can fundraiser; she remembered it as "a struggle just because we had a lot of loud voices in our class. You could definitely tell who were the leaders and who were just like, 'Eh, I'll let them do what they want to do.'" She and Cali also stated stepping back and watching as others took over the project. Cali also recalled the abundance of leaders in the room, saying, "I think the biggest thing out of that group was that there was a lot of leaders in the room. Lots of people who had a lot of big ideas and not a lot of people who liked to compromise." Reba attempted to

explain the surge in leaders as a result of what they were learning in the class, stating, “I think another part of that was that we’re in this class all learning to be leaders, so we all wanted to take the initiative and lead.” Same as Cali and Becca, she observed how difficult it was for some to step back, while others gladly did so and “let someone else do this.” Emma also attributed the difficulties in establishing leadership to the size of the group, saying, “it's harder to be organized when there are that many people.”

“We Knew Each Other Well”

The atmosphere within the group had an impact on their work. Whereas during the fall working together felt “awkward and forced” (Miriam), and rendered difficult because they did not “know each other yet” (Cali), it was the opposite in Costa Rica. Naomi and Miriam explained that they “had all gotten to know each other more, it was more fun to be together.” Lilian felt that “the friendships were a lot closer then, which is really nice, and we were able to work together really well.” Cali emphasized that the established relationships and friendships allowed them to better organize themselves and coordinate the tasks at hand, saying “I think it was because we knew each other better at that point.” Brooke also recalled that in Costa Rica, the sense of community they had built in the fall semester assisted them as “everyone was willing to help out,” Naomi added “We helped each other complete tasks and worked together when others needed a hand.” Becca also acknowledged that by the time they began working at the Nutrition Center, they knew each other well, “and the more you get to know them, the better you work with each other.” AJ explained that the classes they took and activities they participated in enabled them to “see each other in different settings and see our different strengths.” Both Reba and Cali also noted that they had learned to recognize each other’s strengths and differences by

the time the Leadership class was over in the fall, which allowed for the emergence of more "effective leaders" (Reba).

Natural Leaders

Because they knew each other so well by the time they began working at the Nutrition Center in Costa Rica, and they had clear attainable goals for the project (as previously discussed), the participants felt more comfortable stepping up when needed and dividing the tasks based on individual strengths. "We would sort of just go to whichever one fit us best. There were certain times where we would have to sort of take leadership roles, and take charge in certain situations," explained Emma. Natural leaders emerged according to tasks, personal strengths and abilities. Carlo explained, "You figure out their strengths, their weaknesses, and you complement their strengths, and you pick up their weaknesses, and they pick up your weaknesses, and kind of work together like from the leaderships aspects of it." For example, Cedric, generally quiet and reserved, felt right at home with painting so he took the lead in that area, "I'd help people with painting and tell them what to do. So I was kinda lead on that part," but he also remembered others playing up their various skills. AJ, who had previously worked with construction and was an engineering major took the lead with building the cement playground, Cedric recalled "Carlo and AJ became like the masters at making cement. It was cool to see where people had their expertise. Everyone else just got really good at helping pour the cement and moving the rebar throughout it and it was just cool to see who knew what." Emma elaborated on the efficiency of the group with this activity in terms of leadership, explaining that they each "had a little bit of a position and a role that we played." Within the realm of each individual task, the participants found their leaders, but they all recognized the impact of the supervisor of the project in helping guide them to be successful.

Whereas during the fall, the community leaders had taken a step back to let the group take charge and organize their project as they saw fit, the project at the Nutrition Center was led by a local supervisor (Elvin -- expert in construction), assisted by faculty members and the learning assistant. The participants could see a clear leadership team working to direct and support them to accomplish their goals, which allowed them to take various leadership roles within the individual tasks. They recalled Elvin as the person who told them "what to do" (Reba), "pointing us where to go, he took charge" (Lilian). Miriam and Becca also remembered the faculty members supervising to ensure people were staying on task. Although they felt they had more specific direction, the group still remembered having to problem solve issues as they arose, not simply rely on the supervisor at the worksite to do it for them. Cali recalled having to work out an obstacle together, "we still had to problem solve to get there. Like getting over that ditch, between the edge of the playground. So we had to run up the board with the wheelbarrow." Carlo also recalled that Elvin would tell them what needed to be done, but "wouldn't really say how we had to get it done," leaving the group to problem solve, yet being willing to take the time to help and show them when needed "if we were stumbling he would help us."

Organization

The lack of direction and leadership of the can fundraising project in the fall created organizational issues for the group that led to the perceived failure of the activity. On the other hand, at the Nutrition Center, the clear attainable goals supported by a clear leadership model allowed the group to organize themselves to accomplish their tasks.

"We're a Massive Group"

A major problem in terms of leadership and organization during the can fundraising project in the fall was the number of people involved. Early in the fall semester the members of

the SSLC program had requested to all be together to complete any project (AJ, Cedric, Cali), which made for a group of 15 students as opposed to 6 or 7 for the rest of their classmates in the Leadership course (Emma, Lilian). According to the participants, the large group created disorganization that led to the failure of the activity, "our group, even though it was double the size of all the other groups. We got about a fourth of the cans" (Emma).

The size of the group created organizational difficulties, which led to miscommunication. Cedric explained his frustration with the lack of communication throughout the project, saying, "some of us got confused on where we were supposed to be going, on what dates we're doing this" which also led to the perceived failure of the project. Becca explained that "people would end up taking flyers to certain houses, but then when we went to go pick up the cans, we didn't go to the right neighborhoods. And it just was a mess." Cali, Carlo, Lilian, Naomi and Reba further detailed some of the miscommunication and confusion as they organized themselves, distributed flyers in various neighborhood, stood in front of Wal-Mart to pass out flyers, or organized a schedule to pick up the cans from people's homes, she recalled:

> We'd go and stand outside of Walmart and give people who walk in little pieces of paper. "Oh, these are things that [this charity] really needs. Would you be willing to do that?" So we had this date set up. We contacted Walmart. They're like, "Yeah, you can totally come." So, I don't know how many people were supposed to show up, but three of us showed up. It was me, Brooke and, one of the guys. We're the only people who showed up, and we didn't have a table. We didn't have signs. We didn't have anything. We literally were just standing there. We're like, "Okay. Should we just leave? Try and come back another time?" But then we just honestly kind of left. Then the collecting food, we went and gave them bags a certain couple days and said "Oh, we'll be back in a week.

Fill it with food, and we'll come back in a week and pick it up," and then there was obviously we had different groups do that, and so the people who picked up weren't the same who dropped off, so they didn't know exactly which houses they dropped stuff off at, so we're like, "Did we give you a bag?" and then some people, called and were like, "Oh, we got this bag last week, and we filled it, but nobody came to pick it up."

The communication failures and overall disorganization of the group caused a diminished sense of accountability and responsibility for the participants. AJ and Cedric mentioned that, "People just didn't care. Some people forgot to do their roles and picking up cans"; "some people didn't pick up their end." Brooke further explained that, "when you're in a big group you think someone else is always gonna do it." Emma also reported that, "there was less responsibility on us to personally, actually go out and do something. We just always figured, 'Oh, someone else will do it.'"

"Teamwork"

While working at the Nutrition Center in Costa Rica, the participants recalled a much more structured and organized activity, simply in terms of group size. Although the group was large (15 of them), the fact that there were three separate tasks, i.e., cleaning the outside, painting, and building a playground, allowed for a smoother division of labor, as they split themselves into smaller subgroups to accomplish each task. Emma explained that "because we were split up into three different groups, there were people working outside with the cement, and then gardening, and then inside." Becca and Brooke also emphasized how helpful it was to have the group split into subgroups to accomplish their goals, "we all had our individual tasks. I would be working with three or four other people on that one task, and everyone else would be working with three or four other people on another task" (Brooke).

Although divided, the group still felt that they were working together as a team to accomplish the overall goal of the project, "at the playground we had a lot more teamwork and we were able to get organized because we were all there. I felt like we had teamwork" (Lilian). Carlo also recalled the "team player" feeling of the group, no one he said attempted to take charge just to take charge, but rather to work as a team for the benefit of the project. Finally, the fact that the participants had already built a sense of community and knew each other well allowed them to organize themselves better. For example, Naomi recognized that:

> if we hadn't had those relationships going into Costa Rica and had to form them while we were there, we would have not gotten as much accomplished. With the relationships we had going into Costa Rica we were able to develop the teamwork right away and we knew what we had to do for the project and so, we got it done together.

Cali further explained that knowing each other, feeling comfortable around each other, allowed for a smoother division of labor in Costa Rica based on "what they could do and what they wanted to do, and, so, we got it all accomplished."

The broad nature of the first project, the group size, and the lack of leadership led to organizational issues, which resulted in confusion and miscommunication, ultimately making the activity feel like a "train wreck" (Cali, Carlo). Conversely, while at the Nutrition Center, with specific goals and under close supervision, the participants felt the tasks were manageable. One aspect that drastically differed between the can fundraising group service-learning project in the fall, and their work at the Nutrition Center in Costa Rica, was their interest and involvement, which surfaced as one of the main reasons for the success of the latter.

Engagement & Involvement

Each service-learning activity and their perceived outcome were influenced by the structure of the projects, the leadership skills of the participants, and their organizational abilities, as discussed previously, but perhaps as important if not more for the participants was the relevance of the projects for them, which affected their engagement and involvement.

"We Didn't Have a big Passion for It"

During the can fundraising, the group seemed disengaged from the activity. For example, Lilian did not remember the name of the organization they had collected cans for. AJ noted that they were there simply to have fun, "It was just entertaining to drive around Manhattan looking for cans." Reba saw the lack of interest as a result of "having other priorities," while Miriam attributed it to not having any passion for the task "I just don't think anybody in our group felt passionate enough about it." Cedric and Naomi explained that for most of them the project and the class itself was "for a grade, we're just doing this. Let's just get a grade" (Cedric), "It was probably like an easy credit hour or something" (Naomi). Brooke also found it difficult to "see the end result and the big picture of it." Brooke and Naomi further explained that they knew they were collecting and giving food to people, they knew the stakes, but the recipients remained anonymous. Finally, several participants viewed the size of their group (15 students) as a hindrance to completing the project and contributing to a lack of investment and engagement in the activity.

"We Knew Exactly who we Were Affecting"

The group acknowledged a shift in engagement and involvement between the two group service-learning projects. While working at the Nutrition Center in Costa Rica, the participants showed a higher level of interest with the activity because they could see firsthand the impact their work would have on the community itself. Several participants remembered seeing the

children coming to the playground. Miriam explained that they did not interact with them while completing the project, but "we could see them playing over there." Brooke recalled that they "knew exactly who we were affecting," seeing the children allowed her to see the big picture which kept her motivated to work. Both Naomi and Cedric added that the mindset on the service-learning project in Costa Rica had shifted. "Knowing you're there for the sole purpose of helping others I don't know if it was just a different mindset that we had going in there. I think that maybe [it] got our motivation up" (Naomi), "it was, us helping people to help people. We worked together because it was no longer for a grade. It was to help people" Cedric added.

The motivation and engagement level of the participants in Costa Rica was affected by their understanding of the impact of their work and their ability to see directly for whom they were working. Although for both group service-learning projects, they "knew that our work was going to be benefiting another person" (Naomi), the difference was that they could see and interact, albeit from afar, with the recipients of the second project. For the project in Costa Rica, they "actually got to see the effects and see what the children thought about, or how much they enjoyed the work that we did" (Naomi). Cedric further explained that seeing the children made it all worth it and made him feel even more motivated:

> And then when we got to meet the kids, that was a lot of fun too. The kids who are actually going to be using the space and everything. So then it made it all 100% worth it because they were super excited to see everything and they were so happy and they loved the fact that we did that for them. So that was really cool. It just made us more energized.

Brooke brought a picture of the playground they built during her second interview stating how much it had mattered to her. She explained that it had put in perspective for her what was important, saying "some of the kids that came there throughout when we were working, so it just

showed why we were doing it and it just kind of put it into perspective who we were affecting which I really liked."

Summary of Theme 3

The need for focused direction during the first group service-learning project was compounded by the lack of leadership within the group. This in turn affected how the participants attempted to organize themselves to carry out the project, and contributed to their disinterest and lack of engagement with the activity. Whereas the clear direction they received for the project at the Nutrition Center allowed for leaders to naturally emerge based on their strengths, and for the participants to organize themselves into subgroups to accomplish each task, thus contributing to the motivation of the participants to be involved with the project and succeed.

The fall semester group service-learning project, consisting of a can fundraising effort, each group within the Leadership class was "supposed to organize and develop" (Cali), suffered from multiple issues. The broad scope and perceived lack of structure of the project left the participants feeling directionless, which coupled with the size of the group, resulted in issues of organization and coordination of the tasks, and a lack of interest in the project itself, leaving the participant with a sense of failure. As Carlo recalled "the professor was a little disappointed because the last five years it started out as 18,000 cans collected and like 19, 20, 21, 22, and it gets to us and it's like back down to 19 or something." While the participant viewed the can fundraising group project in the fall as a disaster, they considered their work at the Nutrition Center in Costa Rica to be more successful.

Whereas the participants were given full autonomy to organize themselves as they saw fit to collect cans in the fall, they were very specifically directed and supervised in Costa Rica.

While during the first project they felt directionless, they enjoyed the structure that the second one provided, which allowed the participants to focus on the given tasks rather than struggle to make sense of what needed to be done and how, as everything was "more broken down" (Brooke) in the second project. Where the group size was a hindrance in one project, it benefitted the other, as it allowed them to split into different subgroups to accomplish the various tasks given and reach the overall objective. Finally, the shift in the group dynamic, as they had adjusted to each other the semester prior, also enabled them to feel freer to embrace their strengths and support each other to work as a team to achieve their goals.

As Naomi tried to make sense of why the two projects were perceived so differently, she said:

> It was different. Um, I'm not sure if it's, if it was just.... Maybe it was something we didn't necessarily have to do for a class. Like, we chose to sign up for this SSLC because we knew that we were going to go to Costa Rica and do service learning and we didn't know at first what we were going to all do in the leadership class. So, I think we knew what we had signed up for and since we knew what to expect. We knew we were going to be performing service, we were, we signed up for it to do that. So, like, we.... I guess I'm trying to say, we knew we wanted to help others. Um, but we were prepared for the Costa Rica aspect more so than the food drive. That was kind of just like, here, this is something we're going to do in class.

The lack of interest in the task and focus on other priorities during the first group service-learning project, resulted in the group feeling less motivated to do their part, which contributed to the sense of failure of the fall project. Conversely, the participants' ability to see firsthand who they were affecting while working at the Nutrition Center motivated them and kept them

engaged, motivated, and on task throughout the project. Although they felt a sense of accomplishment with both projects (Carlo, Becca, Reba), the majority perceived the fall can fundraising service-learning activity as a "failure" and a "train wreck," compared to their work at the Nutrition Center in Costa Rica where they "did a tremendously better job" (AJ). Along with acquiring more experience and understanding of service learning, the SSLC program also empowered the participants to grow and learn as individuals, as shown in Theme 4: A journey of discovery – From "bubble" to "there's another world out there."

Theme 4: A journey of discovery – From "bubble" to "there's another world out there"

According to AJ, the structure of the program itself not only facilitated the interaction between the participants and increased their comfort level; it also enhanced their learning experience. The connections formed throughout the program, due to its structure and supportive environment (Theme 1 – The outer shell), reinforced by the challenges and new experiences they faced together as a group, that enabled them to bond further (Theme 2 – The inner circle), and their experience of the group service-learning projects (Theme 3 - A service-learning experience), enabled the participants to broaden their horizons and find out more about themselves (Becca, Emma, Cali, Naomi, Reba). This was not an easy process, as Emma explained, "if you're unwilling to accept moments of defeat, it's not going to work out. You're not going to grow from it." The participants reported that the pedagogical methods, such as the discussion based approach used in the Leadership course (Brooke, Cali, Carlo, Cedric), the positive and relaxed atmosphere in the classroom (AJ, Carlo, Cedric, Reba), and the community that was shaped throughout the semester (Cali, Lilian, Reba), contributed to their academic and

personal growth as well as opening them up to new perspectives. Becca defined her experience with SSLC program as a growth process:

> I think during the SSLC and the Costa Rica experience you're going to learn, so many things. You learn so much about yourself, different cultures, you get to meet so many different people, learn more about your community here and a community so many miles away. So, there's a lot of different aspects in that. I'm trying to think of a good word. I want to say process, but not process at the same time. I'm trying to think of a more.... Process, maybe growth. Because you're going through a process but you're learning so much and then by the end you've grown so much.

Through the various challenges, new experiences, many interactions amongst themselves, with other peers, with faculty, or with the community that the SSLC program offered, the participants became aware of the community surrounding them locally and abroad, as well as the differences in lifestyles and cultures.

Need and Privilege

During the fall, the group members participated in several service-learning activities through the SSLC program, which allowed them to better realize and understand the needs of their community. Cedric recalled his can fundraising experience as part of his Leadership course, as being "insightful." Through the process of collecting cans for a local charity that gathers food to distribute to people in need within the community, and discussing this project in class, Cedric and his classmates became aware of the extent of the "food insecurity there was in the nation." Additionally, as part of the Connection Hour, the participants also volunteered at an ESL center in town. AJ, Becca, Lilian and Miriam discussed assisting adult non-English speakers with using computers and learning English. AJ explained that the people they were assisting "were just

trying to use a computer with English instructions, and it was somewhat challenging to explain to them what we were trying to do, what each action was." This service-learning activity made them more aware of the Hispanic population within their local community, its linguistic and support needs. Miriam found the experience "humbling," stating she "had a lot of respect for them." The SSLC program, specifically the service-learning projects forced the participants to think about what they have, what they have access to, as well as what they took for granted. For example, some participants realized their privilege. While discussing the lack of running water when arriving in Costa Rica, which lasted over a week, Becca stated that the experience made her realized that she was "very privileged." She explained that she knew "I'll always have running water. I won't have to worry about that ever. And if we have water that breaks at our house, it gets fixed that day."

Cultural Differences

When further asked about the program, and Costa Rica in particular, the participants understood the purpose of that particular component as a way to immerse themselves in the culture (Becca, Brooke, Cedric, Naomi, Reba), where they could experience firsthand the life of the local community in Costa Rica, and "seeing a part of their daily life" (Lilian). Brooke acknowledged that being in college, "you kind of get into a bubble and you kind of forget that there's a world out there," for her, being part of the program made her realize that "there's other people out there." By participating in the program and going to Costa Rica, she found herself immersed "into another way of living," which she found "very eye opening." These other people have different lifestyles. Miriam, for example, recognized that when she thought of Costa Rica prior to the program, she assumed it was "beaches and pretty scenery;" however, she continued, "I guess I don't really think of places like that having to do day-to-day life like we do." As they

stayed with host families, who involved them in their lives and activities, as well as worked within the community at a local Nutrition Center, where they interacted with the owner of the center as well as the contractor, the participants learned about a different culture and lifestyle.

Since, most of the host families were related to one another and frequently spent time together. Several participants recalled being amazed by family dynamics. Miriam realized that family interactions were similar to her own, and she enjoyed watching them

> interact with their relatives and kind of compare it to how my relatives act and see that like.... Okay, we are completely different. And, we're just completely different location, such different lifestyles, but the way they interact with their loved ones mimics the way that we do.

Becca, Cali, Lilian, Naomi and Reba recalled how welcoming the host families and community were as well as the pace of life there. For example, Brooke, Naomi and Lilian remembered going to the market with the group and interacting with the locals to buy fruits and souvenirs. They recalled the "very laid back" atmosphere, which Brooke contrasted with her experience at home, saying, "we have a list, we have a task, we're getting these things and leaving," whereas in Costa Rica, she felt everyone was "walk[ing] around and just see what's to offer and try new things." Although they had learned during the fall in the Connection Hour the Costa Rican expression "pura vida" referring to enjoying life, being able to experience it themselves, gave them a new perspective. Both Lilian and Naomi used the phrase while discussing the atmosphere in the community and in particular at the market, explaining that there was a "more relaxed way of life, the pura vida that we got after every.... You know, in every conversation it was pura vida, 'I'm good. Life's good'" (Naomi), "everything is more relaxed and the people are just so much happier" (Lilian). Becca also recognized the differences in lifestyles.

She felt that while in “American views you need to make people like you,” she had a different experience in Costa Rica. She explained that their values were different and that people were friendly, that they took their time, there was no sense of rush as there is in the U.S. She recalled various instances when

> wherever they went they would talk to everyone, and they weren't worried about being somewhere on time. It was like ‘oh I can sit here and talk, I don't need to rush somewhere’, and that's not how it is here at all. I was going in the town and they were just really friendly and would stop and talk to anyone. Even when we went to the different restaurants and bars like people there- Like usually here in America if you see someone new you just look at them weird but you don't say anything, and they would actually try to get to know you and stuff, and welcome you to their town and stuff, which was really cool.

AJ, Cali, Emma, and Lilian having had the most extensive experience abroad were able to compare with their prior travels and realize not all Latin American countries are the same. Lilian for example, remarked that “it just gave me a new appreciation of Latin America. I have been to Guatemala before and I think Costa Rica was very different. It was a bit nicer, Costa Rica has a more stable government and the education system is better.”

“Burst the Bubble” – The Value of Diversity

The SSLC program opened the participants’ eyes to other worlds through activities they took part in and interactions within and outside the classroom, which enabled them to broaden their horizons and realize they valued and craved diversity. Cedric, an Architecture major, also commented that in his field he is “always stuck with the same people over and over again.” The SSLC program allowed him to “meet new people in different fields. I met engineers, and

business majors, and people who are going to be teachers. And that was really cool because I wouldn't have had that opportunity if I didn't take that class." Brooke also explained that the program, and in particular the service-learning activities, helped her gain a different perspective and realize that "there's another world out there," outside of college.

Cali was perhaps the most "sheltered" of all participants coming into the SSLC program, even though she had had extensive experience volunteering abroad. Coming from a small homogenous town, she realized she had been "very sheltered" growing up "in a very white middle class school," she was "very much in a bubble." Being a Speech Pathology major did not improve Cali's access to diversity, as she explained there is "forty of us, and thirty-eight of us are women. There's one girl who's Hispanic and there's one girl who is half African American and half white. And out of the thirty-eight girls, thirty are in Greek life." However, the SSLC became a stepping stone for her to be involved with Leadership as it provided her access to many different perspectives and points of view, which "burst her bubble." To her being part of the program, and being introduced to Leadership studies was "interesting because that community on campus is very diverse," and it made her "grow in conversation for having the ability to see other points of view. That was very good for me because I wouldn't have had that [opportunity] otherwise." She credited the Leadership course for teaching "you to not think about yourself, which is what a lot of people do when they come to college. It's like all about them."

Brooke, Cali and Carlo also recalled enjoying class discussions, as they would allow the students to "bounce ideas off each other and grow in that way" and exposed them to a variety of viewpoints. Carlo and Cali, in particular, learned the value of listening and having access to a variety of viewpoints, through the service-learning projects and other group activities they participated in. Cali explained that she had many opportunities in class to speak, but that she

learned to “intentionally listen to other people more before just telling them how I feel,” so that she could “learned a lot more from my classmates.” Carlo recalled finding it interesting to watch other students discussing “hot button kind of issues” in the Leadership course, saying, “people were really adamant about it with certain arguments on their point but then there would be something you never really thought of, like ‘oh that's a good idea.’” Through this process, same as Cali, he found that listening, and more specifically having access to different viewpoints was extremely valuable and needed to be cultivated, as one begins to “realize, oh there's other ways to do this.”

Personal Growth

For Carlo “college is when you start getting your ideas challenged and you start forming into the person that you are.” Throughout the program, the participants developed confidence in themselves, expanded their comfort zone, and became more independent. Both Miriam and Emma recognized they had grown more confident and independent, as the activities they took part in gave them a “more hands on experience” (Emma) while being part of a group that made them feel comfortable enough to “break out of my comfort zone” (Miriam). Cedric also recalled the SSLC program playing an important role for him as he “was forced to talk and be open with people,” which helped him “break out of my shell and my comfort zone.” He also realized that college is meant to help a person become more independent; however, in his case, by participating in the SSLC program, and being “thrown into a different country you become extremely independent.”

Naomi recalled her experience in the SSLC as “powerful,” she gained confidence in her Spanish skills, but she remembered coming home and talking to her father about what she had learned to do on the worksite, saying, “I remember coming home being so proud that I knew how

to mix cement, line everything up, lay it out, and smooth it. I felt like I could conquer anything." Becca learned the value of her own voice. While facing the "loud voices" from the can fundraising activities, she remembered shutting down and letting others take control. However, as the program progressed, and she felt more comfortable, she began to voice her opinions more in classes, take charge when she felt she could (e.g. when working on the worksite in Costa Rica), because she realized

> how important it is. You have to decide how dedicated you are, by using your voice or not, you're giving up what could have happened by not saying anything. I think being in the SSLC definitely helped me be more open to saying my opinions.

Brooke, who had been interested in the program originally because it could give her the opportunity to do a short study abroad program, so that she could "dip my toes in the water for studying abroad," recognized that her experience with the SSLC program gave her the confidence to study abroad in Prague for a full semester. She explained that she saw through her time in Costa Rica that she was "okay being away and being in another culture, so it definitely pushed me to be able to do it." Carlo also credited the program for helping him to learn "how to live on my own, away from my parents, in a foreign country. Overall it helped me develop into an independent individual and world traveler."

During the program, the participants also had an opportunity to go zip lining in Costa Rica. Lilian, who had a fear of heights, remembered being "so high up in the trees" and feeling "proud of myself that I was so determined to do this." Emma described the changes she saw in others throughout the program, how some participants grew more confident and "comfortable in their own skin." Similar to Lilian' story, Emma recalled the experience of one of her classmates while zip lining in Costa Rica:

> He was really scared of heights and everything. But then he still went through, and I don't know if he actually completed the entire zip line, but at least he tried, and he got up there, and I remember he was really proud of himself for that and that's something that most people would sort of see him not finishing it, or they would see him as not finishing it, but he saw it as him making the initiative and taking the step to actually even start it. So that was I think, the coolest sort of personal growth I saw with anyone in the group.

Finally, Becca and Emma became aware of another layer of service. Although both value service to the community, they learned more about the "gap between intent and impact" (Becca). Throughout the second interview, Emma recalled her frustration with some aspects and activities from the program (e.g., "painting a wall was a waste of time"). Emma stated that part of the project at the Nutrition Center in Costa Rica "still just bugs me a little bit. The fact that we just painted a wall." She mentioned having read, in the Leadership class, an article titled "Hell with Good Intentions" that discussed issues with volunteering abroad, specifically the idea of not painting a wall, "because there are orphanages that have people just come to paint. They have groups of foreigners that come and want to help somehow so they just have them paint a wall because there's not much else they can do." Although she was more comfortable with the other phases of the project (e.g., building a playground, cleaning the area to plant a vegetable garden), as she could see their value, the idea of simply painting a wall remained at the forefront of her memory. She stated that this particular aspect "cemented in me the idea that if you're going to do something abroad, it has to be a lot more than just the one little aspect of just actually painting. It's fine to just paint a wall as long as it's more than just that."

Summary of Theme 4

The SSLC program' structure and support assisted the participants in gaining a better understanding of their own community, as well as others abroad, while becoming aware of other's needs (e.g., food insecurity), and their own privilege (e.g., access to water). The program also enabled the participants to grow as people, to learn to appreciate diversity, to become more confident, and independent young adults, as Cali explained, "You're learning language. You're expanding on your skills. You're growing as a person. You're learning about yourself." Carlo added that the program and the trip in particular "was meant for us to develop as young adults in an increasing global community." Naomi described her experience with the SSLC program as

> a powerful experience. All of the thoughts, doubts, nerves, excitement, and growth that I experienced throughout this adventure allowed me to grow in more ways than I thought possible. I watched myself become more confident in my Spanish-speaking abilities, I watched as relationships developed among our entire group, and I watched us all grow together in our leadership abilities as well.

She completed her reflection by saying "I honestly can't think of a better way to have started my college career." A sentiment that was echoed by her classmates, as presented in the last theme below.

Theme 5: College insights – From "Being a Mess of a Freshman" to "Diving Into the Waters of College"

The participants recognized the academic value of each component of the program. They viewed the Spanish course in the fall as well as the language classes they took while in Costa Rica as a means of strengthening their linguistic skills ahead of and while in Costa Rica (Brooke, Cali, Carlo, Cedric, Naomi). This then facilitated their engagement with activities that in part contributed to their personal development (discussed in Theme #4). They also thought of the

Leadership course as a way to learn about themselves and human interactions through pedagogical content and activities. This aspect of the program served them while working on the various community projects included in the program (Brooke, Cali, Lilian), as it benefitted them and enabled them to adapt to their service-learning projects and facilitated their personal development (as discussed in Themes #3 and 4 respectively).

However, the academic aspects of the SSLC program was not the only source of growth for the participants. Joining the SSLC also gave them a broader sense of college. Although the members of the group did not know each other prior to the beginning of the program, all had mostly been attracted to the prospect of going to Costa Rica. However, they soon realized that they were also facing similar academic challenges and that, as a group, they could help each other, "we were just kind of all like, it's our first year of college, like first semester getting into everything. We spent a lot of time together, so we all kind of like goofy like figuring everything out together," explained Cali. The combination of the courses and settings, the activities the participants were involved with, the bond that developed among them as well as the support they felt from the faculty and peer mentors all contributed to the participants' understanding of *how to college* and *broaden their career paths*.

College Transition - How to College

Several participants, including AJ, Cali, Carlo, Cedric, Emma, Lilian, and Reba noted that the structure of the program and the community that was shaped throughout the semester, combined with the positive and relaxed learning environment, eased their transition from high school to college. They explained that the SSLC enabled them to bond and relate to others while on the program, and in subsequent courses, as it created a greater sense of belonging. Cedric was the only one from his hometown to enroll in this university and therefore did not know anyone at

first. Reba recalled that she had originally signed up for the program in part because she was an out of state student, “coming from out of state I didn't know anybody. It was a great way to meet people and get to know those people, become friends with those people,” for her, finding a program that would enable her to make connections quickly at the start of college was essential. Lilian and Naomi viewed the SSLC program as the **“**the greatest way to kick off my college career,” because the structure of the program ensured that the participants would spend ample time together in and out of class, thus allowing them to become very close to one another. Lilian explained that, “as freshman you are starting to make friends and it helps to know people in your classes.” AJ added that the program “was one of the best ways to integrate incoming freshman into college and help them meet new people from different backgrounds at a deeper level.” Cali and Emma also emphasized the support of the group and the importance of making friends early on at the beginning of college, “know more people on campus, which is always good” (Cali). Both argued that the SSLC program “forced friendships,” which gave them a group of 15 people, out of the whole university, they felt comfortable with and they could rely on, as Emma stated:

> Coming into my freshman year of college, I was overwhelmed by new experiences, new people, and newfound freedom. After 18 long years of waiting for that very moment, I was finally on my own, and I was scared shitless. That’s where the SSLC came in, it helped me find a place, find my niche.

Aside from the friendships and bond the SSLC enabled the participants to form, participating in the program also helped them through their first year and developing some college and life skills. Not only did the program help Cedric find friends, it also gave him a “wake-up call” about responsibilities, time management and organization, especially in the Spanish class, saying, “You need to learn to work harder and faster, not forget about deadlines

and tests because that was horrible, and it screwed me up. It's honestly helped me because it made me learn to appreciate the time that I had." The Connection Hour took Carlo by surprise. He first misconstrued the number of credit to mean that it "was nothing," and had a "laissez-faire attitude" about the course. To him this one credit hour class was simply "just here to be fun kind of thing," so he did not "put in as much time outside of class as I probably should have." However, he credited that class for helping him realize that college was different from high school in terms of expectations, as well as "the value of organization and time management." Whereas Carlo initially thought high school and college might be similar, Cali, on the other hand was worried, as she thought she was supposed to have all the answers, she recalled a "weird disconnect of not knowing and not knowing what was okay to not know, kind of being a mess of a college freshman." but instead she

> learned my freshman year, especially through the SSLC, I learned that I didn't know everything that we can help each other out a lot more in college and be more collaborative, which was really good because I learned to rely on other people just as much as they rely on me.

Broadening Their Career Paths

One of the purpose for enrolling in the program for the participants was to improve and practice their Spanish (Becca, Brooke, Cali, Lilian, Naomi). Brooke explained that paramount for her was "developing my Spanish skills." Carlo also explained that the program helped him understand his "strengths and weaknesses when it comes to my Spanish speaking ability." The increased confidence in their linguistic proficiency, as well as their experience with the SSLC program overall enabled the participants to (re)think their career choices and broaden their horizons. For Carlo, Brooke and Lilian, this meant including in their program of study a

semester-long program in Spain (Carlo/Lilian) and Austria (Brooke). Brooke acknowledged that "honestly don't think I would be doing it if I had a bad experience." In terms of academic career choices, Naomi recognized that she did not "know what would have happened with my Spanish career" if she had not participated in the SSLC program, as her experience helped her make the decision to major in it. Reba, a biology major, realized that she not only liked Spanish, but that she wanted to "incorporate [it] in my future job" which pushed her to minor in Spanish.

Spanish was not the only subject that affected their college plans. The content of the Leadership course led Becca, Cali, Cedric, Emma and Lilian to add the Leadership minor to their curriculum. "The leadership class, was interesting. I don't think I would ever… I don't think I would take that class or get the minor in anything like that, if it hadn't [been] for the SSLC," explained Lilian. Finally, Cedric, an architecture student, explained that participating in the SSLC program, going to Costa Rica, taking in nature and working at the Nutrition Center, was a turning point for him as it made him realize his career objectives and helped him focus his studies:

> It was just an eye opening to like I wanted to go into.... I wanted to do something where I help people later on. I don't want to just draw. I want to have the buildings actually impact people. I wanna continue to help people. I wanna do building that help people mentally and don't feel like a prison. It made me realize that I want to go into healthcare as an architect and design clinics and hospitals that will help people mentally and not just physically.

Summary of Theme 5

For some participants, the SSLC program contributed to (Cedric, Lilian, Naomi, Reba) or reinforced (Becca, Cali, Emma) their career choices, and eased their transition from high school

to college. The SSLC program' structure and support provided the participants with situations, interactions, and activities that helped guide their academic and professional career (e.g., Cedric's objective to build children's hospitals that do not look like prisons), and gave them tools to become successful college students (e.g., time management, relying on others). Cali summarized the connection between the SSLC program and college in general, saying:

> You don't know necessarily what you're doing. College in general, you don't know what you're doing when you first get here. You're going to experience some sort of different experience. But, you're with this group of people, going through the same things at the same time. Maybe having a different experience cause it's individualized, but, you're getting into something really fun. So, it helped me to learn how to build relationships, how to take college-level courses, and aided me in the transition from high school to college.

While they struggled to find their footing in their first semester, they benefited from having their inner circle and outer shell to support them and to get through it. In Emma's words, "Having a small group of a dozen or so students with whom I would always find a friend, was what I needed to be able to dive into the waters of college." Their understanding of leadership, organization, and overall service learning, as well as their academic progress, assisted them in their choices of career paths, and basic understanding of the mechanics of being a college student.

Essence of the Spanish Service-Learning Community program

The findings from this study derived from the analysis of the participants' interviews, personal reflections, and discussions of artifacts, provided an answer to the research question for this study:

What is the essence of the shared experience of former students who participated in a Spanish Service-Learning Community program in their freshman year?

The SSLC was a multi-HIP program, aimed to engage and integrate students by connecting with each other across a variety of topics, centered on Leadership Studies and Spanish, while combining domestic and overseas service learning, and faculty-led study abroad. Although each participant recalled and chose to share diverse stories, referred to different events, places, activities, people, or similar ones but from a unique point of view, the data showed that all the participants perceived the program to have created a *learning community*, symbolized by AJ's takeaway from the program as "It's in the name. The community part." Cali and Emma explained that they "wanted somewhere to fit in," in particular; Cali wanted to be "involved with a group on campus" where she could be herself "but also grow and learn." That community was not just a simple group of friends, it went beyond that (AJ, Brooke, Emma, Naomi), as Cali continued, "it's like you're closer than just normal people on campus." However, this community, this place to fit in, was not built on personal affinities. Becca remembered the group, saying, "each person was very different from each other." None of the participants knew each other prior to the beginning of the program, and all had different career interests (AJ – mechanical engineering, Becca – social services, Cali – speech pathology, Carlo – business, Cedric – architecture, Emma – anthropology, Lilian – Spanish, Miriam/Brooke – HR, Naomi – education, Reba – biology).

The only apparent commonalities were that they were all 18-year old freshmen, and were mostly interested in the program because there was a trip to Costa Rica at the end of it. "I just knew that we were going to Costa Rica. If there wasn't a Costa Rica at the end, I probably wouldn't have joined," indicated Miriam. This sentiment was echoed by several others, "an

opportunity to go to Costa Rica" (Lilian), "the going to Costa Rica, I'd say was the main part" (Reba), "just going to Costa Rica, 'cause I love traveling" (Becca), "The fact that I'd get to study abroad, honestly" (Cedric), "I think I just liked the whole idea of Costa Rica" (Emma).

Instead of kinship, the sense of *community* that the participants developed was embedded in the building blocks of the program and grew through the challenges and situations they faced. The *outer shell* comprised of the *structure of the program* itself "forced them to hangout" (AJ, Cali, Cedric, Emma, Miriam), and spend time together, while being anchored in a *supportive environment* composed of advisors, faculty, peer mentors, and the local community abroad. Additionally, the program content: a combination of leadership, language, domestic and overseas service learning, provided *situational challenges* and *new experiences* that helped the participants grow and *learn*, by creating their own *inner circle* while building, strengthening, and cementing their bond. Thus enabling them to improve their communication skills, trust and rely on one another, expand their comfort zone, and discover more about themselves and the world around them. (see Figure 4.1 below).

Figure 4-1 - Building Blocks of a Community

The five themes discussed in this chapter are all intertwined with one another to form the essence of the phenomenon for the participants. The first two themes: "The outer shell" and "The inner circle: Standing together" are related to one another as they both address the *sense of community and belonging* the participants developed throughout the program, which went beyond simply being classmates, while the last three themes centered on discovery through learning and growth. As the sense of community slowly grew, so did the participants' engagement in the service learning, their overall growth, and their understanding of college.

More specifically, the first theme revolved around the *outer shell* and the emergence of connections between the participants, facilitated by the nature and design of the program, which created a structural foundation for the participants to connect to one another in a supportive environment. The second theme centered on the *inner circle* and the emergence and solidification of the connections among the participants themselves through the new experiences and challenges they faced. Thus, the first two themes laid the foundation that allowed the

participants to *learn* and *grow*, represented in the last three themes. The third theme: "A service-learning experience" focused on the perception the participants had of the two group service-learning projects they chose to discuss, and the learning that derived from these activities. While, the fourth theme "A journey of discovery" revolved around discovering more about themselves, i.e., the personal growth they experienced throughout the program, as a result of the situations they were placed in, and the interactions they had within and outside of their inner circle, that led to an awareness of the world around them and personal development. Finally, the last theme "College insights" depicted how participating in the SSLC program enabled the participants to learn to navigate college and influenced or solidified their career goals. These five themes (the outer shell, the inner circle, service-learning experience, journey of discovery, and college insights) formed the essence of the phenomenon for the participants, which could be described as:

> The creation of a unique community embedded in a supportive and structured program enabling the participants to bond through new experiences and challenges, grow together, apply learning to reach goals, transition through college, and learn more about themselves and the world around them.

Conclusion

For Naomi, the most important aspect of the program was "building relationships with everyone, growing together throughout the semester and letting that culminate during our time in Costa Rica." The participants all shared throughout the interviews, the reflections, and the artifacts they chose to share, that the relationships, the friendships that grew beyond simple classmates were at the forefront of their minds when thinking about the SSLC program. They also credited the program, its structure, activities, and supportive environment, for their personal

and academic development that occurred during that time. However, they all acknowledged that this community did not come together naturally. Rather it was forced upon them by the structure of the program (combining a variety of interest, offering a structured schedule and an opportunity to spend a lot of time together) and the support that came along with it (the advisors, faculty, peer mentors, host families), which became the building blocks of the community, the protective *outer shell*. This supportive environment shaped by the structure of the program created a foundation for the participants to cement the sense of community by working together on challenges and face new experiences together. These challenges (e.g., confusion, frustration, communication) and new experiences (e.g., working together, living with host families, different culture) strengthened the group, by enabling them to open up to each other and to learn to rely on one another, thus forming their own *inner circle*. This initial group of strangers became a tight-knit family by the end of the program. With the help of this protective outer shell and slowly forming inner circle, the group learned and grew together. They were able to make sense of why, in their eyes, the first group service-learning activity failed, while the second one was more successful, through direction, organization, leadership, and involvement. However, they also found out about college, how to rely on others to succeed, how to make connections, and how interacting with others, having a support network, helped them build confidence and become more independent.

The participants recalled building a cement patio for children at a Nutrition Center, in Costa Rica, as the main part of their service component abroad. AJ, Cali, Carlo, Cedric, and Lilian in particular remembered a phrase that was used by many while on the worksite, “turning big rocks into little rocks” as they had to literally break down rocks to mix them with water to pour the concrete patio. “We also turned big rocks into little rocks as we made concrete by hand”

was Lilian's version. While analyzing the data, this sentence kept coming up in my mind, and became the embodiment of the participants' experience of the whole program. The *big rocks* symbolized the big steps they took, the challenges they faced, and the new experiences they encountered (e.g.: first semester in college, meeting new people, going to a different country, doing something new, etc.). The *little rocks* represented them breaking down these big "scary" new events with each other's help and the support of the community around them into more manageable chunks. The *concrete* made *by hand* represented the relationships that slowly developed and strengthened throughout the program, the support and friendship that helped them get through that first semester and trip abroad, and overcome the challenges they faced during the program, all of which turned into a solid bond in Costa Rica. Just like making concrete to build the playground, it was a slow and long process, but they persevered and saw it through to the end. Through this bond, this community, they were able to apply their newly acquired knowledge, develop new skills, reach goals, broaden their horizons and find out more about themselves. AJ shared his final thoughts about the SSLC program in his reflection as follows:

> I think the SSLC program was one of the best ways to integrate incoming freshman into college and help them meet new people from different backgrounds at a deeper level. I say this because we had 3 different classes together that semester and allowed us to be around each other more than the average class, thus allowing us to connect more than most classes. These classes also allowed us to see each other in different settings and see our different strengths. In our Spanish class, we were able to see who was comfortable with Spanish and who we could go to for questions/help. In our leadership class we had different leaders who weren't necessarily comfortable with the Spanish aspect of the SSLC but weren't afraid to share their opinion with the rest of the class. The third class

> [the Connection Hour] we were able to see who was the most interested/excited about our trip. These three classes allowed our class, our community not to be completely dictated by one person because everyone was able to be a leader at one point or another.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the findings of this research in light of existing theories and literature, as well as present implications for higher education and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

AJ: "SSLC is a program that allows students to become a community, and work towards a common goal and experience new things in a different way"

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings of the descriptive phenomenological research conducted with students who participated in a Spanish Service-Learning Community program (SSLC), a multi-HIP approach to high-impact practices (HIPs), which included two courses linked by a third, thus forming a learning community, a service-learning component, and faculty-led study abroad, in their freshman year. The chapter addresses a brief review of the purpose of this study, the connection between the findings and existing literature, a discussion of the new contributions this research makes to the field, the implications for higher education and offers recommendations for future research.

Purpose of the Study

HIPs are known to further student development and learning and to promote student success through a supportive environment and creating more interaction opportunities between peers and faculty (Brownell & Swaner 2009, 2010; Kuh, 2008). Reporting on a survey of 11,997 students, Soria and Johnson (2017) found that students who participated in HIPs such as learning communities and service learning self-reported a higher degree of leadership competence, while students who participated in freshman seminars and study abroad type programs self-reported greater development in multicultural competence than their peers. HIPs also emphasize the notion of collaboration (Astin et al., 2000; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013), the integration of several academic subjects to encourage students to make connections across disciplines beyond the classroom setting, and offer them an opportunity to apply new skills and problem solve through the use of community-oriented activities (Kuh, 2008). Kilgo et al. (2015)

also credited HIPs for their positive impact on critical thinking, and overall student learning. Finally, the concepts of involvement (Astin, 1984; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009), academic integration (Tinto, 1997, 2012; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009), engagement (Schreiner, 2010; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009), and academic determination (Schreiner, 2010) are key to student success in general, but also intrinsically linked to building successful HIPs.

The purpose of this study was to investigate a unique multi-HIP program through a qualitative lens to better understand *how* students experience these types of programmatic interventions. The SSLC program was chosen for this study as it represented an approach to multi-HIP by integrating learning community, service learning, and faculty-led study abroad, which included active and global engagement, involvement, integration, connectedness through community building, as well as application of learning. The aim of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of multi-HIPs, by focusing on the experience of the participants themselves, their perception of the phenomenon, rather than the outcomes of the program, which is most prevalent in HIPs and multi-HIPs research (Brownell & Swaner, 2010).

Discussion of the Findings

The findings from this study, derived from the analysis of the participants' interviews, personal reflections, and discussions of artifacts, led to five distinct yet connected themes, related to community building, community service, growth and college transition (presented in Chapter 4). Together, these formed the essence of the phenomenon (detailed in Chapter 4), and provided (the beginning of) an answer to the research question from this study:

> What is the essence of the shared experience of former students who participated in a Spanish Service-Learning Community program in their freshman year?

For the participants, the essence of the SSLC was in the unique community they developed, which was embedded in a supportive and structured program, thus enabling them to bond through challenges, to grow together, to apply learning to reach goals, to transition through college, and to learn more about themselves and the world around them. These findings both align with existing literature on HIPs and present new information that only a program composed of multiple HIPs could provide. Therefore, the findings of this research are discussed in two parts. First, in light of existing literature, and second through three lenses embedded in the social constructivism theoretical framework that shaped this study (see Chapter 3): Szreter and Woolcock's (2004) concepts of *bonding, bridging and linking* rooted in social capital theory (SC), McCabe's (2016a) work on *friendship networks*, and Engeström (2001)'s Expended Activity Theory Model.

CAS Standards and Existing Literature

The findings of this research align with the standards established by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in higher education (CAS) and the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), which are based on research from the American Association for Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) regarding the goals of HIPs. They also mirror previous research on learning communities, service learning, and study abroad (see Chapter 2 for details).

CAS and AAC&U Student Learning Outcomes

Although this study was not an assessment of the SSLC program, it is worth noting that the participants' perceptions of the program corresponded to the standards established by CAS and the LEAP regarding the learning outcomes of HIPs. These standards fall into six distinct domains with some overlapping characteristics (detailed in Chapter 2): 1) knowledge acquisition, construction, integration and application; 2) cognitive complexity; 3) intrapersonal development;

4) interpersonal competence; 5) humanitarianism and civic engagement; and 6) practical competence (CAS, 2015).

Knowledge Acquisition, Construction, Integration and Application

Throughout the activities and courses the participants took part in, they were able to make connections between course content (e.g., leadership and Spanish), and construct new knowledge (e.g., build upon course content to better understand leadership models, further develop their linguistic skills while working on service learning projects locally and abroad, and communicating with the local community in Costa Rica). They were also able to relate all of it to daily life (e.g., through the application of their new knowledge and skills to the service learning component), which in turn also helped them strengthen, and/or become aware of their career goals and path to accomplish them.

Cognitive Complexity

While discussing their perception of the two group service-learning projects they worked on while on the program, the participants showed critical and reflective thinking, effective reasoning and creativity in how they approached the program's activities, problem solved issues, and organized themselves to accomplish a variety of tasks. They were able to identify some of the issues (e.g., communication, division of labor, and leadership) that led them to consider the first project a failure, learn from them and apply newly acquired skills to the second project. They also showed a willingness to learn from others (e.g., the project manager in Costa Rica).

Intrapersonal Development

The participants acknowledged that the program helped them grow in various aspects. Some academically (e.g., Carlo's realization of his linguistic skills and ways to improve them), some related to career choices (e.g., Cedric's ability to define his career objective as a result of

his participation in the program), others centered on personal growth such as self-reliance, confidence and independence (e.g., Naomi, Lilian, Miriam). They also showed self-reflection and evaluation, which led them to accept accountability (e.g., Miriam's realization that she could and should have made an effort to better understand the Connection Hour), and reinforced commitment to values and principles (e.g., Emma' struggle with the design and objectives of the second service-learning project).

Interpersonal Competence

The program's nature and structure provided a support system that enabled the participants to develop mutually beneficial relationships. These enabled them to seek help when needed (e.g., reliance on each other for assistance with academic issues, connection with peer mentors, faculty or local community to better understand assignments, or cultural differences); resolve conflict effectively (e.g., approach faculty to discuss and reunite the group within their Leadership class); and collaborate and demonstrate effective leadership to accomplish the goals of the service-learning projects.

Humanitarianism and Civic Engagement

It is important to note that prior to participating in the program, all the participants had benefitted from some form of connection abroad, through extensive international community service (AJ, Cali, Emma, Lilian) or through short trips with family members (Becca, Brooke, Carlo, Cedric, Miriam, Naomi, Reba), and all had been involved with service to the community. However, participating in the SSLC program, in particular, its service-learning activities and faculty-led study abroad component, offered an opportunity for them to further their appreciation and understanding of cultural and human differences as well as global perspective. For example, Miriam realized that family life and connections between family members were similar to her

own family. Lilian who had lived in Guatemala realized that not all Latin American countries are identical, and noticed the differences in government between the two. She, along with the other participants, also noticed the Costa Rican way of life and its motto of "pura vida" (meaning: relaxed life, take your time, enjoy each other's company, enjoy life), which they found refreshing compared to the American way of life. The SSLC also provided a venue for the participants to further their sense of social and civic responsibility. By participating in a food drive service-learning project in the fall, Cedric noted food insecurity in his community, which he was not aware of before participating in the program. Through the ESL service project, many participants realized both their own privilege and a need within the community they could address (e.g., access to education, knowing how to use a computer, ability to speak another language).

Practical Competence

As a result of their participation in the program, some participants amended their academic and career goals. Some changed or added a Spanish minor or major or a minor in Leadership studies (Cali, Carlo, Becca). Others, like Cedric, focused his professional goals, leading him towards a purposeful and satisfying life, by blending nature with his architectural skills to enhance the quality of life for people in hospitals. All learned the art of communicating effectively through the service learning activities (e.g., miscommunication from first service-learning project which contributed to its perceived failure), some challenging situation (e.g., confusion with assignments, getting acquainted with each other), as well as living abroad (e.g., communicating with host family and contractor at the worksite). These various practical situations allowed them to converse with a variety of people in two languages (peer, mentors, faculty, host community), and enabled them to demonstrate professionalism (e.g., division of labor, staying on task, completing projects) while completing their service-learning projects,

albeit more visible during the second one. Finally, for some (Carlo, Cedric) the SSLC provided them with an opportunity to learn time management. Others learned to navigate college, academically (Reba, Cali, Naomi), but also socially for all of them, as they developed healthy and supportive relationships amongst themselves, with peer mentors, faculty, and members of the community abroad.

Overall, the participants' perception of the SSLC program matched the learning outcomes established by CAS for HIPs. Additionally, as a multi-HIPs approach, the SSLC offered three types programmatic interventions: learning communities, service learning, and study abroad. The participants' experience of each of these elements also aligned with existing research on these practices, as explained next.

Learning Community

The findings of this research align with previous research on learning communities. The structure of the SSLC program allowed the participants to build a community that helped them develop a sense of belonging (Dodd, 2002). This enabled them to have access to each others' support, to develop a sense of self-efficacy, for example, by becoming more independent, confident (Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002). This learning community also allowed them to create connections with peers and other college resources through faculty, advisors and other community members (Pike et al., 2011), thus assisting them with finding their footing and transitioning from high school to college (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). As the program provided multiple extracurricular activities and opportunities to work together on projects, it also led them to be more engaged and involved, especially during the second service-learning project (Pike et al., 2011; Tinto, 2012), giving them a greater sense of civic engagement (Fatherly et al., 2020).

Service Learning

With the SSLC, the participants had the opportunity to developed new and existing skills (e.g., leadership, construction, problem-solving) and connected what they learned in the classroom as they applied this new knowledge to real-life work (Butler & Christofili, 2014; Hart, 2015) by participating in various service-learning activities (e.g., ESL, can fundraising, nutrition center). The perception the participants had of their performance with the two group-activities, i.e., food drive and nutrition center, showed an improvement between the first and second. In particular with characteristics associated with participating in such endeavors, such as communication, working independently, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving (Barth et al., 2014; Bowie & Cassim, 2016; Fullerton et al., 2015) between both activities. The participants recognized that they were able to organize themselves better while working at the Nutrition Center than during the can fundraising activities, while problem solving issues as they arose. Participating in these activities also led them to be more aware of the needs of the community, develop some social awareness and civic responsibility (Marshall et al., 2015) either by becoming aware of food insecurity (Cedric), or the need of non-English monolinguals to develop new skills (e.g., AJ, Becca, Lilian and Miriam at the ESL center). By also including an international service-learning component, the SSLC helped the participants get acquainted with another culture, interact and work with members of a different community. This opportunity further developed their sense of social and civic responsibility, and for some even encouraged them to redirect their academic plans and future careers (e.g., Cedric's plans to build hospitals inspired by nature, Reba's addition of Spanish to her Biology major). Additionally, as they all had to learn to work together, to listen to one another, and to help each other, they built character and grew as individuals (McLeod, 2013). However, Butin (2003) also cautioned that service learning might perpetuate "the norms of whiteness" (p. 1682). Emma for example had a

strong negative reaction to part of the work they were doing in Costa Rica (painting walls), as she saw it as the thing they bring foreigners to do, saying "I remember we actually painted over a wall that I think they had painted the year before. This isn't actually going to make much of a difference for them, you know?"

Involvement Theory

One aspect of service learning this research was able to provide a clear example of was the importance of engagement and involvement. Astin's (1999) Involvement Theory (presented in Chapter 2), posits that students must be engaged in their environment to grow and learn. He also indicated that the amount of engagement is proportional to the amount of learning and growth. Astin further added that to be effective, the activity must also elicit student involvement. The SSLC program provided all the attributes that would increase student involvement: small classes, connection with other courses, involvement with local and international communities, benefit of senior peer mentors, and close contact with faculty. The better relationship the participants created among each other throughout the program and the knowledge and skills they gained throughout the first semester also contributed to a better interaction among the group, leading to a need to accomplish their task. As the participants became more engaged in the process as the semester went on, they acquired more skills related to leadership and Spanish and they began to know each other and work together more. This in turn affected the level of engagement of the participants with each project. They felt disconnected from the food drive and saw the charity they were working for as an anonymous entity during the fall, most of them viewing the project only as a grade. On the contrary, while at the Nutrition Center, they knew each other well, and they had direct contact with who they were affecting, i.e., they could see the children coming to the worksite. Therefore, during the second project, they were more engaged

than with the first. The level of engagement was a contributing factor to the perceived failure of the first group service-learning project and perceived success of the second one.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD theory (briefly presented in Chapter 2) can also account for the approach to and perceived failure or success of the service-learning projects. While endeavoring to collect the cans for the first activity, the participants did not have the benefit of having access to a more knowledgeable other to guide them through the process. On the other hand, while in Costa Rica, the participants interacted with faculty and the peer mentor to better negotiate linguistic issues, and a local contractor who directed the work and showed the participants how to do things when they did not know (e.g., make concrete by hand, form the foundation of the playground out of rebar). Knowledge and skills were acquired through social interaction, which is at the core of social constructivism. However, the level of involvement of the students with the program and activities themselves as well as access to a more knowledgeable other were not the only reasons for perceiving the outcome of each service learning so differently, as will be discussed later on in the section "Service Learning: How Does it Work?"

Faculty-Led Study Abroad

Some participants in the SSLC program noted that they had originally registered for the program to improve their linguistic skills, and did notice improvement as they communicated with the local community (e.g. negotiating at the market), attended language courses, interacted with host families and troubleshot language issues that arose as a result, with the assistance of their classmates. This is on par with research that has shown linguistic development (Gaia, 2015; Martinsen, 2008) especially if the program provide homestays (Allen et al., 2007). The participants also became more aware of the differences between their own country and Costa

Rica, learned to communicate with the community, and developed and appreciation for another culture's lifestyle, thus showing intercultural awareness (Gaia, 2015; Gullekson & Tucker, 2012). Not only did the faculty-led program change their perspective (AJ, Brooke), it also allowed them to become more independent and confident (e.g., Carlo, Miriam, Lilian), and (re)directed their career choices (e.g., Cedric, Reba), thus showing personal growth, transformational learning and career development (Di Gregorio, 2015; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Walters et al., 2017). Additionally, having participated in the SSLC led Brooke, Carlo, and Lilian to enroll in other programs abroad in Spain and the Czech Republic (Coryell et al., 2016, Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). Finally, all participants in these study recognized and appreciated being able to be part of, and involved in, the community by living with host families, attending authentic cooking lessons, learning to dance, going to the market, and working at the Nutrition Center, furthering their understanding of the culture (Gaia, 2015). This made them feel connected to the local community, which enhanced their experience abroad and fostered global citizenship (Kehl & Morris, 2008; Mule et al., 2018).

The qualitative findings from this research corroborated the majority of the existing literature regarding the effects of individual HIPs as described in this section. However, the SSLC program was comprised of a learning community, service learning, and faculty-led study abroad, which combined, may have created a compounding effect (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Henscheid, 2004; Hesse & Mason, 2003; Swing, 2004) in some aspects, as discussed next.

Contributions to Multi-HIP Research

Although the nature of this research could not quantify the compounding effect multi-HIP may generate (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Henscheid, 2004; Hesse & Mason, 2003; Swing, 2004), the phenomenological aspect of this study provided qualitative insights, i.e., a better

understanding of how a learning community, multiple service-learning projects and study abroad combined enhanced the sense of belonging for the participants and their approach to service learning. As this study created a rich source of data concerning a) the formation of the sense of community, and b) the perception of group service-learning projects, it enabled me to look at these two aspects in a way that, to my knowledge, has not been present in existing literature regarding HIPs or multi-HIPs, especially qualitatively. By combining multiple HIPs into one program, the SSLC allowed the participants greater access to people and resources for a longer period of time (i.e., a semester and a few weeks) and through a wider variety of people (domestically and abroad). This created a strong sense of community, and opportunities to participate in more activities (e.g., two group service-learning projects) spaced enough apart and within different locations, which contributed to the differences in approaches and perceived outcomes of each, allowing them to grow and learn more. This study offered a clear understanding of the building blocks of this community (i.e., the structure and the support presented in Theme 1) which in turn allowed them to create deep bonds and a wealth of social capital, which permeated throughout the program for the participants. This sense of community became the glue that tied the program together for them and allowed them to learn and grow. Furthermore, this study added to existing research on multi-HIP program as it offered a unique approach to service learning, which allowed for the comparison of two major projects the participants carried out successfully, yet with vastly different perceptions of each. The deep bond the participants formed along with the social capital they formed are explained next.

What Makes a Community?

The SSLC combined learning community, domestic and international service learning, and faculty-led study abroad. This provided several opportunities for the participants to bond

with one another and with the variety of people associated with the institution and community. First in the fall semester as part of the learning community and working on a group service-learning project embedded in the Leadership course. The sense of community and belonging was further enhanced as they were forced to rely on each other even more as they traveled to Costa Rica, and worked on a service-learning project there. This aspect of the program demanded they further develop their leadership and organizational skills (e.g., division of labor), learn new ones (e.g., construction) while problem-solving issues and communicating in another language (e.g., with host families and to a certain extent on the worksite), thus work together and get better acquainted. Without the addition of the service-learning faculty-led study abroad segment of the program, the group may not have created such a strong bond, as it forced them together into a new situation abroad, seeing each other daily. The strength of the community they built resided in its layers and the multiple people they interacted with, which granted them more access to more varied resources and support. The situations they were placed in (e.g., working on group projects, going abroad) forced them to know each other, learn to rely on one another thus enabling the group to create a solid bond going into unknown territory (e.g., study abroad in Costa Rica, staying with host families) in an "us vs. them" type interaction. Therefore, the group went from classmates early in the fall semester, to friends at the end of it, to a bonded group in Costa Rica relying one another to interact with outsiders (See Figure 1).

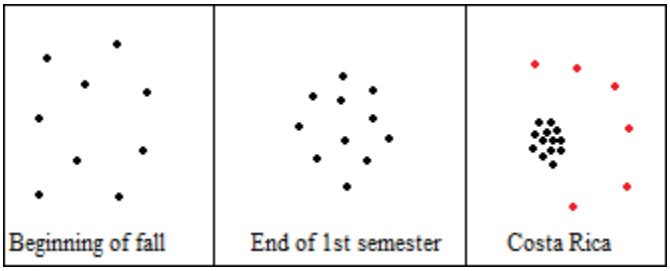


Figure 5-1 - Visual Representations of Group Dynamic Within the SSLC Program

The findings from this study highlighted not simply the sense of community the participants formed, but rather its building blocks. This aspect of the SSLC can be discussed through two lenses embedded in the social constructivism theoretical framework that shaped this study (see Chapter 3). I used Szreter and Woolcock's (2004) concepts of *bonding, bridging and linking* rooted in social capital theory (SC) and McCabe's (2016a) work on *friendship networks* to further explain the relationships formed within the community the participants built as a result of having participated in the SSLC.

Bonding, Bridging, Linking

The nature and structure of the SSLC program allowed the participants to accumulate social capital (SC), which can have a positive impact on student success (Almeida et al., 2019; Mishra, 2020), as it allows them to build a network of people and resources. Bourdieu (1980) identified SC as a collection of existing or potential resources related to the possession of a long-lasting network of more or less institutionalized relationships. The breadth, depth, and quality of these resources depend on the members of said group. Although Bourdieu used the definition of SC to explain how the dominant class can maintain its social position, Coleman (1988) defined it in a more neutral form. He considered it a "variety of different entities" which have two common features: "some aspect of social structures" that "facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure," thus enabling success that would not be possible were it not present (p. 98). Putnam (2000) further identified two main elements of SC, *bonding* and *bridging* referring to horizontal connections, while Szreter and Woolcock (2004) added the notion of *linking* capital, a vertical relationship. *Bonding* SC is associated with relationships and interactions within a homogenous group, among people of the same or similar social identity (e.g., the participants). While *bonding* is inward, within a group, *bridging* SC is

outward as it refers to the connections among people of diverse social and ethnic groups that may not share similar identities (e.g., peer mentors, host families). This is a horizontal extension on the *binding* element, joining people from different groups, but that remain rather equal when it comes to status and/or power. *Linking* SC is another extension of *bonding* and *bridging* as it goes farther outside the circle to include connections with people from a different social or ethnic group, who also have a different status or power, making it a hierarchical or vertical relationship (e.g., faculty, onsite contractor). Dahl and Malmberg-Heimonen (2010) perceived *linking* SC it as a way to access professional resources.

The SSLC program exemplified all three aspects of Szreter and Woolcock (2004)' SC framework of *bonding*, *bridging*, and *linking*. The program reinforced and supported the element of *bonding* SC as it enabled a relatively homogenous group of people to join and participate in the program. The participants, who were all 18-year-old freshmen at the beginning of the program with experience and an interest in community service, developed ties among themselves thanks in part to the structure and nature of the program. The SSLC enabled them to take three courses together focused on topics of interests to all of them, albeit in varying degrees, participate in a variety of in and out of class activities together, spend time together and bond within their inner community. As the program progressed, they became a tight network, they created an inner circle, which allowed them to build trust among each other, and provided them with a sense of solidarity enabling them to face and resolve issues together as a group (e.g., communication, academic matters, and linguistic support). The program also offered the participants an opportunity to create *bridging* and *linking* SC. As they ventured outside their immediate social network by interacting with peer mentors (student learning assistants) while in the U.S., and the local community (the host families) in Costa Rica, thus they began to bridge the

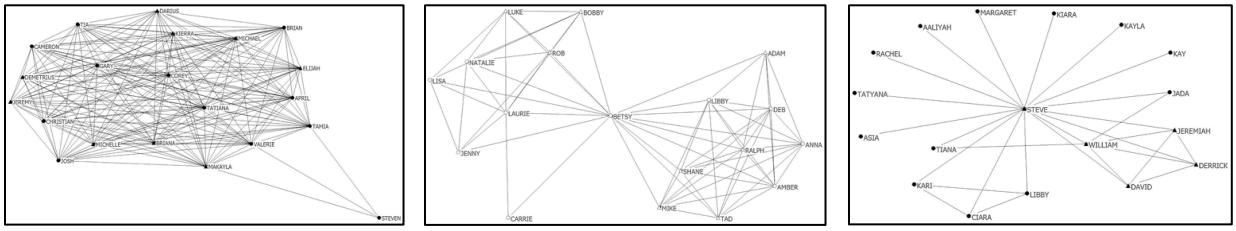
gap and build trust with other communities. This outward interaction granted them access to information they were not familiar with (e.g., help navigating college, getting a passport), understand and discover a different culture (e.g., by staying with and engaging with host families). Finally, the participants built *linking* SC as they interacted with advisors, faculty, and project managers who provided them with knowledge (e.g., the existence of the program itself) and skills (e.g., linguistic, leadership, construction) to succeed in their courses and service-learning projects.

The Tight-Knitters

This study highlights the importance of *friendship networks* (McCabe, 2016a, 2016b) to succeed in college, as the relationships the participants created permeated through every aspect of the program. Although artificially created, since none of the participants gravitated toward one another naturally to become friends, rather they became friends due to circumstances, i.e., participating in the SSLC program, that forced them together, this group became a tight-knit family. A group that McCabe (2016a) would identify as *tight-knitters*, a "densely woven friendship group in which nearly all their friends are friends with one another" (p. 24)

McCabe (2016b) studied the relationship between friendship networks and success of college students by interviewing 67 students at a large Midwestern four-year public institution. Through her research, she identified three typologies of network types: *tight-knitters*, *compartmentalizers* and *samplers* and their associated social and academic costs and benefits. The *tight-knitters*, prevalent with Black and Latino/a students, have a cohesive group of friends (see Fig. 1 below). The social benefits of this network is high levels of social and academic support and aid "combatting race-based marginality." However, if their friends have a lower academic drive, lack skills and/or knowledge to help, they can become distractors. McCabe

further indicated that it may be difficult to withdraw from this type of network. The second group identified is the *compartmentalizers*, generally common with middle- and upper- class white students and mostly women, have two to four groups of friends with few connections between these groups (see Fig. 1 below). This type of network represents a moderate level of social support from friends, which generally comes from one group only. The compartmentalizer may find it difficult to, academically and socially, balance the multiple time and identity issues that come from managing multiple groups of friends. With this type of network cluster, students of color and lower class achieve academic involvement from one cluster and "academic multiplex ties," while more privileged students are successful with either. Finally, the *samplers* have distinct friends who mostly do not know each other, which creates a network that is diverse racially, socially and in terms of gender (see Fig. 1 below). The samplers have limited social support derived from one-o-one friendships, and experience social and academic loneliness and a sense of isolation. However, the samplers can be academically successful without relying on their friends.



Tight-knitters *Compartmentalizer* *Sampler*

Figure 5-2 - Visual Representations of Friendship Networks (McCabe 2016b).

The participants in the SSLC program became an artificially created network of *tight-knitters*, which allowed them to find support and help in a variety of situations. Whether they needed a friend to "drag them to class" (Carlo speaking of AJ); congregated to study for finals; spoke to each other to resolve issues (e.g., reuniting their group within the Leadership class); helped each other academically (e.g., homework, understanding the goals of a course); or share

new experiences with a friend (e.g. going abroad). They all personally, socially and academically benefitted from this artificially created network of friends (e.g., successfully completed the program, became more independent and confident, created long-lasting friendships). Although the information the participants chose to share mostly highlighted the positive aspect of this type of network, i.e. the support they found in each other that helped them throughout the program, there were some drawbacks. Emma, for example, became the de facto interpreter for the group while working at the nutrition center, as her level of Spanish was more advanced than some of her peers, which left her frustrated with her classmates. The SSLC enabled the participants to build SC within their first semester across multiple levels while also allowing them to bond with each other, which made them feel supported and heard throughout the program, thus enabling them to learn, succeed, and grow. Another aspect of the SSLC program that was unique was its multiple service-learning components, as discussed next.

Service Learning: How Does it Work?

The unique structure of the SSLC program provided the participants with the opportunity to complete two-group service-learning projects early on domestically and at the end of the program internationally. This feature provided a rich source of data regarding the participants' approach to community service and the perceived achievement of each, which can then be compared, using both Astin's (1999) Involvement Theory, and Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Theory (see section on Service Learning earlier in this chapter). However, these two theories only offer insights on one individual aspect of service learning at a time, they do not offer an overview of the dynamics that take place within the activity. In order to further understand the reasoning behind the participants' perceptions and interactions afforded by both group service-learning activities and how these were approached, both projects are

analyzed next with Engeström (2001)'s Expended Activity Theory Model, embedded in the social constructivism theoretical framework that shaped this study (see Chapter 3).

Activity theory

Activity Theory (AT) is a theoretical framework that originated from the work of psychologist Lev Vygotski (1896-1934) and his student Aleksei Leont'ev (1903-1979) in the 1920s (Hasan & Kazlauskas, 2014). Contrary to Pavlov's (1849-1936) stimulus-response model, Vygotski posited that human activity is purposeful and transformative, recognizing an interaction between the *subject* (the person) and the *object* (the world) mediated by *tools* (Engeström, 2001; Hasan & Kazlauskas, 2014). Engeström (2001) expanded on Vygotsky and Leont'ev's work and added several elements to compose an activity system (see Figure 5-3). The system uses triangles to represent the interaction of the various elements and their influence or connections with others leading to the outcome. For example, the interaction between the *subject* (the person) and the *object* (the activity) is mediated by *tools* (e.g., signs, language, computers) that enable the action to be performed. The *rules* (the directives given) mediate the relationship between the *subject* and the *community* (the environment), and/or between the *subject* and *the division of labor* (the distribution of tasks). The relationship between the *object* and the *community* is mediated by the *division of labor*. The *tools* can also mediate the relationship between *division of labor* and *subject*. This activity system does not only show the relationship between the various components of the activity, it can also highlight what Engeström refers to as *contradictions*, which can lead to problems or generate new ideas:

> Activities are open systems. When an activity system adopts a new element from the outside (for example, a new technology or a new object), it often leads to an aggravated secondary contradiction where some old element (for example, the rules or the division of

labor) collides with the new one. Such contradictions generate disturbances and conflicts, but also innovative attempts to change the activity. (p. 137)

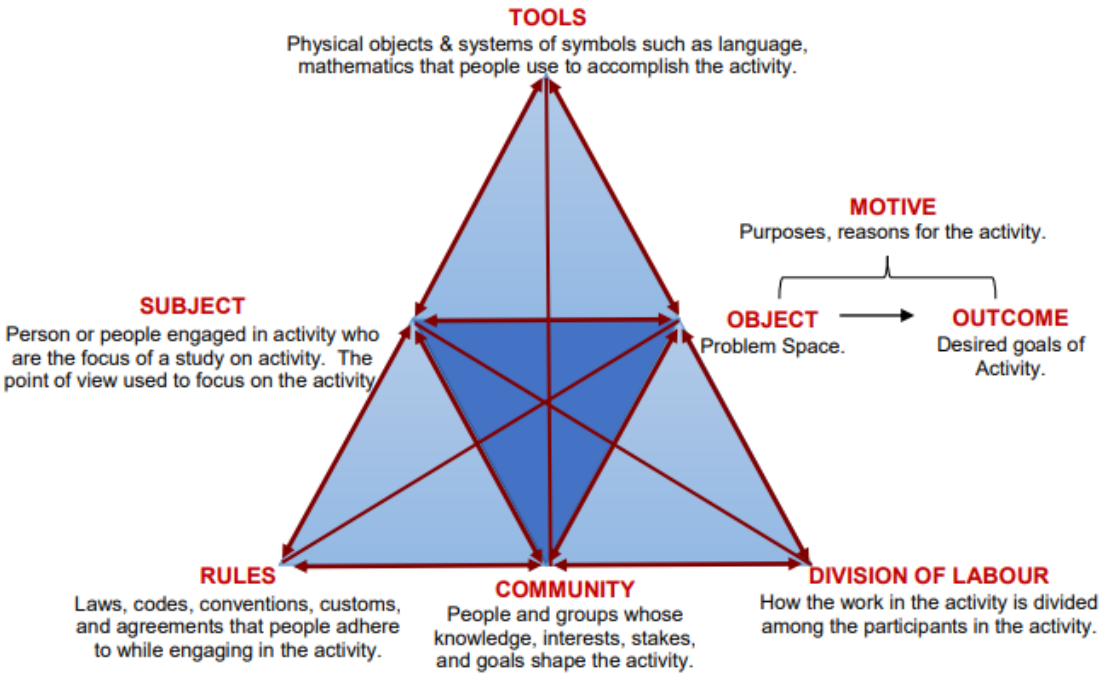


Figure 5-3 - Engeström's (2001) Expended Activity Theory Model (as presented by Vahed et al., 2018)

As Hashim and Jones (2007) explained, AT enables the researcher to better understand the complexity of human activity. While interviewing, observing or surveying participants may disclose explicit aspects of their actions, it does not explain the implicit motivation behind them. In that sense, AT adds another layer of explanation and "through the examination of artefacts can render explicit the more tacit elements of an action" (Hashim & Jones (2007). In the case of the two group service-learning project the group participated in while on the SSLC, AT allows us to see the relationships between all the elements and how they affect each other, which can help better explain and understand how the participants approach each activity.

For example, in the case of the first project (the can fundraising from the fall semester), the *object* was to organize a food drive to collect cans for a local charity. The participants (the *subject*) achieved their goal by using the following *tools*: advertising materials, distribution of flyers throughout neighborhoods, orally promoting the food drive in front of a local store. While carrying out the activity, i.e., can collecting, *contradictions* emerged thus creating tensions between the following elements: *subject-rules* and *subject-division of labor* (signaled in red in Figure 5-4 below). These created disturbances in the process (e.g., miscommunication, lack of involvement/sense of responsibility). The contradiction between the *rules* and the *subject* took place, according to the participants, because they were not given any specific instructions to organize and carry out this project. This lack of directions and structure left them to fend for themselves, which created another contradiction between *subject* and *division of labor*. As none of them really knew each other at the beginning of the fall semester, did not have all the knowledge at their disposal yet (e.g., leadership concepts), they were unable to organize themselves. They cooperated, i.e., they each took on some tasks, but did not communicate well amongst themselves to achieve them. In turn, this led to some miscommunication and discouragement on the part of the participants (e.g., distributed flyers in neighborhood A, but went to neighborhood B for pick-up; gave up and went to the store to buy cans). In this case, the "contradictions generated disturbances and conflicts" (Engeström, 2001), leading to a negative perception of the goal accomplished. Despite these limitations, the goal of the activity was still achieved (as a class they collected over 19,000 cans that year, according to Cali), albeit perceived negatively by the participants because they felt disorganized, and unable to collect as many cans as in previous years.

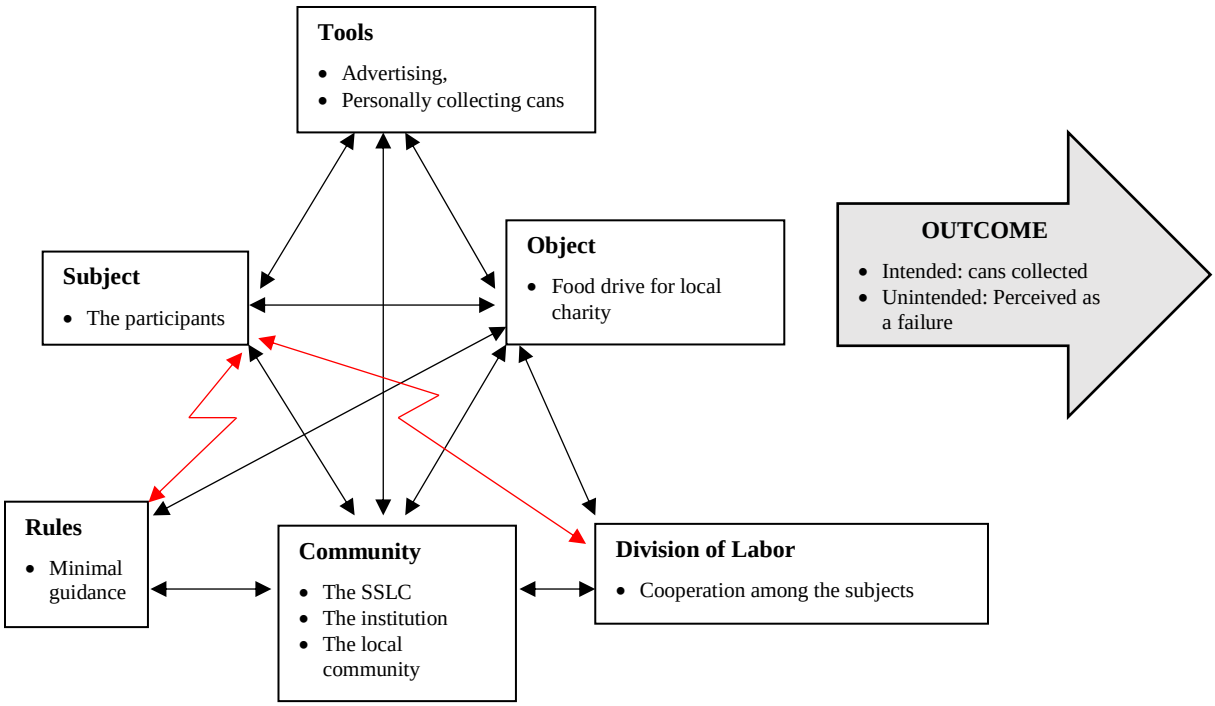


Figure 5-4 – Activity System First Group Service-Learning Project

For the second project (volunteering at a local Nutrition Center in Costa Rica), the *object* was upgrading the Nutrition Center. In this case, the *subjects* were a combination of the participants, the faculty and the peer mentor, as everyone worked on the project. To achieve the goal of the activity, the *subjects* used the following *tools*: paintbrushes, brooms, rebar, wheel barrels, trowels, levels, rocks, water, cement mixer, etc. At the beginning of the project, and contrary to the first one, the *subjects* were given very specific *rules:* clean up an area to create a garden space, paint the inside of the building, and build a concrete patio. These specific set of rules enabled the subjects to collaborate amongst themselves in order to *divide the labor*, based on knowledge and skills, interests, and strengths. As the subjects all knew each other well, in particular the participants knew each other' strengths and weaknesses, they were able to coordinate, collaborate, delegate and organize themselves in various groups. Cedric took the lead with painting, AJ took charge of cement mixing, Miriam led a group in shaping rebar in squares,

and Brooke guided the cleanup. With clear sets of instructions and defined groups (which varied from time to time, so that anyone interested could learn/do something new), the subjects were able to carry out the activity. In this case, though, *contradictions* emerged and created tensions between the following elements: *subject-tools* and *tools-object* (signaled in red in Figure 5-5 below). The participants had to learn to use construction tools (*subject-tool*) which affected their ability to perform the task, and not all necessary tools were available, slowing down the process (*tools-object*). The first week of the project, there was no cement mixer, therefore the subjects had to learn how to make concrete by hand. Several other instances of needing to learn how to use a tool or find a way around not having access to some tools, led the subjects to seek the advice of the contractor and implement different ways of doing things to ensure the tasks could be accomplished. A third contradiction arose from the *subject-community* relationship (signaled in red in Figure 5-5 below). The subjects could see the children, i.e., the members of the community, who used the nutrition center. Although they did not interact with them until the last day, they were able to see exactly who they were affecting, which became a source of motivation for the subjects to accomplish their goal. In the case of the second project, the *contradictions* led to "innovative attempts to change the activity" (Engeström, 2001), leading to a positive perception of the goal accomplished, as they were able to organize themselves, get the tasks accomplished, improve on or learn new skills, and were able to directly interact with/see the community affected.

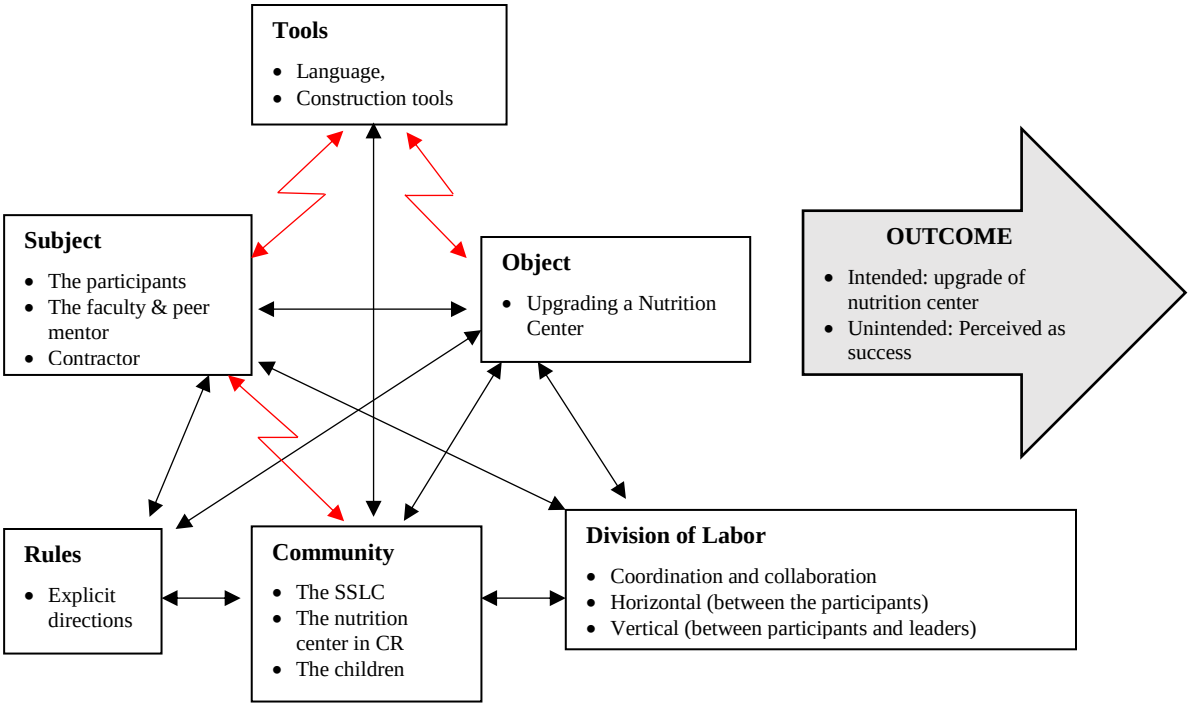


Figure 5-5 – Activity System Second Group Service-Learning Project

Implications for Higher Education

The purpose of this study was not to evaluate the SSLC program, but rather to learn from the participants how they had experienced it. However, the findings contribute to existing literature on HIP programs, but also to understanding multi-HIP programs, how they function and how they are perceived, thus can assist institutions in making decisions regarding components to include in such programs as well as refining some to be of more benefit to the students.

For example, the findings from this study made emphasis on the building blocks of the community that were created through the program, specifically the various groups of people who surrounded the participants, and show how it was perceived as a supportive environment conducive to an overall positive learning experience for the members of the SSLC. Three factors in particular contributed to this support. Firstly, prior to the beginning of the fall semester, the

advisors were made aware of the program so that during freshmen orientation and enrollment they would be able to effectively communicate this option to incoming students as a great opportunity to begin their college career. Second, the combination of faculty and peer mentors to support the students academically as well as navigating through the first year of college in a formal (faculty) and more informal manner (peer mentors) seemed to have contributed to the feeling of support the participants felt. Third, the choice of the site in Costa Rica (small community) with the opportunity to stay with host families and take part in different daily activities the local community participated in themselves, contributed to a sense of welcome and belonging for the participants, which enhanced their learning of the culture and the language. The combination of all three helped the participants build social capital across various groups and among themselves, which contributed to their learning and sense of belonging. It could be of interest to create programs which go beyond the scope of the initial goals and include follow-up and ways for students to keep in touch throughout their college careers (e.g., through social events, regular activities) to help maintain that connection and network to assist them academically or socially throughout college.

The unusual feature this program offered with two different service-learning projects domestically and internationally also furthered the students' understanding of class concepts as they applied them in hands-on activities. Although they perceived the first project as a failure, the learning that came from that, the recognition that they were not able to organize themselves, they lacked leadership and direction, they lacked motivation, and a sense of responsibility, may have contributed to better organization, a more positive attitude toward the project, and an overall sense of success. The participants did cite as an influential factor the fact that they knew each other better, knew each other' strengths and weaknesses, and felt more empowered to take

on tasks they felt comfortable with. It is also important to notice that the structure of each projects were drastically different. The first seemed to have put the responsibility of the entire project on the shoulders of the participants, while the second was piecemealed for them. It might be of interest for institutions to create more programs involving more than one group service-learning project with pre/posttest surveys for each, discussions concerning organizational, leadership, and engagement issues, to better measure the learning between each activity.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Social networks and social capital are linked. A social network provides a student access to a variety of valuable social capital ranging from information to support and economic resources (Schulz et al., 2017). Based on McCabe's (2016a, 2016b) research on friendship networks in college and their social and academic impact; it would be worth exploring follow-up programs that keep the initial members of the group actively connected throughout college to reinforce the beneficial aspects of the *tight-knitter* networks created by such programs as the SSLC. The majority of HIPs or multi-HIPs programs are short term. They are designed to create a sense of community and belonging for a group of students while they participate in any given program for a semester. It would be of interest to follow-up with students who participate in integrated HIPs (e.g., learning communities + service learning + study abroad), to see how their relationships and interactions with the members of the inner circle (the participants themselves) and the outer shell (the advisors, faculty, peer mentors, host community) evolve. Do they keep interacting throughout college (as seemed to have been the case for the majority of the group in this study)? If so, in what capacity (e.g., support system, occasional hang out)? Do they capitalize on the gained social capital and expand their circle? If so, does being part of the initial group assist students in forming new relationships that will further support them (as seemed to

have been the case for Cali and Reba in this study)? Having more data could help create focused and intentional activities that would allow the participants to remain within each other' social network in an active and relevant way as a "permanent" source of support and connection throughout college.

Although I noted the difference in the profiles of the participants (novice vs. expert) in terms of their prior experience abroad, at the beginning of the result chapter, I did not feel I had enough data to make any compelling argument regarding whether this factor had affected their perception of their experience abroad. It would be interesting to further compare the approach and impact the service-learning faculty-led study abroad might have had, and if so how could we better prepare students with little experience, or how could we intentionally involve the "experts" to better assist the "novices" in preparing for study abroad and international service learning.

Finally, I believe further research on the use of multiple service-learning projects embedded in HIP programs is necessary to further understand the impact each have on the students. What they learn from one and how they apply it to the next. This could help programs structure their service learning more effectively. For example, should the first project be the responsibility of the students, while the second be more directed, or the other way around to maximize benefit and learning? How much did being abroad for a short period of time working daily together affect the participants approach to the project as opposed to a longer period of time with no specifically designated time to work on one?

Summary

With this chapter, I attempted to make meanings of my results in relation to existing literature, and found out that the unique features of the program studied generated rich data that enabled me to expand on existing research regarding multi-HIPs. More specifically this research

contributed to the understanding and depth of the sense of belonging and community building the participants achieve through their participation in a multi-HIP program. It also provided new insights on students' approach to service learning as two projects varying in length and settings were compared. However, this was a unique program with a small number of students, thus the findings are not generalizable. That being said, they still contribute to a better understanding of multi-HIPs, the construction of communities of learning, sense of belonging, and approaches to service learning. As such faculty and administrators may be interested in the experience of the participants in this study as an example of how to develop programs according to learning outcomes.

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Appendix A - Participant Email Contact

Hi _____,

As you may already know, I am working on the completion of my doctorate in student affairs in higher education. I am currently conducting my dissertation research and investigating the experiences of students who participated in the Spanish Service-Learning Community. My data collection will involve conducting two individual interviews per person, the first one focusing on the Fall component of the program and the other focusing on your experience in Costa Rica. Following these interviews, I will also ask that you reflect on the overall experience in written form. You will have an opportunity to review and to comment on the findings of this study to ensure they truly represent your own perspective of your Spanish Service-Learning Community experience.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please click on the link below to sign up for a day and time for each interview. Keep in mind that you can make changes to this schedule later on if need be. If none of the days and times work for you, please let me know so we can arrange an alternative.

As required, this study has been approved by K-State's Institutional Review Board and will be supervised by College of Education faculty member, Dr. Christy Craft. If you have any questions, please contact me at angeli@ksu.edu.

I would greatly appreciate your assistance in the collection of this data. The more information from a variety of students I can get, the better I can understand and describe the experience you all shared.

Thank you for your support.

Angélique Courbou

Appendix B - First Interview Guide

This interview will focus on the **Fall component** of the program.

In-person Introduction

Hello, ___.

Thank you for participating in my research about the Spanish Service-Learning Community that you participated in during the 2014-2015 academic year. Hopefully, this study will be helpful to the university in developing or enhancing Spanish Service-Learning Community programs.

As I explained earlier in our email correspondence, I want to make sure you are clear that the information you share for this study is considered confidential. For my research, your name, the name of the program and any other names of related persons will be changed. Do you have any questions about the "informed consent form" you have been provided?

I will be audio-recording our interview so that I can give you my full attention during the interview and make sure that I capture every word of your responses to my questions. At a later point in time, I will provide you with a chance to review the preliminary findings of the study to help verify the information collected.

During our interview, I am going to be asking questions about your experience in the Spanish Service-Learning Community program. Many of my questions will ask you to recall specific experiences or share examples. I want you to feel comfortable pausing and taking time to think about your response to any question. The most important goal of this interview is to benefit from your first-hand familiarity with and interpretations about your experience.

At the end of our interview, you are welcome to ask me any questions about today's session or my research. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview guide (Fall)

1. First, I would like to begin with a bit of background information
    a. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
        i. Current year in school, age, major, extra-curricular activities, anything else.

ii. Prior to this program, had you ever participated in any community related activities (volunteering, church, summer camps)? What/when/where? What were your overall feelings about the experience(s)?

b. How did you find out about the Spanish Service-Learning Community?

c. Why did you enroll in it? / What attracted you to the program?

2. Did you bring photos/artifacts from the Fall component of the program?
    a. Can you show them to me and tell me about them/describe them?
    b. Why did you pick this/these particular photo(s)/artifact(s)?
    c. If you did not bring anything, can you tell me why?
3. Now more specifically about the Fall component of the program, could you describe how it worked/was organized? *(a, and b will be used as prompts/follow up depending on how they respond to this question)*
    a. What courses did you have to enroll in? What do you remember of these courses (content, activities, people, anything else?)?
    b. Tell me about some activities you participated in outside of class, but related to the program. What were they? Can you share/describe one or more of these experiences?
    c. Looking back on the Fall components, the classes, the in/out of class activities, if you were going to describe your Fall experience related to the program to your "freshman self" (before participating in the program), what would you say? How did you experience it? Can you share some specific examples/experiences?
4. If you could share anything with your "freshman self" (before participating in the program), what would you say were the most important things/your take-away from the Fall component? What elements stand out the most for you (as the essence of the Fall components) from the Fall component of the program? Why? What would define the Fall part of the program for you?
5. Can you share a challenging experience where you had to resolve a conflict or solve a problem during the fall portion of the Spanish Service-Learning Community? What happened? What did you do? What did you learn about yourself through that experience? Looking back, would you do anything different in that situation?
6. Can you share a positive experience/memory about the Fall component of the program? What happened? What did you do? What did you learn about yourself through that experience?
7. What was your social interaction like with others (for example: classmates, peers, faculty) during the Fall component?
8. Overall, how would you describe your experience with the Fall components of the program?
    a. For example, looking back on it now, what do you think you would tell other freshmen who are considering participating in this program, specifically about the Fall components?
9. What other questions do you think I should have asked you to talk about your experience? How would you answer that question?

Do you have any additional comments or any questions for me?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences with me today. As I explained earlier, the information you have provided will be handled confidentially. Also, I had mentioned in my email that we will have a second interview to discuss the study abroad portion of the program, next week. Your day / time is _____. Between now and then, I would ask a couple of things.

1) If you feel you want to add anything to this interview, anything you forgot, wish you had mentioned, something you want to change, feel free to email me about it, or write it out and bring it to me the next time we meet. Is that ok?

2) Can you look through your photos of the trip and bring one or two that for you most represent your experience? You can email them to me prior to our interview, or bring them with you when we meet.

Thank you again for your input and participation.

Appendix C - Second Interview Guide

This interview will focus on the **Costa Rica component** of the program.

In-Person Introduction:

Hello, ___.

Thank you for agreeing to a second interview to continue our discussion regarding the Spanish Service-Learning Community you participated in during the 2014-2015 academic year. As discussed in the first interview, all information you provide is considered confidential, your name, the name of the program and any other names of related persons will be changed.

This interview will also be audio-recorded, as was the first one, so that I can give you my full attention during the interview and make sure that I capture every word of your responses to my questions.

During our interview, I am going to be asking questions about your experience in the Spanish Service-Learning Community. Many of my questions will ask you to recall specific experiences or share examples. I want you to feel comfortable pausing and taking time to think about your response to any question. The most important goal of this interview is to benefit from your first-hand familiarity with and interpretations about your experience.

At the end of our interview, you are welcome to ask me any questions you have about today's session or my research. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview guide (CR)

1. First, I would like to begin with a bit of background information
    a. Prior to this program, had you gone abroad? *(either i or ii will be asked)*
        i. In what context (family trip, volunteering, mission work, other?) Where did you go? With whom? How long? How were these experiences for you?
        ii. If you had never gone abroad, did you know anyone who had? In what context (family trip, volunteering, mission work, other?) Where did they go? How long? And what was their impression/feelings about going abroad? What were your impressions/feelings of them going abroad?
2. Did you bring photos/artifacts from Costa Rica?
    a. Can you show them to me and tell me about them / describe them?

b. Why did you pick this/these particular photo(s)/artifact(s)?

c. If you did not bring anything, can you tell me why?

3. Now, more specifically, could you describe how the program worked/was organized? *(a, b, c, d, e, f, g will be used as prompts/follow up depending on how they respond to this question)*

   a. Could you tell me where you went, when, and for how long?

   b. Can you describe/explain the purpose of the trip as it was described to you?

   c. Can you describe/explain the purpose of the trip for you individually?

   d. Can you talk to me a bit about the housing? What was your experience like with a host family?

   e. Can you describe a typical day?

   f. What activities did you participate in?

      i. How would you compare this activity [working @ the nutrition center] with the one from the Fall [collecting cans]?

   g. Looking back on your time in Costa Rica, what was most memorable? Why?

4. If you could share anything with your "freshman self" (before participating in the program), what would you say were the most important things/your take-away from your time in Costa Rica? What elements stand out the most for you (as the essence of the program) from your experience in Costa Rica? Why? What would define your time in Costa Rica?

5. Can you share a challenging experience where you had to resolve a conflict or solve a problem during your time in Costa Rica? What happened? What did you do? What did you learn about yourself through that experience?

6. Can you share a positive experience/memory about your time in Costa Rica? What happened? What did you do? What did you learn about yourself through that experience?

7. What was your social interaction like with others (for example, classmates, peer, faculty, families, local community) while in Costa Rica?

   a. Do you think your social interactions changed/evolved while in Costa Rica?

8. Overall, how would you describe your time in Costa Rica?

   a. For example, looking back on your time in Costa Rica, what would you tell other freshmen who are considering participating in this program, specifically about the Costa Rica component?

9. Looking back on the whole experience: Fall and Costa Rica, what would you tell other freshmen who are considering participating in this program?

1. How would you summarize your entire Spanish Service-Learning Community experience (Fall and Costa Rica)? In one sentence? In one word?

Do you have any additional comments or any questions for me?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences with me today. As I explained earlier, the information you have provided will be handled confidentially. If you feel you want to add anything to this interview, anything you forgot, wish you had mentioned, something you want to change, feel free to email me about it. Also, I have one last request/favor to ask of you. During these interviews, we have discussed the Fall and Spring component of the program separately, I would like you to take some time over the next week or so to think about your overall sense of the experience, to think about what was the whole experience like for you. Following this interview, I will send you an email with specific instructions and questions to guide you in this final written reflection, is that ok? Finally, I will be back in touch to offer you an opportunity to review a summary of my preliminary findings so that you can comment on them. Is your university email the best way to get back in touch with you?

Thank you again for your input and participation.

Appendix D - Reflection Prompt

Hi _____,

Thank you again for participating in the interviews and sharing with me your experience of the Spanish Service-Learning Community program. During the interviews, we focused on separate components of the program, I would now like you to take some time to reflect on the **overall experience**. Within the next two weeks, using the prompt below, please write your perspective of the experience in no more than two pages (single or double space as you see fit). As was the case for the interviews, all the information you are providing will be handled confidentially.

Prompt: If you were to write an entry in **your personal diary** about the **OVERALL EXPERIENCE** of participating in the Spanish Service-Learning Community program, what would you say? Please think about any and all of the following:

- What were the most important things about this experience for **you**?
- What elements from the overall program (from any and all of the following: classes, in/out of class activities, relationships, trip, individual or group experiences, etc.) stood out (and perhaps still stand out) the most for **you**, that would best describe the **essence** of the program for **you**?
- Overall, how would you describe **your** experience (how it was for you, individually, internally) while you were a participant in the Spanish Service-Learning Community?
- Overall, how do **you feel** about your experience now **looking back on it**?

Thank you again for taking the time to not only discuss your experience with me, but also to reflect on it further and share your overall sense of the experience.

Thank you for your support.

Angélique Courbou

Appendix E - Student Participant Background Information

	Demographics				Prior experience			Appeal of the program
Name	**Age**	**Year**	**Gender**	**Major**	**Domestic Community involvement**	**Experience Abroad**	**Community involvement abroad**	
AJ (expert)	20	junior	male	Mechanical Engineering	none mentioned	Panama Spanish immersion program, stay w/ host family + service	Amigos de las Americas (work w/ community toward common goal, create sustainable project) – Panama	"relive my experience in Panama" + "how they all connected & being able to be with the same class"
Becca (novice)	20	junior	female	Social Work	Friendship Club/children w/ disabilities	cruises with family - Bahamas, PR, Mexico - tourist	none	"just going to Costa Rica, 'cause I love traveling"
Brooke (novice)	20	junior	female	Human Resources	community service in HS, sort food, raise $$ for Child Cancer research	Mexico w/ family - tourist	none	"I wanted to study abroad, so I thought it was good, like, tester to see if… you know, it was 11 days so… it wasn't like, committing either a full summer or full semester"
Cali (expert)	20	junior	female	Speech Language Pathology	Young Life	Brazil & Honduras	Brazil - worked @ sports camp; Honduras - built houses	"I think it like the traveling sounded fun and then also like being in like 212 [Leadership course] already and then also in the Spanish classes that I needed to be in, I guess I just"
Carlo (novice)	20	junior	male	Spanish & Business	volunteering in hospital, boy scouts	Germany - tourist	none	"Three birds with one stone" [leadership, Spanish, Costa Rica]
Cedric (novice)	20	junior	male	Architectural Design	HS when required - helped w/ kindergarten enrollment	Canada (5 yrs old) + Family cruise to Mexico, Belize, Honduras and the Grand Cayman Islands	none	"The fact that I'd get to study abroad, honestly"

Emma (expert)	20	junior	female	Spanish and Cultural Anthropology	mission trip w/ church	Mexico w/ family - tourist	Amigos de las Americas - DR, sports, fundraising; Nicaragua - built a bridge, donations	"I think I just liked the whole idea of Costa Rica"
Lilian (expert)	20	junior	female	Spanish, International Studies, Business	volunteering thru church, and school (soup kitchen)	England (band trip)	mission trip to Guatemala past 3 summers, teach English, Bible study @ school, help w/ clean water, bring a dentist, medical team	"an opportunity to go to Costa Rica"
Miriam (novice)	20	junior	female	Human Services	Community service class - nursing home	Mexico w/family (4th grade)	none	"I just knew that we were going to Costa Rica […] If there wasn't a Costa Rica at the end, I probably wouldn't have joined"
Naomi (novice)	20	junior	female	Education & Spanish	mission trip to Texas/volunteering - fixing houses	UK w/ grandparents - tourist	none	"It was just kind of cool how it was all able to work together [leadership, Spanish, connection hour]" + "The fact that we would get to apply our leadership ability, and our knowledge of Spanish…and to help people" + Costa Rica was cool too"
Reba (novice)	20	junior	female	Biology	Make-a- Wish, movie theater	Nebraska ambassadors for music - Europe - tourist	none	"going to Costa Rica, I'd say was the main part. And then I guess in the Spanish Service-Learning Community since especially coming from out of state [make friends]"

Appendix F - Informed Consent

PROJECT TITLE: Examining the Experience of College Students Participating in First-year Spanish Service Learning Communities

APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT: ____ **EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT**: ____

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Christy Craft, ccraft@ksu.edu, 785-532-5940

CONTACT AND PHONE FOR ANY PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Christy Craft, ccraft@ksu.edu, 785-532-5940

IRB CHAIR CONTACT/PHONE INFORMATION:

- Dr. Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, 785-532-3224.
- Dr. Cheeryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, 785-532-3224

SPONSOR OF PROJECT: N/A

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of this study is to discover the essence of the shared experience of students who participated in an integrated freshman experience program combining elements of learning community, service learning, and study abroad. This study is being conducted to help inform university faculty and administrators who work with freshmen programs.

PROCEDURES OF THE RESEARCH: Participants in this study will include students from Kansas State University. Volunteer participants will be interviewed twice for approximately one hour and a half each time at an agreed upon campus location, and will be asked to write a short reflection paper post-interviews. All interviews will be audio-recorded.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT: N/A

LENGTH OF STUDY: Interviews will be conducted and reflections collected from October to December 2016.

RISKS ANTICIPATED: There are no foreseeable risks of participation in this project.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: Participants will benefit indirectly from providing input that can improve and enhance student experiences with freshmen programs.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: Only the investigators in this study will know participant identities. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the final written report. Individual names will not be associated with responses.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS: No.

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS: N/A

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME: _____

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE: _____ DATE: _____

WITNESS TO SIGNATURE: DATE: ___