

# LEARNING BEYOND BORDERS: IMPLICATIONS OF US WORK AND TRAVEL EXPERIENCES ON LYCEANS

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**Abstract:** This study determined the implications of Lyceans' participation to the US Work and Travel (WAT) program. Using survey data and transcriptions from interviews, the study established specific program implications on the students' personal, social, intercultural, and career development. A total of 22 or 56% WAT alumni who joined the program in AY 2017-2018 participated in the survey.

The study revealed that the WAT program has positively contributed to the participants' personal and professional development. Despite some challenges encountered, the overall experience of the participants has been positive due to the intimate interactions they have had with diverse groups of people; in which their exposure to work and day-to-day challenges have been a source of learning and adventure. It was evident from the participants narratives that their experience has enhanced their self-confidence, independence, intrapersonal skills, and cultural competence. The experience has also influenced the participants' views about the hospitality and tourism industry, as well as their future career aspirations.

Proposals to effect improvements in the administration of the program, with emphasis on orientation content and placement arrangements with local providers are recommended.

**Keywords:** Cultural exchange, cultural immersion, career development, personal development, intercultural competence.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Given that business environments are increasingly becoming diverse and global, it has become more important for educational institutions to produce globally competent professionals. The Asia Society, a consortium of academic and business leaders in Asia, describes a globally competent student as "someone who is aware, curious, and interested in learning the world; someone who recognizes diverse perspectives; someone who can effectively communicate with diverse audiences; and as someone who has the knowledge and skill to make a difference in the world" ("What is Global", 2019).

One of the pivotal roles of educational institutions is to provide opportunities that will facilitate development of these skills among students. For the Lyceum of the Philippines University (LPU), this aspiration to develop globally competent graduates is explicitly stated in the organization's mission statement. Experiential learning is one of the main thrusts and is embedded in all curricular programs. Defined as the "process through which students develop knowledge, skills, values from direct experiences outside a traditional classroom setting" experiential learning has been proven effective in assisting student development ("What is Experiential," 2019). Cultural immersions and exchanges as a form of experiential learning has likewise been proven an effective mechanism to develop students' professional and personal competencies, more so when these occur in professional settings (Matriano, 2017; AFS Intercultural Programs, Inc., 2016; Crowe, Sanchez, Weber, & Murtagh, 2016; Egeland, 2016; Conroy & Tagart, 2015; Geale, Beament, Gibson, Fauler, Baker, & Smith, 2015; Al Barwani, Al Mekhlafi, & Neisler, 2010; and Covita & Torres, n.d.). In particular, this was confirmed in a

study of occupational therapists who joined a 10-day interactive session with Mexican indigenous traditional healers. The study concluded that the therapists' exposure has positively contributed to the latter's personal and professional views and practices and that their immersion experience would help them better understand different cultural views of health as they work in a multicultural society" (Crowe, Sanchez, Weber, & Murtagh, 2016, p.318). The same was found in Egeland's (2016) study on the overseas teaching experiences of students from one of the universities in the US. His study confirmed that the students' overseas experience "support the preparation of new teachers for the increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students in P-12 public schools (p.23)." Meanwhile, a study of undergraduate nursing students also revealed that overseas training "develop a cross-cultural and international outlook which underwrites provision of patient- and family-centered care for a multicultural population" (Geale, et. al., 2015, p.96).

The impact of cultural immersions extends beyond cultural awareness. Those who have joined become self-aware and gain skills on decision-making, problem-solving, resilience, self-reflection, and critical thinking (Wright, 2017; AFS Intercultural Programs, 2016).

Among the cultural exchange programs that the LPU Cavite offers is the US Work and Travel Program (WAT). Developed under the Mutual Education and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 (Fulbright-Hays Act), the J1 Visa Exchange Visitor Program is a US government-sponsored program "designed to build a greater understanding of the American people and culture around the world" (EurekaFacts, 2017, p.1). Under the WAT program, students from non-US countries are given opportunity to work and travel in the US for a short period of time. According to EurekaFacts (2017), WTP draws more than 100,000 participants annually for up to 4-month stay during the participants' academic break. Given the magnitude and scope of the program, the U.S. State Department has effected monitoring measures to ensure effective administration of the program. It's monitoring report in 2016 showed that majority of the SWT exchange visitors were happy or somewhat happy with their program experience. There were, however, reported problems in terms of transportation, housing, Social Security cards, and job agreements. The participants' favorable views towards the program were also noted in EurekaFacts' survey report in 2017. The survey further revealed that participants feel that they have obtained skills and knowledge they can use in the future (EurekaFacts, 2017, pp. 5-6).

Among the participants interviewed in both surveys were Filipino exchange visitors. The SWT is a popular program in the Philippines. Every year, thousands of students go to the US to participate in the program. Based on the records of the Commission on Filipino Overseas (CFO), 6,287 Filipinos participated in the Visitor Exchange Program (EVP) in 2015, up by more than a thousand compared to previous year's number of 4,342. Almost 60% are under the SWT category. The CFO is part of the inter-agency committee that is tasked to register all EVP participants leaving the country and to provide pre-departure orientation seminars.

In the Philippines, there is scant literature written about the WTP and its implications on students. There however two notable researches on the topic: the work of Covita and Torres (n.d) on "*Problems and Coping Strategies of Saint Mary's University (SMU)-Hospitality and Tourism Management (HTM) students during their US Cultural Exchange Immersion*", and the work of Matriano (2017) titled "*A Narrative Analysis of Internship Experience of Filipinos in the US.*" Both studies reveal that participants have gained positive and meaningful experiences from their cultural immersion albeit concerns on accommodation facility, visa sponsors, host companies, among others. Covita and Torres (n.d.) shared that participants considered their "whole experience as very much worth it and will recommend other students to grab the same opportunity" (p.84). Meanwhile, Matriano (2017) reported enhanced self-esteem and independence among participants.

Despite the general positive perception among WTP alumni, critics of the program argue that the program "has become a cheap-labor program under the guise of a cultural exchange. The critics argue that the program has displaced young Americans and that it has been used as a "gateway for illegal immigration" and used by criminals for financial fraud schemes" (Kammer, 2011, p.2).

Meanwhile, the US State Department published the Interim Final Rule (IFR) and the "Notice of Proposed Rulemaking for the Summer Work Travel Program" to further strengthen the program following a department-wide review in 2010. Both guidelines are meant to protect American workers and ensure the safety and welfare of the participants ("Strengthening and Reforming...", 2019).

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of the participants towards the US Work and Travel program. Specifically, it aimed to 1) determine the profile of the participants in terms of their placements, work, placement location, and previous travel experiences; 2) identify the students' motivation for participating in the program; 3) determine the implications of the students' experiences on their personal and professional development; and lastly, 4) determine students' general views towards the program based on their collective experiences.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Design

The study applied quantitative method to measure the participants' perception of the extent of implications of their WAT experience to their personal and professional development. The study likewise used qualitative anecdotes to capture the lived experiences of the participants and reveal how these have impacted the participants' collective experience.

### B. Participants

The study included students who joined the Work and Travel program during the Academic Year 2017-2018. They are enrolled in hospitality and tourism programs and are on third-year level. The survey participants represented 56% of the total WAT population. Thirteen (13) participated in the interview.

### C. Procedure

Upon return to the country, the participants were advised to visit the Center for Career Services and Industry Relations (CCSIR) office to participate in the survey. The survey instrument was developed from different sources and covered questions on motivations, implications, challenges and general perceptions of the participants towards the program.

Respondents were asked if they were willing to participate in an interview. For those willing, they were scheduled for interview based on their availability. The interviews were conducted in the CCSIR office and lasted for 30 minutes to an hour and a half. It was audio taped with consent using Voice Memo and was facilitated in both English and *Tagalog*. The participants' narratives were coded to abide with the research's confidentiality guidelines.

### D. Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively. Meanwhile, transcriptions from the interview were used to support inferences gleaned from the quantitative data. Participants' anecdotal testimonials were quoted verbatim to capture their actual lived experiences.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**TABLE I. Host Training Establishments of participants**

Type of Establishment	n	%
Hotel	21	95
Restaurant	0	0
Theme Park	0	0
Others	1	5

**TABLE II. Job Titles of participants**

Job Title	n	%
Entry cook	1	5
Housekeeper	18	86
Server/Food Runner	2	9

As Table I and Table II illustrate, a vast majority (95%) of participants work in hotels as housekeepers (86%). Some (9%) are assigned as food server/runner, while others (4.7%) work as entry cooks. This figure reveals that the participants' work in the US match their field of study.

**TABLE III. Placement locations of participants**

State	n	%
Colorado	1	4.76
Florida	14	66.67
Montana	3	14.29
South Dakota	1	4.76
Tennessee	1	4.76
Wyoming	2	4.76

As the table above shows, majority (66.67%) of participants are placed in Florida. Given that students apply as a group, it is understandable that majority of the participants would choose to be placed in the same location. In addition, Florida has the same tropical climate as the Philippines and hosts ample hotel and restaurant properties, most of which readily accept students at any time of the year. Others, however, opted for novelty and chose destinations such as Colorado, Montana, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wyoming.

**TABLE IV. Previous travel experiences of participants**

Travel experience	n	%
Overseas travel	7	31.82
Domestic travel	10	45.45
None at all	5	22.73

Table IV reveals that more than half of the participants have not had any overseas travel experience prior to their participation in the program. This suggests that for most of the participants, this would be their first time to travel alone and live overseas, away from their families and natural environment.

**TABLE V. Participants' motivations for joining the program**

Indicators	n	%
Cultural exposure	19	86.36
Earn money/work	19	86.36
Meet new friends	20	90.91
Career advancement	18	81.82
Be more independent	22	100.0
Enhance self-confidence	21	95.45

The participants' primary motivation in applying for the program is "to seek independence." All the participants see the 3-month stint in the US as an opportunity to challenge themselves and explore things on their own, away from the comforting confines of their home and their parents. As Participant 3 narrated,

*"it was my first time to be away from my parents – paying my own stuff, doing my own laundry, working so hard for travel – doing everything by myself. This US work and travel really helps me to become the person I want to possess now and for the near future. I learned to value my time and manage it well while throwing myself in this adventure of a lifetime."*

Another participant validated this after completing the program,

*"I was able to meet all those goals because during my stay there [US] I have learned how to be independent now. I do not ask money or financial assistance from my parents that often now because I know how to value money and not spend it on [for] my own satisfaction only."* (Participant 22)

The second motivation centered on enhancing self-confidence. Given that the US is an unfamiliar environment for them, nearly all (95%) of participants expressed positive expectations towards the program, believing that it would change their lives and themselves for the better. The participants believe that their exposure to the challenges of the day-to-day

living— commuting, going to the bank, doing laundry, grocery shopping, going to work and meeting people at work, etc.— would boost their confidence to live on their own, and take on the harder challenges of life.

The third motivation was “to meet new friends.” Majority (91%) of participants are excited with the prospect of meeting new friends, especially foreign individuals. Meeting and interacting with a diverse group of people is integral to cultural immersions and exchanges and is also one of the attractions of the program. Given the wide geographical scope of the program, the participants not only have the opportunity to meet and work with Americans, they also have an opportunity to meet and work with students from other countries. It was noted that participants have worked with and bonded with co-J1 participants from Cambodia, China, Egypt, Jamaica, Romania, to name a few.

A vast majority (80%) the participants cited the following motivators: cultural exposure, money, and actual industry experience.

**TABLE VI. Participants’ intercultural experiences**

Indicators	n	%
Cultural activities organized by host employer/staff	13	59.09
Practicing local language skills	19	86.36
Working with host country nationals	22	100.0
Working with other country nationals	22	100.0
Socializing with host country nationals	21	95.45
Working with other country nationals	22	100.0

One of the integral components of the program is cultural exchange. This is explicitly stated in 22 CFR § 62.32 which states that, “sponsors must ensure that all participants have opportunities to work alongside U.S. citizens and interact regularly with U.S. citizens to experience U.S. culture during the workday portion of their Summer Work Travel programs (“22 CFR..”, 2012).

Table VI illustrates that participants had ample opportunity to experience diverse cultures from their interactions and engagements with locals and foreigners, in and outside work. Expectedly, 100% of the participants have had plenty of opportunity to immerse themselves in American culture from socializing and working with Americans. An example of this was their participation in the July 4<sup>th</sup> festivities with colleagues from work. One participant shares her experience:

*“we use[d] to go to the bar, to have fun and celebrate July 4<sup>th</sup> while watching fireworks with them. [After work], they play jokes, in front of the people they are kind of very professional, but when we go to the bar, they are just like normal people...”* (Participant 17)

Another participant shared,

*“we had ice skating and bowling party of the Wilderness. It was a great experience to be with other cultures.”*

(Participant 6)

One relevant finding from this study is the participants’ observation of the business culture in the US. A participant noted how well American companies take care of employees. While another observed the relaxed and informal relationship dynamics between the crew and manager on her narrative,

*“I see their flow of work, I see how they manage the restaurant... It’s kind of easier, prepared, organized, even the manager are [is] good, you know, they help even if they’re busy, I see the manager keeps washing dishes, it inspired me, and I hope Philippines have that kind of culture one day...”* (Participant 22)

Another participant shared,

*“...when you apply [in the US], it is very easy. The process is very fast. They ask your schedule and call you immediately or email you, then you can start.”* (Participant 3)

This cultural exchange is not exclusive between American and Filipino participants. The latter also had opportunity to experience other nations' cultures from co-J1 participants. A participant had this to say:

*"it's really nice because they (Cambodian) are talkative we talk about our culture, what are the difference. They are very friendly."* (Participant 6)

The State Department categorizes cultural activities as sponsor-arranged, host-arranged, and independently-arranged. Based on the participants' statements, most of their cultural activities outside work were independently-arranged. This study noted that only 59% of the participants signified that their host companies and/or visa sponsors organized or hosted intercultural activities for them. The State Department found the same trend in their 2016 Monitoring Report. The Department rationalized the limited cultural activities to lack of local sponsor representatives in certain areas (Department of State, 2016).

**TABLE VII. Implications of WAT Experience on Participants' Career Development**

<i>My participation in the WTP:</i>	Agree	Disagree	NA
enhanced my overall employability	100.00	0	0
allowed me to acquire a skillset that will influence my future career path	100.00	0	0
allowed me to learn more about the industry	95.45	0	4.55
has ignited my interest in a career direction that I will pursue after this experience	95.45	4.55	0
provided an introduction to, or enhanced my ability to speak the English language	86.36	9.09	4.55
provided an introduction to, or enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English	86.36	9.09	4.55
provided me an internship experience that has shaped my career choices	90.91	4.55	4.55

As shown in Table VII, all (100%) participants believe that their WAT experience helped them enhance their technical and soft skills. These participants shared,

*"...I've become more faster making beds. We manage our time, especially our time because we clean like 20 rooms in a day then you need to finish within 7-8 hours. So you really need to work fast, fast but clean."* (Participant 6)

*"...the things that we were doing [cooking] we already knew. But [when] in terms of speed and time management, I learned that thing at the company."* (Participant 4)

*"It helped me how to address the customer concern and how will I satisfy the customers."* (Participant 5)

All participants share the same perception that their WAT experience would enhance their employability. These participants said:

*"...believe that [this] experience will help them get job faster...because I know that we Filipinos, here in the Philippines when they saw that you've already worked in the USA they will say ohhh, you already worked in the USA...they know that it's not easy to go there, not everyone can have the opportunity to work there..."* (Participant 22)

*"This [housekeeping work] would be my stepping stone to be a housekeeping manager someday."* (Participant 2)

Nearly all (95.45%) of participants also believe that they learned more about the [tourism] industry and ignited their interest in the career directions they will pursue after completing the program and eventually, after graduation. One participant shared:

*"...it [work experience] opened our minds to how we can work in different fields, inside the industry."* (Participant 4)

Another participant shared:

*"It makes me know more about my course and face the real world [of reality]."* (Participant 12)

Meanwhile, 90.91% of participants also signified that their work experience has shaped their career choices. This narrative from one of the participants support this:

*"...this is the thing I keep telling my mom that I don't see myself working here in the Philippines to be honest. Working with them [Americans] is like this is your future, you have to be prepared, you should know how to communicate with*

them. I really want to own my restaurant in the Philippines, that is the thing that I want. Work with them, learn from them, and apply it here so that Philippines have better something, like that” (Participant 22)

When it comes to communication skills, more than two thirds of all participants (83.36%) feel that their experience enhanced their English proficiency. One participant shared,

“...I gained a lot especially in communication skills. Because in order to give the best quality service I need to give the proper information” (Participant 3)

It was noted that the participants were emboldened to speak in English because of the open and nonjudgmental way Americans converse with them. A participant shared,

“some Filipino(s) are judgmental, the Americans, parang wala silang pakialam kung pangit diction nyo or yung grammar or pronunciation ko [Translation: Americans do not seem to care if your diction is ugly or your grammar or pronunciation is wrong] as long as you understand each other...]” (Participant 7)

Although the optimal goal was to expose the students to an English-speaking environment to enhance their English proficiency, it was noted that there were instances when students were placed in host companies where English was not the main language between and among the workers. As this participant noted,

“...I believed that it was only enhanced a little bit (English]...because the people I worked with do not speak English, like Mexicans. They can't speak English. And the Jamaicans have broken English. The Thai can't speak English too.” (Participant 21)

Then again, some participants took this as another learning opportunity, as this provided them an avenue to learn a language other than English. An example would be this participant's experience:

“my experience [was] not only for our career, it opened our minds to how we will communicate to other people, and how we can work in different fields, inside the industry. I thought I was just going to work and travel but I went there, I realized it is really a cultural exchange program the moment that I communicated with Chinese, not only Americans but different nationalities...it just exceeded my expectations because this really is a cultural exchange program and when I moved there I didn't feel that I was different, and then I learned how to embrace their culture and they did the same thing for me.” (Participant 5)

**TABLE VIII. Implications of WAT Experience on Participants' Personal, Social, Intercultural Development**

<i>My participation in the WTP:</i>	Agree	Disagree	NA
enabled me to learn something new about myself	86.36	13.64	0
allowed me to value perspectives other than my own	95.45	4.55	0
influenced my perspective on how I viewed the world	100.0	0	0
allowed to better understand my own cultural values and biases	100.0	0	0
served as catalyst for increased maturity	100.0	0	0
influenced my interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds	100.0	0	0
influenced to seek out a greater diversity of friends	100.0	0	0
increased my independence	100.0	0	0
enhanced my self-confidence	100.0	0	0
increased my openness to new ideas	100.0	0	0
contributed to increased creativity and problem-solving skills	90.91	9.09	0
enhanced my leadership skills	90.91	4.55	4.55
enhanced my planning and time management skills	95.45	4.55	0
increased my intrapersonal skills	100.0	0	0

The table above demonstrates participants' perception that their WAT experience has enhanced their personal, social, and intercultural development. An overwhelming 100% participants agree that their collective experience brought these positive changes in them: 1) increased interpersonal skills; 2) openness to new ideas; 3) self-confidence and independence; 4) influenced desire to seek out a greater diversity of friends; 5) influenced interaction with people from

different cultural backgrounds; 6) has served as catalyst for increased maturity; 7) allowed them to better understand their own cultural values and understand others; and 8) influenced their perspective on how they view the world.

Participant 19 shares how her experience helped her to be independent:

*“... I really don't know how to cook rice, but now I can do it. Pinakanatutunan ko po, wag kang susuko agad pag di mo pa na ta-try. First day ko pa lang umiyak na ako kasi ang dami ko gagawin na nakalagay sa board ko and 1 week pa lang ako na ti-training dapat po kasi 2 weeks, wala pa ako trainer, but after that comfort po ako ng mga Lyceans and supervisor ko.”* [Translation: The most important lesson I have learned is not to give up. On my first day, I cried already because I saw on the board that I have lots of things to do; and I've just had my training. The training usually takes 2 weeks but I've only been trained for a week. But my Lycean friends and supervisor comforted me] (Participant 19)

Talking about the program's contribution on building their independence, these participants shared:

*“Kasi before kahit sa ganito lang po [conversation], nahihiya ako mag excuse, naghahanap po talaga ako ng frontliners, tas yun po, kahit papano po nakgaroon po ako ng lakas ng loob na maging confident, hindi na mahiya humarap sa mga tao. [In the US] Pag sa mga Americans kausap mo, syempre po hindi ka naman kilala so mas malakas pala loob ko kumausap sa mga Amerikano kesa dito sa atin.”* [Translation: Before, I would really get shy even in small conversations like this. I would ask someone to speak for me. Somehow I can say now that I am not as shy in talking and meeting people] (Participant 17)

*“I can say that it really boost my confidence towards communicating to other nationalities, kasi po pag sa bahay lagi po ako naka depend kay mommy pero nung nasa US po ako mas naging independent po ako. Hindi po ako ganun ka shy magsalita towards other nationalities, yung pakikipagusap ko sa kanila parang with confidence na po.”* [Translation: ... I am very much dependent on my mom when I am at home. But when I was in the US, I became more independent. I wasn't that shy to talk to foreigners; I talked to them with confidence] (Participant 7)

The experience was also an opportunity to correct some misconceptions about certain nationalities as evidenced from the experience of this participant:

*“Yung makakilala ka ng ibang tao, ng ibang nationality. Lalo na ng nakakilala ako ng Russian kasi yung mass media po kinontra nila Russia, but she was very nice.”* [Translation: The thought of meeting other people, especially other nationalities. Especially when I met the Russians because the mass media condemns them, but I realized that they are very nice] (Participant 16)

Another participant shared,

*“Akala ko medyo rude yung iba [Americans]. Pero yung napuntahan namin, parang nice po nila. Parang welcome na welcome kami. Kaya mahirap umalis...Ang bait po nila. After po ng may event malapit sa lake, ang dami tao, akala ko after the event madumi, pero kinabukasan malinis. Tsaka masyado po sila masunurin lalo na sa seatbelt.”* [Translation: I thought the Americans are rude. But where we worked, they were very nice. They made us feel welcome, which made it difficult for us to leave. They were very kind. One time there was a community event, we thought the place would be dirty with trash after, but we were surprised to see that the next day, it was clean. And they are also disciplined when it comes to the use of seatbelt] (Participant 16)

*“I feel like somehow they will think because I am Filipino, she's Asian, because from the movies I watched I saw racism but when I was there, nothing happened like that. They love Filipinos. They find us kind and accommodating. They told me [workmates] that among Asian people, Filipinos are the closest to their heart because they were good at communicating and there's a personality to Filipinos that they are so hardworking but they are really working hard not for the money but the quality of work.”* (Participant 4)

Reflecting on the impact of his experience in the US, another participant cites an incident where he reached out to a foreigner:

*“2 weeks ago nung nasa bandang Kadiwa ako, kinausap ko yung Nigerian, nagdadalawang isip ako, pero dun nga po sa ibang bansa [US], ang ganda ng pakikitungo nila sa amin, sila papansin sa'yo tapos dito sa Pilipinas, di tayo namamansin sa kanila. Sabi ko pag uwi ko dito, ma greet ko mga prof, mga guards, ako yung unang kakausap, pero sa ibang foreigners, hindi naisip na ako unang kakausap sa kanila.”* [Translation: 2 weeks ago, I was in the Kadiwa area, I



approached and talked to a Nigerian. I thought to myself, when I was in the US, they treated us nicely, they would take initiative to approach us and here, we don't talk to them. So I said to myself, when I go home, I would greet people, the prof[essor], the guards. I will take the initiative] (Participant 17)

**TABLE X. Difficulties and problems encountered by the participants**

Indicators	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
High expenses	20	95	1
Getting paid	2	9	10
Discrimination	4	18	8.5
Homesickness	7	32	6
Time management	11	52	2
Safety and security	3	14	9.5
Social Security cards	3	14	9.5
Difficult transportation	8	36	5
Limited cultural activity	9	41	4.5
Surprise/unexpected fees	9	41	4.5
Culture shock/cultural differences	10	48	3
Low work hours (lower than minimum work hours)	4	18	8.5
Communication barrier/misunderstanding	6	27	7

High expenses, particularly on housing rental, was the most prevalent problem that participants encountered. Housing is arranged while still in the participants' home country; and often with the assistance of the visa sponsor through the local provider. There are various housing arrangements available for the participants: company-arranged, sponsor-arranged, or independently-arranged. Oftentimes, the housing is included in the program fee package, either provided by the visa sponsor or the host company. But in cases when this is not available or part of the package, participants have an option to look for the accommodation themselves. A temporary housing is initially arranged by the visa sponsor until such time that participants have found their accommodation. The study reveals that either arrangements could lead to some problems, as these participants show:

*"...we stayed in Sta. Rosa Beach, Florida provided by [mentions hotel property/host company]. When we came, it was very dirty. No bed sheets, no pillow casing, and then they don't have kitchen equipment to cook food. ....the housing manager, he wants us to deduct the rental fee but we already paid for it ahead of time."* (Participant 2)

*"[housing]...kasi sa mga katrabaho naming sa resto, sabi sa amin masyago mahal. \$100 lang naman po per week. Pero meron dun sa \$60 lang 1 month."* (Participant 3)

Yet, there were also noted difficulties when students look for housing themselves and choose a very cheap housing facility thereby compromising comfort and safety:

*"We got to find our own house. It is an unfurnished house so find it difficult to live there without TV and there's no air-condition. Our American friend let us borrow air-condition so we can make it through the night. It was cheap and near our work."* (Participant 5)

The next problem for more than half (52%) of participants is "time management." This is understandable given that students had to deal with a myriad of activities like cooking, going to the bank, laundry and grocery shopping all by themselves, on top of their very demanding jobs. It was noted that some students would log in 10-16 hours of work every day, while some took second jobs.

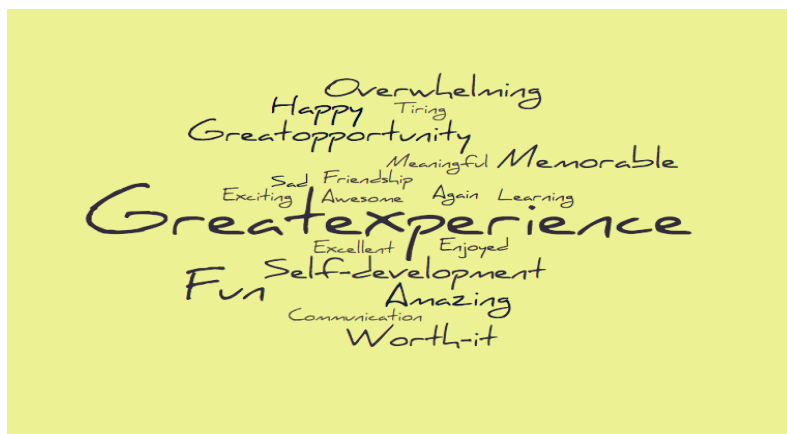
Participants also struggled with culture shock/cultural differences. Interestingly, they confessed to have expected certain differences from what they have seen in American movies, yet were still surprised to experience the disparity firsthand as evidenced from the excerpts of these participants' stories:

*"the way people handle their alcohol and mannerisms like they throw up in the street, they go home really drunk, they walk around in their bikinis really drunk..."* (R16)

“...because the location of our house is near the lake, I saw a lot of couples and locals naglalakad ng naka swimsuit. Dun din sa store naming, naka swimsuit sila namimili. [Translation: ...the locals were walking in swimsuit; they were also in their swimsuit while in the store, buying stuff.] I was shocked.” (Participant 5)

Some complained there was no rice—a Philippine staple. Although others appreciated the novelty of eating American staples like burger and pizza, it eventually wore off. One noted,

“eventually it tastes the same because it revolves around pizza, burger...” (Participant 16)



**Fig.1. Word cloud generated from participants’ description of their overall WAT experience**

As the WordCloud illustrates, the most common words the participants used to describe their experience was “great experience.” Collectively, participants credit the program for helping them become a better person. Being in a foreign country and taking responsibility for a lot of things, the program enabled the participants to develop and enhance skills on time management, customer service, cross-cultural communication, problem solving, to name a few. As one participant shared,

“there’s no doubt: this is a terrific way to spend a university break....This US work and travel really helps me to become the person I want to possess now and for the future. I learned to value my time and manage it well while throwing myself into this adventure of a lifetime.” (Participant 4)

The program also taught them to be independent, particularly in managing their finances. As in the case of one participant who shared,

“I was able to meet all those goals [learn about the world] because during my stay there I have learned how to be independent. I do not ask money or financial assistance from my parents that often now because I know how to value money and not spend it on my own satisfaction only. I have learned that it is not really easy to be away from my loved ones and I have learned that there are many kinds of people that you will meet in your life which will give you different experience, some will break you, some will help you step.” (Participant 22)

For some, the experience was great owing to the invaluable learning they have obtained at work, and from the examples of their supervisors. One participant quipped,

“Staying here in the US is such a great achievement that I ever had personally. I learned a lot of things that can help me and where I can benefit from to become a strong and well-equipped and knowledgeable individual....our Head Manager is Sir Mike Mckee, he is a very responsible manager, the way he treated us was like we’re his real family, he sets a good example on how to be a good leader and because of him, I was then inspired to make the impossible things possible and work even harder thinking maybe one day I could be like him or even better.” (Participant 2)

“It was the best opportunity I could have, and it was the best decision I ever made since I lived because it gave me a sense of purpose.” (Participant 5)

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of this study suggest that participants of the WAT program perceive their overall experience in the US to have positively contributed to their personal and professional development. Despite some challenges encountered, the overall experience of the participants has been positive and this is due to the interactions they have had with a diverse group of people. The situations they have been exposed to at work and outside their work environment have likewise been a source of learning and adventure, which was primarily what motivated participants to apply for the program. For Filipino students in general, the opportunity to work and live abroad, particularly in the US albeit for a short period of time, is a once in a lifetime opportunity. It was evident from the participants narratives that their experience has enhanced their self-confidence, independence, intrapersonal skills, and cultural competence. In addition, the experience has influenced their views about the hospitality and tourism industry and future career aspirations.

Preparation is a key component to the success of the student's participation in the program. Thus, it is suggested that the orientation content include information about specific areas where the students would be placed. The WAT alumni may be asked to participate during the orientation or pre-departure information session to provide insightful testimonies about their lived experiences in the US. Furthermore, it is recommended that the Center for Career Services and Industry Relations work even more closely with local providers to ensure that good housing and transportation options are available to participants. More importantly, that terms and conditions related to these offers are explicitly indicated in contracts/agreements to avoid "surprise payments/fees" upon arrival in the US.

The study noted that the program has contributed to the development of the student, as such, it is recommended that LPU Cavite continue to offer the WAT program as an alternate learning activity for students, particularly to hospitality and tourism students.

For future research, it is suggested that a pre-departure survey be conducted to assess the participants' expectations, cultural perspectives, and learning objectives. This information would be important in the overall assessment of the programs' contribution to student development.

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