

# 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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## Introduction

- International education experiences cultivate global citizenship, yet barriers such as high financial costs often discourage underresourced students from accessing them.
- While the immediate benefits of study abroad are well documented, this study utilizes narrative inquiry to investigate long-term transformation in students' lives 5-10 years "post-Gilman."
- We explore how FGCSs perceive the impact of their GS experience for their longer-term personal, social, academic, and professional goals and aspirations.
- By investigating how Gilman scholars see their the individual transformations, we can better understand the value of study abroad program quality and accessibility investment.

## Research Questions

- How do first generation in college students reflect on their experiences with the Gilman Scholarship?
- How do these first generation in college students understand the impact of their Gilman Scholarship experience for their longer-term personal, social, academic, and professional goals and aspirations?

**54%** of undergraduates are First Generation in College Students (FGCS)

**16%** of undergraduates participate in study abroad programs

**8%** of First Generation College Students (FGCSs) study abroad

## Education Abroad

- "Education abroad" describes any "experience that contributes to a student's academic and career preparation, completed in a country different from the one in which a student is regularly enrolled" (Goertler & Schenker, 2021).
- **Some immediate benefits of study abroad:**
  - Academic success, intercultural competency, employability, and increased self-confidence.
- **Primary demographic of study abroad participants:**
  - White, female, traditionally-aged attendees of a liberal arts college who are studying a humanities or social science discipline.



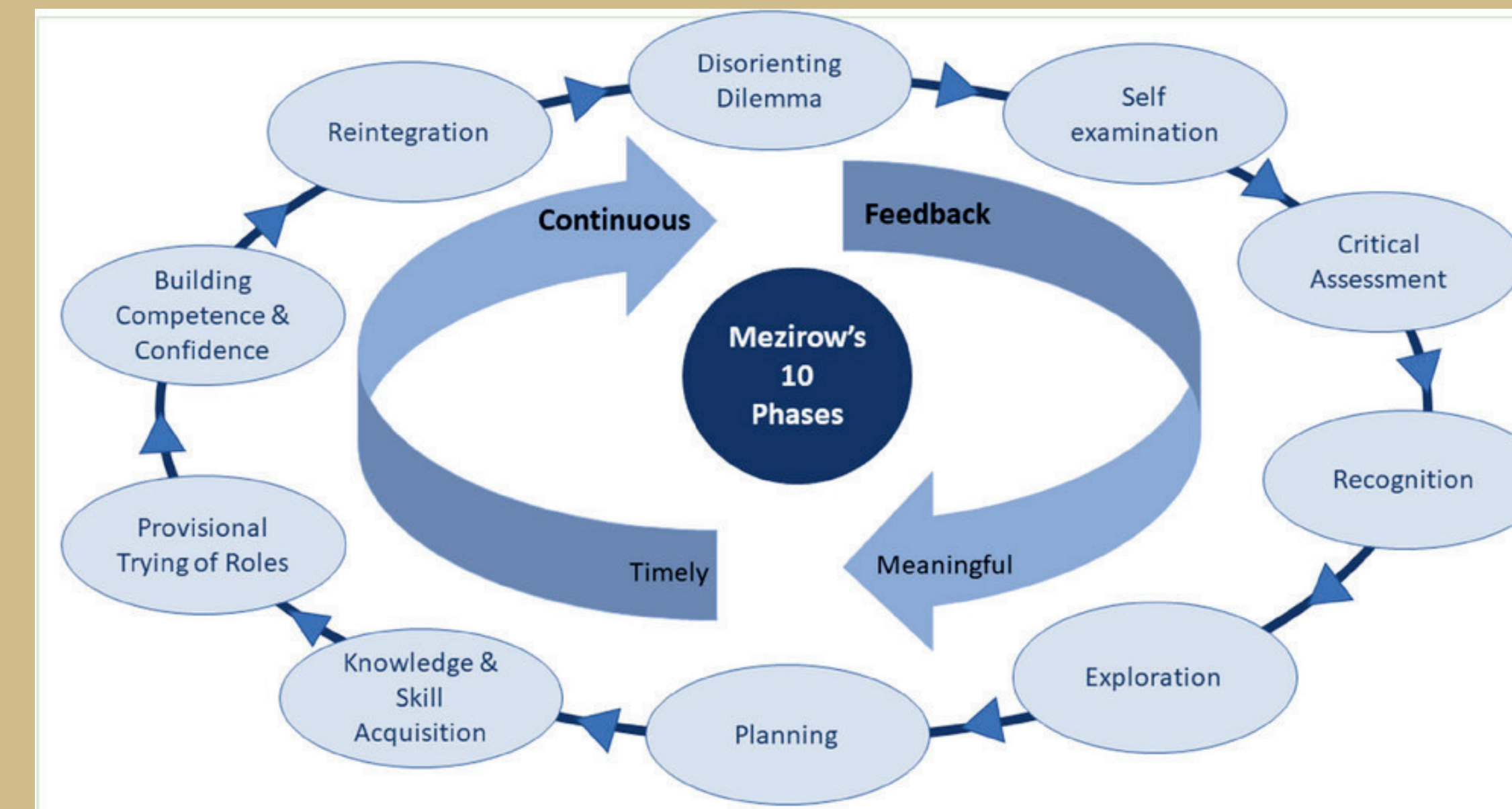
- Aims to mitigate financial obstacles by providing funding to Pell Grant-eligible students studying abroad.
- Allows American youth to gain a deeper understanding of their place in the world and further international understanding.
- **Nearly half of Gilman Scholars are FGCSs.**

## First-Generation in College Students

- **No standardized definition** of FGCS in research/policy
  - Thresholds vary, and thus students with similar obstacles often receive different levels of support.
- **Higher Education Act** defines FGCS as an individual whose parents (residing parent) did not complete a Baccalaureate degree
- FGCS draw upon navigational, aspirational, and resistant capital to maneuver through unfamiliar institutional landscapes
- Assets include proactivity, resilience, resourcefulness, and optimism; FGCS often use their background as their primary motivator.

## Theoretical Framework

- **Transformative Learning Theory (TLT)**
  - An adult learning framework by Jack Mezirow
  - Explains how individuals make sense of their lived experience
  - Process of self-reflection and rational discourse to transform previously held "frames of reference" (sets of fixed assumptions, expectations, and habits of mind) that guide their understanding of the world
  - Emphasizes that transformation is a continuous process that embeds internal and external changes over time
- **Narrative inquiry:** "Approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 1990).



Mezirow's ten stages of transformation, which we used as a theoretical framework to assist in understanding transformation.

## Methods

- **Participant Selection:**
  - We surveyed FGCS Gilman Scholar alumni (N=65) from a large R1 university in the Southeast U.S.. Participants (N=19) both described their international experience as transformative in their lives and were awarded their scholarship between 2013 and 2019.
- **Multimodal Data Collection:**
  - Focus Groups: (N=10) Post-questionnaire, utilized semi-structured interview sessions with 1-4 participants.
  - Creative Elicitation: after focus groups and coding, storytellers will be selected to choose up to ten materials that represent their journey to map on a visual timeline.
  - Concluding Interviews: participants will share their timeline via an in-depth reflection.
- **Data Analysis:**
  - Transcription: a denaturalized transcription approach preserved the authenticity of participant voices.
  - Coding: We combine inductive and deductive coding to organize our data and triangulate responses. Lastly, we map coded themes onto respective TLT phases.

## Preliminary Results

- **Personal Transformation**

"I felt very aligned . . . that's what London was for me. It was, like, this alignment piece"

- Gilman Scholar, England

  - Disorienting dilemma reorders self-identity and worldview
  - Navigating a foreign environment activated inherent assets (resilience and autonomy) from FGCSs' upbringing, causing a confidence switch that altered their life trajectories.
  - Transformational friendships and cultural connections gave them an otherwise absent sense of belonging.

## Return on Investment

"I was able to pick a better master's program and be a part of a . . . HBCU and get the other experience that I needed to be around people that look like me and professionals."

- Gilman Scholar, Cameroon

- Gilman transforms an otherwise inaccessible activity into a platform for equity and growth.
- Long-term economic impact via professional mobility, increased graduate-school competitiveness, and the confidence to self-start businesses, among other benefits.
- 70% of FGCS wouldn't have been abroad without Gilman.

## Global Citizenship

"It taught me to appreciate my circumstances a lot more . . . and to see myself as a global citizen in being able to provide opportunities for others where I could."

- Gilman Scholar, Ghana

- Opportunity to see the world beyond what they knew.
- More interest in traveling and seeing what the world has to offer and how they can serve their community.
- Inspiration to immerse themselves in new cultures and languages and continue learning about the world past their Gilman experience.

## Transformation Beyond Ourselves

"It's like you being fearless . . . encourages other people to be fearless."

- Gilman Scholar, Senegal

- Participants' experiences have motivated family and friends to travel and pursue new experiences.
- Heightened ability to challenge the barriers and mindsets that FGCSs and their families thought they were limited to.
- Representation matters; Personal transformation can be an inspiration and increase the confidence of people of similar cultural and/or socioeconomic backgrounds.

## Future Steps

- Future research should go beyond the 5-10 year threshold to better understand how these experiences contribute to lifelong identity, meaning making, and professional development/mobility
- We need a standardized FGCS definition for study comparison and better, more universal, less exclusive student support policies.
- Research should explore how transformation extends beyond the self, exploring various home-settings (foster care, single-parent households) impact social, cultural, academic, professional capital

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