

June 2023

A Semester on the Road to Santiago: The Long-term Impacts of Walking the Camino de Santiago with a Family-like Study Abroad Group

Douglas Challenger
Franklin Pierce University, USA, challedf@franklinpierce.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp>



Part of the [Tourism and Travel Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Challenger, Douglas (2023) "A Semester on the Road to Santiago: The Long-term Impacts of Walking the Camino de Santiago with a Family-like Study Abroad Group," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 11: Iss. 3, Article 4.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/BECZ-FC76>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol11/iss3/4>

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](#).

A Semester on the Road to Santiago: The Long-term Impacts of Walking the Camino de Santiago with a Family-like Study Abroad Group

Douglas F. Challenger

Professor of Sociology, Franklin Pierce University, USA
challedf@franklinpierce.edu

In this paper, research findings are presented from a small, longitudinal study using qualitative data on the long-term impacts of a unique, semester-long, study abroad program at Franklin Pierce University. In this programme, students study the history and contemporary renaissance of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage and then walk the entire route in northern Spain as pilgrims. Alumni who participated in one of four trips conducted in the fall of 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2017 were asked in 2022 to respond to five open-ended questions about how their semester abroad impacted their lives, to what degree they thought their study-abroad group functioned as a ‘family’ and how that impacted their experience. Twenty-one alumni responded to the questionnaire; all indicating to varying degrees that the program had life-changing impacts that had influenced and were continuing to shape their lives. Their responses are organised into seven themes that describe the long-term impacts of the program. The researcher’s interpretations also draw on his memories and extensive field notes on experiences that occurred on the four trips, as well as the reflective essays students wrote based on their personal journals immediately upon their return from their semester abroad. The results are situated in the context of research on short and long-term impacts of study abroad and within the liberal education mission of U.S. institutions of higher education.

Key Words: longitudinal study, internal impacts, study abroad, Camino de Santiago, liberal education

Introduction

No one could have predicted fifty years ago that we would be experiencing the second great period of world pilgrimage in the late 20th and early 21st centuries? Modernity, it was assumed, had unleashed secularising forces that would continue to render religious and spiritual practices insignificant – a trend sociologist Max Weber famously called ‘the disenchantment of the world.’ But since the turn of the 21st century, world events and new trends seem to clearly point to the fact that a religious imagination and interest in the spiritual is still a strong aspect of social life almost everywhere. The renewed interest and practice of pilgrimage in almost every part of the world is evidence of that fact. The Camino de Santiago – a 1,200-year-old Catholic pilgrimage route in Europe – is one example of the new global interest in this ancient practice. After lying dormant for 500 years, the Camino is now walked by over a quarter million people every year.

Traditionally a religious practice, pilgrimage is being remade in the post-secular idiom of our times as what one scholar calls ‘travels for transformation’ (Greenia, 2018). In the case of the Camino de Santiago, it used to be that the main purpose was to visit the shrine in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela where the bones of St. James are said to rest, where healing, forgiveness of sins, and an encounter with the divine might be sought. But today, many pilgrims put a greater emphasis on the journey itself, its lessons for personal growth and development, and on authentic encounters with themselves and others.

Regardless of motivation or meaning that pilgrims bring to the experience, the Camino’s traditions, rituals, and practices create a sacred container that serves the secularly oriented in their pursuits of ultimate meaning and authenticity as well as the more transcendental aims of those motivated by belief in the supernatural, either traditionally religious or ‘New Age’. Thus, the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage is a kind of post-secular

sanctuary where we can observe the manifestation in microcosm of a deeper kind of pluralism characteristic of the post-secular societies gradually emerging in the modern West where the religious and secular co-exist in social space and, for some, in the minds of individuals themselves (Roszak, 2019; Challenger, 2014, 2020).

Pilgrimage is often studied from the perspective of individual pilgrims, with little to say about experiences of pilgrimage with a group or significant others. Going on pilgrimage as a family or a group implies a different set of challenges and benefits that deserve more scholarly attention. Many walk The Way as a couple or with their children and report that the experience strengthened family relationships and a commitment to an ethic of care for those outside their intimate circles (Jenkins, 2021). Groups of Spanish young people on school trips are a common sight on the Camino, too, especially along the last one hundred kilometres, the distance one must walk to receive a Compostela Certificate of completion from the Pilgrim's Office of the Cathedral.

Recognising the historical relevance of the Camino as central to the making of Europe and attuned to its contemporary renaissance, many American universities have been taking groups of college students to Spain to study the Camino and take part in the pilgrimage as an innovative study abroad opportunity. Franklin Pierce University in Rindge, New Hampshire is one of those institutions operating a unique semester-long study abroad Camino walk/study program. After leading four trips from 2011 – 2017, I asked alumni of this program in the summer of 2022 to reflect on how the Camino had impacted their lives and what it was like to walk it as a study abroad group. The paper's results offer insight into how group pilgrimage impacts members' experiences and sheds light on the long-term impacts of study abroad experiences, in general, and walking the Camino, in particular.

In large part, the questions posed in the survey echo the teaching and writing assignments that framed our journeys in a seminar at the beginning of our study abroad trips and were emphasised throughout in group meetings along the way. In a final essay, for example, after completing the Camino, students were asked to describe how they had grown, and how walking the Camino had

changed them. Those initial reflections upon returning home from their semester abroad were overflowing with appreciation for their experiences on the Camino and within the group. They felt the Camino had changed them but were somewhat limited in their ability to articulate how so, and they had no way of knowing, of course, if those changes would stick with them as they got older. They hadn't yet had an opportunity to 'zoom out' to gain perspective on what they had just been through. So, the goal of this study was to see how they would respond to similar questions 5 to 10 years later. In hindsight and outside of the pressure to perform in a university program for grades and academic credit, did the Camino really make a difference in their lives? Was their pilgrimage experience still fresh in their minds? Did the intervening years and life experience deepen the lessons they initially learned or reveal new insights that were only now possible to see in retrospect? Examining their observations again years later to see what changes might have occurred over a time was the intention of this longitudinal study.

Program Overview¹

Prior to departure, students in our program read several texts and do research on the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage. The main books include the German comedian Hape Kerkeling's Camino memoir: *I'm Off Then: Losing and Finding Myself on the Camino de Santiago* (2006); art historian Conrad Rudolph's meditation on the differences between Medieval and modern pilgrimage in his *Pilgrimage to the End of the World* (2004), and Nancy Frey's seminal anthropological study of the Camino entitled *Pilgrim Stories: Journeys Along the Ancient Way in Modern Spain* (1998).

Kerkeling describes how he developed a 'Camino family' with other pilgrims he met and how they learned to trust and support each other's journey. He also tells stories about how many other pilgrims he meets along the way offer him insights into his own character flaws and provide opportunities for him to grow personally. His narrative is one of personal transformation in fits

¹ A feature-length immersive documentary film that chronicled the journey of our 2017 Camino semester abroad entitled *Perpetual Journey: A Semester on the Road to Santiago* is available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oI3J1zgsKOE&t=1526s>

and starts, forged in the crucible of Camino relationships and the physical challenges of pilgrimage. Nancy Frey describes the history of the Camino and its contemporary renaissance and makes use of anthropological concepts of ritual, liminality, and *communitas* to interpret her interviews with pilgrims who describe a spontaneous and mystical sense of community they experience walking with others on the Camino.

‘Camino family’ and ‘*communitas*’ are familiar tropes among personal memoirs, films, and scholarly discourse on pilgrimage and figure into the themes which this study uncovers in its analysis. It may be that the reflections shared by alumni are in part shaped by these framing concepts that were employed in our Camino Seminar and reinforced by these and other texts that students read. As George Greenia perceptively noted,

in the end we have to bow before the power of the language we use to talk about travel for transcendence, because the metaphors in play script lives before anyone hits the trail ... The push into pilgrimage is in some ways surrender to a runaway metaphor (2020:13).

Experiential Learning as a Pilgrim

While our program involves some traditional academic work and time in a classroom, the bulk of the experience consists of walking the entire length of the *Camino Frances* route to Santiago de Compostela. Students are encouraged to travel the Camino in the role of a pilgrim, in contrast to other modes of study abroad such as academic tourist, researcher, or service learner. Studying abroad as a pilgrim requires a shift in educational objective. This involves a curricular design whereby the student becomes the focus of study and is coached to understand their educational journey as having many dimensions – self-discovery, the art of living well with others as well as a quest for knowledge of the wider world. An effort is made to balance and integrate these educational objectives – to encourage openness and curiosity to encounter history and other cultures in the context of engaging in the age-old quest to ‘know thyself,’ – the basis of liberal education in the classical sense.

From College Student to Pilgrim

Predictably, after our arrival and a ‘honeymoon’ period while we are still in classes together, some antagonism

arises when we begin to walk on the trail as students initially resist adopting pilgrimage routines and other rules that we establish and begin to enforce regarding traveling safely and considerately as a group in other cultures. This initial antagonistic dynamic comes about because students need time to make the transition from free-wheeling, raucous American college students to pilgrims immersed in a whole-hearted enterprise as well as a rigorous, new daily structure. At some level, our study abroad students don’t really know what they have gotten themselves into at first. Unlike a typical study abroad program where they would not have had these kinds of restraints put upon them, they chaff at them initially. But, as they gradually surrender to the routines of being a pilgrim and adopt good travel etiquette, they start to reap the benefits of doing so, and eventually embrace these new rituals and routines as their own. Once through this phase, students begin to flourish as pilgrims having internalised their new role. The considerable long-term personal growth and development I describe below is a result of this process that unfolds over time.

Group Leaders: in Loco Parentis

As their verbatim comments will show, the students thought of our study abroad group as a ‘family’, where they were siblings, and the faculty leaders were their parents. The association in their minds of their faculty leaders as their parents was reinforced, no doubt, by the fact that my wife Laurie and I were close to the age of their actual parents. While we were in a position of authority as the leaders of a university-sponsored trip, the intimate nature of walking a pilgrimage and living together 24/7, added an *in loco parentis* aspect to our leadership role that is not part of more traditional study abroad programs.

Short- vs. Long-term Study Abroad on the Camino

One other distinguishing feature of our study abroad program needs to be emphasised to give context to the life-changing and long-term impacts I will describe below. Lasting nearly three months, our Camino semester-long journeys take on the shape, as others have noted about the Santiago pilgrimage, of a ‘hero’s journey’ (Gower, 2003; Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014), following the long arc of a three-act drama that lies at the foundation of so many human stories (Campbell, 1949). Though

not developed in this paper, in a previous publication I draw on the socio-anthropological framework of other pilgrimage researchers who describe ritual as the dynamo of the sacred and its attendant experience of *communitas* and liminality to explain the mechanism of growth and transformation that the students report (Challenger, 2020; Beckstead, 2021; Starr-Glass, 2016, 2020; Ybarra, 1997; Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969).

Semester-long programs are declining and make up only about a third of study abroad these days, which I believe makes a difference in what students can take away from such experiences, especially from what the Camino has to offer. There are many forces behind the shift to short-term study abroad and there is great value in such programs, Camino-related and otherwise. But, my experience leads me to be sceptical that students can make the transition from college student to pilgrim that I have described above, not to mention go on to live on the other side of that transition long enough to absorb all the lessons such a lengthy, liminal journey has to offer, in only two or three weeks. One important key to the long-term impacts which our program has on students is its length.

Literature on the External and Internal Impacts of Study Abroad

Since the 1950s, researchers have been studying the external and internal impacts of studying abroad. In recent decades studies describe significant external impacts in foreign language acquisition and proficiency, intercultural understanding, global citizenship as well as in disciplinary knowledge. A 2005 study, for example, reported that study abroad alumni were more knowledgeable about their host countries, more interested in international affairs and news, developed more proficiency in other languages, and were more friendly toward foreigners and confident about visiting non-English speaking countries in the future (Hadis, 2005). A 2009 *Study Abroad for Global Engagement* study showed a strong influence in the self-reports of thousands of study abroad alumni from various institutions in both the near and long-term on measures of global engagement, charitable contributions, and personal development (Paige, 2009).

An American *Field Service* study found that over a twenty-year span, compared with their peers, study abroad alumni

were more likely to have friends and work with people from other cultures and have less intercultural anxiety. They were also inclined to encourage their children to study abroad (Hansel, 2008). Still other studies (Benson-Schrambach, 2009; Allen, 2010) found that participating in study abroad significantly impacted students' vocational direction and professional development.

In recent decades, researchers have described study abroad as one of the 'high impact' practices that engage students at a higher extent than traditional classroom experiences (Kuh, 2008; Stebleton *et al.*, 2013). In 2014, a study showed that study abroad experiences increased students' local and international civic engagement and influenced their personal and professional development (DeGraf *et al.*, 2014). Research findings have also noted significant internal impacts of study abroad experiences on students' self-confidence, sense of vocational direction and life purpose, psychological, emotional, and spiritual development (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2010).

While millions of pilgrims have travelled the Camino and many schools now offer study abroad programs that make use of it, the impacts of the experience on students have rarely been featured in educational research (Knouse, 2021). Religious tourism and pilgrimage research in recent years, however, has begun to focus on experiences of pilgrimage within the context of a family or a group or significant others (Jenkins, 2021), in contrast to the perspective of individual pilgrims. This study breaks new ground in studying students' experiences on the Camino and builds on this new line of research by showing how walking the Camino as a study abroad group of college students has a family-like dimension with unique lessons and impacts in participants' lives.

Finally, researchers have noted that, compared with studies on short-term impacts, there are far fewer long-term studies examining the impact of study abroad programs and those that do exist are more modest in their claims about the long-term impacts of study abroad (DeGraf *et al.*, 2013). Our small investigation offers a thicker description than most studies on the internal impacts of study abroad, impacts that seem to go beyond those reported in research on traditional kinds of academic and service-based study abroad experiences described in a recent volume by Bodinger de Uriate & Di Giovine (2021).

Research Questions and Methodology

This article is focused on the self-reported internal impacts that our unique study abroad program had on students who participated in one of four study abroad trips. The findings are in line with the results of the studies mentioned above and others in the literature of this field. The alumni were asked to respond to four open-ended questions: two that asked them to write about how they think their study abroad program on the Camino impacted their lives, and two that asked them if they thought of our group as a kind of ‘family’ and how walking as a group impacted the experience for them (see Table 1). This research, undertaken in the ethnographic tradition, builds on my fieldwork as a participant / observer of my students as their teacher on trips that involved walking the Camino together. I follow a grounded theory approach of inductively generating themes that come up often or that seem important to the accounts provided by alumni from the questionnaire. The descriptions are my interpretations of student responses to the open-ended survey questions and are supported by numerous verbatim comments from the data.

Like other ethnographic studies, there are strengths and limitations to the claims based on this research. The data generated were the responses of a self-selected sample of

students who were invited to respond to a questionnaire. Of the 31 students who were part of our four trips, responses came from 21 students. It is uncertain whether the data from the 2/3 of the alumni that did participate can be assumed to be representative of those that did not, and because of the nature of the study, the results cannot be generalised beyond this group’s experience. I use their first names in the paper because they have given me their informed consent to do so.

Themes and Interpretations

Seven interrelated themes emerged from the reflections alumni provided that capture the most important lasting impacts they felt as result of being part of this unique study abroad program.

- Learning the benefits of solitude
- Being away and abroad provided the time and space to gain new perspectives
- The ‘family’ group as catalyst for personal growth and development
- Working through conflicts constructively
- Developing a grounded self through actions that build self-esteem, confidence, equanimity, and the courage to take risks
- The happiness of a simple life
- Love of the world and humanity

The sentiments these themes capture were supported and emphatically re-stated with great frequency throughout the survey results, and leads to a conclusion which corresponds with, indeed surpasses in its level of detail, the existing research that claims study abroad in general has a great impact on students’ lives.

Learning the Benefits of Solitude

Walking the Camino provided lots of time to be alone with your thoughts. That was new for most students and took some getting used to. At the beginning of our travels along the trail, students would walk together in loud and lively banter, chatting about topics familiar to them, never straying far from their social centre. Soon into the pilgrimage, however, we gave students an ‘assignment’ to walk alone for an hour in silence. There was some resistance to this idea at first. Time alone proved to be as big of a challenge as was walking as part of a group. But, students would soon find unexpected treasures from both. Sari captured the shift that happened with most

Table 1: Questionnaire

Did walking the Camino as your semester abroad impact your self-development and/or the way you think about life? Please explain.

Did walking the Camino impact any personal or professional life choices you have made since? Please explain how experiences you had on the Camino influenced your life choices if they did.

Some pilgrims refer to the people they walked with as their Camino ‘family.’ In what ways do you think our study abroad group functioned as a Camino ‘family’, if at all?

What were the pros and cons (benefits, challenges, lessons, etc.) that were unique to walking the Camino as a member of a study abroad group rather than on your own?

Anything else you would like to say about the value of your experience on the Camino and/or the study abroad program?

students along the way as they experienced the rhythm of walking alone and traveling as a group:

In many ways walking the Camino felt like stepping away from the rest of the world (a pro, in my opinion). Walking with our group at times felt insular. We would talk about pop culture, school, social ties at home, etc. And while I believe this contributed to feeling safe, it sometimes made it more difficult to be fully immersed in the experience. Over time, though, our conversations diverted to internal dwellings of the mind, and moments of reflecting about home became rarer – often something to compare our new experience to.

Within weeks, students begin to integrate some deliberate silence into their daily walks. After her trip in 2011, Sarah described her uneasiness about this:

Before I went on the trip, I had a really hard time being alone. And I kind of learned that it was alright to go and be by yourself and it was okay. It wasn't so scary to be by yourself and to process things. It was alright and I feel a lot better about things like that now.

Once discovered and experienced this kind of time with oneself became a habit they have incorporated into their lives since. As Noah confessed,

A big thing for me is I learned the value of being alone. Before the Camino, I had spent a total of ten minutes by myself. That was the joke among my friends, that I was never alone. But during the Camino I got to really spend some time walking alone. Now I am totally fine doing things by myself.

As Noah's comment illustrates, they learned to like time alone and to see the benefits of solitude and the self-reflection it facilitated, a capacity sadly disappearing among people today and not intentionally nurtured as an important part of education on college campuses (Deresiewicz, 2014, 2022). As students realised that solitude did not mean loneliness, they got more comfortable with it. That became the foundation of all the other lessons the students gained on these trips because solitude is the precondition of the ability to engage in introspection, which is what produced much of the growth and transformation I will describe.

Being Away and Abroad Provided the Time and Space to Gain New Perspectives

One theme that came up again and again was how the time abroad and the nature of the pilgrimage gave them the space to look critically at their lives and to begin a process of re-ordering them in ways that seemed more authentic and likely to provide more happiness and satisfaction. Sari, one of the eight female students on the 2013 trip, explained,

There are specific conversations that I look back on and think of them as shifting something in me. I was more moldable there, far enough away from my life at home that I was able to break mental ties and gain vast new perspectives. What really matters to me? How do I impact or connect with others? How does the world work outside of my northeast U.S. bubble? So much...

Being away from home, living as a pilgrim, spending time alone reflecting on their lives freed students from roles, identities, behavioural and relationship patterns they had heretofore improvised, fallen into, or adopted in their lives back home and, while on the Camino, began to question. As Maggie from the 2015 trip recalled,

I grew a lot and was able to figure out who I was outside of my normal social constructs.

A classmate of Maggie's echoed her comment,

I think the Camino helped me look at myself as more than a student / athlete. It made me think about who I am as just Kim and what I want to do with my life.

Several alumni described similar shifts in their sense of self that their Camino experience had impacted.

For a few of the female students their time on the Camino gave them the space to reflect on and embrace more deeply sexual and gender identities that would become more definitive in subsequent years. Sari mentioned this in the context of the way being a pilgrim was a centring experience for her, which led to new commitments in her relationships with others in the years since:

I think walking the Camino had a profound impact on the trajectory of my life. While there, I was able to silence the noise, quiet myself, get centered, talk to people with vastly different life experiences. Upon returning, I immediately began to prioritize connecting with people and

developing healthy relationships. I was never calmer and honed in on what really mattered to me than in the two years after the walk. So much fear had been stripped from me and the way I approached the world. I began to explore my queer identity.

Meghan noted that the Camino she walked in 2013 enabled her to begin questioning her patterns in friendships:

Beforehand I accepted any relationship that came my way leading to some unhealthy connections. Afterwards I was more thoughtful about who I let into my life and what boundaries I set to prioritize my well-being.

Clearly, these and other alumni are speaking about a more intentional and healthier approach to their relationships with others and themselves as one of the long-term impacts of their Camino study abroad experience. Others were clearly working through and seeking some healing from past traumatic events in their lives during the pilgrimage. Mike, who walked in 2017, describes this for himself,

Walking the Camino when I was twenty years old, could be one of the most impactful events in my life. Before I decided to walk, I was struggling with my self-development into an adult. I had lost my father when I was sixteen. He was a major influence in my development into adulthood. When he passed away, I felt derailed from the typical developments of a teenager into an adult. Walking the Camino got me back on track with that crucial development in life.

Demi shared her story of how the 2013 Camino study abroad program was an inflection point in her life, which began a practice of self-examination that has been the key to changing a pattern of self-destructive behaviour.

When I first got back, I remember feeling embarrassed. I wasn't happy about some of my choices and for those reasons I wasn't able to do my reflection paper. I also felt very displaced and didn't know what I wanted to do with my life anymore and I had a lot of anxiety about going back to college knowing that I didn't finish my Camino course requirements [she subsequently dropped out of college the last semester of her senior year]. At the time it was very devastating. However, as time went on and

I started choosing to do better for myself and make the right decisions, I was able to grow and reflect on the Camino journey. I don't think I would be where I am today had I not gone. [She has since finished college, gotten married, has a child in kindergarten, works in human resources full-time, and is a graduate student].

She went on to talk about how walking the Camino in the context of our program gave her

the drive to be successful and to be a good person. Walking the Camino and going through that journey has given me the drive to want to do better and make something of myself. I learned that I am much stronger than I thought I was. I was hiding behind childhood trauma and walls I built up and walking the Camino allowed me to break through some of that and really have a reality check.

The 'Family' Group as Catalyst for Personal Growth and Development

Mike and Demi's stories illustrate that it was not only the space and time away from their lives back home that helped students to initiate some personal change. They and others talked about how walking the Camino with a group of peers and their leaders provided a non-judgemental environment that helped them feel safe enough to do the self-discovery work that was important to them. Mike recognised how our study abroad group became a kind of family that was a vehicle for learning and for personal transformation:

I would have to say that a Camino 'family' is different from the traditional idea of a family at first. In a traditional family, members tend to know each other for most of their lives or at least grow up with them. Whereas on the Camino, I did not know anyone from our group before we left. We all bonded though, when everyone opened up about their lives during the first week in class, when we all shared why we decided to walk the Camino. We developed a sense of unity from that point on. Having us walk together for the first few weeks or so also led us to be more of a family. We continued to learn about each other's lives and how we ended up on the Camino. It was like that for every person we met on the Camino except it was more in-depth with the members of our group.

Meghan thought the analogy of ‘family’ was apt for the all girls group that she travelled with in 2013:

I’ve always felt that family isn’t always blood related. At the end of the day, our ‘family’ was always there for one another through the good days and bad days each of us may have had. The experience would not have been the same if we were each walking the Camino alone.

Demi explained how the solitude she experienced on the trail combined with teacher-guided group activities and meetings, along with the spontaneous bonding with others, helped her to begin to recognise that some of the defences she had erected in response to childhood trauma had become dysfunctional as a young adult. The students recognise that the learning and growing they are doing as pilgrims was happening in the company of and in conversation with others.

And it was not only the group that provided a conducive environment for change, but the home-like atmosphere of the Camino, generally. Combined with the hospitality offered by the owners and workers at the hostels and albergues, the whole atmosphere of the Camino enveloped our group into a wider community of pilgrims that felt like a large extended family.

Working Through Conflicts Constructively

The metaphor of ‘family’ was used in the context of describing challenges and conflicts as well as support and care. Noah put it this way:

It was a family for sure. One way was that even if we weren’t getting along or agreeing, we had no choice but to sit and work it out. With friends, you have more options. We really had to work together all the time, make sure nobody got left behind or hurt, and make it work. It’s a great lesson because we were able to do it. If we didn’t have to, we may not have known that. We also had to accept people for who they are and their flaws, or quirks. And I’m talking about my own flaws just as much as others.

Sari added that on her 2013 trip with the group of eight young women:

Many of us had never backpacked or been abroad before, so our leaders Doug and Laurie functioned as guides / Camino parents, while

the eight students in the group were more like sisters. The interpersonal dynamics were not always easy between members of the group, but nonetheless we would walk, eat, laugh, sing, cry, process, and overcome together.

Kim recognized the same experience on her trip in 2015:

We faced challenges together, had tons of fun and had a few arguments along the way. That’s what family is all about, making it past the tough patches together just to grow into stronger, smarter, and happier individuals.

Because students were not permitted to leave the group, they had to work through conflicts with each other like siblings in a real family would have to and sometimes with their leaders, who were thought of as ‘parents.’ As Lydia described,

Doug and Laurie were our parents; they protected us, gave us the resources we needed, and wrangled us back in when needed.

Not being able to just walk away or avoid people they found annoying or hurtful, they learned how to own their part in conflicts and to make amends or accommodations when necessary and to become more patient, tolerant, and accepting in general.

The students learned that conflict, when handled constructively, could help them grow as individuals and feel more connected as a group. Molly recalled how, early in the 2011 trip, she imagined leaving the group because of difficult personality clashes she was experiencing within it and how she responded.

Eventually I figured out a better way to exist within the larger framework of the group. I didn’t have to be best friends with everyone on the trip in order to walk alongside them. I can’t think of a better skill to have given the challenges of navigating a contentious world today.

As her comment shows, in retrospect, she came to see that remaining within the group was like being in a family where you must face those conflicts and create workable adjustments to keep your relationships intact, skills that she now thinks are essential in her personal life and within society.

Developing a Grounded Self Through Actions That Build Self-Esteem, Confidence, Equanimity, and the Courage to Take Risks

All the students saw that one of the most valuable things they gained from their study abroad program was that they grew in self-esteem and confidence from having completed such a difficult task. Maggie describes how she grew in self-appreciation through meeting the challenges the walk presented.

Personally, I was able to really learn more about myself and test my emotional, physical, and mental limits. I think it was beautiful and gave me a stronger respect and appreciation for myself. I think I have a much steadier belief in myself and that I can do hard things now. My self-esteem really grew.

Near the end of the 2017 trip in one of our last group meetings at an albergue in the town of Melide, Mike tried to describe how it felt to be near the end of the journey,

We just walked across an entire country! How many people do that? I'm speechless.

Five years later and as he was entering law school, he did find more words to describe what he gained from walking the Camino beyond pride in his physical accomplishment. He described how he learned to respond to life situations with greater equanimity and to cultivate in his life the practice of self-reflection.

Walking the Camino, helped me learn how to handle stressful situations by teaching me that sometimes things are out of our control, and it is better to deal with them with a level head. This has helped me immensely ever since in dealing with life's situations. It taught me to take a step back and analyze the situation before acting so it can be solved with ease. I also learned to take a step back from my life in general on occasion to analyze what is going on and to ask myself if I am headed in the direction that I want. While I was walking the Camino, I got to spend a large portion of it, thinking about my life and how I got to where I was. I did not forget those moments and I try to continue thinking about my life from that kind of perspective. This has helped me become the person that I want to be and has helped me achieve the goals I have set for myself.

In every case, the alumni from this program still find the Camino experiences they had on their semester abroad resonating with them and having impacted the way they live and work. Hannah spoke of how the Camino helped her to embrace life's transitions and to become more comfortable with change that she initiates or that comes her way:

Every night [on the Camino] was spent in a strange place, and you could never anticipate what the next day would present. At first this gave me great anxiety, but as we went on, I became more at ease with not knowing and accepting of the constant change. Life since has been full of transitions: graduating from college, moving across the country, finding a new job, and breaking off a long-term relationship. Some have called me brave for how I have embraced these changes, but I believe the lessons from the Camino have helped me through these transitions.

Many point to the way they grew in self-love and self-appreciation as the key to living their lives since with more courage to do things out of their comfort zone. Alicia, from the 2011 trip, touched on this theme.

I feel the gifts of the Camino live in my life constantly. The biggest ones that stick out to me are the confidence and courage I had after the Camino. I pushed myself to move across the country and start a new business. These two huge life changes worked out for the best ... I don't know if I would have had the confidence to do them without the Camino experience.

Hannah describes how her Camino experiences are currently informing her deliberations about changing jobs. She writes,

I am currently at a crossroads in my life. One path is staying at the same job where I am financially comfortable and there is certainty. The other path is a complete leap of faith where there is no certainty. When I find myself in situations like this, I try to embody the sensation I felt after crossing the Pyrenees mountains and the same sensation when I fell to my knees in the rain in Santiago beneath the Cathedral. That version of myself would know exactly which path to take without question. That version of me has zero self-doubt. Without the Camino I

don't know if I would have found that feeling anywhere else. [She has since taken that more authentic, but emotionally risky career path].

Like Hannah, Molly also described being at a crossroads recently in her own professional life and how she draws on her Camino experience to navigate her way through decisions in this area of her life.

I was waffling about what to do with my career when I went on the Camino. I knew that pursuing a career in the arts was going to be both exhausting and financially nearly impossible. When I got home from the walk, I jumped into the career I wanted in my heart to pursue without fear, and miraculously it all worked out for ten years. The Camino taught me to trust in the universe a little bit more. When I had a need recently to change careers I thought back to my time on the Camino. I was able to see this change as just a new path that would lead me to places I couldn't yet see (and still can't, but I'm on a new journey). It helped me to navigate what could have been a really devastating shift with more grace and goodwill.

And when I met Alex at FPU through the friends I made on the Camino, I was sure he was the right person for me and I wasn't afraid to love, or to tell him how I felt. Now we are happily married with a beautiful family. I truly believe that if I hadn't completed my walk, I might not have taken these risks which have led me to feeling so fulfilled.

From these comments, it's clear that the alumni of this unique study abroad program draw on the confidence they gained as they make decisions about their lives and work. In fact, many of them describe how this experience impacted their sense of direction professionally, clarified their career choices, and helped them to take steps to achieve their personal and professional goals.

The Happiness of a Simple Life

Another theme that came through in the comments of most of the respondents to the questionnaire was the recognition that happiness does not require a lot of material goods. As American students from a culture that idolises wealth and material abundance, they were surprised how happy they were on the Camino with only

the things they could carry in their backpacks. As Jill said,

Carrying all my belongings on my back for months made me realize how little I need to be happy.

Lydia put it this way,

I think that from living out of a 25 lb. backpack, it's made me desire a simple, minimalist life. I don't need to make the most money at work, rather I want to be the most happy.

Luke emphasised how the Camino helped him learn that happiness requires letting excess of all kinds go and focusing on what is most important:

Walking the Camino helped give me a better sense of what is most important in life. When everything you have has to fit in a backpack, you can't carry around any extraneous weight. Learning how to let go, pick your battles, and not bother with excess is an incredibly important life lesson. Whether it's unnecessary material goods, or ridiculous interpersonal drama and gossip, learning to live without it can lead to a happier life.

The participants experienced a deep satisfaction from leaving the busyness of home and school, for a season of their lives, as a pilgrim, wayfaring from place to place on a journey toward a deeper version of themselves, in the company of others who care for them, experiencing the kindness of strangers, the hospitality of the hostel owners and volunteers, and moments of serendipity.

Love of the World and Humanity

Finally, like most students who spend some time abroad, alumni from our program spoke about how their study abroad experience fostered a love of the world and of humanity. Mike noted this in one of his responses:

I think meeting all those other pilgrims expanded my idea of what the world was like. Getting tossed into a pilgrimage where thousands of people from across the world were walking with me, allowed me to learn about different cultures and build upon my idea of what the world was.

Noah pointed out that because walking the Camino involves traveling slowly through rural villages as well as through towns and cities, one gets a fuller picture of the life of a country and its culture. Emily underscored the importance of study abroad for today's students:

International experience matters, we live in a global world and long-term exposure to other cultures and histories matter.

She tried to capture all the ways being a pilgrim transformed her and left her feeling optimistic about her life and the world:

It would be impossible to say all the ways that walking the Camino has impacted my life. I gained a lot of self-confidence and self-esteem from walking over 500 miles and navigating a foreign country. But the changes that I went through really impacted me right to my core and changed who I am as a person. I would say I became more optimistic, less religious, happier, and less willing to accept bullshit. Seeing trail magic and hearing stories from other pilgrims is really what drove my optimism. I was inspired by all kinds of folks walking the Camino. It showed me how there is no age or time in your life when you just must stop learning. I see the world as a bit more of a magical place now.

Conclusion: Walking the Camino as Liberal Education

Many have observed that the Camino is a microcosm of life's journey and challenges. The lessons alumni from this program describe, which are still resonating years later, are ones that simultaneously address the three great problems unique to the experience of human being: living, living together, and living well. As Meghan concluded,

it is an excellent character builder for anyone, especially young college students.

Molly described the character-enhancing lessons this way:

My experience on the Camino reinforced all the values you learn as a child, that become harder and harder to sustain as you get older. Follow through on your commitments and finish what you started. Practice patience. Be open to people who are different than you are and

make no assumptions about what drives others to make the choices they do. Don't be afraid to take risks and always maintain common sense. Treat the world with love.

Lydia enthusiastically summed up the experience with these words:

Not only did we get an insane amount of exercise, but we travelled through two countries, learned bits of their languages, spent time in school in Spain, met so many inspiring people, saw history with our own eyes, participated in a well-known spiritual and historical walk, overcame obstacles and challenges on our own and as a group, had loads of fun, created lifelong connections with our Camino family, and also got college credit for it!

These observations and those illustrating the seven themes above reveal the range of learning that occurred within this Camino study abroad program, from inter-cultural appreciation to language acquisition and historical knowledge to physical, emotional, and interpersonal skill development. The lessons they describe span the three distinct purposes for a university, as David Brooks noted in his review of William Deresiewicz's (2014) critique of elite universities and call for renewed emphasis on the soul-building purpose of higher education – the commercial purpose of career direction and preparation, the cognitive purpose of acquiring information and learning how to think, and the classical purpose of building an integrated self (Brooks, 2014). The long-term impacts of this unique study abroad program especially fall within the latter purpose - the open-ended cultivation of young people to live full and productive lives awakened by self-knowledge and wonder (Deresiewicz, 2014, Montás, 2021). Walking as a group of pilgrims to Santiago as a study abroad group is a curriculum that touches on all the purposes of a university education, but especially the moral purpose, which has been at the heart of liberal education as classically conceived – cultivating an examined life focused on engaging the world, connecting better with ourselves and others, and living happier, more meaningful lives.

References

- Allen, L.Q. (2010) The impact of study abroad on the professional lives of world language teachers. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43(1), 93-103.
- Beckstead, Z. (2021) On the way: Pilgrimage and liminal experiences in Wagoner, B. and Zittoun, T., *Theorizing Liminality*. New York: Springer.
- Benson-Schrambach, B. (2009) Undergraduate study abroad as a tool for vocational discernment. *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages*, 10, 10-26.
- Bodinger de Uriate, J. & Di Giovine, M. (2021) *Study Abroad and the Quest for an Anti-Tourism Experience*. Lanham, MD, Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield.
- Brooks, D. (2014) 'Becoming a Real Person,' *New York Times*, September 8.
- Campbell, J. (1949) *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, NJ: Bolingen Series 17, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Challenger, D.F. (2014) Secularization and the Camino de Santiago Pilgrimage, in Harman, L.D. (Ed.) *A Sociology of Pilgrimage: Embodiment, Identity, Transformation*, London, Ontario, Canada, Ursus Press, 128-145.
- Challenger, D.F. (2020) Walking Together: The Camino de Santiago Pilgrimage as a Post-secular Sanctuary, in McIntosh, I.S. Farrar Haddad, N. & Munro, D. (Eds.) *Peace Journeys: A New Direction in Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Research*, New Castle upon Tyne, UK, Cambridge Scholars Press, pp. 121-140.
- DeGraff, D., Slagter, C., Larsen, K. & Ditta, E. (2013) The Long-Term Personal and Professional Impacts of Participating in a Study Abroad Program, *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, pp. 42-59.
- Deresiewicz, W. (2014) *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. NY, Free Press.
- Deresiewicz, W. (2022) *The End of Solitude: Selected Essays on Culture and Society*. NY, Henry Holt and Co..
- Gower, K.A. (2002) *Incorporating a Hero's Journey: A Modern-Day Pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela* (Dissertation). California Institute of Integral Studies.
- Greenia, G.D. (2018) 'What is Pilgrimage?' *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, Vol. 6, Iss. 2, Article 3.
- Frey, N.L. (1998) *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago, Journeys Along the Ancient Way in Modern Spain*. U. of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Hansel, B. (2008) *AFS long term impact study: Report 2*. Retrieved from AFS International - website: http://www.afs.org/downloads/files/Report_2_Long_Term_Impact.pdf.
- Jenkins, K.E. (2021) *Walking the Way Together: How Families Connect on the Camino de Santiago*. New York, NY, Oxford University Press.
- Kerkeling, H. (2009) *I'm Off Then: Losing and Finding Myself on the Camino de Santiago*. New York, NY, Free Press.
- Knouse, S.M. (2021) Leveraging the Camino de Santiago: promoting intentional reflection and group cohesion during study abroad. *International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Vol. 23, Issue 2.
- Kuh, G.D. (2008) *High-impact educational practices*. Washington, DC: AAC&U Press.
- Miller-Perrin, C., & Thompson, D. (2010) The development of vocational calling, identity, and faith in college students: A preliminary study of the impact of study abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, XIX, 87-103.
- Miller-Perrin, C., & Thompson, D. (2014) 'Outcomes of Global Education: External and Internal Change Associated with Study Abroad.' *New Directions for Student Services*.
- Montás, R. (2021) What Should Students Learn? *The Point Magazine*, Issue 25, Aug. 15. <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/what-should-students-learn/>.
- Paige, R.M., Fry, G.W., Stallman, E.M., Josic, J., & Jon, J.E. (2009) Study abroad for global engagement: The long-term impact of mobility experiences. *Intercultural Education*, S29-S44.doi:10.1080/14675980903370847.
- Roszak, P. (2019) Sacred and Space in Post-Secular Pilgrimage: The Camino de Santiago and Relational Model of the Sacred. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, Vol. 7, Issue 5, Article 5.
- Conrad, R. (2004) *Pilgrimage to the End of the World*, Chicago, U. of Chicago Press.
- Starr-Glass, D. (2016) Repositioning Study Abroad as a Rite of Passage: Impact, Implications, and Implementation. In *Handbook of Research on Study Abroad Programs and Outbound Mobility*, 89-114. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Starr-Glass, D. (2020) Intercultural Awareness and Short-term Study Abroad Programs: An Invitation to Liminality, *Academic Mobility Programs and Engagement: Emerging Research and Opportunities*, 31-56. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Stebleton, M.J., Soria, K.M., & Cheney, B.T. (2013) The High Impact of Education Abroad: College Students' Engagement in International Experiences and the Development of Intercultural Competencies, *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 22: 1-24.
- Turner, V. (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and anti-structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Van Gennep, A. (2011 / 1960). *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ybarra, C.M. (1997) *Kalamazoo College in Madrid: Study Abroad as a Rite of Passage*. (Dissertation), Yale University, 1996.