

"The fear you'll be the same person when you go home and the fear you won't":

A narrative inquiry of first generation in college student recipients of the

Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

First-generation college students (FGCS) are consistently underrepresented within education abroad. For FGCS to have the opportunity to study abroad, they often need funding to help pay for their study abroad experience. The Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship aids FGCS in increasing participation in study abroad, but there is limited research on the experiential outcomes of participating Gilman Scholarship students. Previous research has shown the positive benefits of education abroad for all students and for FGCS more specifically, but understanding a previously overlooked group of people will provide evidence to continue to support FGCS engagement in international education. To identify how the Gilman Scholarship has impacted FGCS, this research utilizes a transformative learning theory framework to better understand FGCS students' experiences during and after their study abroad program. Primary data will be collected using qualitative methods and narrative inquiry. Applying narrative inquiry by interviewing and surveying FGCS who have received the Gilman Scholarship will effectively represent how FGCS understand the transformative nature of their experiences abroad with the Gilman Scholarship program. The findings from this research will aid those in higher education, international education, and policy research, ultimately helping increase long-term support for First-Generation College Students (FGCS) engaging in higher education abroad.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose:

- A qualitative narrative inquiry to better understand the experiences of FGCS who have received the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship
- Help explain how FGCS participants themselves understand their experiences with the Gilman Scholarship and the role they feel the program played in their post-graduation lives
- To contribute to our knowledge of the unique experience of FGCS within education abroad

Significance of Study:

- Provide further understanding of how a federal US educational initiative impacts higher education, international education, and policy research
- Strengthen the understanding of education abroad as a transformative learning experience and transformation over time
- Provide new information on the Gilman Scholarship and its impacts to help benefit the recipients of the scholarship
- Provide further support for the Sen. Paul Simon Act, which intends to expand the Gilman Scholarship, increasing the level of federal support for education abroad and FGCS
- Contribute methodologically to the use of narrative inquiry using creative data elicitation techniques
- Help increase long-term support for FGCS engaging in higher education abroad

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do first-generation college students reflect on their experiences with the Gilman Scholarship?

How do these first-generation college students understand the impact of their Gilman Scholarship experience for their long term personal, social, academic, and professional goals and aspirations?

FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

- Different organizations define "first-generation college students" differently, varying in exposure to postsecondary education as experienced by different combinations of parent/guardian arrangements
- First-generation status can be determined by one or more of the following: neither parent attended or completed college, neither parent graduated, both parents did not attend or complete college, or one parent specifically completed college
- Across the literature, neither parent having pursued postsecondary education was the most common indicator of FGCS status
- FGCS are less likely to enroll in and graduate from college, so policy makers frequently concentrate on initiatives for ensuring success for this student population
- For this study, we employ the federal definition of FGCS: "A student neither of whose natural or adoptive parents received a baccalaureate degree. A student who, prior to the age of 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent and whose supporting parent did not receive a baccalaureate degree" (Federal TRIO Program)

UNDERREPRESENTATION IN STUDY ABROAD

- Before the pandemic, ~10.9% of all undergraduates (including those enrolled at community colleges) and 16% of undergraduates at four-year institutions studied abroad (IEE 2022 Open Doors Report)
- FGCS constitute an estimated 40% of U.S. undergraduate population but are less likely to study abroad than their peers whose parents attended college (Ashcraft & Snodgrass, 2023)
- Factors attributed to underrepresentation: lack of information on opportunities, program costs, financial aid restrictions, family and community expectations, not seeing peers with similar backgrounds engaging internationally, concerns about graduating on time, lack of compelling study abroad destinations, and racism, among others (Engel, 2017; Wanger et al., 2020)
- Only 8% of FGCS study abroad (Mason & Garcia, 2022)

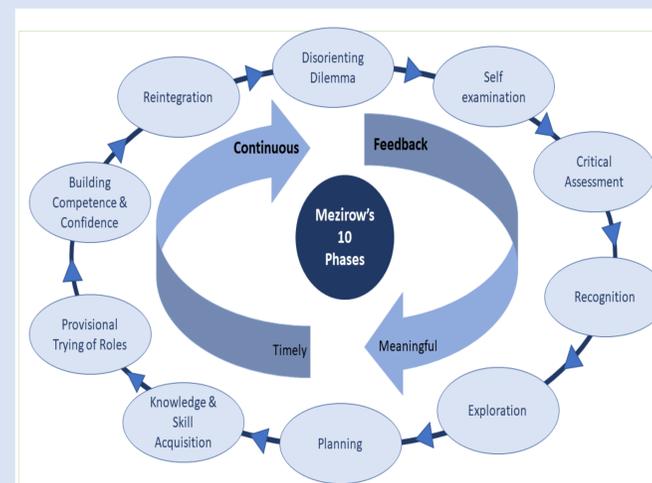


THE GILMAN SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

- Sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program supports students with "limited financial means" to study or intern overseas
- Every academic year, around 3,000 scholarships worth up to \$5,000 are given to undergraduate American citizens who want to study or intern overseas
- These expenses include program tuition, accommodation and board, books, local transportation, insurance, international travel, passport and visa fees, and more. Award recipients are selected through a competitive screening procedure
- Must either be receiving a Federal Pell Grant at the time of application or show documentation that they will during the duration of their internship or study abroad program
- The Gilman Program's goal is to raise a new generation of American leaders who will reflect the country's great diversity and possess the global connections and expertise needed to enhance both economic growth and national security for the country

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

- Transformative learning theory, developed by Jack Mezirow (1978), explains how an adult makes sense of and constructs meaning from their lived experiences through a ten-phase process of critical self-reflection and rational discourse that transforms an individual's previously held perspectives or frames of reference
- How learners interpret and reinterpret their experiences is essential to meaning-making and learning (Mezirow, 1994, p.222)
- Critical reflection: "Making an assessment of what is being reflected upon" that is directed toward one's assumptions or presuppositions (Mezirow, 1994, p.185)
- Discourse: Dialogue "involving the assessments of beliefs, feelings and values" by examining supporting evidence for and against competing viewpoints



Mezirow's Ten Phases of Transformative Learning (Brown & Brown, 2015)

NARRATIVE INQUIRY

- The creation, interpretation, and portrayal of storied versions of lived experience are the focus of narrative inquiry (NI)
- NI: derives from epistemological perspective that examines the nature of knowing
- Calls for a deeper investigation of truth as it is understood or experienced by the people sharing/in the story or narratives
- Over past 20 years, growing trend in social scientific research, particularly education, to use narratives to portray individual or group experiences
- Narrative research has challenged the conventional definitions of validity by obfuscating the distinction between reality and fiction

METHODS

Qualitative Study Using Critical Narrative Inquiry:

- Research participants: storytellers selected from pool of FGCSs awarded Gilmans between 2014 and 2019 at a large, public R1 university in the Southeast of the United States
 - 70 potential storytellers (out of 99 Gilman awardees)
- Multimodal Data Collection:
 - Informational Questionnaire (qualtrics): to elicit interest in joining focus groups from Gilman Scholar alumni
 - Focus Groups: up to 20 storytellers in two focus groups
 - Creative Reflection Activity: five storytellers selected to complete activity combining "cabinet of curiosities" and "timeline"
 - Storytellers collect up to 10 objects that convey their trajectories post-Gilman and place objects into a timeline that makes sense to them in a narrative that can be conveyed to a listener
 - Individual Interviews: conducted with each storyteller to share story and understanding of trajectory post-Gilman
- Narrative Data Analysis:
 - Qualitative data analysis using NVivo software

ETHICAL COMPENSATION

For this study:

- Focus Group Participants: \$25 card for up to 90 minutes a session
- Critical Reflection Participants: \$150 gift card for up to 1.5-hour session

Ethical concerns: creating monetary motivations and/or superficial relationship

In this study: altruistic motivation because significance of study to enhance support for education abroad and FGCS

- Compensation is a way to reimburse informants for their time spent participating in the research and is also a gesture of recognition and respect for intellectual and emotional involvement (Surmiak, 2020)

REFERENCES



Gilman Scholarship alumni participate in an in-person summer seminar (Gilman Scholarship newsletter, 2024)