Exploring That Fulbright Magic: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Fulbright-MESCYT Alumni Who Return to the Dominican Republic

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EXPLORING THAT FULBRIGHT MAGIC: A TRANSCENDENTAL
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FULBRIGHT-MESCYT
ALUMNI WHO RETURN TO THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

by

Joshabel De La Cruz

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
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Western Michigan University
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EXPLORING THAT FULBRIGHT MAGIC: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FULBRIGHT-MESCYT ALUMNI WHO RETURN TO THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Joshabel De La Cruz, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2021

International higher education graduates may experience challenges related to reentry to their home countries as their expectations upon returning home may not match their reality (Alandejani, 2013; Butcher, 2002, Gaw, 2000). This study utilizes a transcendental phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of seven Fulbright-MESCYT alumni who completed U.S. graduate degree programs and returned home to the Dominican Republic (DR) between 2015 and 2018. The Fulbright-MESCYT Program in the DR is a joint initiative of the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo and the Dominican Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (MESCYT) and adds funding for up to 10 Dominican Fulbright grantees annually to participate in U.S. graduate programs.

Prior to their first interview, each participant submitted a photo that embodied their experience in the Fulbright-MESCYT program. The researcher then engaged with each participant in two in-depth, semi-structured interviews on their experiences. Findings are grouped into an arc of development that connects to Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s (1963) W-Curve and are divided into three stages: making it through, feeling stuck, and finding the new me. Under making it through, the following themes emerged: I prefer diversity, learning how to deal, destroy the logic, and sorting out the homesickness. The following themes emerged for feeling stuck: come back and be who you were and it’s impossible, no opportunities for people who travel and get degrees and my mama hates Fulbright. Finally, the following themes emerged
under finding the new me: if you have skin in the game, you have to stay in the game, neither the authority, nor the boss, but you have to make change, shaping my teaching persona, living up to the Fulbright standard, and Fulbright magic. Study participants described challenges adapting to U.S. culture, developing a preference for diversity, and sorting out feelings of homesickness through networks of social and emotional support. They described striking differences between their host and home cultures and, upon their return home, they struggled to find meaningful work that values and puts the learnings from their graduate program experiences into practice. These findings align to the experiences faced by other exchange participants that return home as reflected in studies from different cultural contexts (Butcher, 2002; Alandejani, 2013; Gama and Pedersen, 1977; Gaw, 2000).

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni persist and find ways to make an impact. They shape their views on teaching and learning based on their experiences with U.S. faculty members. Findings that add to the literature include if you have skin in the game, you have to stay in the game, Fulbright magic and living up to the Fulbright standard. Implications for practice outlined in this study include a need to implement re-adjustment seminars for returning alumni, increase support from Fulbright alumni associations to better engage alumni upon their return home, and help alumni connect to meaningful work opportunities in their home country. Implications for research included increasing studies focused on returnee experiences for international scholarship programs and similar long-term international education programs, and differences in the experiences and outcomes of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni that complete one- versus two-year graduate degree programs in the U.S. This is one of the first studies focused on the value of an international scholarship program for Latin American alumni after their sojourn, and the first study of Dominican international exchange alumni following their return home.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To the Fulbright-MESCYT alumni who opened up and vividly shared their experiences living in the United States and returning home, thank you! Your stories are the cornerstone of this work, and your commitment to your country is truly inspiring.

I shared this journey with a group of other education leaders from the Dominican Republic. I am grateful to them for serving as mentors and for providing support to get the dissertation done.

Finally, I would not be here without the support of my family. My spouse and best friend, Oscar Echavarria, was my cheerleader, partner, and therapist. I would not have made it to publication without you. I missed countless hours of being mom to Lucas so that I could finish this dissertation. Lucas, thank you for your laughter, joy and unconditional love.

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother and father for showing me the power of education. I appreciate the countless times you cared for Lucas while I completed this study. I am equally thankful of my siblings, family, friends, mentors, colleagues and faculty that have encouraged me to follow my dreams. Thank you!

Joshabel De La Cruz
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Every little thing you want in life is to leave this world a better place.”
(Ethan, Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus)

The Fulbright Program is a flagship international exchange program of the U.S. Department of State with the goal of increasing mutual understanding between the United States and nations around the world (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, n.d.). Senator William J. Fulbright created this academic exchange program in 1946 using surplus war funds from World War II (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, n.d.). In the Dominican Republic (DR), the Fulbright Program began in 1962. Since then, more than 500 Dominicans have participated in the Fulbright Program (Mejía, 2011, April 7). Ninety-six of these approximately 500 Fulbright participants are alumni of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program (Batista, 2018), which is a special international partnership program between the Dominican and U.S. governments focused on priority fields of development for the Dominican government, including science, economics, education, health, and the arts (U.S. Embassy, 2018, September 28). The Fulbright-MESCYT Program is a joint initiative of the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo and the Ministerio de Educación Superior, Ciencia y Tecnología (MESCYT) [Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology], which has provided funding for, on average, approximately eight additional Fulbright grantees per year from the DR to participate in graduate study in a master’s or Ph.D. program in the United States (Cabrera, 2018). In the sections that follow, I provide a broad overview of international education, higher education and government-funded international scholarship programs, including the Fulbright-MESCYT program, in the Dominican Republic. I also present my research problem statement, purpose, research questions and the significance of the study.
Overview of International Higher Education

The internationalization of higher education institutions transforms campuses, students and curricula through student and faculty exchange (Altbach & De Wit, 2015). Higher education institutions like Nalanda University in India, and other centers of learning in Greece and Egypt, have actively engaged in study abroad activities for thousands of years (Bevis, 2019). However, it was Roman authorities who established policies and immigration requirements that would set the stage for the current academic exchange system (Bevis, 2019). In the United States, it is thought that the very first international student was a Venezuelan, Francisco Miranda, who enrolled at Yale University in 1784 (Bevis, 2019). After World War I, several organizations emerged, including the Institute for International Education (IIE) (in 1919) and the British Council (in 1934), with a focus on fostering mutual understanding among people from different societies (Altbach & DeWit, 2015). International education expanded on a broad scale from the early examples discussed above and now such initiatives reach higher education institutions around the world.

While independent international education initiatives have existed for thousands of years, government-sponsored international scholarship programs only began as recently as the early 20th century and were developed in resistance to emergent communist ideologies in developing countries at the time (Varghese, 2008). Madge et al. (2015) discussed the countless methods for transnationalization, or the ways in which higher education institutions around the world are establishing branch campuses in various nations, developing partnerships between higher education institutions in different countries, and the proliferation of networks focused on internationalizing higher education, international student recruiters, massive open online courses (MOOCS), available free of charge no matter where one is located in the world, and
internationalization of the curricula. Around the world, countries are doubling the number of international students who visit their respective countries, conducting joint research with international universities, and implementing dual degree and hybrid programs (Knight, 2012).

**Reasons Higher Education Institutions Internationalize**

Higher education institutions in the U.S. pursue internationalization efforts for different reasons. Altbach and Knight (2007) detailed the reasons for-profit, private universities pursue internationalization as financial, whereas public higher education institutions pursue internationalization efforts “to enhance research and knowledge capacity, and to increase cultural understanding” (p. 292). Often, higher education institutions internationalize to fulfill organizational goals, linguistic goals, and to increase or maintain the status of the higher education institution (Seeber et al., 2016). Maringe and Foskett (2010) discuss the increasing competitiveness of higher education institutions in the era of globalization, and the focus on acquiring the best talent, as rationales for the internationalization of higher education, and then discusses the need to push for more inclusive immigration policies for students, positioning countries as destinations for educational progress, and providing support for international students to afford to study at these institutions as ways to maintain competitiveness. Gacel-Ávila (2012) discusses the importance of internationalization of higher education as a way to increase institutional competitiveness and institutional ability to recruit students, support increased joint research and output, and develop stronger global citizens. Altbach and Knight also found that higher education institutions in developing countries engage in internationalization to improve their educational quality and prestige. Such is the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, where many higher education institutions are investing in partnerships with universities from more
developed countries to enhance their prestige, including the United States and universities across Europe.

**Internationalization of Higher Education in Latin America and the Dominican Republic**

Higher education institutions in Latin America collaborate with postsecondary partner institutions in the United States, Spain and other countries located in Europe to offer online and dual degree programs (De Wit et al., 2005). Latin American students studying in the United States increased by 50% between 1993 and 2002, and universities from around the world are establishing branch locations all over Latin America (De Wit et al., 2005). While large numbers of Latin American students travel abroad to pursue degrees, there are a smaller number of exchange students and foreign workers traveling to these countries for educational and employment opportunities. Higher education in Latin America needs to improve its quality, focus on its outreach strategy and innovate in order to attract international students (Holm-Nielsen et al., 2005). Innovative international education partnerships for Latin American students to study at U.S. and European countries continue to emerge across the region, but Latin American countries have been less successful at retaining trained professionals once they complete their academic programs abroad. Some examples of hybrid innovative programs between U.S. and Dominican higher education institutions include programs discussed below.

**Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra (PUCMM)**

PUCMM implements a dual bachelor’s degree program with Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) allowing students to complete two summers and a trimester at RIT, and two summers at Tompkins Cortland Community College. PUCMM and Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU) also have a dual bachelor degree program that allows students to obtain a dual bachelor’s degree after completing two semesters of study at FDU (PUCMM, n.d.).
**Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo (INTEC)**

INTEC hosts a number of dual undergraduate degree programs with U.S. higher education institutions. INTEC has a partnership for students to complete a dual bachelor degree program with Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) after two years of study at INTEC and two years of study at Penn State in the fields of energy engineering, environmental engineering, biological engineering and engineering sciences (INTEC, n.d.). In addition, INTEC also has three dual bachelor degree programs under the same 2+2 study format with Western Michigan University in the fields of mechanical engineering, aerospace engineering and chemical engineering, and with the University of Miami in the fields of environmental and architectural engineering (INTEC, n.d.). INTEC also has a 3+2 program for students to complete three years of study at INTEC, and two years of study at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and acquire a Master’s of Civil Engineering from the U.S. university. Finally, INTEC also promotes a dual master’s degree program with the Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico.

**Universidad Iberoamericana (UNIBE)**

UNIBE, another private university in the Dominican Republic, implements a 3+1 Bachelor of Business Administration Bachelor Degree Program and dual MBA degree offered between Universidad Iberoamericana (UNIBE) and Florida International University. In the past, UNIBE has also served as the location for coursework for the Ph.D. in Educational Leadership offered by Western Michigan University in the Dominican Republic.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2012) conducted a study of the higher education system in the DR and found that while the DR had a robust scholarship program for its citizens to study abroad, it had not contemplated a strategy to attract international students to the country. The OECD also discussed the importance of developing a
strategy to retain students following their participation in an international scholarship program. The report made recommendations for Dominican higher education institutions to increase their partnerships in international research opportunities, establish technical training programs that respond to the needs identified within a national strategy of internationalization and improve the quality of higher education including the definition of competencies for and accreditation of academic programs (OECD, 2012).

**Government Funded Scholarship Programs**

Governments, foundations, and companies around the world fund international scholarship programs (Kent, 2018). Perna, Orosz, and Jumakulov (2014) developed a typology of the different types of government-funded scholarship programs aimed at supporting students to pursue academic credits, degrees abroad, or vocational training that exist in 196 independent nations around the world. These researchers found that 183 international scholarship programs existed at the time of their study. Seventy-six percent of these programs were targeted toward graduate-level studies, 85% were bound to specific disciplines and to certain countries where students could pursue their studies, and 59% required students to return home when they completed their respective programs (Perna, Orosz & Jumakulov, 2014). Boeren (2018) described similar goals for international scholarship programs including human capital development, diplomatic and economic connections, and increasing the prestige and quality of education offered by higher education institutions in the donor country. Selection and eligibility criteria vary depending on the objectives of the respective program, and there is always an interest attached to the scholarship, whether the end goal is development, national interests, or diplomatic interests (Boeren, 2018). International scholarship programs search for candidates that can become change agents, or “a future leader or a decision maker within an organization of movement-a rigorous selection of
candidates with certain characteristics and/or influential positions is essential” (Boeren, 2018, p. 48). “For embassies (and heads of state and ministers), scholarships can be lubrication in establishing and maintaining good diplomatic and economic relations” (Boeren, 2018, p. 55). Funding organizations are increasingly seeking data to understand the return on investment, but tracking scholarship results is time consuming and requires funding across budget and electoral cycles (Kent, 2018). A study on outcomes of an African scholarship program found that 86% of program alumni have held leadership roles, developed soft skills, including increased “critical thinking, intercultural communication, research techniques, changed attitudes toward work, and managerial skills” (Kent, 2018, p. 116). Kent (2018) also discussed the sustainable alumni networks created by former participants and how these connections foster increased community engagement. Kent (2018) discusses the challenges that also accompany international education including the potential for skills obtained abroad to be non-transferable in one’s home country, and that without substantial support, some students are unable to make the most of the program experience. Degree completion rates for international scholarship program recipients are consistently high across organizations (Mawer, 2018). The majority of research conducted to understand scholarship program outcomes has been evaluation research and has provided basic data on the outcomes of the respective scholarship program (Mawer, 2018). Surveys conducted through these studies are self-reported and have found increased positivity towards the host country by program alumni, and for those that interacted with professors, and engaged culturally and academically, the impact was greater (Mawer, 2018). Mawer (2018) called for an increase in amount of “detailed commentary on complex questions about scholarship outcomes” from the research community (p. 276). While I found evaluation studies focused on scholarship programs,
few qualitative studies focused on understanding the value or the lived experience of scholarship alumni, and none focused on the context of the Dominican Republic.

In the Dominican Republic, the higher education system is centralized and the supervisory authority is the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (MESCOY, n.d.). The ministry oversees Dominican higher education quality, foments scientific research development, accredits and evaluates higher education programs, and monitors higher education institutions in the country (MESCOY, n.d.). In addition, the Ministry implements international partnerships and runs international scholarship programs for its citizens (MESCOY, n.d.). This ministry has provided approximately 9,879 scholarships for Dominican citizens to pursue international study at universities around the world, and 826 of those scholarships were for study in the United States (MESCOY, n.d.).

**MESCOY-funded International Scholarships**

MESCOY funded international scholarships for Dominicans between 2012 and 2017, with scholarships assigned to the following fields: engineering and architecture (18%), information and communication technology (5%), sciences (1%), health (20%), economics and finance (3%), administration (10%), law and political science (4%), humanities (11%), education (13%), arts (5%), hotel and tourism (4%), agronomical and veterinary science (2%), and other unspecified fields (3%) (MESCOY, 2018). Ninety-five percent of international scholarships given to Dominicans were directed toward graduate programs abroad, while undergraduate programs were assigned three percent and certificate programs and courses were assigned two percent. The top two destinations of study for MESCOY-funded international graduate programs were listed as Spain (68%) and the United States (8.3%) (MESCOY, n.d.). In 2017, the Dominican government provided 2,511 international scholarships to its citizens, with 1,783 scholarships assigned to Spain,
176 scholarships assigned to the United States and 151 scholarships assigned to the United Kingdom (MESCYT, n.d.).

**Fulbright-MESCYT Program**

MESCYT and the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo celebrated the 10-year anniversary of their joint program, the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. Through this program, MESCYT has supported 96 participants over the past 10 years (Batista, 2018). The celebration featured 12 alumni profiles where former participants shared their experiences and their work following their completion of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. During the 10-year celebration, the MESCYT Minister announced that alumni of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program have returned and put into practice their acquired knowledge, and that they continue to improve systems in the Dominican Republic. Fulbright alumnus (Class of 1967) and historian Dr. Frank Moya Pons provided a keynote speech during this celebration where he stated:

> I am sure that almost all of the scholarship recipients have experienced similar processes of discovery and cultural transformation when they entered into direct contact with U.S. academia and culture, and with thousands of students from around the world; and I am also sure that the majority would be in agreement that it was worth experiencing, because they have returned to serve their country as agents of change and modernization, and now carry a more accentuated democratic culture. (U.S. Embassy, 2018, September 28)

While this anecdotal evidence of a generalized Fulbright experience is available, there are no current empirical studies focused on the Dominican Fulbright or Fulbright-MESCYT program. I have also not found a research or evaluation study describing how the program has influenced the lives of these participants, which is the focus of this study. This study is not focused on evaluating the successes or failures of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program in reaching
programmatic goals, nor is it a review of the return on investment of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. This study is focused on understanding the value of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program for its alumni upon their return to their home country. All of the information included within this dissertation study is publicly available information.

**Problem Statement**

Dominican government-funded academic exchange programs are designed around strategic areas outlined in the *Plan Decenal de la Educación Superior* (2008-2018) (PDES) [Decennial Plan for Higher Education (2008-2018)] for the development of higher education in the country. The Fulbright-MESCYT program has existed for 10 years and has maintained a focus on critical fields for development as identified by MESCYT and discussed previously. There is an important gap in current literature on the value and influence of international exchange programs for the personal and professional development of alumni from the Dominican Republic upon their return to their home country. Existing studies focus on cultures that have very different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds and different development goals from the Dominican Republic. Currently, there is little information on the influence of the exchange experience on the lives of alumni upon returning to the country; how they make meaning of the exchange experience; how their experiences while in the program influence their involvement in community improvement and economic development for the country, improved mutual understanding between the Dominican Republic and the United States; and the perceived value of the exchange experience for their individual personal and professional development. I have also found little research on the value of government-funded scholarship programs for citizens of Caribbean and Latin America nations. The few studies I have found (Perna, L., Orosz, K., Jumakulov, Z., 2015) focus on different regional contexts, including the Eastern European context, as showcased in a
study on the Kazakh Bolashak program. This study found that participants greatly improved their communication and leadership skills, but lacked transparent selection criteria (Perna et al., 2015). Following 10 years and approximately five million U.S. dollars of Dominican government support, an examination of the Fulbright-MESCYT program poses a unique opportunity to understand the value of an international exchange program for alumni from a developing country, such as the Dominican Republic.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the lived experience of alumni of the Dominican Fulbright-MESCYT scholarship program who returned to the DR. I explore how this experience influences the lives of these individuals after their return to their home country, including their ongoing personal and professional goals and their engagement in their local communities.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question of this study is: *What is the lived experience of the Dominican alumnus of the Fulbright-MESCYT scholarship program after returning to the DR?* In addition, the following sub-questions further guide the exploration of participants’ experiences: (a) How has this experience shaped their personal and professional goals? And (b) How do participants’ lived experiences influence their: (1b) subsequent work; (2b) commitment to community involvement; and (3b) aspirations for themselves?

**Significance**

I have found no reports that showcase efforts by the governments of the DR and the U.S. to understand the value assigned by participants to their international exchange experiences. Millions of U.S. dollars have been spent to send DR students abroad and limited anecdotal
evidence has been presented related to these alumni experiences; however, there are no currently published studies that investigate the perceived value of alumni experiences and whether these experiences shape other areas of their lives upon returning to their home country. Understanding how alumni of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program make meaning of their experiences while abroad and after returning home may help the DR and U.S. governments better understand the lived experience of the alumni, how the program runs and help refine defined program outcomes. In addition, understanding the value of the program for its alumni may also highlight more effective ways of engaging alumni.

Governments around the world are investing in international scholarships for their citizens to promote social and economic development in their respective countries (Perna et. al, 2014). While there are limited studies focused on the overall contributions of specific country strategies for internationalization, like Brazil’s Science Without Borders Program (McManus & Nobre, 2017; Moreira Nery, 2017), there appear to be few studies focused on the value of international scholarships for citizens of Latin American countries who participate in them (Veras de Sandes-Guimaraes et al., 2020). This study would fill the gap by focusing on the value of the international exchange program for an individual located in Latin America, and more specifically, the Dominican Republic. By conducting a study focusing on lived experiences of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni who have returned home, the findings from my study may provide information helpful to governments in the Caribbean, Latin America and beyond to refine the components and outcomes of their international scholarships, and more specifically, the Fulbright Program. Further, this study may help to encourage Dominican alumni who participate to reflect upon their prior experiences and how these experiences influence their ongoing and future lives. This study is important because it supports increased understanding of
the value of international exchanges and provide insight on whether participants perceive the scholarship program leads to personal change. Participants describe their perceptions on how their experiences affect their community, the country’s economy and relationships between Dominican and U.S. citizens. This dissertation project fills this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni once they return home to the Dominican Republic.

**Conceptual Framework Concepts Guiding My Study**

Based on my previous experience running a field test focused on the Fulbright-MESCYT experience, participants in the Fulbright-MESCYT program are influenced by the context of the Fulbright Program and the vision of both of the funders, MESCYT and the U.S. Department of State. The Fulbright Program is focused on increasing mutual understanding, while the MESCYT is honing in on the development opportunities presented by the Fulbright-MESCYT Program for the Dominican Republic. In addition to the context of the funder, one must also take into consideration the context of a student’s personal, family and socio-economic realities and background, because these experiences weigh into how the Fulbright-MESCYT experience is processed and utilized. The Dominican Republic is the fastest growing economy in Latin America; however, income inequality pervades Dominican society and educational levels continue to be one of the lowest in the region. The Dominican Republic and the United States are culturally different in the sense that one is a family-based culture and the other is individual centric. The educational context of both the United States and the Dominican Republic are also important as participants had the opportunity to experience U.S. graduate education and return home to influence their home country’s education system. The personal and professional goals of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni and their commitment to community involvement, and subsequent work made it important to understand how alumni have reached or are working towards their goals. This frame of reference
helps me broadly understand the experience of the Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus and contextualize it in reference to other existing theories. I present my final conceptual framework and diagram in Chapter Five.

**Researcher Statement**

As the researcher for this transcendental phenomenological study, it is critical to share my prior experience with international exchange programs and what drives my interest in completing this study. I spent the first 21 years of my life in the United States. I graduated from a U.S. university having completed my first foray into research through my honor’s thesis in French. I participated extensively in exchange programs during my undergraduate career, including a semester in France, another semester-at-sea with an international community of students traveling from Greece to Hong Kong, and a service-learning program to Jamaica where I taught Spanish to public school students. Each of these experiences was vastly different from the other. During the service-learning program to Jamaica, I explored the complex realities and disparities of power and privilege through stays in Kingston, a stay in an orphanage where I taught Spanish to 50 students in a public school located in a mountain community in Jamaica, and a stay in a luxurious condominium apartment in Ocho Rios, with the continuation of teaching occurring at another more privileged school. This was my first taste of international education. I was exposed to my ignorance of how the world worked and I felt I needed to learn more, so I applied for a once-in-a-lifetime scholarship for one student of the federal TRIO Program to travel aboard The Scholar Ship.

The Scholar Ship was composed of a community of international students and we traveled to ports located around the world. There were students from all socio-economic levels on the ship, and we each had a distinct program we were focused on. My focus was global cultures and social
change. We participated on academic field programs for our focus area in at least three of the ports. In one particular academic field program while I was in Panama, we visited a shantytown located next to the Colón Free Zone area. We met with locals and had a disturbing experience. Locals and the guide offered us the opportunity to purchase some of their trinkets, rather than engage in the cultural experience of learning from the people and their lives. The experience on The Scholar Ship was one of the most illuminating experiences because it forced me to examine who I was and why I think the way I think, my hybrid identity, in order to pursue a new way of thinking that was more open-minded, thoughtful and appreciative of other cultures. The Scholar Ship was one of the key drivers in my decision to move to the Dominican Republic after college and engage in meaningful work that could impact the lives of people in a developing country.

Finally, my experience in France was a chance to delve into the way one culture works. My semester in Angers allowed me to understand the complexities of French culture, and understand the loyalty and care with which French people treat their friends. The time I spent in France allowed me to engage in a life that valued experience over material goods. I returned to college a different person, ready to drive change through my actions, and more focused on initiatives that connected humanity on the aspects that unite us. When I graduated from college, I decided that I would not stay in the United States to work in the private sector for the sole goal of increasing profit for a company. I wanted to dedicate my life to something that would make a difference for others, and the experience of moving to the Dominican Republic would allow me to learn about the home country of my parents, and contribute to better opportunities for Dominicans and increased mutual understanding between the United States and the D.R.

After college, I moved to the Dominican Republic and enrolled in a joint master’s degree offered by the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra (PUCMM) and Rochester Institute
of Technology (RIT) offered in a hybrid format, with online and face-to-face coursework. This was my first experience in the Dominican higher education system. I completed this graduate program while working full time, first as a call center recruiter, then as a high school teacher, and finally as the Alumni Coordinator for the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo. Through these job opportunities, I deepened my understanding of the challenges faced by youth trying to enter the Dominican workforce using English skills learned in primary and secondary schools in the country. I also gained first-hand experience serving as a teacher in lower to mid-level bilingual schools for middle and high school students. I also had the chance to work with alumni of U.S. government-funded exchange programs to help put their ideas following their exchange programs into action. After spending my entire educational career studying in the U.S. context, it was interesting to learn from people from completely different cultural and academic backgrounds. As a result of these experiences with both the Dominican and U.S. higher education contexts, and because of my own experience studying abroad, I felt compelled to learn about the experiences of Dominicans that had pursued long-term exchange programs. I have first-hand experience of how transformative international education exchange programs can be for an individual, and I wanted to know if the international exchange programs that were heavily invested in by the Dominican government were providing similar results for the participants of the program and for the communities they belong to.

As the Academic Specialist at the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo, I currently manage U.S. government-funded exchange programs, promote partnerships between U.S. and Dominican higher education institutions, foster increased quality of English through strategic teacher training initiatives and oversee alumni programming. Within my role, I manage all of the Fulbright programs for the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo including the Fulbright U.S.
Student, Scholar and Specialist Programs; the Fulbright Foreign Student Program, including the Fulbright Student Program; the Fulbright Faculty Development Program; and, central to the current study, the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. In order to fund the Fulbright-MESCYT Program, I work with MESCYT to sign a new addendum for each year’s cohort. One reason I have been so interested in conducting the current study is that while we send hundreds of participants on programs to the U.S. and we work with them to implement alumni programs for those who have returned to the DR, I do not understand the perceived value of the program for participants. I think my own work to understand the influence of my personal study abroad experiences and opportunities to learn abroad has driven me to want to understand how others’ experiences with international exchange programs to the U.S. has affected them.

This study has been undertaken separately from my work at U.S. Embassy Santo Domingo, only contains publicly available information, and does not represent the views of the U.S. Government.

**Chapter Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program, an introduction to internationalization of higher education around the world and in the Dominican Republic, provided details about MESCYT support for international scholarships and offered an overview of why this study on the Fulbright-MESCYT Program is needed. I also discussed the study’s problem statement, research questions, purpose, significance, conceptual framework and provided a statement about what has shaped me as a researcher. Chapter Two provides an overview of the literature relevant to this study including different types of internationalization, the costs and benefits of international education, an overview of the Dominican higher education landscape, and an overview of the Fulbright Program.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

“I had a very tight study group. These relationships they help you sort out the homesickness, they help you sort out the loneliness, and vice versa. Like, I mean, I saw how do these people cry in, like, very deep emotional cries. And I also experienced some of that, like, their best times there.”

(Mario, Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus)

This study explores the lived experience of alumni of the Dominican Fulbright-MESCYT scholarship program who returned to the Dominican Republic. I explore how this experience influences the lives of these individuals after their return to their home country, including their ongoing personal and professional goals and their engagement in their local communities. In Chapter 1, I provided an overview of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program, an introduction to internationalization of higher education around the world and in the Dominican Republic, details concerning MESCYT support for international scholarships and offered an overview of why this study on the experiences of alumni of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program after they return home is needed. I also discussed the study’s problem statement, research questions, purpose, significance, conceptual framework and provided a statement about what has shaped me as a researcher. The components I defined as relevant to the lived experience of the Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus are the program contexts, vision of the funder and the Fulbright Program, the personal contexts including the student’s personal, family and socio-economic realities, and the educational contexts including the U.S. and Dominican higher education systems. The personal and professional goals and aspirations, subsequent work, and commitment to community involvement are the outputs of the lived experience that I have identified as important to understand. In order to gain a perspective of the international education context, this literature review focuses on the origins of international education, the development of higher education in the Americas and different
definitions of and rationales for international education. I also discuss the current state of higher education in the Dominican Republic and Dominican student mobility. Further into the literature review, I describe literature on international scholarships, the experience of returning home, discuss the costs and benefits of international education, and explore student mobility. I then delve deeper into the discuss the Fulbright and Fulbright-MESCYT Programs.

**Origins of International Education**

Universities have historically served as centers that transcend borders (Bevis, 2019). In the earliest stages of formation, learning institutions centered on philosophy and brought together people from diverse backgrounds (Bevis, 2019). Nalanda University in northern India served as the learning center for thousands of mostly Buddhist monks from across Asia in the 5th century (BBC, 2013). Madrasas across the Arab world served as models for what would later become universities, and even included housing for students who traveled to study there (Bevis, 2019). The early start of international education in Europe emerged in the Sophists, or “teachers of wisdom,” who traveled from distant regions to learn and study with the philosophers of the time (Bevis, 2019, p. 18). This later transcended into the development of philosophical institutions, including the Platonic Academy, the Lyceum, the Garden, and the Porch, which led to the participation of foreign students in Athens and, later, Rome.

During the Roman Empire, Rome was a popular study destination for aspiring scholars and even introduced tax breaks to students, tracked student participation in studies and their return to their homes following their studies. The first higher education institution in the Western world was the University of Bologna, which was established in 1088, and a number of years later, the University of Paris opened. These two universities served as the models for either education of students, as in the case of Bologna, or for education of teaching masters that would later teach
students, in the case of Paris. More and more universities continued to emerge, including Oxford, Montpellier, and Cambridge. Foreign students faced difficult and often dangerous circumstances in their travels to their educational institution. However, once they arrived to their respective educational institution, they formed associations and, because of their sheer number, grew both in size and power (Bevis, 2019). Their associations helped shape policies that would benefit students, negotiate rental fees, and even support beneficial efforts for local townspeople (Bevis, 2019).

Higher education eventually spread to the Americas, through European colonization, and the first university in the New World to receive a papal bull, an official papal decree, in 1538 was the University of Santo Domingo, based on the Spanish educational curriculum (Bevis, 2019). While the Dominican Republic can boast of being the first nation to receive a papal bull for a university in the Americas, educational development in the country has lagged since that time.

**Development of Higher Education in the Americas**

Higher education institutions in the United States in the 1800s were rapidly growing and attracting elite students from across the region. The U.S. produced successful alumni from its very start in international education. The first foreign student to attend a U.S. university may have been Francisco de Miranda from Venezuela in 1784, who attended Yale University (Bevis, 2019). Following his attendance at Yale, Simon Bolivar’s nephew, Fernando Bolivar attended the University of Virginia, and later became a member of Congress in Venezuela, and the governor of Caracas. Mario Garcia Menocal became the third president of Cuba after attending the Institute of Chappaqua, the Maryland College of Agriculture and Cornell University (Bevis, 2019). The experience of participating in U.S. higher education must have affected these future legislators in some way, and perhaps had an impact on mutual understanding. However, the lack of information
on the value of these academic exchanges for its participants limits our understanding, and makes it more important to explore these experiences to help fill the gap in the literature.

The U.S. Department of Education has reported on foreign education development since opening in 1867 (Bevis, 2019). The International Union of American Republics was developed in 1890 to promote commercial ties between the U.S. and Latin America, and later also became responsible for promoting educational information. This organization then became the International Bureau of the American Republics, and finally was named the Pan-American Union. Through the Pan-American Union, the enrollment rate of Central and South American students increased. This increase led to directed recruitment and services for foreign students and for U.S. students studying abroad. This increased interest in foreign education led to the establishment of scholarships and fellowships dedicated to study abroad, with more than 115 organizations established with international exchange by 1925 (Bevis, 2019). The Institute of International Education (IIE) was one of the organizations developed as a response to World War I, with the goal of increasing mutual understanding and educational exchange (Bevis, 2019). IIE would later serve as one of the leading student and faculty exchange organizations, the producer of the annual Open Doors report, which tracks student exchange enrollment data, and one of the administrators for the State Department’s flagship program, the Fulbright Program.

**Higher Education in Latin America**

Higher education in the Americas began in Latin America, and the first university to open was the University of Santo Domingo, which still exists in modern-day Dominican Republic. The Latin American higher education sector is affected by inequality but it has expanded exponentially over the first two decades of the 2000s, with enrollment rates doubling from 21% to 43% between 2000 and 2013, and a large percentage of those new students are from a low or middle socio-
economic status (Ferreyra et al., 2017). Youth from high socio-economic status groups have 45% more access to higher education than youth in the lowest socio-economic groups, yet this is mostly attributed to the low high school completion rates of the students in the lowest socio-economic rungs of society. Most Latin American countries subsidize their public higher education institutions, but do not provide financial aid for private institutions, which limits student access to fields of study and educational quality, especially because private higher education institutions are more likely to open new programs than public institutions (Ferreyra et al., 2017). In regards to higher education completion rates, in the region, nearly half of the population did not complete a degree after beginning one, more than 20% of students dropped out, and another 40% were still enrolled.

Holm-Nielsen et al. (2005) described how Latin American countries that engage in knowledge-based economies and invest in international education broaden their opportunities to meet the needs of their labor market and to increase a country’s competitiveness. Latin American countries face challenges in updating curricula, in hiring and retaining qualified faculty, and rigidity in their program selection procedures, which makes students choose their specialty at the beginning of their academic career. The majority of faculty members at Latin American universities are part-time faculty members, making it all the more difficult to improve the quality of the higher education system. The Dominican Republic is no stranger to this phenomenon, as the majority of universities and higher education institutions have adjunct and part-time faculty members with additional full-time jobs. The salary offered to faculty at Dominican universities is also not competitive enough to veer them away from wanting to move abroad. Faculty at Dominican higher education institutions are, in the large majority, hired on a part-time or hourly basis, and they are paid on average less than one hundred dollars per month. Approximately 87%
of faculty teach on part-time or hourly basis, and 12% teach on a full-time basis, but also have additional careers (Corcino, 2018). Fifty-seven percent of Dominican faculty members hold a master’s degree, and only three percent hold a doctoral degree; more than half of those faculty are concentrated in the capital city of the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo (Corcino, 2018). Faculty remuneration makes it especially challenging for higher education institutions to retain qualified professors and experts that have received training abroad and return to their home country in search of work. The inability to hire, retain and provide faculty the time to teach and conduct research hinders the ability of Dominican higher education institutions of increasing the quality of their higher education programs and the internationalization of their universities.

Holm-Nielsen et al. (2005) call for setting up goals and strategies to proactively move higher education forward through international education initiatives. Berry and Taylor (2014) sought to describe internationalization strategies implemented in Latin American universities, and the opinion of internationalization managers at those universities, by highlighting the work of select public and private universities in Colombia and Mexico. They found large differences in the scale of internationalization between public and private universities. Since private universities use their own funding, they are more quickly able to devise internalization strategies that are integrated into the institution's objectives. Public universities regularly have to deal with bureaucratic processes in order to implement change. This is similar to the case faced by public and private universities in the Dominican Republic. The largest public autonomous university, and the oldest in the Western Hemisphere, is the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD). UASD serves more than 200,000 students per year on just $11,886 million Dominican pesos, elects chancellors, deans, and runs competitions to hire faculty. UASD does engage in internationalization initiatives and regularly serves as a host to students from around the world,
but with such a large student body, and such a low budget, it is difficult to engage in more meaningfully and sustained international exchange initiatives. In the following section, I attempt to provide a picture of the Dominican higher education system in its current state and then discuss the international mobility of Dominican students.

**Dominican Higher Education System**

According to the Ministerio de Educación Superior, Ciencia y Tecnología’s (MESCYT) Informe General sobre Estadísticas de Educación Superior 2017 y Resumen Histórico 2005 – 2017 [General Higher Education Statistical Report 2017 and Historical Summary 2005-2017], as of 2017, there were 562,667 students enrolled in the Dominican higher education system, of which approximately 64% were female and 36% were male (MESCYT, n.d.). Ninety-seven percent of higher education students in 2017 were enrolled in universities, 2% were enrolled at technical institutes and 1% was enrolled in specialized institutes. From 2012 to 2017, the higher education enrollment rate increased from 49% to 61%. Fifty-seven percent were enrolled in private higher education institutions, while 43% were enrolled in public higher education institutions. Approximately 60% of students in Dominican higher education are between the ages of 21-30, followed by 23% who are 30 years old or above, 16% who are younger than 21 years old, and 1% that is unspecified. The academic programs with the highest enrollment rates include business, education, health, humanities, and engineering and architecture. Of the 2291 faculty members serving in the Dominican higher education system, with 54% are male and 46% are female. The majority of faculty members in the Dominican higher education system have completed master’s degrees (61%), while 18% have completed a bachelor’s degree, 11% have completed a specialty, 4% have completed a doctoral degree, and 6% of faculty members have attained an unknown highest level of education. Eighty-three and a half percent of Dominican higher education faculty
are paid hourly, 11% are full-time faculty, 5% are half-time faculty and 0.5% work solely as faculty members. Because of these enormous gaps in workforce and in research, the Dominican government has dedicated millions of dollars in training citizens abroad in designated high priority fields, including engineering and architecture, information and communication technology, sciences, health, economics and finance, administration, law and political science, humanities, education, art, hotel and tourism, and agricultural and veterinary science.

International Mobility of Dominican Students

According to an article in El Nacional newspaper, the Dominican government has invested in scholarships for nearly 50,000 citizens since 2005, of which 14,243 pursued scholarships in Latin America, Europe or the United States (Cabrera, 2018, September 28). This article provides critical opinions of the scholarship program, including the need for the fields of study to be more closely aligned with what is really needed in the country. Globally, the United States is the largest recipient of international students at 27.8% of all international students, followed by the United Kingdom at 16.3%, and Australia at 9.7% (UNESCO, 2019, September 14). UNESCO student mobility data shows the destination countries for students from the Dominican Republic with the top five being Spain (1,798 students), United States (1,418 students), the United Kingdom (175 students), Italy (159 students), and France (143 students). Two of the main reasons that Spain tops the list of destination countries is because of government-funded scholarships for Dominicans to pursue graduate study there and there is no language barrier.

The Dominican government continues to offer thousands of scholarships to their citizens, but after tens of thousands international scholarship recipients, a study to explore the value of a government-funded scholarship program is strongly needed. This study focuses on the value of a joint U.S. and Dominican government-funded program for alumni of one type of government-
funded scholarship program in the Dominican Republic. I have not found a formal study focused on this topic, nor have I found a qualitative study focused on Dominican alumni upon their return home. In the next section, I discuss different definitions of and rationales for the internationalization of higher education to bring deeper context and understanding of its value.

**Definitions of and Rationales for Higher Education Internationalization**

Increasing levels of internationalization at higher education institutions has elevated the practice of international education to new heights (Maringe, 2013). Universities are at the epicenter of change with a focus on transitioning from developing knowledge to developing learners that can connect to others, and in doing so, also produce universities that can respond to the ever-changing needs of society and industry (Lorenzo & Gallon, 2015). Internationalization has evolved within higher education institutions over thousands of years because of its natural ability to engage students from diverse countries (Altbach & DeWit, 2015). Internationalization efforts have shifted mindsets, promoted peace and developed mutual understanding. After many major war periods, the power of academic exchange has achieved broadened dialogue and promoted deepened understanding between the other. Much work has been done on international education, but it largely relates how internationalization affects students in the United States, Canada, Europe, and other western nations (Akli, 2011; Caffrey et al., 2005; Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Fitzpatrick et al., 2015; Heppner, 1988; Heuer, 2001). This study focuses on exploring the lived experiences of Dominicans who participated in the Fulbright scholarship program. In order to understand international education efforts, and reach the core of the topic, we need to first examine what international education is and how entities implement these efforts across the higher education landscape.
Defining Internationalization of Higher Education

There are a myriad of definitions of internationalization in higher education and descriptions of the types of programs used within international education (Edelstein, Douglass, 2012; Knight, 2004; Perna, et al., 2014; Tadaki, & Tremewan, 2013). Knight (2004) describes the concept of internationalization of higher education as an approach, and not a description; that higher education institutions or nations utilize to develop their positions, including programs, rationales, ad hoc, policy and strategic, as the five approach types. Similarly, Edelstein and Douglass (2012) describe seven different engagement methods including “individual faculty initiatives, the management of institutional demography; mobility initiatives; curricular and pedagogical change; transnational institutional engagements; networking building; and campus culture, ethos and leadership” (p. 1). Altbach and DeWit (2015) describe internationalization of higher education as a method employed by diverse countries to bring about peace and expand mutual understanding, with waves of international education implemented after each major war period in the western world.

Internationalization activities include student mobility, academic mobility, academic partners through e-learning programs, and foreign campuses (Vincent-Lancrin, 2007). Knight (2012) discusses the ways that internationalization affect higher education, both by looking at the trends and the issues facing higher education in today’s world. Internationalization is strategically implemented across the higher education sphere into curriculum, student-learning outcomes, and cross border education programs. Knight (2007) refers to the concept as cross-border tertiary education, and defines it as “the movement of people, programmes, providers, curricula, projects, research and services in tertiary (or higher) education across national jurisdictional borders” (p. 48). Vincent-Lancrin (2007) describes four different approaches for cross-border tertiary education.
education: the mutual understanding approach, the skilled migration approach, the revenue-generating approach, and the capacity-building approach. The mutual understanding approach has the goal on developing stronger political and cultural linkages between nations. The goal of the skilled migration approach is to recruit international students to the labor market, meanwhile the revenue-generating approach gains income from the fee-paying students. The capacity-building approach is focused on both filling demands for labor market skills and increasing the local capacity of higher education. Vincent-Lancrin supports the use of cross-border education programs to provide capacity development, especially when policies exist to support those initiatives.

**Rationales for Internationalization**

Capacity building supports economic development, both for an individual and for the country; however, developing nations reap the benefits at a much higher rate than developed nations. Significant capacity development for tertiary education also has the potential to improve primary and secondary education, as it is the main stage for training principals, teachers, and where they learn how to design, teach and implement educational initiatives. Vincent-Lancrin discusses the importance of international education for workforce development, and argues that studying abroad is an effective model to train faculty, develop capacity for creating new academic programs in pertinent fields for development for the home country, and increase research output. While the Dominican Republic invests in thousands of international scholarships for its citizens to pursue graduate study abroad each year, I have found no research focused on the impact or perceived value of this investment for the country or its citizens. Dominican government initiatives and higher education capacity is discussed further in this literature review.
Internationalization Strategies

Knight (2012) discusses the tensions between internationalization at-home and abroad, the focus on student-learning outcomes, academic mobility, and the need to engage in internationalization to increase competitiveness. Knight (2012) describes the following methods of internationalization at home, including “curriculum, teaching, learning, open access education, domestic student and faculty, international students/scholars, extracurricular activity and research and abroad/crossborder internationalization, including mobility of people, programs, providers, projects/services, and policy” (p. 22). Knight (2008) defines internationalization as “the process of integrating international, intercultural and global dimensions into the goals, primary functions and delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels” (p. 21). Knight (2012) describes at-home internationalization as ways to integrate the curriculum with intercultural and international components to support increased intercultural understanding, adaptability and skills, and cross-border education as the mobility of people through academic partnerships. Some Dominican higher education institutions engage in international education partnerships, including innovative endeavors, like dual degree programs, internationalization of the curriculum and faculty and student mobility. However, these initiatives are usually limited to the top ten or twelve universities out of nearly fifty higher education institutions in the country.

Student Mobility

Student mobility programs constitute a segment of international education, which include the exchange of people, including students, faculty, and researchers, to conduct study abroad programs, degrees abroad, fieldwork, internships, consulting and sabbaticals (Knight 2012). In addition, student mobility also includes twinning, double degree and online distance programs, as well as validated and franchised programs for courses and full degree programs. Altbach and
Knight (2007) describe student mobility programs in six different categories: “full degree program in foreign country, short-term study-abroad experience as part of degree program at home institution, cross border collaborative degree programs between two or more institutions or providers, research and fieldwork, internships and practical experiences, study tour, workshops” (p. 25). Institutions have branch campuses, virtual universities and conduct mergers as part of student mobility, and academic projects conduct research and develop curriculum and capacity building. Academic policies and management are developed through quality assurance, qualification frameworks and academic credit programs (Knight, 2012). I do not know of any branch campuses operated by any international universities in the Dominican Republic; however, there are a number of U.S. based institutions, including Florida International University and Western Michigan University, as discussed in Chapter 1, that offer dual degree bachelor degree programs and implement their programs on local institutional campuses. In regards to research collaboration, while partnerships may exist, I have not found a compilation of this type of work carried out between Dominican and U.S. or other foreign institutions.

Gürüz (2011) discusses the importance of academic research and student mobility to respond to the needs of business and commercial interests, to provide workforce training that increases entrepreneurial and intercultural skills, and innovate traditional higher education institutions so they can compete in today’s global higher education marketplace. Knight (2007) referenced the “movement of people, programmes, providers, curricula, projects, research and services across national or regional jurisdictional borders” as cross-border education and discussed the growing tendency for providers to shift from student mobility to provider mobility (p. 24). In people mobility, faculty, students and experts participate in cross-border exchanges, whereas in program and provider mobility, the provider mobilizes to the country of origin of the students to
impart programs, or delivers programs virtually. Knight also defines different types of mobility programs including, franchising, twinning, double/joint degree programs, articulation models, validation agreements, and e-learning or distance programs. More and more nations are investing in building capacity and human development through cross-border education. As proof of that, Knight highlights “the fact that education is now one of the 12 service sectors in the General Agreement on Trade in Services under the World Trade Organisation” (p. 32).

According to the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (2019, September 14) report on the Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students, students from the Dominican Republic studied in the following top six countries, in order of highest to lowest number of higher education students studying abroad: United States (1,616 students), Spain (1,099 students), Argentina (202 students), Italy (142 students), France (135 students), and the United Kingdom (101 students). The Dominican Republic is also featured as one of the top 12 destinations for students from the United States to study abroad with 1,743 U.S. students studying there. While the Dominican Republic is a major U.S. student study abroad destination, I could not find evidence of a country strategy toward attracting international students to the Dominican Republic.

Rivza and Teichler (2007) defined four different objectives for student mobility. Students seeking higher quality education from prestigious foreign universities travel to study at institutions that have better reputation or offer programs that are not available in their home countries (Rivza & Teichler, 2007). Rivza and Teichler also describe study abroad as a means to foment mutual understanding and to foster better relations. Countries focused on increasing mutual understanding and universities in developed countries also focus on attracting international students to boost their financial gains (Rivza & Teichler, 2007). Rivza and Teichler also mention two glaring inefficiencies posed by student mobility data, including the fact that some data does not include
short-term mobility and foreign students are the only population segment included in the data; however, there may be dual citizens who have not experienced the culture of the host country before. While this may be a concern for regular student mobility data collection, the Fulbright Program does not allow dual citizens with some form of U.S. citizenship to participate in the Fulbright Foreign Student Program. While mobility data provides insight on the number of participants studying in specific countries, it does not tell the story of international students, the competencies they gain, or their experience upon returning home. In the next section, I discuss the literature on international scholarship programs.

**International Scholarship Programs**

One type of student mobility program that is increasingly funded by governments around the world is the international scholarship program with many countries investing in such programs. Perna, Orosz and Gopaul (2014) found 183 international scholarship programs in 196 nations around the world in their typology of international scholarship programs. Atkinson (2010) discussed one method of exposing citizens to firsthand experiences in democratic nations through exchange programs that promote interpersonal engagement, promote commonalities between participants, and engage foreign citizens that might have an influential role especially in the political sphere upon return to their home countries. Exchange programs have the potential to change participants’ worldviews and their thoughts about a particular country. While some Dominicans have had the chance to participate in international education, it is not clear whether these programs have affected their perceptions of themselves, their home, and host country.

Another potential advantage for host countries of hosting international scholarship programs is the economic impact such programs can have. Bergerhoff et al. (2013) focus on the economic benefits of hosting international students for host countries. Countries always reap the
benefits when they implement policies that favor student mobility in their countries, and that additional migration policies to help students remain in the host countries thereafter further impacts the economic growth of the host country (Bergerhoff, 2013). This study is related to the European context and does not factor the benefits for home countries that provide scholarships for their citizens and the impact vs. student returning to their home country or stay in their host country. My study would deepen understanding about a participant’s value of international scholarship program versus studying in their home country.

Perna et al. (2014) developed a typology of international scholarship programs to describe programmatic characteristics of international scholarship program populations, economic and political characteristics of the nations that sponsor international scholarship programs, compared Fulbright program to other international scholarship programs funded by governments and developed a typology of the major type of international scholarship programs sponsored by governments. Perna et al. (2014) assessed 183 international scholarship programs in 196 nations; 52% have at least one program, 25% have one program, 18% have two programs and 9% have more than two programs. The majority of international scholarship programs are developed for graduate level education (76%). Seventy-eight percent of international scholarship programs are funded for students to acquire a degree and only 15% allow students to pursue study in any field. Fifty-nine percent of programs require participants to return home following program completion. These statistics show that governments recognize the benefits of human capital development but it does not show whether governments are assessing the results of their investments in these scholarship programs. This study is an attempt to organize the different types of scholarship programs. It does not delve into how each program works, and it does not provide a breakdown of their criteria.
In their research, Perna, Orosz, and Jumakulov (2015) focus on Kazakhstan's Bolashak Scholars Program and its benefits for human capital development, and how program characteristics promote the benefits of the Bolashak program. Employers perceived Bolashak recipients to be more open-minded, adaptable, and have stronger English proficiency, which makes it easier to engage with foreign partners (Perna, Orosz, & Jumakulov, 2015). The Kazakh government transitioned to funding more graduate opportunities as opposed to undergraduate study because of the difference in cost and student maturity levels. Additionally, the Kazakh government has invested in local higher education institutions to promote study at local universities to reduce dependence on international study opportunities. Alumni of the Bolashak Program return to Kazakhstan with high motivation to give back to their home country. Out of 5714 alumni, just 87 were unemployed following completion of their scholarship programs. Employers that were not located in the same region as the majority of Bolashak recipients had the most difficulty in hiring them. Also, this study described that some participants would have been able to pay for their own studies if the Bolashak Program did not exist. This study focused on the Bolashak Program was one of a small number of (non-U.S. and non-European-based scholarship programs that focused on the benefits for human capital development. In the following section, I discuss background information on the Fulbright Program.

**Fulbright Program**

While international scholarship programs funded by foreign governments have specific goals, there are other forms of internationalization of higher education that need to be discussed. One such program funded by a government is the Fulbright Program. The Fulbright Program was introduced to U.S. Congress by Senator William Fulbright to promote friendship and mutual understanding though student exchange (Bevis, 2019). As a Rhodes Scholar, Senator Fulbright
studied at the University of Oxford, and returned with a commitment to internationalization and brought that vision to fruition with the first Fulbright participants who conducted a two-way exchange to and from Burma in 1947. Since its inception, 390,000 people have participated in some form of Fulbright Program, and 4,000 Fulbright Foreign Students travel to the United States to engage in higher education programs annually (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Altbach and DeWit (2015) describe the Fulbright Program as a method to counteract the influence of the Soviets during the Cold War. Within the concept of internationalization, further studies on the costs and benefits of international education and outcomes of short-term and long-term programs have showcased the impact of international exchange for U.S. based students that travel abroad and for international exchange students that travel to the United States for their academic exchange programs (Altbach, P. G., 1989; Kim, J., 1998; Knight, J., 2001; Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G., 2002; Messer, D., Wolter, S. C., 2007; Pfotenhauer, S. et al., 2013; Pham, Lien, 2013; Rumbley, L., 2007; Singaravelu, H. D., White, L. J., & Bringaze, T. B., 2005). The Fulbright Program functions in many different formats, including the Fulbright U.S. Scholar and Students Programs which support U.S. citizens that would like to conduct research in a country outside of the United States (U.S. Department of State). Fulbright Foreign Students are exchange participants that are sent from their home countries to pursue a graduate education in the United States, either for a master’s or PhD degree. There are many other programs that function under the umbrella of the Fulbright Program, but these two are the most relevant for the purposes of this study.

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State commissioned an evaluation study using survey data completed by 360 participants of the Fulbright Foreign Student Program that had a special seminar program focused on the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields (U.S. Department of State, 2017). The evaluation
study was focused on the effects of the Fulbright Program. The study also sought to understand the value of a special seminar program, how participants applied acquired skills, networking following the program, and the development of problem-solving skills for alumni communities. The evaluation study lists the United States as a top destination for pursuit of higher education in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, highlights the ability of U.S. higher education institutions to train students in academic research, networking, leadership skills, and the use of technology. More than 50% of program alumni also became faculty members or returned to their faculty positions upon their return home and shared what they had acquired in the United States through teaching, curriculum review, fieldwork and advising. Alumni continue to engage with U.S. organizations after returning home. This evaluation study focused on participants from different countries and regions and sought to examine the program with questions defined from the perspective of the funder.

Kahn and MacGarvie (2016) examined whether the policy that requires Ph.D. exchange students to return to their home countries following completion of their program in the U.S. actually affects the dissemination of knowledge between the U.S. and their home countries. Kahn and MacGarvie reviewed the number of citations within published articles in STEM journals for 249 recipients of the Fulbright Foreign Fellowship Program and 249 participants that completed Ph.D. programs through other means. Fulbright participants from countries where scholars published lower levels of scientific research were cited 90% more than their peers who did not participate in a Fulbright program (Kahn & MacGarvie, 2016). Their research highlighted that there is a benefit for knowledge dissemination for scholars who are required to return home even if just for the two-year period required by their visa type. The Fulbright Program is a government-sponsored program and, as such, all participants travel on a J-1 visa. The J-1 visa carries the 212e
rule, which requires participants to reside in their home country for at least two years before being able to work or immigrate to the United States. This study provides important context on the relevance of the two-year requirement in the face of a more mobile world for Fulbright participants across the world. In the following section, I present background information on the Fulbright-MESCYT Program to provide context on the experience lived by study participants.

**Fulbright-MESCYT Program**

The government of the Dominican Republic funds approximately 10 additional scholarships on an annual basis for Dominican citizens to pursue graduate study in the United States (U.S. Embassy, 2018, September 28). The U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo commemorated the 10-year anniversary of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program in 2018 by showcasing the stories of 12 alumni that have had success in their respective fields, including a molecular and cell biologist, an economist, geotechnical engineer, an educational policy specialist, a software developer, an urban planner, a marine scientist, a public administrator, an animal scientist, a photojournalist, a musician, and a veterinarian. Within each alumni profile, there is a photo of the alumnus and a short description of the program they attended, the work they are now conducting, and a brief statement about the meaning of the program for the participants. The recurring themes in these short statements about the Fulbright-MESCYT Program include the transformative power of the program, an increase in self-esteem and confidence of its participants, the resilience the program builds in its participants, the ability of the program to open participants’ minds, and the high-level professional opportunities that are now open because they are Fulbright-MESCYT alumni (U.S. Embassy, 2018, September 14). This study allowed for an in-depth exploration of personal and professional experiences of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni, their successes and challenges. In the
next section, I present research focused on the cost, benefits and perceived value of international education.

**Costs, Benefits and Perceived Value of International Education**

Student mobility and international education programs need to be planned with intention, integrating intercultural training, reflection, and learning engagements that help international students dive into and navigate new cultural norms (Savicki, 2012). Gallarza, Seric, Cuadrado (2017) explored the value of the study abroad opportunity for students, focusing on how students processed their experiences, positively and negatively, sought to understand what benefits and sacrifices were for those international students. Using focus groups of five to six individuals between the ages of 19 and 22, Gallarza et al. conducted a qualitative study to understand students’ experience at the University of Valencia, one of the top receiving universities for international students in Spain. The results of this study highlighted the following as benefits in the international student experience: faculty interaction, social status both during and after the experience, intercultural relationships with other students, sense of freedom. In regards to the sacrifices of an international student experience, students in this study mentioned economic sacrifice, missed social and family events, and depending on the background of the student, there were differing opinions on the administrative staff and faculty and staff interactions. As discussed by Gallarza et al., international students face challenges and gain benefits through their international education experiences. Zull (2012) discusses the role that study abroad can have on one’s memory, and how it can affect what one remembers and what one forgets. Additionally, Zull stresses the importance of integrating reflection into the study abroad experience so that knowledge is achieved. If a study abroad program is not planned well, and does not include strong experiential learning, then participants will suffer from passive experiences and not be transformed. Experiences lived by
students are individual and are also based on a student’s prior experience. Understanding that each experience is diverse is key when discussing what has value and how to define value (Zull). Zull discusses the importance of digging deep to understand the transformational change presented by study abroad experiences, as many opportunities take long periods of time for people to process. For some people, the process of reaching what Zull calls emotional change takes much, much longer than cognitive change. This is an important point for my study to consider, as emotional change is one of the segments that may be of value for alumni of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. Special care should be taken to ensure participants have had enough time after returning home, when considering alumni for my research study.

Another important aspect to consider is whether international exchange alumni gain skills that are necessary to advance in their careers, and increase their ability to be hired. Crossman and Clarke (2010) conducted a study to explore whether employers, faculty and students perceived a connection between one’s ability to be hired and one’s international experience. Crossman and Clarke found through individual, qualitative interviews and semi-structured questionnaires that increased exposure to international experiences also translated into enhanced learning, competency acquisition, soft skills development and potentially an advantage over other candidates without international experience in the recruitment process. This study focused on the U.S. context and not on the Dominican context. Gaston and Nguyen (1999) explored what elements created value for business students by conducting a focus group interview with 16 students and then they administered a questionnaire to 65% of the business school’s student population using 33 consumption value dimensions based on that interview. The authors found that students want a quality education but they want it at a fair price, and that image is also key to supporting student perceptions of quality at a business school. In regards to their findings on what leads to positive
value perceptions, Nguyen and Gaston found that providing high quality education, service and motivation provides strong value. Additionally, students also found benefit in understanding the industry and its needs, integration of teamwork in the classroom, job opportunities for career growth and strong alumni and business networks. My study could deepen understanding about the types of programs and services alumni value upon their return home and further potential for government sponsors to connect participants to mutually beneficial initiatives. The following section discusses intercultural competencies and international education programs.

**Intercultural Competencies and International Education Programs**

International students have challenging experiences while studying abroad. In order to maximize their learning experiences, Triana (2015) describes a need to refocus the international student experience to focus on increased cultural engagement and highlights two case studies as part of her study, one university’s approach to engaging international students and their inability to foster interaction between domestic and international students, and the experience of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi and the impact of studying in the United States on his subsequent presidential tenure. In the case of the university, Triana discussed a lack of support for international student transition and adaptation to their host university, and a need to focus on fostering relationships between domestic and local students to increase adaptation and understanding. Triana also discussed the case of former President Morsi of Egypt, his experience studying for a long period of time at a U.S. university, and his later actions as President of Egypt to steer away from U.S. values. Triana describes a need to engage international students, and described President Morsi’s case as an example. He both looked up to U.S. work values and rejected U.S. cultural values, as he isolated within his comfort zone and interacted mainly with Arab counterparts during his time in the United States. Triana highlights the importance of
focusing on intercultural dialogue as part of any study abroad experience to ensure public diplomacy goals are also met.

There is a plethora of research focused on international education and cultural competencies during their study abroad programs; however, little research specifically focused on the evolution of cultural skills for study abroad participants after they return home. Gardner, Steglitz and Gross (2009) conducted focus groups with 450 potential employers to understand the value they place on study abroad experience and found that initially only 20% of employers valued study abroad because they did not have firsthand experience and did not understand the skills students could develop. Gardner et al. found that the inability of students to describe the competencies they developed led to employers not hiring prospective employees, and led to the researchers developing a program to support student reflection and evaluation of their experiences with a focus on professional skills students developed through those programs. These programs focused on reflecting on student experiences could prove interesting to support student reflections.

Kortegast, Boisfontaine and Terral (2015) explored the meaning-making process of short study abroad experiences for students after they returned from their program. They conducted ethnographic interviews with participants of a short-term study abroad program in Spain. Kortegast et al. (2015) found that more emphasis needs to be placed on supporting students as they discover the meaning of their experiences and reflect on their identity. Kortegast et al. found that participants felt that their families and friends were not really interested in learning about the substance of their experience, and that they wanted to share everything they had experienced with someone. Kortegast et al. felt that they did not have a chance to process their experience, engage in reflexivity in order to analyze their experiences. Kortegast et al. highlight the importance of unpacking the study abroad experience in order to explore and understand its meaning for each
participant. Kortegast et al. interviewed short-term program participants, since the Fulbright-MESCYT Program is a long-term program, one could understand the need to implement sessions to help students process their experiences. Kortegast et al. also discuss the effective use of photos to spark memories of the program experience for international education participants. The use of photos to help participants relive their memories may also be an effective tool for exploring the lived experiences of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni.

Root and Ngampornchai (2012) conducted a qualitative study to explore intercultural competencies acquired by students through study abroad as reported through their descriptive reflection essays. Students participated in either international internship or study abroad programs, and they were part of a certificate program where they took, at minimum, four classes focused on international topics, study a foreign language, and complete a reflection paper for their international experience. Within the essay, students have to discuss their adaptation, intercultural engagement, speaking a foreign language, and their use of competencies, either skills they had or acquired through the program. Root and Ngampornchai found that students gained cognitive skills, including increased interest in learning about the area where they studied, learning about intercultural differences between the host country and the United States. They also found that students reported increased behavioral skills, including, language skills, nonverbal communication and the use of colloquial expressions, living skills, including managing and keeping a household, and living communally with other host family members, and increased affective skills, including increased appreciation of diverse perspectives, being more open-minded, thinking critically, and increasing their worldview. Participants increased their flexibility, critical thinking skills, and patience. Root and Ngampornchai argue that these skills are not deep enough to reflect that they have achieved intercultural understanding, and that effective pre-and post-departure programs
focused on intercultural communication would deepen their reflections on their experience and enable them to connect their changed behaviors with intercultural meaning and an enhanced worldview. Their focus on the differences rather than what they learned from the cultural interaction is key in determining whether or not participants achieved intercultural competence. Root and Ngampornchai argue for more critical reflection of study abroad experiences. The integration of critical reflection activities may also support increased reflexivity and understanding of the Fulbright-MESCYT experience for returned alumni. The following section describes the literature connected to international student experiences of re-entry.

**International Student Experiences of Re-entry**

Readjusting to one’s home country comes with its own set of challenges, where most participants have a community to accompany them in the process of getting used to their international education experience, the return home is very lonely. Butcher (2002) found that East Asian international students returning their home countries after studying in New Zealand experienced a need to feel connected which made them reevaluate their relationships with family, friends, their new worldview and what they thought their return home would feel like. Transferring the skills alumni learned while in New Zealand, transforming their beliefs and worldview, and returning to live at home were some of the most difficult situations faced by alumni in Butcher’s study. Butcher also found that returned alumni both had high expectations, of well-paid employment that put their skills to work, and friendships, and were faced with a high level of expectations from others. Like Root and Ngampornchai (2015), Kortegast et al. (2015), Butcher (2002) also found that implementing pre-departure and post-arrival programs to help alumni understand what they would face helped participants prepare for the grieving process, and ultimately helped them overcome the grief.
International students that return home and have a chance to engage in professional work that allows them to share what they learned more easily transition and re-adapt. Alandejani (2013) explored the experiences of Saudi scholars that returned home after completing their doctoral degrees in the United States and the United Kingdom and found that the scholars each experienced reverse culture shock and that each re-adjusted to their home culture at their own pace, and that they each engaged in reflexivity as a part of processing their experience. Alandejani found that engaging in work was a key remedy for study participants to overcome reverse culture shock, and recommended that the Saudi Ministry make better use of their investment by providing support to decrease reverse culture shock for returned alumni. Exploring the professional experiences of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni may also allow me to explore whether this applies to these study participants. Epaminonda (2014) conducted a study that focused on the impact of education abroad for the citizens of Cyprus that studied abroad in the United States and the United Kingdom and then returned to their workplace with the hopes of transferring those skills. Epaminonda found that it was challenging for returnees to implement their newly gained style of leadership and management and that alumni had to re-learn and re-adapt themselves to local norms in order to influence their subordinates, but may find it challenging to achieve that transformation with their supervisors if they do not connect to the different style of leadership. Gama and Pedersen (1977) conducted a study to understand the readjustment process for Brazilian Laspau Scholars that returned to their home country and found that the most challenging part of their reentry process was adapting to their professional roles and environment and their role as new faculty members. Gama and Pedersen also found that returning home and interacting with family was less problematic than adapting professionally for study participants. Gama and Pedersen found that their study participants had very high expectations for their return home, and these were not met.
Gaw (2000) found that U.S. college students that returned home after studying abroad felt reverse culture shock, issues adjusting back home and connecting to students. Gaw found that the more culture shock U.S. college students felt, the less likely they were to use student services. Yoshida et al. (2009) found that participants that had an easier time readjusting to their home culture had interaction with people that were accepting of them, while those that had more difficulty faced discrimination. Yoshida found that two different groups of participants emerged after returning home from long-term immersion in foreign countries, those that adjusted well to their home country, or “Smoothies”, and those that had difficulty re-adapting to their home country, or “Bumpies” (p. 274). Christofi and Thompson (2007) interviewed participants that returned to their country of origin and then, after finding they could not deal with their home society, decided to return back to their host country to live there. Participants of this study found themselves conflicted with the decision of staying or returning, because their home country changed, and they felt they needed to be free. Christofi and Thompson described this experience as a bipolar struggle for each participant, where the participant never felt fully whole after participating in the experience abroad.

Ziguras and Gribble (2015) found positive methods implemented by Singapore to engage study abroad students that departed their home country: integrating employment opportunities for returned Singaporean graduates of international education programs, enhancing opportunities to study at home and lowering the need for students to travel abroad in order to acquire a quality education, engaging with Singaporean diaspora abroad through new government outreach units set-up overseas, and encouraging they return home through targeted promotional campaigns. While these methods have proved effective for the Singaporean government, I have not found research focused on the engagement conducted by the Dominican Ministry of Higher Education,
Science and Technology or by the Fulbright Program. I detail U.S. Government alumni programs as described on the U.S. Department of State’s website in the following segment.

**U.S. Government Alumni Programs**

The U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs hosts a website for its international exchange alumni. This website provides access to funding competitions, research tools, a career center, and a tool to connect to the alumni community (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). The Asociación de Ex-Becarios de la Embajada de Estados Unidos en RD [Association of Alumni of the U.S. Embassy in the Dominican Republic] has a social media presence and describes their goal as creating a network of Dominicans that have participated in academic or cultural exchange programs sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in the Dominican Republic (Asociación de Ex-Becarios de la Embajada de Estados Unidos en RD, n.d.). I was unable to find further information regarding the engagement of U.S. Government alumni in the Dominican Republic.

**Chapter Summary and Conclusion**

The origins of international education begin in the 5th century with students traveling to Nalanda University for education. Since then, international education has contributed extensively to the connection of cultures and societies. Latin America has deep roots connected to the U.S. higher education system with a Venezuelan identified as the first person thought to have participated in international education in the United States in the 1800s. Yet, in the centuries that have passed, little has been written about the value of the international student experiences following their return home. Nation states and higher education institutions generally use the number of international students that attend their universities as a measurement of their
internationalization, but the majority fail to understand their experiences following their return home.

An international student that travels to another country comes with their personal, educational and professional context and experiences, and processes their U.S. study experience from their own perspective. This literature review described some of the similarities and differences between the U.S., Latin American and Dominican higher education systems. Some of the key issues that face Latin American higher education that emerged in the literature review are the need for updated curricula, bureaucratic processes, and the issue of faculty and student retention, along with the fact that most university faculty in Latin America are adjunct and not full-time faculty (Ferreyra et al., 2017; Holm-Nielsen et al., 2005). In addition, higher education students in Latin America are 45% more accessible to students from higher socio-economic status groups than students from lower socio-economic statuses (Ferreyra et al., 2017. This may also affect the experiences and outcomes of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni upon their return home. International education in the Latin American region has been transformed through partnerships between United States and Europe-based higher education institutions and has broadened the access to international degree programs through online, hybrid and dual degree programs. The Dominican Republic is no stranger to international education partnerships, and has implemented hybrid and dual degree graduate degree programs with U.S. higher education institutions. The extremely low level of PhD graduates that serve as Dominican higher education faculty members, at less than one percent, showcases the importance of training future Dominican faculty members for the development of its higher education system. Vincent-Lancrin (2007) also describes multiple methods of using international education to increase the number of skilled workers for improving the capacity of the labor market and higher education.
Research conducted on international students tend to focus on their experience while at their host universities, and find that students benefit from increased faculty engagement, intercultural relationship, better social status, and a feeling of freedom (Gallarza et al., 2017). Another study discusses the importance of making concerted efforts to engage international students and connect them to domestic students to achieve mutual understanding and adaptation (Triana, 2015). Additionally, a few studies indicated a need to increase reflexivity and support alumni as they process their international education experience so that they are able to understand and articulate their newly gained skills and competencies (Gardner et al., 2009; Kortegast et al., 2015). Governments around the world are investing in scholarship programs for their citizens, but few studies exist that review the effectiveness of those programs or the value of the programs for the participants after they return home. The Dominican Republic has invested millions of dollars in international scholarships for its citizens, but no studies have been published with a focus on the experience of Dominicans on these exchanges, or upon their return. The international education sector is developing rapidly in the Latin American region and in the Dominican Republic, and as it drives forward, it does so with little clarity or understanding of the experiences lived by participants following their return to their home countries. The few studies that do exist tell a story of reverse culture shock, grief, disconnection from family, and frustrating career options, which eventually led participants to re-evaluate who they were in their home environment (Alandejani, 2013; Butcher, 2002; Gama & Pedersen, 1977). These authors describe the opportunity to implement re-adaptation seminars for students upon their return home.

I close my literature review with a section devoted to the Fulbright Program, as it is a program that emerged after World War II to increase mutual understanding, and it is this program that fused with the interests of the Dominican government in order to conceive the Fulbright-
MESCYT Program focused on Dominican development priorities. This program, while different from the cadre of MESCYT-funded programs, provides the opportunity to understand the value of the experiences lived by Fulbright-MESCYT alumni during their program and following their return home.

In Chapter Three, I provide an overview of the research design and methodology for this dissertation study. I provide reasoning for conducting a transcendental phenomenological methodology for this research study. I provide a description of the field test I carried out prior to embarking on this study, sample, access, recruitment and study site and location, and data analysis procedures.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

“The conversations with my classmates were so interesting, culturally open. And, you know, going back to work where I changed a lot, I think, it was hard to get back to the same conversations and the same office gossip and the same dynamic.”

(Mildred, Fulbright-MESCYT alumna)

Governments around the world invest in international scholarship programs for people-to-people exchange. The Fulbright Foreign Student Program is one example, with cost share for the program provided by partner governments. However, I found few studies focusing on the value of the program for participants or for partner governments that fund the cost of the program and none that focus on the Dominican Republic, a country that triples the number of U.S. government funded Fulbright scholarships for its citizens (on an annual basis) through the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. In an attempt to fill this gap, the current study employed transcendental phenomenology to understand the lived experience of the Fulbright-MESCYT participant. As such, this transcendental phenomenological study explored the lived experience of Dominican Fulbright-MESCYT alumni who participated in the program and subsequently returned to the DR. I explored the meaning of this experience to the lives of participants after their return to their home country, their ongoing personal and professional goals, and their engagement in their local communities.

The overarching research question of this study is: What is the lived experience of the Dominican alumnus of the Fulbright-MESCYT scholarship program after returning to the DR? In addition, the following sub-questions further guide the exploration of participants’ experiences: How has this experience shaped their personal and professional goals? and how do participants’ lived experiences influence their: (1b) subsequent work; (2b) commitment to community involvement; and (3b) aspirations for themselves?
In this chapter, I discuss the methodology, research design, approach, and rationale for the study. I also present the selected population, sampling procedure, and the data collection protocols and analysis I used to implement the study. To conclude, I describe the steps I took to ensure trustworthiness and the limitations and delimitations of the study.

**Research Design, Approach and Rationale**

Phenomenology is the study of lived experience, an understanding of being, and the manifestation of existence (Patocka, 1996). Edmund Husserl (1931/2013) thought beyond the realm of what was possible at the time and theorized what could be if we focused instead on the being and the lived experience in its full sense. Transcendental phenomenology digs deeper and focuses on the essence of the lived experience and the formation of identity through one’s lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). This type of phenomenology was effective for this study because it focuses on the essence of lived experience in order to extract commonalities and develop an overarching identity that encompasses the Fulbright-MESCYT program experience. Through transcendental phenomenology, the essence of participants’ experiences with the Fulbright-MESCYT Program elucidated their lived experience during and after being a participant in this program. In the process of formulating the research questions for this study, I understood that the best method to understand the essence of one’s lived experience was through transcendental phenomenology because it allows each person’s experience to emerge as it is reflected in their memory, and then provides the researcher an opportunity to find the clusters of feelings and experiences that compose the Fulbright-MESCYT identity. Past research on the Fulbright Program also lacked a focus on the meaning of the lived Fulbright experience, and largely focused on the U.S. citizen experience in the Fulbright Program. The articles I found examining the Fulbright Program focused primarily on the context of U.S. citizen participants of the Fulbright Program and
were either autobiographical or evaluation studies, or were studies focused on a national context that is very different from the Dominican Republic, including South Korea and Japan, Brazil, Indonesia, Pakistan, Algeria and Colombia; in addition, I found no studies using the transcendental phenomenological approach as a method to explore the experiences of Fulbright alumni on the topic (Ailes & Russell, 2002; Ammerman, 1984; Cheddadi, 2018; Infeld & Wenzhao, 2009; Shim et al., 2010, U.S. Department of State, 2017).

**Transcendental Phenomenology**

Transcendental phenomenology opens the researcher’s mind to separate her subjectivity from the narrated lived experiences of others through deep self-reflection, isolation, and recognition of her preconceptions (Moustakas, 1994). In this pursuit, Moustakas (1994) highlighted three critical aspects to human science and research, including noema, “that which is experienced”; noesis, or “the way in which the what is experienced”; and intentionality, which is composed of both the noema and the noesis (Moustakas, 1994, p. 69).

What is meant noematically is continually changing in perception, the something meant is more, more than what is originally meant explicitly. The something meant achieves a synthesis through a continual perceiving of the whole through its angular visions and perceptions (Moustakas, 1994, p. 30).

In the process of exploration of the lived experience, one key aspect is to achieve reflection, because through the process of recalling the memory, new layers of meaning are added, and new thoughts and voices are integrated (Moustakas, 1994). In order to identify the identity of the phenomena, a textural description must take into account all different perceptions that form the experience (Moustakas, 1994).
Field Test

Over three years ago, during a qualitative research course as part of the required coursework for my Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership, I conducted a field test and interviewed three Fulbright-MESCYT alumni following their return to their home country. Following completion of the field test, some refinement was required on the selection criteria for study participants, particularly focused on the length of time participants spend in the Dominican Republic after completing their Fulbright Program in the United States. The guide used for the interview process also required edits to increase opportunities for probing in order to allow participants to dig deeply and reflect on their experiences during their dialogue with me. While some participants could speak about their experience for long lengths of time, some were not as extroverted and required further inquiry to elicit information about their experience. In order to address this, and to increase the quality of the information shared during the interviews, I included a photo-elicitation method as part of this study. I requested participants send me one photo that embodies their Fulbright-MESCYT experience prior to the first interview. Participants described the impact of looking for photos as a reminder of their experience, and described the challenge posed by allowing them to only choose one photo, because so many photos were indicative of their experience. I spent the first interview listening to their story and the memories that emerged after looking at the photo. Following the first interview, I sent a demographic profile to each participant in order to acquire demographic information (see Appendix D for Demographic Profile Form). Then, I held second interviews which focused on the return home for each participant.

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

I obtained approval from the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) at Western Michigan University prior to starting research for this study (see Appendix G).
Population, Sample, Setting, Access and Recruitment

This study explored the lived experience of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni following their return to their home country, their ongoing personal and professional goals, and their engagement in their local communities. I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to recruit alumni of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program that returned to their home country between 2015 and 2018. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select cases that are information-rich or, “those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling” (Patton, 2015, p. 53). More specifically within purposeful sampling, I started with criterion sampling. The first round of criterion sampling allowed me to find some participants for the study. I utilized a second round of snowball sampling to complete my group of participants for this study. Criteria for research participants to participate in this study included:

1. Participants must be from, and currently reside in, the Dominican Republic.
2. Participants must have completed a Master’s degree from a U.S. university with support from the Fulbright-MESCYT Program between 2015-2018. This allowed for alumni to have similar immersion time in the United States, and sufficient re-integration time to have participated in meaningful professional and personal experience. Setting the cap at six years allowed me to find participants who were more likely to still be immersed in the alumni community than those that returned more than seven years ago.

In order to focus on participants who had a similar first-time graduate degree experience during their participation in the Fulbright-MESCYT Program experience and spent a similar number of
years in the U.S., I also established exclusionary criteria for this study. Exclusionary criteria for this study included:

1. Completed a master’s degree in a country outside of the Dominican Republic before completing a master’s degree in the United States. This allowed me to hone in on alumni that have only had a long-term U.S. study experience and reduces the chance for confusing other past international experiences.

2. Completed a Ph.D. degree in the United States.

The sample for this study included seven Fulbright-MESCYT alumni. I conducted two in-depth interviews, lasting between 60-90 minutes each, for seven research participants who returned to the Dominican Republic. I collected data using the following tools: demographic profiles, phenomenological interviews, and a photo-elicitation method with each participant that allowed them to share vivid memories of their Fulbright-MESCYT experience.

The Fulbright Program alumni in the Dominican Republic established an alumni association to bring together the community in the country called the Dominican Fulbright Alumni Association, and later renamed it as the U.S. Embassy Alumni Association. The alumni association served as the first access point to recruit participants for my study. I sent a message to the U.S. Embassy Alumni Association inviting potential alumni to participate in the study (see Appendix A for the recruitment e-mail); however, I was unable to find participants through this method. I found participants by sharing the flyer with people that had Fulbright alumni within their networks. They shared the flyer through their social media networks, and that led me to the first two participants. Those participants then found other participants from their same cohort year that matched the inclusionary criteria. I provided potential participants with an overview of the study, the purpose, methodology, and answered any additional questions they had concerning the
study. I gained informed consent from participants who agreed to participate in the study using the consent form in Appendix B. After gaining each participant’s informed consent, I scheduled the first interview. I utilized interview protocols for each interview as indicated in Appendices C1 and C2. After the first interview, I provided them with a demographic profile form for their completion (Appendix D). In order to allow participants to reflect upon the first interview, I scheduled second interviews no later than one month after the first interview.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection consisted of a series of two semi-structured interviews with seven study participants. As recommended by Seidman (1991), I divided the interviews into two separate 60–90-minute sessions. After scheduling the first interview, I asked participants to send me a photo that embodied their Fulbright-MESCYT experience. The first interview focused on building rapport with the participant and listening broadly to their Fulbright-MESCYT experience through the use of photo-elicitation methods, or the “simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview.” Photo-elicitation methods are described further below. At the end of the first interview, I requested participants complete a demographic profile. The second interview focused on the experience and outcomes of participants’ experiences, as presented in the conceptual framework for the study, and provided space for the participant to clarify information collected from the first interview. I conducted interviews in a virtual format to encourage participation during the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic.

Photo-elicitation Methods

Photo-elicitation methods utilized during qualitative research unleashed memories and inner thoughts linked to experience that basic interviewing does not provide. Harper (2002) describes the ability of images to “evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words;
exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain’s capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words” (p. 13). Further, Kunimoto (2004) discusses the power of photo narratives and the use of photos to revive memory and to elicit stories about one’s experience. “The album thus increases in value when it represents what is no longer accessible, idealizing what is out of reach; it operates through the discourse of nostalgia, heightening desire for the past and thereby elevating its own status” (Kunimoto, 2004, p. 134). To increase the capacity of the phenomenological interview process to generate data relevant to participants’ Fulbright-MESCYT experience, I integrated a photo-elicitation method. I asked research participants to send me one photo that represents their Fulbright-MESCYT experience in advance of the initial interview and I focused the entire first interview on their story and their description of the selected photo. Integrating photo-elicitation into the interview also gave power to the research participant by allowing them to interpret and reflect on their experiences themselves, making them active contributors to the research process (Bates et al., 2017). I describe the value of integrating a photo-elicitation method as part of this study in Chapter Four.

Confidentiality of Data

I maintained a back-up storage device containing the documents used for the study, managed a list of the data used for the study, and removed any personally identifiable information, including coding each set of data using an assigned code for each participant. I kept all hard copies in a locked cabinet and all digital files in an encrypted storage device that is password protected. I submitted all of the data used for the study to the archive at Western Michigan University and it will be destroyed after five years.
The Phenomenological Research and Data Analysis Process

*Epoché* is critical in the transcendental phenomenological process, as it allows the researcher to set aside her preconceptions in order to bracket her previous experience as the study begins and it should continue throughout the study. *Epoché* provides the researcher with a new set of eyes (Moustakas, 1994). I engaged in memoing and created an audit trail while I was defining the methodology for the study, data collection and data analysis.

Through phenomenological reduction, the researcher engages in a process of providing a textural description, describing the experience as the participant describes it, or “the what.” Then, the researcher engages in providing the process in which the experience was felt and engaged in, “the consciousness” or “perceiving experience” of the actual experience. In doing so, and practicing continuous reflection on the data that was collected, we are “opening ourselves” to listening to the stories as they are told to us and rediscovering the experience to find new angles of the story (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation allowed me to imagine different meanings that can be derived from the experiences shared by the participants, “in other words the “how” that speaks to conditions that illuminate the ‘what’ of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). By looking for the multiple angles of reality that can exist as part of a phenomenon, we give light to the full spectrum of the experience.

Imaginative variation takes various steps, including, exploring “structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings”, recognition of “underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon”, “considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon”, and “searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes that facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). Through synthesis, I brought together the
“fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). In order to carry out this transcendental phenomenological study, I used the following steps: bracketing (*epoché*), creation of horizons from the data, imagination of variation, and synthesis of meanings and science. Through bracketing, I focused on what was relevant to the study and left all of the information that was not related to the study outside of brackets. Through horizonalization, I first considered all statements as equally important for the study and then I went back and removed irrelevant or repetitive comments from the study. Afterwards, the relevant data that were considered horizons were clustered into themes and organized (Moustakas, 1994).

I conducted data analysis for this study utilizing Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of data analysis for phenomenological research.

1. **Horizontalization:** Through this data analysis process, I first completed the horizontalization process where I “list every expression relevant to the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

2. **Reduction and elimination:** I continued with the process of reduction and elimination by reviewing all of the data for moments within the experience that are “necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it” and whether it is “possible to abstract and label it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

3. **Clustering and theme development:** After completing the reduction and elimination process, I completed the clustering and theme development process for the data.

4. **Final verification of themes:** I validated those themes to understand whether they are “explicit and compatible” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).
5. Individual textural and structural description: I wrote up an individual textural and structural description, using the imaginative variation, invariant constituents and themes, as suggested by Moustakas (1994).

6. Overall textural and structural description and invariant description: Finally, using this, I developed a textural and structural description, or an invariant structure, for the overall results to describe the essence of the Fulbright-MESCYT experience.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is key to engaging in rigorous qualitative research, and the researcher holds a degree of power in qualitative research because she is collecting and analyzing the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1982) established four key aspects of trustworthiness including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In order to ensure the study’s trustworthiness, I followed the guidelines set out by Lincoln and Guba, which utilized peer-debriefing through memoing and discussion with my adviser about my biases and preconceptions; creation of an audit log; and thick description.

**Credibility**

Credibility is the manner in which a researcher provides the reader with confidence that the results of the study can be trusted (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). Lincoln and Guba (1982) explain the importance of confirming the findings of the research with the research participant in order to establish credibility for the study. In order to ensure credibility, I engaged in member checking of my data with each participant (see Appendix E). I sent out the interview transcripts and invariant structures to each participant. Each participant confirmed that the interview transcripts matched their experience, and two of the seven participants responded to my correspondence regarding the invariant structure and felt that it accurately depicted their Fulbright-MESCYT experience and
return home. The remaining five participants did not respond in time for the publication of this study. Further, I engaged in epoché, as suggested by Moustakas (1994), and in memoing throughout the study, to ensure I properly reflected and worked out preconceptions and thoughts as I conducted the study. I participated in peer debriefing by sharing my memos with my dissertation adviser to maintain transparency in the data analysis process. Although triangulation is a method for establishing credibility in qualitative research, in the case of transcendental phenomenology, the data is the story as told by the research participant, so the focus is on the source (interviews) and the manner in which data is collected and interpreted (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). Therefore, data triangulation was not a trustworthiness strategy utilized in this study.

**Transferability**

Transferability in qualitative research is the potential to transfer the study to other scenarios using the thick description provided by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). While naturalistic inquiries are not generalizable, it is important for qualitative research to provide enough thick description for the reader to understand the context and be able to discern whether or not study findings can be transferred to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). In order to report on the context of the study, it is important within qualitative research to describe the details of the “physical description, movement description and activity description” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). To address this, I provide full descriptions of the setting, participant background, and meaningful situations that affect participants.

**Dependability**

Dependability is “stability after discounting such conscious and unpredictable, but rational and logical changes” (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, p. 247). In addition to conducting peer debriefing for the credibility of the study, I also engaged in peer debriefing to ensure the study is dependable.
I discussed my preconceptions, biases, and the process I engaged in to implement the study in order to establish dependability for this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1982).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is how well the data can be confirmed by the research participant, with little possibility of alteration by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). To ensure confirmability of the study, I created an audit log that documents the data analysis back to the original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1982).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

When discussing the procedures involved in a particular research study, it is also important to recognize any limitations and delimitations inherent in the stated research design. In this study, the included participants represent a small number of the total participants of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program and an even smaller proportion of participants of the Fulbright Foreign Student Scholarship program. As such, the results of this study are not generalizable to the larger population; however, the results may be transferrable and may provide important information adding to our understanding of a broader range of other international scholarship programs. In addition, participants of this study were not geographically diverse or representative of the entire population of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program; however, this is also not the goal of the study. The goal of this transcendental phenomenology study was to understand the lived experience of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program alumnus who returned to the DR through a purposeful, qualitative sample of individuals who have experienced the program. Participants of this study were nearly all from the capital city and attended private schools for high school and for university. This may not be representative of the socio-economic and geographic diversity of Fulbright-MESCYT participants. Five of the seven participants of the study studied economics
during their graduate program, and the two remaining participants studied architecture. This was not intended, but may be a limitation as this study may not be representative of alumni from other fields of study. Also, one of the participants I interviewed as part of this study participated in a one-year program, while all other participants completed a two-year program. The data I collected from her experience was significantly less concrete and provided much less context than the participants of two-year programs. This study is delimited to exploring the lived experiences of seven Fulbright-MESCYT program alumni who returned to the Dominican Republic. Participants of the study completed the Fulbright-MESCYT Program between 2015-2018.

**Chapter Summary and Conclusion**

Chapter Three provided an overview of the research design and methodology for this dissertation study including a rationale for the use of transcendental phenomenology as the guiding methodology. I provided a description of the field test I carried out prior to embarking on this study, sample, access, recruitment and study site and location, and data analysis procedures. I also discussed experiential learning theory as an alternative lens for the study. In Chapter Four, I provide an overview of my pre-analysis epoché, vignettes of each participant and results following the interview, and in Chapter Five, I provide textural and structural descriptions, invariant structure, and connect research findings to the literature.
CHAPTER IV

DATA PRESENTATION

“For two years, I had been challenged intellectually, thinking about the biggest questions on how to run the Dominican Republic, or any country, and I felt that the same job I left was the exact same job.”

(Mario, Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus)

In Chapter 4, I present the findings of my research study, including demographic profiles of study participants and individual descriptions of experience which allow me to share the depth of the experience and meaning-making process as presented by each research participant. I present the horizons obtained from the data, the clusters of meaning and the themes in three different stages of re-entry, which begin at the point where Fulbright-MESCYT alumni begin their program in the United States: making it through, feeling stuck and finding the new me.

Engaging in epoché is a key part of the qualitative data analysis process, thus, I begin the chapter by sharing some of the bracketing I conducted throughout the data collection process.

Pre-analysis Bracketing

Bracketing is a critical part of any qualitative research study because it allows a researcher to engage in the essential reflexivity work that is required to understand one’s preconceptions as they relate to the data and the data analysis process. As discussed in Chapter 1 of this research study, I have extensive study abroad experience and I have engaged in a series of international exchange experiences in diverse cultures around the world. Because of these experiences, I have created my own perceptions of how international exchange programs have affected my life and my personal and professional development. In addition to my experience as a study abroad student, I also have extensive experience living abroad, as I moved to the Dominican Republic after completing my undergraduate career. This experience was both helpful and challenging to manage throughout the data collection process. Though I did not use
my professional capacity in the recruitment of individuals for my study, each time alumni would reach out, they would indicate that they were happy to participate especially for me. It was challenging because sometimes participants would speak to me during their interviews as if they were speaking to the Fulbright Program in the Dominican Republic about their experience. I found myself clarifying that I was not there in a professional capacity, but in a personal capacity, as a researcher, because I wanted to understand their lived experience and how it has shaped their lives. I came into this study expecting to learn about the ways in which the program shaped participants, and how they were able to increase mutual understanding. In order to set aside these preconceived notions about their experiences, I practiced bracketing and reset between interviews. I also spoke to my adviser about my feelings to engage in reflexivity. By actively engaging in bracketing throughout the data collection and analysis process, I deepened my awareness of my own preconceptions and increased my understanding and my focus on the experience of others. This helped me understand that every person’s journey was vastly different, and in some ways the process of self-discovery was painful, because of the many up and down moments they faced. One of the most surprising moments was the recurrence in the participants’ statements about the isolation the majority of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni consistently felt upon returning home, and it reminded me of my own journey home after my study abroad experiences, and how the deeply obscured sense of no one understanding served as one of the cries that was left unheard. I found myself trying to accurately represent each participant’s experience through the identity of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program, but each was different from the next. In order to provide you with context about the participants of the study, while preserving their identities, I gathered their demographic profiles and present them to you in
the next section. Following the demographic profiles, I share a vignette of each study participant using pseudonyms to protect their identities.

**Demographic Profile of Participants**

This study included seven alumni of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program, all between the ages of 28-31. There were no age restrictions listed within the criteria to participate in the study. Additionally, the seven research participants attended private schools and universities prior to participating in the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. All participants grew up in and continue to live in urban areas, though one participant grew up and lives in an urban area located outside of the capital city. All participants graduated from their bachelor degree program between 2010 and 2014. Five of seven participants completed a program in the field of economics, and the remaining two completed a program in an architecture-related field. Three participants completed graduate degrees in mathematics at Dominican higher education institutions prior to participating in the Fulbright-MESCYT Program, and the four remaining participants did not complete any graduate degree programs prior to the start of their program in the United States. The majority of participants had at least two years of work experience in the government, at architecture firms, brokerage firms, and other organizations, during or after their undergraduate degree. Fields of study during the Fulbright-MESCYT Program included applied economics, finance, public administration, public policy, architecture, urban planning and Latin American studies. All participants started the Fulbright-MESCYT Program between 2014 and 2016, and were selected the first time they applied. Three of the seven participants completed an internship program at a multinational organization, in a third country, or at an interior design firm during their exchange experience. Three of the seven participants work at the same organization they left before departing to the Fulbright-MESCYT Program, and the remaining four either run their
own business, work in the public sector or serve as a consultant. Two of the seven participants learned English at the Instituto Cultural Dominico-Americano, and the remaining five learned English at another unidentified English language institute, watching television, at school and practicing at home, or during trips to visit family in the United States. While this did not emerge in the demographic profile data, during the interviews two participants disclosed that they were married to each other. This is an important reality to note as they had each other to turn to and share with upon their return to the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. In addition to the demographic profile data, in the next section I provide individual descriptions of each participant’s experience based on the interviews I held with them. These descriptions allow for more exploration and understanding of the experience.

**Individual Descriptions of Experience**

In the following section, I provide a description of the individual experiences lived by Fulbright-MESCYT alumni based on our interviews together. Prior to the start of the first interview, I requested participants share one photo that represents their Fulbright-MESCYT experience with me. I opened the first interview asking them to describe the photo and the memories they brought to mind. The participants then continued with an in-depth description of their experiences during the Fulbright-MESCYT experience and upon their return home through two semi-structured interviews. In between the first and second interview, participants sent me their demographic profiles, which helped me learn more about their background and provided more context of their experience leading up to their participation in the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. While there were many recurring themes that emerged between participants, each experience was very different from the next. In order to provide as much context, the following narrative statements attempt to provide an overview of each research participant’s experience as
described during the interviews. Please note that in order to protect each study participant’s identity, I do not include the institutions where participants studied and I utilize pseudonyms for each participant, in lieu of their real names.

Juan

Juan is a 30-year-old Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus who attended a public university in the Midwest. He attended a monolingual private school in the northern region of the Dominican Republic, a private university and lived in an urban city prior to his departure for his graduate program in the United States. When I asked Juan to describe the photo he selected to best represent his Fulbright-MESCYT experience, he shared a photo of him with his peers in their graduation gowns, and he said it was the “fulfillment of that academic experience.” Juan said that the academic experience “main reason he got there” and that he is “kind of an outlier” as he is “in the middle of four Asian people” and it is “this cultural space that I learned a lot about.” Juan worked for the government, took a leave of absence from work, and returned to the government following the completion of his program. Juan studied economics in his undergraduate degree program, and has some work experience in the private sector. Juan remarked about the major differences between a U.S. academic experience, and learning at a Dominican university, including the benefit of having a cadre of full-time professors and teaching assistants versus part-time professors that also had full-time jobs. Juan also was greatly surprised about the flexibility of his graduate degree program, and expressed that he felt overwhelmed from the number of options, having come from a system that predefines what you need to study in order to complete your degree coursework. Additionally, Juan’s experience with support services offered at his university was over the top. He was surprised he could find support for everything he could need, like writing services. Juan felt fortunate to have received
support from his roommate, as he was initially more outgoing. His roommate was from a similar culture, and while he was very excited to learn about new cultures, he was also happy to have something that was easier to connect to and understand from the very beginning. After he received the boost of support, Juan felt ready to soar, and gained experience leading a student organization at his university. Having a roommate from a similar culture also helped Juan increase his home management skills. Juan also felt he became a citizen of the world, as he took the time to learn about different cultures from his incredibly international group of peers.

Engaging with people from other cultures also made him much more adaptable, and able to think differently. Juan discussed challenges he faced, including living in locations that had very, very cold weather, and dealing with an apartment that had very little heat. He described learning to speak up in order to obtain a solution. Juan traveled to different locations in the U.S. during his program, and found a feeling of belonging to Fulbright in each of those locations. He attended Fulbright association meetings where he met Americans that had participated in their Fulbright Program many years prior, and he also met Fulbright students who were participating in their programs currently. Juan felt that the common thread between Fulbrighters was the high expectation, and a need to live up to the Fulbright standard. To Juan, Fulbrighters want to create an impact wherever they are, by improving themselves, and improving others. Fulbrighters gain a toolset and learn how to solve issues, and they acquire maturity and leadership. When Juan returned to the Dominican Republic, he returned to his government job, and found he was doing the same work as when he left. This only lasted a few months, and he was later given opportunities to soar and use the skills he learned in the U.S. for the benefit of his home country. Juan’s partner also went through the Fulbright Program so he was able to make sense of his experience with her.
Maria

Maria is a 28-year-old Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus that attended a university in the northeastern region of the United States. She attended a private bilingual school, private university and grew up and lives in an urban area of the Dominican Republic. When I asked Maria to describe the photo she selected to best represent her Fulbright-MESCYT experience, she said “throughout the time when I was abroad, I met a lot of people from different cultures and around the world. And I think that was one of my favorite parts of the experience, because I got to interact with people from countries that I had never talked with, and learn about their, like their points of view a little bit of their culture.” Maria worked in the financial sector of the Dominican Republic prior to departing to her graduate degree program and she returned to work at the same organization upon her return home. Maria studied economics in her undergraduate degree program. Maria was very connected to other Fulbright participants she met during the Fulbright Gateway Program, and would meet with them monthly during her program. Maria felt the Gateway Program was an orientation to how academics work and increased her intercultural skills. Maria’s experience was a one-year graduate program, while all of the other research participants completed two-year master’s degree programs. Maria had a very challenging living experience with one of her roommates, as the roommate was smoking illicit drugs in their shared apartment, and accused her and her parents of stealing the last check she left to cover her portion of rental fees before moving out. This caused her a lot of stress and anxiety, and she ignored her until she eventually moved out. Maria felt that there was too much focus and time wasted on perfecting academics, instead of building relationships. Maria served as a teaching assistant, but felt it was useless because she was not academically challenged. Maria’s family was very proud of her for pursuing a graduate degree abroad, but they were also facing their own challenging
moments. Maria’s parents got a divorce while Maria was abroad, and she felt “bad that she was not there to support her mother in the process.” When Maria returned home, she immediately returned to the same organization where she worked prior to her departure. She used her experience from abroad to make an impact at her office, even in areas not pertaining to her field of expertise. She received a promotion a few years later, but she was upset that the promotion was not at the same level as the person that left the position. Maria also feels she became more environmentally conscious following her return to her home country. This consciousness led her to decrease her environmental footprint and participate in a sustainable hack-a-thon event in her home country.

Mario

Mario is a 29-year-old Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus that attended a university in the northeastern region of the United States. He attended a private monolingual school, private university, grew up and lives in an urban area of the Dominican Republic. He completed his undergraduate degree in economics, a graduate degree in mathematics, and worked for three years prior to departing to the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. He learned English by watching television, at school and during extracurricular activities. When I asked Mario to describe the photo he selected to describe his Fulbright-MESCYT experience, he said that it “captures the moments that we had, and captures a little bit about how everyone was in that picture.” Relationships were a central part of Mario’s experience, and his study group was essential to make it through, because they “help you sort out the homesickness, they help you sort out the loneliness.” He vividly recalled difficult moments for him and his family, and the support that his classmates gave him to get through. When similar challenges arose for his peers, he was equally there to help them make it through. In his own words, “this thing that you don’t do it because it’s reciprocal, but it feels
good to know that it’s reciprocal.” In addition to the incredible community Mario found during his graduate degree program, he also felt his experience increased his critical thinking and strategic negotiation skills. Mario felt very connected to his faculty members, and, in the same respect, he felt like they were constantly challenging his thoughts, and that led to his development of strong critical thinking skills. Mario felt he increased his ability to convince multinational organizations, government entities, and elected officials on the right approach to a program. These skills directly transferred to his teaching practices upon his return home. Mario also specifically described the impact of his faculty members on the course he teaches, and used that experience to modify the course he teaches at home. Mario’s dedication to students back home is not limited to coursework, he is also part of a group of Fulbrighters that helps interested students define their goals, find programs that are well-suited to achieve those goals, and then helps them apply to those programs. Mario was passionate about improving his home country and that feeling also overlapped into his personal space. One of the most frustrating moments for Mario was when he returned to the Dominican Republic, because he immediately entered the same job in the public sector. He described having to deal with issues that had been untouched in the two years since he left the office. While this was his initial experience with work, he later had the opportunity to create substantial impact for his home country in a public sector role. In addition to his feeling that the incredible growth and experience he had gone through in his graduate program would not land anywhere, at least initially, he also felt deep levels of isolation from his friends, and as if they were in separate worlds. He had changed too, so the differences were not only because his friends’ lives had continued to occur while he lived his experience, it was also that his mentality changed. This inability to connect came from he and his friends being in different stages of their lives after Mario returned to his home country, and his inability to connect with the worldview that his friends had.
In addition to the difficulties reconnecting to friends back home, Mario found it challenging to adjust to life at home. He found himself frustrated at the traffic, at the time it took to do the groceries, at the difficulties in creating new relationships, and that contempt for returning home was something his mother really disliked. Fulbright-MESCYT also gave Mario the chance to engage in relationships with people from very different cultures, understand and appreciate them. Mario went deeper and expressed how his broadened worldview helped him be able to work with people from diverse cultures, and, when he returned from his experience, he found himself much more likely to promote tolerance.

**Mildred**

Mildred is a 30-year-old Fulbright-MESCYT alumna that attended a university in the southeastern region of the United States. She attended a bilingual private school, private university, and lived and grew up in an urban area, though some of her time growing up was spent in an urban city outside of the capital. She completed her undergraduate degree in economics and a Master’s Degree in Mathematics before departing for her Fulbright-MESCYT experience. Mildred worked for some time prior to departing to the Fulbright-MESCYT Program, and she returned to the same government job when she returned to her home country. She learned English by watching television, at school and practicing at home. When I asked Mildred to describe the photo she selected to describe her Fulbright-MESCYT experience, she said that she wanted one that only featured her and that reflected her joy. She wanted the photo to “show the happiness and the feeling of accomplishment” and that “reflects how balanced my year was, because it was, of course, very rigorous in academics, but it was also very fun, and I also love that my mom took the picture, and I had my family with me.” Mildred had a very diverse Fulbright-MESCYT experience. For a portion of her experience, Mildred participated in
an internship program in a location outside of the United States, and she also conducted an internship during her program at her U.S. university. Mildred thought the academic coursework of her program was very similar to what she learned in her undergraduate program, but it allowed her to “go deeper” because it allowed her to apply all that knowledge in a practical manner. Through her experience, Mildred made long-lasting relationships with people from around the world, people that similarly wanted to “change the world”. Mildred faced challenges when she first arrived because she rented an apartment with absolutely no furniture, and she had no car to take her to the store, and no internet to request a car service help her. She was fortunate to gain support from someone she found on her program’s Facebook group, and that was her first experience of community. In the beginning, Mildred felt a bit frustrated, and turned to her international peers. They became her community and helped her through challenging moments. That same community that helped her through difficulty was also a means to increase her exposure to diversity and to broaden her worldviews. She discussed deep conversations on sensitive topics like religion, and how difficult it made her feel when she heard conversations focused on gossip upon her return to her office at home. Mildred learned about leadership without authority during her program, and was able to apply it in her work once she returned home. She also learned about the importance of applying soft skills in her role as a leader. Mildred similarly discussed a challenge with reconnecting to the style of living once she returned to her home country. She lived with her family for a few years before eventually purchasing her own apartment. She described difficulties living with other people, and not finding parking. Mildred also serves as a faculty member and brought back a lot of anecdotes and even the teaching structure of the program to her home university. While Mildred feels she has made many strides professionally, she still struggles to figure out what she wants for her future family
on a more personal level. She discussed her and her partner’s ambitions of thriving here in the Dominican Republic, because she is deeply committed to transformation here, but she struggles with the idea of being able to offer her future children the opportunity of living a different lifestyle, learning different languages and having access to a more usable passport.

David

David is a 28-year-old Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus that graduated from a university in the southern region of the United States. David attended a monolingual private school, a private university, and grew up and lives in an urban area of the Dominican Republic. David completed his undergraduate degree in architecture. David worked for some time before embarking on his Fulbright-MESCYT experience and he did not have a job secured when he returned home. David learned English at the Instituto Cultural Dominico-Americano, an English school in the Dominican Republic. David conducted an internship program during his graduate degree experience in the United States. When I asked David to describe the photo he selected to best represent his Fulbright-MESCYT experience, he said, “it really portrays how I lived my Fulbright experience, willing to absorb everything, every foreign experience, every foreign culture, every foreign tradition, I was there to absorb it, but also trying to be myself, an ambassador of my own heritage and culture.” David was rocked by his Fulbright experience, as it brought all his prejudices to the forefront, and forced him to reckon with them. David now focuses on getting to know each person for who they are, where they come from, and how life shaped them. David’s story begins just before his Fulbright-MESCYT experience began, when he came out to his parents. “When I got to the U.S., right before traveling to the U.S. for my Fulbright experience, it was the time that I told my family that I was gay. To me, it was very difficult because just those few months before leaving for the U.S., I was going through very
difficult times with my family. They were Catholic, very religious, they were trying to change me, and take the gay away, they will bring me to psychologists, so, right before starting my Fulbright experience, I was not in my best shape. I take this time as an opportunity right now, to tell you that to me the Fulbright experience was a blessing. It was the opportunity I had to kind of have my own time, to get to know myself, in many aspects, I could probably not have been able to do it if I was still living with my family.” His story is one of perseverance and determination to know himself, his identity and be comfortable in his skin. David became part of a community of people, both domestic and international, in his university town. This community was there for him through difficulty and happiness, and he was equally there for them. He described the network of emotional support as incredibly helpful, even when they live in another city. David found a new religion that accepted him, and that provided him with examples of what was possible when he was included in society. “I found a place where all my views in terms of like, faith, were very aligned with this church. It was thanks to the Fulbright experience, that I got to be exposed to another type of faith and practice.” David also developed strong friendships with the other Fulbrighters from his cohort, and with Fulbrighters that he met during his orientation programs. He found a sense of support and community in his peer Fulbrighters. When David returned to his home country, his family forced him to choose between living in his true identity or living in their home and going to the same church. He decided that he would much rather be himself. David credits his Fulbright Program for showing him that it was possible to be himself and to be successful. David’s essence and his ability to say this is who I am, love me or leave me, came from his opportunity to see that other ways of living were possible. David expressed courage and an ability to be authentically himself, something he did not feel before leaving the program. While he was a different person, and while he found power
in the Fulbright Program, he did not find the same opportunities to share what he had learned and feel he was being remunerated fairly upon his return home. The job opportunities he was offered provided him with the same salary he was being paid before he departed to the United States. When David returned home, he began comparing everything in his home city to the city in the United States where he studied, the quality of life, access to public transportation, health and education. He called it part of his reverse culture shock. Teaching was one of the main reasons David wanted to complete a master’s degree. David took hold of his adviser’s method and implemented it in his own classroom, and integrated a specific rating method to ensure they were learning. David went through a metamorphosis during his Fulbright-MESCYT Program, and for him, there was no going back to his previous reality. He now works for the public sector and would like to continue impacting his country, and has considered continuing his studies in a third country.

**Ethan**

Ethan is a 31-year-old Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus and he completed his graduate degree at a university in the southeastern region of the United States. Ethan studied at a bilingual private school, a private university, and lived and grew up in urban areas located outside of the capital area. Ethan completed his undergraduate degree in architecture. He learned English with family and friends in the United States, and learned grammar and writing from a school in Puerto Plata. Ethan did not have a job waiting for him when he returned to the Dominican Republic. His first initiative when he returned to the country was to reflect and impact his community by painting murals, free of cost. Ethan has dreams for what his country could be, and the private sector is the route he would like to use to achieve them. When I asked David to describe the photo he selected to best represent his Fulbright-MESCYT experience, he said it was about
“standing on the shoulders of his giants.” For Ethan, his Fulbright-MESCYT experience was deeply personal, because “I would have never made it here if it wasn't for the steps of all the other people behind me. And those people are done, like I ain't done. I don't think I have paid my dues to this world to everybody that has been part of it, because I know where I can go and I'm not even close to it.” Ethan talked about the importance of critical feedback from his faculty as a way to improve his writing, and helped him focus on his improvement. Ethan experienced discrimination on one occasion, and vividly remembers the engagement. He was walking to a football game in a pink shirt, and a person yelled a discriminatory slur through his window. Ethan feels that Americans taught him to think critically, to ask questions, and to be better.

Ethan turned down a job offer in the United States before returning home. When he returned home, he immediately realized what a mistake it was, because he had changed, but his community remained the same. It took him some time to find his way and figure out what he wanted to do, and although he worked in the private sector and runs various companies, his dream of doing something for the country burst. He wanted to improve the lives of many people from his city, and he was achieving plenty through his companies, but the disappointment in not being able to achieve everything he had set out to accomplish was palpable, and even more frustrating was the description of isolation he gave during his interviews. Ethan is still living in a bubble because it his safe space, and he describes it as isolating himself from others because it is the only place where he can think in peace. Ethan’s inability to find space where he can openly dialogue and implement the ideas he came back with has affected his personal life. He describes the Fulbright-MESCYT Program as a game changer, and tells future Fulbrighters that they need to be ready to return home different, otherwise they should not go. The last thing we discussed was the power he felt was given to youth in the United States, because it was the place where
“It’s not a money thing, it’s not a racial thing, it’s not a gender thing, it’s just that they can do whatever they want to do. They just have to be disciplined and work for it, and you don’t get that here.” For Ethan, the U.S. is a place where anyone can be anything.

Olivia

Olivia is a 30-year-old Fulbright-MESCYT alumna that completed her graduate degree in the northeastern region of the United States. Olivia studied at a private monolingual school, private university, and lives in and grew up in an urban area. Olivia completed a bachelor’s degree in economics and a master’s degree in mathematics prior to the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. She learned English at the Instituto Cultural Dominico-Americano. Olivia worked for two years before departing to her program in the United States. Olivia completed an internship during her Fulbright-MESCYT Program. When she returned, she found a job rather quickly in the private sector. Olivia now works in the public sector of the Dominican Republic. Olivia was positive, upbeat and passionate about connecting to intercultural work. Olivia engaged nearly immediately in leadership and community building activities, including the local Fulbright association, student organizations at her university, local salsa classes. Olivia faced difficulties learning how a different academic style works, so she had to quickly adapt to a new location, a new climate and a new learning style. This paired with the feeling of having left a good opportunity at home, Olivia had lots of challenges in her initial adaptation process. Olivia found she became very critical, and much more resourceful after the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. Olivia also enjoyed the close contact she had with faculty in smaller classes, but felt that it was much harder to connect with large student groups. Olivia initially thought it would be very easy to engage with people from different countries, but she found it was a challenge she had to overcome. After adapting to that new reality, Olivia now prefers diversity. Olivia felt like the
Fulbright umbrella gave her access to a network, and that started at the Gateway Seminar. This engagement with a Fulbright network increased her network of friends and created relationships that endure. Olivia interacted often with a group of international students, and she found that once they left, she was alone. She understood that she was living in an international student bubble. “I'm in this bubble of international students, of people that came from everywhere, and we share the same feeling. But this probably is not the normal. I realized afterwards that I was like in a very nice, international bubble.” During her program, Olivia lived with a family friend in a location that was a half-hour ride away from her university. This caused a disconnection between where she lives and her university. Also, Olivia described her relationship with the family friend as very positive, though there was always the thought at the back of her head that the friend would call her mother and report her if she did not behave, so it was not a feeling of full independence. Upon her return home, Olivia found it very hard to connect to her family, because she was a different person, and they would not allow her privacy. Her mother reinstated a curfew, and rules that she was not used to. It was not just the adjustment to her relationship with her mom that affected Olivia, she was equally affected by the conversations she was having with her friends. It was hard for Olivia and for her family and friends, because with her new worldview, Olivia became “annoyed about certain conversations” and “annoyed about some rules, rules regarding the way you should dress to go to work, the way you should do your hair to go to work, things I used to see in the news regarding the color of the skin,” and “that’s another reason why I started to be more like out loud about, about that kind of topic.” Olivia ended up adapting, and trying to take her friends along with her in the conversation and explain her experiences and her new way of thinking. Now Olivia feels that she and her friends can discuss issues of discrimination and dialogue aspects of society “more openly than ever before.”
workspace, Olivia returned and, through a former supervisor, found a job immediately within the private sector. She lasted some years working within the private sector on topics of “transparency and accountability,” and now serves in a role that directly supports policy in the public sector. Olivia credits the Fulbright-MESCYT Program with broadening what she thought was achievable. This program also increased her ability to “meet like people that right now are my role models in different areas.” Olivia described a drive for excellence that is a standard of the Fulbright Program, and as a “Fulbright-MESCYT alumna, you have some responsibilities you have to take into consideration every time you act.” For Olivia, it was a letter that she received from the Fulbright Program at the very beginning of her experience. “And it's like, when you receive something that like a piece of paper, a simple piece of paper that changes the way you see things. I think that that happened, like a letter that was signed at that moment by Obama, listing my responsibilities and what the US and the DR expected for me, and that was mind blowing and, and changed me a lot.”

**Three Significant Stages for Fulbright-MESCYT Alumni**

I began the data analysis process, based on the modification of the Van Kaam Method of Data Analysis of Phenomenological Data listed by Moustakas (1994), which calls for first listing every relevant statement, or each horizon. Horizons are also called invariant constituents, or statements that are meaningful and significant to the phenomenon being studied. Moustakas (1994) described invariant constituents, or horizons, as “a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it” and that has the possibility of being labeled and abstracted (p. 121). In this first phase, everything is considered important. After completing horizontalization, I then engaged in phenomenological reduction and elimination through several rounds of data analysis. I implemented an open coding process, using the
horizons obtained through the reduction and elimination process to cluster and re-cluster the themes, and continued to reduce and eliminate redundant information in order to focus on the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). I reviewed the data several times to cluster, and re-cluster, and ensure there was no overlapping. Through this process, I sifted through the horizons and found important clusters of meaning, as recommended by Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Van Kaam Method of Data Analysis. I then conducted validation of the clusters of meaning by comparing them to the original transcripts, ensuring that they remained true to the study participant’s overall statement, and the themes emerged. Following theme generation, I created individual textural descriptions for each study participant including quotes from the interview transcripts. I continued this process until I finally felt that the themes matched with my understanding of the experiences presented by the study participants. I then worked on re-clustering the themes again to ensure that each statement was well represented by the themes that emerged from the data. In the next section, I identify three stages that emerged as the arc of evolution for Fulbright-MESCYT alumni through the data analysis process: making it through, feeling stuck and finding the new me. The most significant clusters of meaning are listed below under each identified stage (see Appendix F for the full Table of Findings).

Making it Through

Fulbright-MESCYT participants spend their time in the United States adapting to a new reality, a different way of living, and a learning in a different language. Fulbright-MESCYT participants are constantly immersed in diversity, are challenged to think critically, and find a way to make it through by creating a network of emotional support. The horizons most present during the period of adaptation and that describe their experience while in the United States are listed below.
I Prefer Diversity

I prefer diversity was one of the most significant themes for Fulbright-MESCYT alumni, as they felt it was central to their experience of study in the United States. Six out of seven Fulbright-MESCYT alumni associate their Fulbright-MESCYT experience with a preference for diversity and an interest in intercultural understanding.

I think, now, I definitely prefer diversity. And I think I’ve learned to handle this kind of situation. And I’m more aware about the differences and how we can work on them, and make the best out of everybody’s way of thinking, I think now, every time I face an environment, similar, I have like more tools to interact in it, and I enjoy it actually.

I lived my Fulbright experience willing to absorb everything, every foreign experience, every foreign culture, every foreign tradition, I was there to absorb it, but also trying to be myself, an ambassador of my own heritage and culture.

To be exposed to people who come from different cultural backgrounds, different religious backgrounds, people who come from no religious background at all, it kind of sets you up to, to be more open to absorb different ideas.

It was an experience that made me more sensitive, in terms of a human aspect, like, don’t put up a wall, don’t build a book before you understand where they come from, and like how their life shaped who they are now, and try to understand also, at least, like a variety of people.

I’m more aware of what goes on in the U.S., after you live there for sure, you also leave a little bit of your heart back in there. You start worrying about what happens there. So, you’re no longer a one country citizen, like, even though your passport says you’re only Dominican, in identity, you also identify with these people who you left. You are now a two-country citizen.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni were faced with a lot of diversity, and that made them challenge their own preconceptions, stereotypes, and become more culturally sensitive. This diversity that is emblematic of the United States made them dig deeper to understand others. Their preference for diversity came from the opportunities to engage and interact with people that were different from them and to participate in dialogue that allowed them to learn from each other’s experiences and broaden their worldviews. Participants developed deep connections to
people from other cultures, and that shaped their overall understanding of the many cultures that make up U.S. culture. Learning about people expanded their ability to see people for who they are, not the stereotypes or generalizations they thought they were. The Fulbright-MESCYT experience also made them more critical, better problem solvers, and increase their consideration of their environment and of others. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni became advocates for diversity once they returned to their home country.

**Sorting out the Homesickness**

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described a strong sense of support that emerged during their time in the United States from a network of fellow international students, domestic students, friends, and Fulbright participants that helped them sort out the homesickness, work through challenging moments and celebrated their achievements. Five of seven Fulbright-MESCYT alumni associated their Fulbright-MESCYT experience with a network of emotional support.

These relationships they help you sort out the homesickness, they help you sort out the loneliness. I saw how these people cry in, like, very deep emotional cries. And I also experienced some of their best times there. And vice versa.

And he pushed me a lot, he was a little bit more, a lot more outgoing. Especially in the beginning, there's a lot of people that I got to know because of because of him. And then after that, I could get on.

It was, like a very fast way for me to broaden my views and horizons, not only on like, my views on stuff, but my views on other people like how much our lives depend on the things that happened to us and on what we do with that, but also on the things that happen to us. And on like, how to make the best of knowing people and leaning on them and they leaning on you and you offering them a shoulder to lean on in every aspect of your life.

The whole experience can also leave you with this network of people that can also become your emotional support at trying times.

Through the community, participants developed alongside others during their program, and found their peers to be extremely supportive through the good and the bad. The community that began during their Fulbright-MESCYT experience did not cease after the program ended,
those relationships continued to be supportive after their experiences. Fulbright-MESCYT experiences saw participants deal with being homesick, mourn the death of their loved ones, and pushed them to put themselves out there. Participants supported each other through challenging academic times, but found the most value came from the time they spent dialoguing with other participants. Fulbright-MESCYT participants felt they had someone that understood them, that they could talk to and they would listen, and that would push them to be better. This community expanded their worldview, and allowed them to break the bonds of what they thought possible. The majority of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni stayed in touch with the network they developed during their US graduate experience even after returning home. Those that do remain in contact credit their network for working through reverse culture shock as they returned home.

**Destroy the Logic**

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni talk about the major differences between their academic system in the Dominican Republic, and the academics taught at their respective university. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni discussed the challenges to adapting to a new style of thinking where everything was questioned, and where professors presented their ideas, and challenged their students to find the holes in the logic, so that they could increase their critical thinking, foster inquisitiveness and destroy the logic of the argument. U.S. faculty members became connectors, masters of dialogue and facilitation, and fostered communication that Fulbright-MESCYT alumni were not used to experiencing and that they sought to implement when they returned home. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni even described feeling that their interactions with people during their experience in the United States reformed their way of thinking, in the sense that they now questioned everything and saw arguments from a multitude of angles. Fulbright-
MESCYT alumni return to their home country and get frustrated about the conversation topics, because they were used to having interesting conversations that broke their stereotypes and destroyed their logic.

I think that part of it is having professors that have presented their views, but then they made you think about it too, like, find the logic of it and try to destroy the logic. And if you actually came up with a way to challenge the logic in a thoughtful way, they wanted to engage in conversation they wanted to not think that they weren’t the final know-it-all.

I got the most out of my academic institution was not what I learned from books, was what you learn when you interact with a person on the knowledge that they can only embark in interactions in discussions in a way they explain it in the way they ask you. And they challenge you to think it through before they actually need an answer.

I have always said that the Americans told me how to think. I realized that with a Fulbright scholarship, because I actually went to an American school. Before that, I was already like that. During the scholarship, I definitely realized it, and after it, I have definitely confirmed it.

Learning How to Deal

Fulbright-MESCYT participants must adapt constantly through their international education experience and upon their return home. They arrive to a foreign country to take classes in a new system, in a completely different language, and experience living in cold weather. Adaptation is difficult for them when they arrive to the United States, so they lean on others to get through it. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are constantly surrounded by people, and “everybody thinks different.” They were also confronted with themselves at the very start of the program, and they learned about their “weaknesses.” They found that in order to succeed in their quest for completing their graduate degree programs, they would have to show grit and determination, and some used their faith to overcome. While the experience of adaptation is difficult for their transition to the United States, nothing prepares them to adapt to living back at home.
Feeling Stuck

Participants described returning home and feeling stuck. Participants had a broadened worldview and a commitment to transform their country. They found they were initially unable to connect with their friends and that either led to them trying to explain their experiences and new worldview, or being unable to continue their relationship with their former friends. Some Fulbright-MESCYT participants were left isolated, because they could no longer turn back to who they were, while others found new friends they could relate to. Fulbright-MESCYT participants that had jobs waiting for them upon their return home had a jumpstart and had one less issue to worry about when compared to those that had no job to return to. However, even those with jobs had to wait some time before implementing what they learned in their programs and had difficulty adjusting to their home country and style of work. The following clusters connect to feeling stuck when participants returned home.

Come Back and Be Who You Were and It’s Impossible

Fulbright-MESCYT participants return to their home country excited to reconnect with their friends, engage and contribute to their society and spend time with their family. However, when they return, they find that while they have completely changed, everyone else has also moved on. Everyone is in a different stage of life and their thoughts and ideas are very different from what you want to discuss. In addition to the thought processes and ideas they want to discuss, Fulbright-MESCYT participants find that they have become accustomed to a completely different way of living, and it is hard for them to adjust to a different style of transport and levels of security. Fulbright-MESCYT participants have many ideas for how to reform their society and without a way to fix them all at once, they compare their home country to where they
studied. In addition to the constant comparison between the location where they studied, participants have completely changed who they are but they find that who they have become is at odds with how their society works. They find that they have to adapt again, not by reverting to who they were, but finding a balance between being authentically who they have become and by understanding and adapting to the realities of their home country. While some accomplish this feat successfully, others are still working on this, or have given up altogether. A majority of study participants associated their Fulbright-MESCYT experience with an inability to connect to the discussion topics their friends and colleagues spoke about because their worldviews changed. Some Fulbright-MESCYT participants tried to share their thoughts and experiences with others, to increase their frame of reference. They became emotionally charged because of how “different” their thoughts were compared to their friends, and their inability to connect.

Fulbright-MESCYT participants described the difficulties in hearing people gossip about other people after they had engaged in such meaningful conversation with their friends during the Fulbright-MESCYT experience. Some Fulbright-MESCYT participants did not feel they were heard and preferred to keep their thoughts to themselves, unless they were around fellow Fulbright friends.

You pretty much need to quit on being who you are, and become somebody for where you are, and then after that reality will hit you. Because you have to come back and be who you were. And you realize right away, it's impossible.

When you come back from the US, you are usually thrown at one moment. So, you just feel the flow going by you of everyone else's lives, and you're just there standing in the middle and what you feel is that you're kind of stuck, but you're also making them feel uncomfortable because their lives are flowing. You changed during the program, so like, you're bound to find yourself that with some friends, it's not necessarily that you're enemies now, but you're, you don't necessarily have the same interests as before.

To me, it was harder, the reverse cultural shock, because then you start getting used to this quality of life, you have access to quality transportation, you can ride your bike in the city, you can walk on the street very late at night and feel safe. Then coming back home,
and then kind of, my country's still so far behind and transportation and public
transportation, insecurity in access to health and education access, there are so many
things and you start like, noticing everything and realizing where did I just come to, like,
everything is so wrong in here. And you start comparing.

The people I've helped get the Fulbright, I've told them if you don't have the character
and the strength of mind to come for what you have to deal with when you come back,
you better not go.

We were in different worlds, my friends wanted to talk about certain topics, and I was
always talking about my experience and other topics. So, the conversation started to
change. I was bringing new topics, and exploring how the people that surrounded me
thought about these new topics that they never talked about. And I think it changed a
little bit how I interacted with my friends. I had also to control myself sometimes because
probably my ideas were very different. So, it was like a process to try to understand them
and help them understand.

The conversations with my classmates were so interesting, culturally open. And, you
know, going back to work where I changed a lot, I think, it was hard to get back to the
same conversations and the same office gossip and the same dynamic.

I will say that it has to do a lot with this concept of the person that you were before the
Fulbright Program no longer exists, it's a new and evolved person, you know, you change
a lot in so many levels that is just like, I think it's illogical to think that you will be the
same. And in my case, I was not the same at all.

Fulbright-MESCYT participants described reverse culture shock hitting them much
harder than the challenges of adapting to the United States when they first began their
experience. Their friends had continued living, and were now either getting married, having
children, or in a different stage. They found they no longer had time to talk to their former
friends, and that their interests were no longer the same.

**My Mama Hates Fulbright**

A majority of participants expressed difficulty reconnecting with their parents and their
home country. Participants said that their parents felt they were unable to connect to them like
they used to, while participants felt parents were trying to place controls and boundaries when
they had already lived on their own. Parents also expressed pride because their children were
part of the Fulbright Program. Parents remained in conflict between loving the prestige of the Fulbright Program and feeling grief because of their inability to connect with their children.

Still to this day, my mama hates Fulbright. If you if you have this conversation with my mother, she would have been crying like an hour ago. She would be telling you that the American changed the system in my brain, which they did.

My mom hated how much I hated this country. She was like, why are you so negative about the city all of a sudden, and I'm like, you haven't lived abroad, you don't know how positive a city can be. I think that as I got used to it I wouldn't say I love Santo Domingo, but I got to tolerate it.

Choosing between continuing living certain ways of living that I no longer identified with, or choosing to live my life, the way that I wanted to, and that's why my relationship with my family after that point, was not the same. I will spend many months you know, and it was a very hard tension between me and my parents, like, I don't really want you to continue to live in your sin life. If that's something you cannot change, I will probably suggest you go find another place to live.

I came back to live with my mom and my brother. And the first days were fine, because I'm back and they were welcoming me. I had to get used to not having a car, to having my mom trying to get a curfew at home, to get used to use every space in the house with them, to have their visitors in the house and having all the noise around, it was a period of adaptation. I was still comfortable because I didn't pay rent at the beginning until I started to work. That was immediately but it was more comfortable than what I had in New York, of course, but it was hard for me to adapt to being like mommy's girl again. I was like no.

A majority of Fulbright-MESCYT participants had to grapple with a changed relationship with their parents, as they struggled to connect to their children, who were now fiercely independent, had strong opinions on how the world worked, and what they thought freedom looked like. Most Fulbright-MESCYT participants expressed that their parents were excited about having children that participated in the program, but even some of them expressed sadness in being unable to connect with their children and the experiences they had gone through.

Participants described their parents’ discontent with their discomfort and dislike for how their home country worked when they returned home. All participants ended up moving to another home, either with a spouse or a roommate by the end of their experience. One participant was no
longer able to live in his parent’s home and was asked to leave his church community or to continue living a “life of sin” because his choice to be fully himself was no longer approved by his parents.

No Opportunities for People Who Travel and Get Degrees

Three of the seven participants of the study also found themselves excited to return and work in their respective fields so that they can contribute what they learned during their graduate program to their home country. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni returned to the Dominican Republic with hopes, ideas, and plans to transform their country, and change the world. To them, the fact that they studied in the United States as a Fulbright-MESCYT participant means that they will aspire to better paying jobs that allow them to make an impact to their home country. However, what they find when they return is a need to search for work, and the employment they do find does not remunerate them at a level higher than they were paid before departing for their international education experience. Their aspirations were so connected to transforming their home community that they turned down high-paying job offers from U.S. organizations. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni have dreams and commitment to making their country a better place. However, Fulbright-MESCYT participants felt deflated upon their return to their home country, because once they returned, they realized how difficult it would be to attain what they had before. Their experience in a completely different culture and their opportunity to see what could be possible left them feeling dispirited almost immediately. This was initially true for some of the participants that had no job opportunity and had to focus on searching for work, and for those that returned to the same position they left before departing the country. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni that received an immediate promotion that put their skills to use adapted much more easily, and felt like they were putting their skills to use. It was one less thing for them to
worry about adapting to, and one more thing they could actually transform in their community.

Saudi scholars interviewed by Alkubaidi and Alzhrani (2020) similarly felt that they had much to offer after completing doctoral degrees in the United States; however, when they returned to serve as university professors, they found their ideas were not welcome and they faced high levels of bureaucracy and had little guidance in learning to readjust to their workplace.

Alkubaidi and Alzhrani also found that the participants of their study were equally dismayed by their initial salaries because they could not attain the quality of life, or provide quality education to their children, with it. Each Fulbright-MESCYT alumni made important contributions since they returned home; however, those that had immediate promotions or positions that matched their new skillset, the impact was much quicker than for those that had to find a way to contribute to their home community, pay their bills, and adjust to their home country.

Finding the New Me

Fulbright-MESCYT participants spent some time adapting back to their reality at home and faced difficulties and challenges in the process. All of the participants were committed to creating change in their home country, but while some immediately found meaningful work, it took others years to find work where they felt their learnings could create change in their community. That being said, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni looked intently for ways to share the experience they lived in the United States, and were persistent in their cause. Eventually, Fulbright-MESCYT participants found a way their changed persona to their home country. The following horizons describe a few ways in which the Fulbright-MESCYT Program connected to their new reality.
Neither the Authority, nor the Boss, but You Have to Make Change

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni persist and find a way to make change, even when they are not in a leadership position. One of the results of their experience in the United States was to be exposed to the concept of leading from the side. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni may not be in designated roles of authority, but they find a way to lead from the side to accomplish the goals that are required to create necessary change. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are deeply dedicated to transforming their country, and understand the importance of little wins to make that possible. They are more connected to their ideals of creating a better world than they are to a political party, and you may find them working for multiple political leaders as long as the result is for the country’s transformation.

Most of the technical work, and most of the like leadership work, you need to want to work in settings where you are, sometimes the boss, but not necessarily the authority. And sometimes you're neither the authority, but you're not necessarily the boss, but you know, that you need to find a way to make to change things.

I took a class on leadership, which for me was awesome. We read a lot of literature of leadership without authority, and how sometimes you don't have the hierarchical power or the authority to do something, but you have to lead or lead from behind or lead from the side or lead in so many different ways. That gave me like the experience and the opportunity to lead my bosses in some analysis or some techniques, or whatever.

Shaping my Teaching Persona

A majority of participants associated their Fulbright-MESCYT experience with shaping their teaching persona. The majority of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni I interviewed for this study also engaged in teaching at a university following their experience in the United States, including those that did not have experience teaching prior to their programs.

And that's something that I always admired, always aspired to do, in the sense that I said, I want to be that teacher who is very approachable, but also kind of creates this level of respect, and I want to be very organized with my classes. Right now, we have reached past that point of, of half the semester and I always do kind of like a review with my students. And I will send like a poll, and I will tell them please rate the class so far. I will
say that's solely in honor of my Fulbright experience, how I shaped that kind of persona that I wanted to be as a teaching member.

One of the main reasons that I wanted to get a Master’s is because I wanted so badly to teach. And one of the big aspects of the Fulbright MESCOYT experience was achieving my masters and then returning back home. The fact that I could enter my alma mater, and then start teaching there was a great thing about the Fulbright-MESCOYT experience and I shaped my method, trying to replicate my thesis advisor's method.

Fulbright-MESCOYT alumni described shaping their coursework to reflect their U.S. learning experience, including implementing their own faculty rating system to help them improve their teaching practices, becoming more approachable, increasing course organization, figuring out which students are facing difficulties and shaping the course to meet their needs. Multiple Fulbright-MESCOYT alumni described the impact of one or a few of their U.S. faculty on the way that they organized their classes upon their return to the Dominican Republic. One Fulbright-MESCOYT alumni described shaping a new graduate degree program around their experience studying in the United States. Another Fulbright-MESCOYT alumni described the impact their modified coursework had on creating interest in a particular field of study for students that participated in their class.

*If You Have Skin in the Game, You Have to Stay in the Game*

Fulbright-MESCOYT participants are persistent and showcase their grit and their commitment to contribute what they learned to their home country. Their dedication is not tied to financial earnings, though, as referenced above, they do feel better when their compensation is commensurate with their education level. Their commitment is not to their own progress, but to the progress of their community. Fulbright-MESCOYT participants realize that though people are skeptical about political participation, transformation efforts and their possibility to effect change, they have a duty and commitment to make their country a better place. Though Fulbright-MESCOYT alumni faced few opportunities while growing up, they had more chances
than other youth in their home country and they are committed to sharing those opportunities with others from their home country. Faced with all of the odds, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni find a way to make a contribution to their community.

**Living up to the Fulbright Standard**

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described a need to live up to the Fulbright standard. They combined a sense of pressure with a responsibility to uphold a standard of excellence. Some participants attributed this feeling of upholding the Fulbright standard to a letter they received that was signed by then President Barack Obama upon their start of the Fulbright Program. Other Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described a duty to contribute to the Fulbright standard because they met Fulbright alumni from a decade or more ago that were conducting incredible work in their communities. Still others described carrying a Fulbright-MESCYT seal of excellence that made them evaluate their work and actions, personally and professionally. A majority of participants described a feeling that they had to live up to the Fulbright standard in order to maintain the program’s prestige.

When you get to meet the community, and you know that wherever you go, you find Fulbright people and there's like these high expectations. And you see especially like these Fulbrighters, that have gone away a few years back, and have come and spend 10-15 years working here and doing great stuff. You say, like, wow, like, you really have to live up to that standard.

I'm challenging myself every day, because I feel I have this seal right here, like, oh, you're a Fulbright-MESCYT alumna, you have some responsibilities you have to take into consideration every time you act.

**Fulbright Magic**

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described a palpable connection with other Fulbright participants and alumni. The connection was filled with a common goal of improving themselves and others. Fulbright-MESCYT felt reciprocity with other Fulbrighters, a true
interest in getting to know them, their thoughts, ideas, and reflects the power of the program in creating change in them, what one of the participants deemed “Fulbright magic.” Six of seven Fulbright-MESCYT alumni associated their experience with this commitment to improve their communities because they had the chance to live in the “land of opportunity” and take advantage of every opportunity.

These people go through a process to get there, and, you know, you went through the same process. There is like this common belief of, of improving yourself, improving others, and getting the most you can out of every situation. You feel some kind of reciprocity, like you feel that if someone like Fulbright is coming here, I really want them to write to me. That’s part of the Fulbright magic.

It opened doors for me, doing my master's in the US. I think even as I've been promoted several times after that, in my job, I don't know if that had anything to do with that specific, but I think all of that experience, all of my education and how I learned to be more independent, and, and deliver results, and all of those qualities and skills that I gained during my Fulbright years, and also I teach at the university, and I think it, the prestige that a program in the U.S. and also being a Fulbrighter gives you, I do think it makes a difference.

The Fulbright program and the people who have been part of those programs, and I see ourselves and the difference is that at some point, they just put a shot on you and you're changed.

Fulbright-MESCYT participants felt that being an alumnus of the Fulbright Program made a difference in their promotions at work, their ability to work independently and their dedication to teach others what they learned. From the moment Fulbright-MESCYT participants apply to the program, they immediately start thinking about the “positive impact” they want to have on their country, and the effect that had on their “personal goals.” The experiences they lived during their program contributed to the opportunities Fulbright-MESCYT participants had after their experience because of the skills and toolset they gained during the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni also attributed the Fulbright brand with feeling part of a larger community and felt that prestige and pride were connected to the Fulbright name.
Fulbright-MESCYT participants know that even though they are not all participating in different graduate degree programs, they are participating in “education in another language” and they are “being independent on your own.” Fulbright-MESCYT participants felt their experience was deeply transformative, in the sense that participants were “completely different persons at the end of the process.” One participant even described their experience to that of a heart transplant patient, as every “second of existence” depends on their Fulbright-MESCYT experience.

Textural and Structural Descriptions of Experience

Textural descriptions of experience provide descriptions about what occurred during the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This analysis takes place by reflecting upon the experiences lived by the research participants, synthesizing the data, and conducting imaginative variation in order to get to the true essence of the experience. Meanwhile, structural descriptions focus on the underlying manner in which the overall group of Fulbright-MESCYT participants experienced the phenomenon. In the following segment, I provide a textural description of the experience lived by the Fulbright-MESCYT alumni based on the data collected during the interview process, which is followed by a structural description of the experience.

Textural Description of Experience

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni became much more critical in their thought process following their experiences in the U.S. Their interactions with faculty and their peers allowed them to engage in deep dialogue that challenged their frame of reference, and forced them to think from different perspectives. When they did not feel ready to engage in critical thought, they found that the resources were there for them to continue to look deeper. This need to engage in critical thinking was expected and supported by faculty. Faculty members inspired and challenged Fulbright-MESCYT alumni to question their own logic, in order to come up with
a new argument. That sort of critical thinking is what Fulbright-MESCYT participants intended to bring back to their students, if they were serving in a faculty role. In addition to increasing critical thinking as part of their coursework, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni transformed their courses and based them on the models of learning they gained from their favorite U.S. academic experiences. From implementing mid-term evaluations, to engaging with students to learn about their interests and career path, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni shaped their teaching persona and became mentors to their students after their return home.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni felt supported by a network throughout their experience. This network may have included other international students, Fulbrighters, and local friends they made during their program. This network of friends helped them through health conditions faced by family members, issues of adapting to the host country’s academic system, house management, and ultimately broadened their worldviews. The research participants defined this network as a community of people that enjoyed the ups with them, and helped them through the downs, and felt reciprocity with the group. Participants felt like their majority of their friends were from the international student community, though there was an exception of a person that connected deeply to a local resident where he studied.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni that participated in the study engaged in teaching, and connected their Fulbright-MESCYT experience to a need to replicate the U.S. teaching method for their students once they became faculty members in their home country. Participants were surprised by the dedication and type of relationship U.S. faculty members created with their students. They wanted to shape their class around their students to better help them understand the concepts, and to foster critical thinking. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni implemented surveys, started work groups after hours, and implemented new syllabi based on their U.S. educational
experiences. Once they did, they felt rewarded by the engagement their students had in the class, and their interest in diverse career tracks.

Fulbright-MESCYT participants developed a clear preference for diversity. They described their shock and awe at the amount of diversity they encountered when they studied in the United States. At first, participants were apprehensive, and did not know how to engage each culture, some generalized, others thought they were easygoing, but they all absorbed and came to appreciate diversity. That exposure to diversity broadened their worldviews, and led them to understand the importance of treating each person individually, being more thoughtful and considerate, and not building walls. This exposure also generated changes in their worldview, and when they returned home, they expressed an inability to connect to most of their friends, because they changed and because their friends had moved on and were in different stages of life. This issue connecting to people also emerged with Fulbright-MESCYT participants and their families. Parents wanted to enforce rules at home, but participants felt freedom and did not want to revert to the status quo. Some parents developed disdain for the Fulbright Program because of how it changed their children. All of the Fulbrighters were now living on their own, with roommates, or with significant others, but not with their family.

Another theme that emerged for Fulbright-MESCYT alumni was that they returned home to either the same jobs or no jobs. Those that left with contracts to return to found they were stuck doing the same work while they waited for a promotion. Meanwhile, those that returned with no job found themselves receiving job offers that paid the same salary they earned prior to receiving a graduate degree from the United States. They were equally concerned about having gained all this knowledge and not being able to implement what they learned. All research
participants were very focused on making a difference in their country based on their experiences in the United States, but they felt those opportunities were few and far between.

Fulbright-MESCYT participants felt there was a standard of excellence they had to uphold. Fulbright-MESCYT participants learned about leadership during their graduate programs, and they were intent on implementing it, even if they were not in positions of authority. While some of the Fulbright-MESCYT participants were happy to share their perceptions with the world, and train their friends and family on the concepts and ideas they learned, others were ousted from their family homes, or decided to isolate themselves to keep the peace.

**Structural Description of Experience**

The experience of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program for study participants is one of intense emotions, as they are rocked by the challenges to their frame of reference posed by constant interactions with people from diverse cultures. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are challenged by every conversation and moment of dialogue with people from other cultures. Their core thoughts, generalizations, stereotypes are broken by direct interaction with friends that opened themselves up to them, and faculty that destroyed their logic. Their experience in U.S. higher education also brings up emotional struggles because of their own adjustments to living on their own in a completely different country. They pushed themselves to their boundaries, and realized there were none. That effort resulted in a complete change in their perspectives.

The friends they engaged with during their program became their network and family, as they learned who they were, what they liked and did not like, and who they wanted to become. They were shocked as they lifted the layers of the masks, grew together, and learned together about who they really were. This is the network that still today provides emotional support and
helps participants make it through the program. The experience brought many new relationships to each person’s life, people that were all important during the program, bonds that became family and friends, and that helped them each prevail. The relationships were not a one-way affair, participants equally supported their friends in their trying times, creating strong mutual relations with people from around the world. Participants engaged in challenging dialogue, both in class and in activities with friends and classmates, and this provided moments of challenging dialogue that peeled back their preconceptions and showed them their arguments in their raw, true form, led them to describe the program as changing their lives. This feeling of liberty and the ability each participant had to live and feel that they were in the “land of opportunity” allowed participants to feel they were free, without shackles, to become whomever they chose. The seemingly limitless options overwhelmed participants.

Upon their return to their home country, participants returned home to their families and felt like they were placed back in a cage, without an opportunity to make decisions about where and how they live. They were desperate to find work that valued them, but they found themselves returning to the same job they left, or receiving offers paying the same salary they earned when they departed. Participants expressed their deep desire to contribute to their home country. They felt disappointed. They had all this knowledge sitting there, but they were unable to put it to use in a way that would most impact their society. They felt it would just go to waste, so they persisted. They found work as professors, in the private sector, as entrepreneurs, and eventually, the majority had a chance to serve in the public sector.

Their frustrations with their return home were not limited to their work experience. Their worldviews changed, and they became uncomfortable listening to conversations about people, and discriminatory talk. They changed, but nothing at home had. Some of the participants found
themselves trying to change the worldviews of their community, others moved on and found new friends that they could relate to, and others isolated themselves, because that was where they found peace. All participants became louder and voiced their feelings, but while some worked on engaging others to change their viewpoints, others isolated themselves because they felt they were in different worlds and frequencies, cut ties with people that did not accept the new version of them, others made new friends. They found it was impossible for them to come back and revert to who they were. This feeling of being completely disconnected from who they were before the program extended to participants’ relationships with their families. Some Fulbrighters described their mothers hating Fulbright because of the rift it had caused in the bond they had with their children, others attempted to control the lives of their children, who now, after living on their own for more than two years were capable and used to making their own decisions. They felt controlled and like their independence had been snatched away. They even found it frustrating to have help from household workers and their parents. Their experience living abroad during the Fulbright-MESCYT Program challenged their norms, offered them freedom, and taught them how to get things done independently, and they were not going back.

Fulbright-MESCYT participants felt there were high expectations, because of the work implemented by previous Fulbright alumni, because of the impressions other Fulbright participants made on them during their meetings, and because that was what the United States and the Dominican Republic expected of them. They felt pressure to create change and live up to the expectations, but could not define whose expectations they were trying to live up to, aside from their own pressures. There was a common need to live up to the Fulbright standard, and participants expressed a need to create change in their communities because of their commitment to uphold the Fulbright name.
Fulbright-MESCYT participants learned to lead from the side during their experience. They found ways to implement that leadership and felt excited about creating change. Fulbright-MESCYT participants now also felt they were part of the prestige of the program, and felt they had to maintain it by doing good and by continuing to connect with the community. There was no way Fulbright participants were going to go back to how they used to be. Whether they were isolating themselves, completely out there, or moving strategically, each Fulbright-MESCYT study participant was sure the program had changed them, and felt a need to give back what they learned.

**Results from the Photo-elicitation Method**

I started off each of the first interviews by asking participants to show their photo and describe why they selected the particular photo to describe their Fulbright-MESCYT experience. Photos were utilized as a method to build rapport with participants and not as data for this study. The photo-elicitation method transported participants to their experience and served as an exceptional segue into exploring the Fulbright-MESCYT experience. The photos chosen by participants highlighted their relationships with other students, represented a milestone, or showcased a specific spot that was memorable for the study participant. In each case, the photo elicitation method helped jumpstart the conversation and supported the opening up process that is so important in transcendental phenomenological research. Recalling Harper (2002) and Kunimoto (2004), the photo also deepened the context of the experience and allowed for the experience to move past words and into vivid imagery. This was very useful in reviving memories of the lived experience, and in acquiring deeper and more pertinent context. Participants explained how difficult it was to select just one photo of their experience as the representation of their overall experience, and still shared their excitement at looking through
photos from their experience because they helped them remember what it was like. Participants expressed difficulty in selecting the right one to depict their experience. Participants described the stories vividly and that helped me understand their experiences much better because they were more descriptive in their responses. Participants had the power to lead me through their Fulbright-MESCYT experience and tell their story in the way that they wanted to describe it, which is in line with Bates et al. (2017). Future research should include photo-elicitation methods as a means to increase the information sharing process and to ease the start of the conversation.

**Chapter Summary**

The purpose of Chapter Four was to present the findings of my data analysis process. I began the chapter with bracketing before beginning with the presentation of the data, and this allowed me to check my biases one more time. This helped me to ensure my perspectives were set aside prior to defining and refining the horizons. I then began the data analysis process with a presentation of my demographic profiles to provide the overall context of the participants I interviewed for my study. Next, I provided individual narrative descriptions for each participant describing each of their experiences. I then presented the horizons that emerged through my research. Based on that I created composite textural and structural descriptions to outline the essence of the Fulbright-MESCYT experience. Finally, I discussed the results from using a photo-elicitation method as part of this dissertation study, and I described research limitations for this study. In Chapter Five, I provide an overview of my primary research question, discuss my study findings, connect the relevant findings to the literature, connect these to my research questions, and provide recommendations for future research.
“Wherever you go, you find Fulbright people and there’s like these high expectations. And you see Fulbrighters that have come and spend 10-15 years working here and doing great stuff. You say, wow, you really have to live up to that standard.”

(Juan, Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus)

In this final chapter, I discuss the findings of my study, initially presented in Chapter 4. The first section of this chapter presents the invariant structure, or textural-structural synthesis and responds to the central research question. I then connect the experiences lived by Fulbright-MESCYT alumni to the sub-questions. I discuss the study findings and connect them to current literature. I conclude with statements on the implications for research, theory and practice, including updates to the conceptual framework, and provide a summary of the study.

Overview of Primary Research Question

In Chapter One, I posited the following research questions: What is the lived experience of the Dominican alumnus of the Fulbright-MESCYT scholarship program after returning to the DR? The research question is consistent with a transcendental phenomenological methodology. The goal of a transcendental phenomenological study is to understand the essence of the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). Through this methodology, the overarching identity emerged, and brought to light the lived experience of Fulbright-MESCYT Program alumni upon their return home. Within the interviews, I addressed both the Fulbright-MESCYT experience itself and the return home. I present my response to the overarching research question through the invariant structure, also known as the textural-structural synthesis, or what Moustakas (1994) describes as the essence of the lived experience. Transcendental phenomenology explores the
identity of the overall experience, and translates that into the essence. The invariant structure is the culmination of the research process, the integration of the textural and structural structures, and the intersection of the what and how. This is an opportunity to understand the response to the central research question of the study. Below the invariant structure, I include responses to each of the sub-questions based on the data collected from study participants.

**Invariant Structure: The Essence of the Fulbright-MESCYT Experience**

Returning home after the Fulbright-MESCYT experience is to live up to the Fulbright standard. It is a time of adaptation, challenge and opportunity. Their return home is deeply tied to how they made it through the overall Fulbright-MESCYT experience in the United States. During their program, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni develop strong relationships that puts their lives on turbo, broadening their views and horizons, and developing tight knit communities that help participants sort out the homesickness, the loneliness, and the culture shock. This network of emotional support continues long after the program ends, as they continue leaning on peers, and peers continue leaning on them, no matter their geographical location. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni deeply feel the community they were part of during their U.S. study experience helped them learn about themselves and challenged them to remain true to themselves even after they returned home. That community proved key to helping Fulbright-MESCYT alumni as they processed their experience and settled in to their home country. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni continue to reach out to their community to receive support and to serve as their emotional support through the most challenging situations.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni adapt to a different system of academics, learn how to deal with everyday situations, and live their experience with people from very different cultures. They are willing to absorb everything and spend the first two honeymoon weeks learning the
new system, and then, the experience becomes difficult. The sojourn becomes difficult because participants learn to deal with different climates, different ways of learning, and different cultures. They realize they have preconceptions and they were ignorantly generalizing who people are. They come to the deep understanding that you need to understand people as they present themselves. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni became very engaged in learning from their peers and understand the importance of respect. By the end of the journey, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni preferred immersing themselves in diversity. They became used to having interesting, culturally open conversations, and it became impossible for them to revert to who they were.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni come back changed, and find that some of their friends have moved on and are in different stages. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni return home and feel stuck. They are thrown at one moment, as if everyone else’s life continues to flow and they are in the middle, neither here nor there, so they find it very difficult to adjust. Readapting to friends was not the only difficulty Fulbright-MESCYT participants felt upon their return home. While their parents were proud of their children’s achievements, they were also on different wavelengths from their family, and that inability to connect made their families almost feel they had lost a child. Parents tried to exert control over their children because they were living in their homes, but it was counterproductive. All of the Fulbright-MESCYT alumni were either living with their significant others or with their roommates when they participated in the study. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni lived on their own, experienced evolution, and felt they reached the sun, and returned home unscathed. Each Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus processed their return home differently, some tried to shape the mentality and worldview of their friends and family, others had spouses and friends that were Fulbright alumni, had studied abroad, or were open-minded to turn and relate to, but others turned to themselves, and isolated their thoughts so they could have
peace. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni that had spouses that went through similar experiences fared much better than those that did not. In any case, there was no turning back to who they were before the experience for any of them.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni return to their countries excited about making a change, and contributing what they learned to society, only to be hit with a dose of reality. They received job offers for approximately the same salary they were earning before leaving their home country, others felt they were returning to do the same exact work. Some Fulbright-MESCYT alumni become disillusioned almost immediately. However, this initial disillusionment did not last forever. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are like chameleons, they adapt, and find ways to contribute what they learned in the United States to their home communities. They find their new selves. Those that have jobs waiting for them contribute to their societies more rapidly, but even those that have to wait implement actions that enable positive change for their communities. For those that have to search for work or create businesses, their impact takes much longer. Overall, each Fulbright-MESCYT participant found a way to make an impact and each had a passion and a commitment to make a difference in their home country.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni feel a need to make change in their home countries, no matter whether they have authority in leadership roles. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni learned to lead from the side. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni felt they were upgraded following their experiences in the United States, because of the adversity they overcame, and the grit that comes through participating in the experience. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni return home and engage in critical thinking, because the biggest value from their experience was the dialogue they engaged in with other people. They learned how to think critically by having professors that presented their views, then made them find the logic of those views, and tried to destroy the logic.
Fulbright-MESCYT alumni went home with the goal of looking deeper, and asking for help without hesitation. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni shape their teaching persona based on the experiences they have with their favorite U.S. faculty members. They replicate teaching methods, curriculum, programs and coursework to be more approachable, develop a sense of respect with their students and understand how to best structure the course to make it most beneficial for the majority of students.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni embark on a journey of transformation, and find the most meaningful relationships are developed with other people that experienced similar journeys. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni had a chance to live in the land of opportunity and grow and transform in the ways that suited each participant. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni connect to that Fulbright magic in every sense. Participants felt that the Fulbright-MESCYT program opened doors for them because they became independent, results-driven, and the prestige of the program helped them fortify their own network.

Fulbright-MESCYT feel they have to be good citizens and push positive changes. That level of excellence is also associated with pressure to be great always, because Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are part of a select group of leaders and a family and they have to uphold a high standard of excellence. Some participants attribute this need to uphold an invisible standard to a letter sent by the U.S. President to them at the time and because of the successes all of the other Fulbright participants have had before them. The future aspirations of the Fulbright-MESCYT alumni always ultimately link them back to their home country. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are essential to the Fulbright magic, because through the most defying and challenging situations, they overcame and find opportunity for their home country.
How has this experience shaped their personal and professional goals?

Study participants became much more confident of themselves and who they want to be, personally and professionally. They describe learning how to think critically by questioning their paradigms and destroying the logic of their thoughts. Personally, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni that participated in this study faced a plethora of diverse cultures, sexual orientations, and ways of life, and were challenged to find who they were and who they wanted to become during their experiences in the U.S. They describe learning from other cultures and other ways of life and understanding that stereotypes and generalizations do not accurately depict who others are, that study participants need to learn who each person is without first labeling them. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni became much more empathetic because of this. Upon their return home, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni find themselves struggling to deal with parental controls. They had complete control over their lives during their experience in the U.S., so they find it hard to adapt to living with parents, to not being able to manage their time because they cannot account for traffic delays, or lack of parking, and even to support that used to ease their lives, like having household help at home.

All of the participants I interviewed were no longer living with their parents at home. One participant described the impact of seeing LGBTQI people work, have a family and buy their own homes as astonishing and it gave the participant the courage to break free from the confines of society, religious and familial requirements upon his return home. Another participant described having to coach her family and friends through unconscious bias and diversity to share the experiences she had in the United States, and to help them understand her new lens upon returning home. All participants described the importance of having someone to
talk to that had gone through a similar long-term international education experience as a key method for reflecting and adapting back to their home community.

Participants were focused on reaching a standard of excellence, because they were now Fulbright-MESCYT alumni, and the reputation of the program had to be upheld. They felt they had a responsibility to consider with every action they took for the wellbeing of the program and their fellow alumni. Fulbright-MESCYT participants were unable to describe exactly where this expectation emerged from, but alluded to a letter signed by the U.S. President at the time of their departure, and the impact of meeting Fulbright alumni and seeing their trajectory and their focus on upholding those same standards. The majority of participants described a commitment to working in the public sector, or contributing to the public sector in order to create societal change upon their return home. Even for those participants that worked in the private sector, their mind was always on how the work they conducted contributed to the wellbeing of the overall community. Participants described a struggle between wanting to stay and continue to impact their home country, and having desires to participate in another international education experience to learn more and return once again to broaden the impact for their home communities.

**How do participants’ lived experiences influence their subsequent work?**

Fulbright-MESCYT participants want to make a difference in their home country as soon as they return home, but find themselves faced with barriers to enacting change because of the lack of opportunities to serve in roles with decision-making power, delays in acquiring a job that connects to what they learned, and employment offers that pay a similar salary to what they earned prior to departing their home country and acquiring a U.S. master’s degree. They face difficulties in re-inserting themselves into the job market, unless they have a job waiting for them.
upon their return home. Even those that do have a job waiting for them have to wait for a promotion, or a job change that allows them to apply what they learned during the graduate degree programs in their home country.

The majority of participants teach university students in the Dominican Republic, and, like the majority of Dominican faculty, they teach on a part-time basis, additional to their full-time job. They described the power U.S. faculty had on their teaching methodology and how they follow-up with students in their courses. Fulbright-MESCYT participants have access to a network that facilitated job and consulting opportunities they did not have before. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni also described the prestige that was attached to the Fulbright brand and how being a Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus opened doors for promotions and other job and teaching opportunities. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni learned to manage conflict and negotiate during the graduate degree programs, and they described learning to lead from the side when they were not in roles of authority at their workplace. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni persist and find ways to influence their home country, whether it be through major roles in the government, with broad implications for public and economic policy, through entrepreneurship, or through teaching.

**How do participants’ lived experiences influence their commitment to community involvement?**

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni show commitment for improving their home community through teaching, promoting awareness of diversity and inclusion, fostering alumni association activities, and/or participating in mentorship opportunities. Some Fulbright-MESCYT alumni get engaged in the U.S. Embassy Alumni Association, while others engage with other Fulbright alumni they met during their experience in the United States. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are committed to making their community better, whether through their work, teaching or engaging in volunteer activities.
Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are committed to engaging future candidates for international education opportunities through the courses they teach, and offer mentorship to potential study abroad students. They review essays, hold mock interviews, and assign projects so that Dominicans interested in gaining admission to a U.S. or foreign university, or participating in an international scholarship program are prepared. In addition to working directly with Dominicans interested in studying abroad, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni paint murals, participate in sustainability events, and serve as alumni association leaders to promote community development efforts.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni show intolerance for discrimination against others. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni return to the Dominican Republic and become outspoken advocates for tolerance and appreciation of diversity. They engage in dialogue to share their understanding and preference for diversity and are unable to stay shut in the face of discrimination. Participants feel they have to educate family, friends and colleagues when they feel something that is being said is discriminatory.

**How do participants’ lived experiences influence their aspirations for themselves?**

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni go through metamorphosis during their experience in the United States, so they find it challenging to return home. Alumni gain courage to be their full selves, and not pay attention to what others feel about them. One participant described the power of the exchange program in helping him figuring out who he is by observing and engaging with others, learning what he liked and did not like, and applying it to his overall package. He no longer felt boxed in by the parameters he had prior to his experience in the United States.

Initially, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni constantly compare their home community to where they lived in the United States. They struggle until they adjust. After the re-adaptation process
begins, participants no longer see limits to their horizons, because they understand the power of adjusting, and re-adjusting. They are focused on upholding the Fulbright seal of excellence, and feel pressure to live up to the Fulbright standard. They have deep aspirations to contribute to the improvement of the lives of their fellow citizens, whether that is through public service, teaching or private sector work.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni largely intertwine their personal lives with their professional goals. They find partners that understand their experiences and have common goals of creating change for their society and value the power of diversity and an international education. On a personal level, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are conflicted on whether they want to geographically remain in their home country, or travel to other countries, including their host country. They discussed the struggles of defining what they wanted for their personal life, whether they wanted to start a family here, in their home country, or move abroad where they had access to clean, running water, electricity, and other standard amenities for developed countries. While they discussed these thoughts, they also described how they would continue to work for their home country even from abroad, whether it be through joint research or working for government offices located overseas. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are invariably connected to their home country, no matter their geographic location.

The Arc of Development of Fulbright-MESCYT Alumni from their Experience to Home

In Chapter 4, I listed the horizons and themes that emerged through two semi-structured phenomenological interviews with seven Fulbright-MESCYT alumni. What became clear to me through the data analysis process was that study participants go through an arc of development that starts when they depart for the Fulbright-MESCYT Program in the United States. The three stages Fulbright-MESCYT alumni progressively advance through include: *making it through,*
feeling stuck and finding the new me. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni make it through their experience in the United States with the emotional support network they find from mostly other international students in their U.S. graduate programs. They develop strong critical thinking that helps them destroy the logic, develop a preference for diversity, and constantly adapt, or learn to deal. When they return home, participants struggle to adjust and feel stuck because they have different expectations, and they feel they are in different worlds than their friends, family members and colleagues. Their parents struggle to connect with them and develop conflicting feelings for the Fulbright Program, both pride, because their children are alumni of a prestigious international exchange program, and grief, because they are unable to connect to their children in the same way. Fulbright-MESCYT participants feel there are no opportunities for people who travel to get a degree. Finally, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni adjust. They find opportunities to teach to share what they learned, they engage in developing public policies, in starting businesses to impact their community. They find that Fulbright magic is present in every Fulbright alumnus they meet, and they continue to strive to reach the Fulbright standard of excellence. In the following section, I connect each of these significant themes to existing literature and discuss the findings of this research study.

Making it Through

The making it through phase is the first stage of the Fulbright-MESCYT process when participants engage in their U.S. study experience. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are thrown into a completely different culture that tends to value the individual above the collective. Fulbright-MESCYT participants describe confronting themselves, their stereotypes, preconceptions and who they are throughout their respective experiences. They also describe the incredible plethora of cultures and access to diverse viewpoints that made them question everything they thought
they understood. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni describe facing adversity because this was the first time the majority managed their own home, and they were used to having everything done at home. In the Dominican Republic, it is customary for middle-income families to have household help that does the cleaning, cooking, and laundry, in addition to other chores. In addition to having to do housework, alumni were constantly engaged in intense critical thinking, and were consistently challenging their preconceptions. Some Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described arriving to orientation sessions with other Fulbright participants only to find themselves surrounded by smart and intelligent people, and realizing that they would have to work hard to successfully complete their programs. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni made it through their experiences by actively participating in a strong community of mostly fellow international students, engaging in dialogue and working through their insecurities. The following themes discuss experiences shared by participants related to their experiences and the subsequent importance for their life once they returned to the Dominican Republic.

I Prefer Diversity

The Dominican Republic is a very traditional, family-based and religious country. When Fulbright-MESCYT alumni traveled to their graduate programs, they found themselves faced with diversity at every corner, and some felt overwhelmed, because their home country is quite homogenous compared to the melting pot of cultures that exist in many communities of the United States. When they returned to their home country, they hoped to continue to engage in enriching conversations because they developed a preference for diversity; however, they found it difficult to return home because they changed but their society was the same. One participant felt himself represented because he saw the potential for LGBTQI people in the town where he lived in the United States. He remarked about LGBTQI living with their family, owning a home,
having a job, and living life. Another participant described feeling how closed society was in the Dominican Republic, where the city where he studied offered many opportunities to make new friends and dialogue with people everywhere he went. These deep experiences require unpacking and reflection in order to understand them and process them. Many studies focus on the self-reported feelings of cultural transformation expressed by study abroad participants, and Gardner et al. (2009) described the nature of participants to not fully describe or understand the value of their international experience and their cultural exposure because they had not had a chance to process it. Root and Ngampornchai (2012) equally found that short-term study abroad students only described surface level changes brought about by their experiences abroad. Much of the research also discussed limits in the level of transformation achieved by international education programs when critical reflection exercises are not held, or integrated into pre-departure programs or post-international education. Kortegast et al. (2015) found a need to increase the emphasis on intercultural understanding and the meaning making process so that students could get to the value of their study abroad experience. It is important to note that the only participant that did not mention the intercultural experience spent a lot of time in the United States during his childhood. In that same respect, though Fulbright-MESCYT participants described participating in gateway orientations and enrichment seminars, they did not mention participating in a post-academic seminar that would help them reflect or process their experience, and generate awareness of their home society immediately upon returning home.

**Learning How to Deal**

As discussed earlier in Chapter Five, all Fulbright-MESCYT alumni experienced challenges adapting to their “original reality.” These difficulties in readapting home reflect similar challenges to those feelings of grief associated with the loss of connection to one’s family
and friends described by Butcher (2002), Root and Ngampornchai (2015) and Kortegast et al. (2015). Butcher, Root and Ngampornchai and Kortegast et al. called for the integration of pre-departure programs and post-arrival programs to help participants with the culture shock and the reverse culture shock process. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni equally described participating in enrichment seminars held midway between their experiences in the United States as being an important way to reconnect with other Fulbright participants, reflect on their learning and growth thus far, and deepening their Fulbright experience. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni also have the opportunity to engage in a plethora of student support services, unlike anything they experienced at home. They described awe at having access to a writing center, career services, international student office, and in one case, even a sun therapy room, and shared how that helped them overcome the adaptation process. The importance placed on networks of emotional support shared by Fulbright-MESCYT alumni equally indicate that support for alumni to meet each other and foster the development of those relationships after they return home may also be helpful in processing their experiences, increasing their networks, and sharing with people that have had similar experiences so the isolation and alienation is reduced.

**Sorting out the Homesickness**

Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia (2008) found in a study of 200 interviews that the majority of participants described feeling loneliness or experiencing isolation during their international education experience. Sawir et al. describe relational loneliness, as missing family, and social loneliness, as missing social relationships with friends. Altissimo (2020) also described loneliness as one of the recurring themes affecting the participants in her study, as important friendships are no longer nearby and cannot connect to all the moments of one’s experience. Altissimo also described the consistency in finding other international
students to bond with, as they were also lonely, and while one might want to get to know a local, it was much harder for participants to do so. Altissimo described this inability to connect with domestic people and students as a negative mark on the overall experience for participants. For Fulbright-MESCYT participants, the majority also described developing strong connections and relationships with other international students, and not with locals. One participant described efforts to initially foster a relationship with domestic students but found that there was no interest. After connecting deeply to other international students, domestic students finally reached out, but the participant found it was too late as they had already formed a bond with other international students. Two of the Fulbright-MESCYT participants were engaged in a relationship and described how important it was to have each other to share their experiences with and to process and reflect upon it. Altissimo similarly discussed the role of a partner in working through the loneliness, and also referred to the difficulties in being everything for one person. In the case of this study focused on Fulbright-MESCYT participants, they each went on their program in separate locations and found that they were there as support for one another, to comment on their experience and reflect, but they did not feel that they relied upon each other because of the geographical distance and time between their programs. Altissimo and Sawir et al. described a need to increase international student interaction with both other international students and domestic student groups, to help students overcome the loneliness barrier. Fulbright-MESCYT participants also described feeling lonely, because their families and their social networks were not physically there and they were not able to connect. Study participants described finding solace in their emotional support networks. These networks were mainly composed of other international students that were going through the same process of adaptation. This new network was also composed of other Fulbright students from their country, and also
Fulbright students they met during meetings. Developing a network was key for Fulbright-MESCYT alumni as they created a “safety net” that helped them through challenging emotional times, and provided them with different perspectives that emanated from the “different upbringing” or “different support” they had. Having a strong support system also helped some Fulbright-MESCYT alumni put themselves out there and lit the way for the rest of the experience.

Destroy the Logic

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni develop critical thinking skills during their international education experience. One Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus categorized the critical thinking development process as destroying the logic of any argument. Another Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus said that Americans taught him how to think. Still another Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus discussed the way in which faculty members drove inquiry and dialogue in their teaching process. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni that participated in this study only experienced the Dominican system of higher education prior to departing to the United States. As stated earlier, the Dominican higher education system is led by a majority of part-time or hourly paid faculty members who teach after they finish their full-time daily work schedule. Classes may be teacher-centric as opposed to the facilitator style and inquiry-led classes that are typical in U.S. higher education. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni commented on this drastic shift in their thought process after they finished their learning experience in the United States.

Feeling Stuck

Fulbright-MESCYT participants return home and almost immediately enter the feeling stuck phase of their experience. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni return home and are excited to see their family, to reconnect with friends, and to implement what they learned in their home
countries. However, they return changed with a new mindset, but they are not prepared to see that their home country is the same as they left it, except for their friends that have, for the most part, moved to another stage of their life. They feel irritated by the levels of control their parents want to re-impose on them because they already felt freedom. Their parents equally feel grief at the loss of who their children were before. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni feel grief because they no longer had their emotional support network in a face-to-face format, and they no longer had the incredible support services that are available at U.S. universities, and the Fulbright Program accompaniment ends after Fulbright-MESCYT alumni return home. There were no more Gateway Orientations or Enrichment Seminars to attend to help them process their experience. They transformed during their Fulbright-MESCYT experience, but that new persona was not welcome in their home country. They felt stuck between two worlds, and for some time, were unable to mobilize into a new being for their new environment.

**Come Back and Be Who You Were and It's Impossible**

When Fulbright-MESCYT participants return to their home country, they are ready to connect to their old friends, family and contribute to their home country. Kortegast et al. (2015) described the lack of substantive interest displayed by families and friends of international exchange participants upon their return home, and how this stifled their attempts at reflecting on and processing their experiences. They find it hard to connect to the local community and find themselves generally comparing their home country to the place where they lived for a few years in the United States. A majority of study participants associated their Fulbright-MESCYT experience with an inability to connect to the discussion topics their friends and colleagues spoke about because their worldviews changed. Participants got used to talking about ideas and different ways of living, and felt challenged in their way of thinking during their Fulbright-
MESCYT experience. Returning home meant that they would have to abide by societal norms in the Dominican Republic that did not match with what they had become accustomed to in their host country. Alkubaidi and Alzhrani (2020) conducted a study focused on understanding reverse culture shock experienced by six recent graduates of U.S., Australian, or European doctoral degree programs from Saudi Arabia. Participants of the study traveled with their families for a period of five to eight years to their respective host countries. Like Fulbright-MESCYT participants, Alkubaidi and Alzhrani similarly found that the participants returned home with new ideas and identities and that they were not aligned to the society they returned to, and felt their ideas and thoughts were unwelcome when they returned home. Fulbright-MESCYT participants return home with a broadened worldview and no longer connect in the same way. They feel a conflict between who they used to be and who they have become. Some Fulbright-MESCYT participants socially isolate in order to survive.

When participants return to their home country, they realize that their friends have moved on to different stages of life, and that they either are lacking time to connect, or they are just very different people. Fulbright-MESCYT participants realize that the person they turned into during their international education experience must also adapt to their new reality. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni feel it is even more difficult to adapt to their local reality upon their return home because of how much they adapted to their lifestyle in the United States and they start making constant comparisons. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni describe a high level of character and strength required to face the reality once they return home. “If you don’t have the character and the strength of mind to come for what you have to deal with when you come back, you better not go.” Fulbright-MESCYT alumni discussed feeling isolation when they return home, because they were unable to share what they learned and process their experience effectively. The only
people Fulbright-MESCYT alumni were able to talk to that actually got it were people that went through similar situations including other Fulbright alumni and former participants of long-term international exchange programs. Butcher (2002) equally found that relationships with friends that had international education experiences at the same time deepened while those that had not were diverged. Butcher describes the re-entry process as students going through grief because they have lost access to the way they lived their life in their host country, lived independently, and their overall experience, and they are also coming to terms with the fact that their home country, interpersonal relations with friends and family are not the same as when they departed. Butcher describes this grief process as one that affects participants and never really leaves, it is a step that they may overcome, and when they do, they may understand how to merge their experience with their current life. Kartoshkina (2015) similarly found that it was challenging for U.S. college students to connect with their friends that had not had a similar international education experience following their return from study abroad. Some Fulbright-MESCYT alumni describe building walls around themselves so that they are able to continue being the person they want to be. “It doesn’t help you build a relationship because you isolate yourself. There’s no way in hell you can do that, but it gives me peace.” The isolation felt by some Fulbright-MESCYT participants led them to put those thoughts in a box, because they felt their “mind was working on a different frequency” and they did not want to make “anybody feel bad.” One person reported working out, drinking and smoking cigarettes to overcome the feelings of isolation. Saudi scholars that returned home also felt depression, isolation and disappointment in their return to their workplace (Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2020). Fulbright-MESCYT participants cut off people that they could no longer connect to and found they had a very reduced group of people they could actually connect to. All Fulbright-MESCYT participants felt they needed to
be true to themselves and were unable to change back to who they were. For one of the participants, the decision was either continuing to be who he had transformed into during his Fulbright-MESCYT experience or continue to live in his parent’s home and his church community. He reflected on that moment as a “very big rupture moment in my personal life, because that was the time when I disconnected from a very strong foundation that I had from my childhood.” Eventually, Fulbright-MESCYT participants adapt to their local reality, either by explaining their experiences and thoughts to their old friends and transforming their worldview enough to continue to engage with them, finding workarounds in their local reality, or finding new friends.

**No Opportunities for People who Travel and Get Degrees**

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described their frustration at returning home and having all of these expectations to be able to put what they learned into practice, and then not being able to do so. It is important to note that this was true for both participants that had careers they were returning to and for those that were looking for work. However, for some participants that were returning to jobs that were located within organizations used to having workers that go abroad to study and then return only had to wait a few months or a year in order to receive an official promotion. They were able to put what they learned into practice much quicker than any of the other participants. The participants that returned to the same job where organizations were not used to or did not have practices in place where they could immediately put into action what they learned were left doing exactly what they did prior to leaving, until they finally had a chance to implement what they learned. Still worse, participants that did not have job opportunities when they returned home had to search for work. These participants received job offers for the same salary they earned before leaving, and doing the same work they were doing before their
Fulbright-MESCYT experience. The expectations of the Fulbright-MESCYT alumni did not match what they returned to, because they are asked to dream about the ways they can impact their country, then they learn about the concrete methods to make that a reality, and then they are left without opportunities to create that change. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni expressed frustration at the lack of job opportunities they had when they returned because they were precisely selected to support key country development goals, and they felt they were put in a position that did not allow them to put this into practice. The issue of feeling like the education participants received was not being put into practice was a common issue faced by international education alumni in various studies (Alandejani, 2013; Epaminonda, 2014).

*My Mama Hates Fulbright*

A majority of Fulbright-MESCYT participants faced challenges adjusting to parental controls and connecting to the ideas their parents had upon their return home. Dominican society places the family at the center, and holds deference to family elders. Until recently, adults normally live with their parents until they are ready to get married, and they tend to follow parental guidance until that point. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni that return home and live with their parents face tension because they are used to making decisions on their own, managing their own home, and their time, but their parents expect them to return and follow the same norms they had prior to departure to the Fulbright Program. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni also spend an extended period of time in the United States, where the culture is much more individualistic than their home country. Butcher (2002) also found challenges and stress emerged after international education alumni returned to their home country, and made specific emphasis on returnee ability to deal with re-imposed family and home norms. Kartoshkina (2015) similarly described tensions between some recently returned study abroad participants
and their parents because of their expectation that participants would return to function as the same person and to the same norms that were present before departing for their program; other participants had more positive relationships with their parents because of how much they missed them and wanted to reconnect. Storti (2001) equally described the challenge of returning home because of the expectation that one and home will be the same as when one left; however, that is not the case. Like Butcher described in his study, Fulbright-MESCYT participants also described having a newfound appreciation for the efforts made by their parents, and especially mothers. Parents of Fulbright-MESCYT participants faced difficulty acknowledging participants’ reformed ideas about their home countries, especially when faced with the constant comparisons brought up by their children. While they still felt appreciation for their parents, the family tensions and need to feel independence again ultimately led participants to find their own space. None of the participants I interviewed lived at home with their parents. They were all living with a significant other or roommate.

**Finding the New Me**

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni face challenges to readapt themselves to their home country in the *finding the new me* phase of their experience. While Fulbright-MESCYT alumni struggled with the re-adaptation home, they overcame adversity and displayed grit in redefining their character, and focused on finding ways to implement what they learned during their experience in the United States. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are deeply committed to transforming their country, whether through public service, teaching, or work in the private sector. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni felt the need to base their teaching methods on their best experiences of study at their respective U.S. university. They felt the need to live up to an invisible standard of excellence because they were participants of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. Some attributed
the pressure to live up to a standard to a letter sent to them by then U.S. President Barack Obama, while others felt they had a seal of excellence. Finally, Fulbright-MESCYT participants may also have been shaped by their experiences meeting other Fulbright alumni, understanding their trajectory, and listening to their thoughts, something one of the participants referred to as *Fulbright Magic*.

**If You Have Skin in the Game, You Have to Stay in the Game**

Even though Fulbright-MESCYT participants are unable to find ways to immediately put into practice what they learned, each alumnus finds a way to make change happen. Some credit this persistence to the Fulbright standard of excellence they have to live up to, as this search for excellence and for making their home country, and the world a better place, has become a part of their ethos. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni overcome all of the odds to make a contribution to their country. This study took place at least three years after each participant returned, and this makes it possible to explore their return process, and how they each found their niche to give back, and their persistence in making this goal a reality. I found no other studies detailing the persistence of alumni in giving back to their home country, which reflects their understanding that the most important thing in life is not earning money, it is making their country a better place. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni are more tied to this objective than they are to any particular organization.

**Neither the Authority, nor the Boss, but You Have to Make Change**

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni learned various methods of leadership during their academic programs in the United States, including leading from the side. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni understand that even when they are not in positions of leadership, they have to use all of their resources to help foment positive change. That means pushing for little wins by presenting ideas to leaders in positions of authority. Fulbright-MESCYT internalize their mission of creating
positive change and building mutual understanding, and utilize every opportunity to foment change. They value each opportunity in their academic program as a learning opportunity, and find ways to transition that to local growth. Dominican leadership culture is very hierarchical and respectful of elders. The participants of this study were between the ages of 28 and 31, so they were relatively young. They returned home with concrete ideas on how to fix issues, and then they found ways to make those ideas into policies, organizational change and actions that improve their home country.

**Shaping my Teaching Persona**

A majority of participants connected their Fulbright-MESCYT experience with transforming or developing their teaching skills. Most Fulbright-MESCYT participants teach at a Dominican university and replicated an experience with a faculty member or course to their current teaching practices. They described faculty members from their U.S. higher education institution as having a high level of organization and structure, great rapport, and excellent ability to foment critical thinking and they wanted to emulate that. As reported in Chapter 2, approximately 87% of Dominican faculty members work part-time at higher education institutions and Dominican faculty members are paid on a part-time or hourly basis, on average, they are paid less than one hundred dollars per month (Corcino, 2018). The majority of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni engage in teaching and they do it not for monetary gains, but because teaching allows them the opportunity to give back what they learned in their graduate programs in the United States. Saudi scholars that returned home described being very interested in sharing what they learned with their home institutions; however, they were stalled by bureaucracy within their universities and without orientation (Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2018). In contrast, the majority of Dominican Fulbright-MESCYT participants felt they were able to make changes that effectively replicated some of their
coursework and programs in the United States for Dominican students, including changes to course syllabi and program structure. The ability to share what they learned with other students had a positive impact on Fulbright-MESCYT alumni; however, similar to Saudi Scholars described by Alkubaidi and Alzhrani (2018), they also experienced disillusionment with the remuneration they were offered upon their return home. Cheddadi (2018) equally described challenges faced by recently returned Fulbrighters to Algeria in adjusting to their home country, its bureaucracy in validating their studies, and in being able to put into practice what they learned in their U.S. educational experience. Cheddadi also noted the need to implement a re-entry program and workshops to support Fulbrighter reentry to their home country upon their return.

**Living up to the Fulbright Standard**

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described a shared commitment to upholding a standard of excellence that they felt was associated with the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. The need to represent the Fulbright-MESCYT Program’s standard of excellence was attributed to their experience meeting other Fulbrighters, and a congratulatory letter they received from former President Obama. Fulbright-MESCYT participants also felt they wore a Fulbright-MESCYT seal, so all of their actions had to fall in line with the Fulbright-MESCYT standard of excellence. While the feeling that they need to exemplify greatness is a positive outcome of the program, it is one that comes with pressure and stress. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described thinking about their role as Fulbright alumni in each action they took, and were very conscious of their role as ambassadors of the Fulbright Program. I found no studies describing findings of a desire or need to live up to the Fulbright standard. I recommend additional research studies focused on understanding the implications of living up to a standard of excellence and how this affects the mental health of scholarship recipients, including Fulbright-MESCYT alumni.
Fulbright Magic

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described a palpable connection and attraction toward other Fulbright alumni, a term one of the participants coined “Fulbright magic.” Each time Fulbright-MESCYT participants encounter a Fulbright alumnus, they know they are going to have interesting conversations, because they have similar goals and have faced similar challenges. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni face isolation during their graduate degree programs in the United States, but they are fortunate in that they have a strong sense of support, from the emotional support network they establish, to the program administrators that support them throughout the process. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni come back to their home culture and try to re-assimilate, but the root cause is the same. They end up finding and engaging with people that lived through similar experiences of transformation, formative experiences that allow them to be who they have become in their society. Fulbright-MESCYT participants described a common goal of making themselves and their communities better. They persist until they achieve their goals of impacting their country. Fulbright-MESCYT participants felt the Fulbright Program contributed to their success at work through promotion opportunities that were granted to them, and felt like they were part of a larger community. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni share their experience by becoming ambassadors of the Fulbright Program, providing guidance and mentorship to potential candidates, while others serve on the selection committee for the Fulbright recruitment process. Cheddadi (2018) also found that Fulbright alumni from Algeria equally became Fulbright ambassadors and increased interest in the program and in pursuing higher education in the United States. Fulbright-MESCYT participants gained a toolset from having to be independent and learn in a different language.

Recommendations for Future Research, Policy and Practice
The Fulbright Program hosts many different types of scholarships, both for U.S. citizens and foreign participants, and implements a diverse array of support programs for participants prior to arrival to the United States and during their program. I recommend increased scholarship focused on understanding participant experiences from diverse backgrounds, including Latin American and Caribbean contexts. The majority of studies focused on international students are related to topics on their experience at U.S. university campuses and lack an understanding on the context of international students in their home countries. The findings that emerged in this study highlight many positive outcomes, but also reflect the challenges faced by international exchange alumni as they re-adapt to their home country. Additional research focused on understanding participants’ experiences and realities when they return home, also recommended by Alkubaidi and Alzhrani (2020), would be beneficial. I would recommend adding specific research to understand the challenges faced by participants from diverse socio-economic, geographic, and sexual orientation backgrounds. I also recommend a deeper look into the outcomes of one-year versus two-year graduate degree programs.

One of the participants also mentioned different selection processes and diverse funding mechanisms for Fulbright participants that arrived to the U.S. Increased transparency in selection processes from the Fulbright Program would allow for research focused on the efficacy of selection processes, and may support equitable participant selection processes across the board. Many of the Fulbright-MESCYT alumni I interviewed for this study described their work teaching at a local university. It would be interesting to explore the programs and curriculum reform processes that have emerged as a result of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni in U.S. graduate degree programs.
If the Fulbright-MESCYT Program is any indication, Fulbright alumni are committed to their home country, maintaining the Fulbright seal of excellence, and to upholding the values of the program. However, I have not found any additional research to support this assertion. I recommend deepening scholarship focused on understanding the Fulbright standard of excellence that was repeated by various alumni that participated in this study. I would also be interested in learning whether the standard of excellence that Fulbright-MESCYT alumni participants of this study were so focused on upholding affected their socio-emotional wellbeing. Each Fulbright-MESCYT participant interviewed as part of this study shared very different stories of overcoming adversity and reconnecting with family and friends. They each came from diverse backgrounds within their home country. Additional qualitative studies focused on the evolution of familial and friendship relations pre- and post- international study would be beneficial.

In addition, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described powerful networks of socio-emotional support that helped them during and after their experiences. Research that explores these connections and how they contribute to mutual understanding would be beneficial to understand its contributions to the mutual understanding of the Fulbright Program. More and more governments are funding international scholarship programs, and the U.S. Government continues to sponsor the Fulbright Program. As this is a transcendental phenomenology, this study focused on a small sample, and represented a very specific dual government-funded program. Meanwhile, the Dominican government fund thousands of international scholarships for its citizens on an annual basis. Additional research focused on the value of international scholarship programs for the participants, for the countries that fund the programs, and for the countries that receive participants once they return home would also be beneficial in understanding participant
experiences and the value of government investment in these programs. Each participant described the role their experience had in ultimately creating transformation in their home country. Additional studies focused on understanding innovation and the political and economic impact of international students following their return home would be beneficial. This would also allow for further identification of the roadblocks that exist and mechanisms that may ease their transition back to their home country.

**Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s (1963) W-Curve**

Lysgaard (1955) first created the *U-Curve* model to describe the adjustment process for exchange participants transitioning to their host country, in this case the experience of Norwegian Fulbright participants. Lysgaard found that a *U-Curve* describes the experience faced by participants during their sojourn abroad. Participants in short-term stays, or less than six months tended to have an easier time, participants spending six to 18 months in an exchange program faced more difficulty, and participants spending more than eighteen months abroad had a more pleasant stay, because the length of time allowed for engaging in deep relationships, and for the full experience of excitement, challenges and recovery to take place. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) developed *The W-Curve* as an extension of Lysgaard’s *U-Curve* model. The *W-Curve* is the post-return adjustment period for alumni of international education programs. Gullahorn and Gullahorn first discuss the challenges faced by academic exchange participants during their sojourn abroad, the initial excitement, the challenges with adjusting to the host culture, and the transition to the new culture. Gullahorn and Gullahorn found that the number of social relationships participants had abroad with host country nationals also indicated how positive the participant’s exchange experience would turn out to be. Social interactions during an exchange participant’s program were extremely beneficial in building empathy, respect and in
creating a network. Continued interaction with host country nationals meant that participants developed more significant relationships. Participants that spent time in a similar culture to their own had higher satisfaction scores than participants that spent time in cultures that were different than their home country. Gullahorn and Gullahorn called for programs to last longer than one-year, as this was the transition point for many participants during their time abroad. Participants become used to their new social environment and to their social status. If participants experienced culture shock, or acculturation when they were abroad, they tended to experience re-acculturation upon their return home. Gullahorn and Gullahorn found that scholars that were returning home to their positions had less issues with acculturation than other participants, but even they missed the level of respect they were afforded while abroad. Gullahorn and Gullahorn found that student participants had a different re-acculturation process. During their experience abroad, their values changed, and they felt they could not return home. The return home was even more difficult for participants that were not fully accepted by their home society, did not fully understand their identity before departing, and ultimately felt more accepted abroad than home. Participants returning home faced a very different reality than what they had imagined when they departed their host country, and some decided to live or work abroad. Others conduct their work but withdraw from society, because they are unable to connect, so they connect only with those that have similar feelings to them, and are unable to escape the cycle. Gullahorn and Gullahorn also found that returning participants that are unable to process their experience and understand it tend to express their new ideas as superior to the feelings of people at home. This leads to further difficulty achieving an understanding of the experience abroad, and reassessing what that means upon their return home.

**Conceptual Framework based on Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s (1963) W-Curve**
Lysgaard’s *U-Curve* and Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s (1963) *W-Curve* provide a theoretical framework that in many ways matches the results of this study. Gullahorn and Gullahorn describe initial elation at the very start of an academic exchange program that is immediately followed by challenges transitioning to the local culture. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni equally described feeling initial excitement and then facing difficulty transitioning to a new way of learning, a different language, and engaging with a multitude of different cultures. This multicultural environment where they were constantly engaging with diversity was very different than what they were used to at home. Participants described how faculty members destroyed the logic of their arguments as they sought to foster critical thinking, and compared that to experience to their coursework at home, where classes were mostly lecture-based, and faculty member were mostly paid hourly or on a part-time basis, and they felt they had a lot of catching up to do in order to adapt to a different style of learning. On top of the rigorous academics where faculty members expected participation, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni also had to deal with managing their own home, for the first time, without help. This too was very different from their experience at home where they were used to having help from their parents or from household help, which is a norm for middle and upper-middle income families in the Dominican Republic. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni now had to clean, wash clothes, and pay bills, on top of engaging in difficult coursework. For Fulbright-MESCYT alumni, like for the participants described by Gullahorn and Gullahorn, developing emotional relationships was key for getting through challenging moments, sharing happy times, and developing and understanding their new identity. Like Gullahorn and Gullahorn, those that developed strong relationships while abroad, and kept in touch with those contacts, had a much easier time processing their experience and adjusting back home. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni felt constantly
pushed to their limits during their experience, both because of these deep relationships they
developed with similar international students (unlike Gullahorn and Gullahorn, where the
connections were with host country nationals), and because of their freedom to discover who
they were.

Once Fulbright-MESCYT alumni adjusted to their new environment abroad, they return
home with many expectations for their interpersonal relations, job prospects, and opportunities to
impact their home country. They find themselves feeling stuck between two worlds. They come
back expecting to be the new person they transformed into during their international education
experience and find that it is impossible. Their worldview had changed during this core, life-
changing experience, but home was still the same, and they had not come to terms with that.
Many of the Fulbright-MESCYT alumni had morphed into a new identity that was based on the
culture where they were in the United States. Like Gullahorn and Gullahorn, I also found deep
levels of isolation in participants that retreated and engaged only with themselves or people that
had gone through similar experiences, while those that took the time to process and reflect upon
their experience, and tried to describe and explain their new worldview to family and friends had
a much more fulfilling life, socially and professionally. All participants felt they were in
different worlds when they returned home, and they felt they were constantly comparing
everything to their experience in the United States. They could not connect with former friends,
because either they no longer shared the same thoughts, or friends had moved on to different
stages of their life. They found that their families developed feelings of disdain for the Fulbright
Program because they were no longer able to connect with their children in the same way.
Parents in the Dominican Republic are used to having their children live with them and follow
the rules of their household until they marry. However, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni that return
home struggle with following these norms because they have already tasted freedom. All of the Fulbright-MESCYT alumni I interviewed had left their family homes to live with a roommate, significant other, or spouse.

Fulbright-MESCYT alumni felt all of the efforts they made to master their field of study and come back and contribute to their home country were put on hold because they could not find meaningful work to put into action. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni feel a call to action, so while they were facing reverse culture shock, they found a way out of the depths of the curve in order to achieve their deeply held ethos, to live up to the Fulbright standard of excellence. They understood that money was not important, but that if they had skin in the game, they had to stay in the game so that they could make a real impact on their community. They found that by sharing their emotions with the people they developed networks with while they were in the United States, they were able to find new routes for impact. They put into action the lessons from their classes that showed them the power of leading from the side, even when they are not the authority. They replicated their learning and put it into practice in their classes. Finally, Fulbright-MESCYT alumni reached out to other Fulbrighters and experienced the Fulbright magic, that no matter whether or not they knew each other initially, they had gone through a similar experience and had similar goals for their country and for the world. Using the W-Curve developed by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) as an extension of Lysgaard’s U-Curve (1955), I developed the following conceptual framework diagram that highlights the three stages of the return home experience for Fulbright-MESCYT alumni: sorting out the homesickness, feeling stuck, and finding the new me. Fulbright-MESCYT alumni face similar challenges in adapting to a new culture, and then back home, in finding meaningful work, and in connecting with their family and their friends; however, what the Fulbright-MESCYT experience shows is the power
alumni display in overcoming these challenges, staying true to themselves and their commitment to achieving the Fulbright standard of excellence and being part of the Fulbright magic.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for De La Cruz’s (2021) study.

This dissertation study focused on the lived experiences of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni upon their return home. One of the concepts highlighted the need to understand participants’ experiences prior to the international education program and to ensure students are having effective learning experiences and are accompanied in their adaptation in the United States and upon their return home. One of the participants described being surprised to hear the differences in the selection processes from another Fulbright participant. Each Fulbright Program is run differently depending on the country you live in and based on the program funder. Recommendations for a more consistent selection process that ensures transparency,
commitment to home country, appreciation of diversity and academic excellence, support for participants upon their return home would match the outcomes discovered through this study and will support increased equity and access to the Fulbright Program across regions. Also, while Fulbright-MESCYT alumni described feeling connected to a network, they were varied in the types of networks to which they were connected. Some of the Fulbright-MESCYT alumni I spoke to described not feeling connected to the alumni association in their home country, and only feeling connected to the Embassy when they were invited to events or participated in the recruitment and selection panels for the program. In that sense, I would recommend the U.S. Government and partner governments (in this case, the Dominican government) focus on implementing readjustment seminars for participants upon their return home. This would help participants reflect on their overall Fulbright experience, the changes they have gone through, understand how to re-adjust to the society they returned to, professionally and personally, help them in the employment search process so that they can more rapidly put their knowledge to good use. I also call for increased support and networking opportunities from Fulbright alumni associations and an exploration of the most effective methods of engaging alumni following their program completion.

**Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of alumni of the Dominican Fulbright-MESCYT scholarship program who returned to the DR. I explored how this experience influenced the lives of these individuals after their return to their home country, including their ongoing personal and professional goals and their engagement in their local communities. In my search for understanding the experiences of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni, I specifically focused on how the program shaped their personal and
professional goals, and how participants’ lived experiences influence their subsequent work, commitment to community involvement, and aspirations for themselves.

In Chapter One, I provided an overview of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program, the internationalization of higher education around the world and in the Dominican Republic, provided details about MESCYT support for international scholarships and offered an overview of why this study on the Fulbright-MESCYT Program was needed. I also discussed the study’s problem statement, research questions, purpose, significance, conceptual framework and provided a statement about what has shaped me as a researcher.

In Chapter Two, I provided an overview of the literature relevant to this study including different types of internationalization, the costs and benefits of international education, international scholarship programs, the experience of international students and intercultural competencies, reverse culture shock, and an overview of the Dominican higher education landscape, and an overview of the Fulbright Program.

In Chapter Three, I discussed transcendental phenomenology and its use as the methodology for this paper. I used purposeful sampling, starting first with criterion sampling, then transitioning to snowball sampling for participant recruitment. I limited participation to those that completed a master’s degree between 2015-2018, and those currently residing in the Dominican Republic. Participants also did not have another master’s degree from another foreign country. Data for this study was collected through a series of two in-depth interviews, and was analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of data analysis for phenomenological research.

In Chapter Four, I bracketed my experience, then presented my research findings. I included vignettes of each participant to provide some context for the findings. I then listed the
themes that emerged in my research. After completing those sections, I included composite
textural and structural descriptions to provide the frame for the Fulbright-MESCYT experience.

In Chapter Five, I provided an overview of my primary research question and sub-
questions and responded to them. I then discussed my study findings in connection to the
relevant literature. I listed implications for practice and provided recommendations for future
research. This study provided an in-depth look of the lived experience of recently returned
Fulbright-MESCYT alumni. The findings of this research highlight the importance of providing
recently returned alumni the opportunity to engage in reflexivity, envision their new identity
following a transformative experience in the United States, and engaging with them to offer them
opportunities to put what they learned into practice.
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International Institute for Educational Planning.


Dear Fulbright-MESCYT alumnus,

I would like to share an opportunity to participate in a research study about the lived experience of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni. I am conducting this study under the supervision of Dr. Eric Archer from Western Michigan University. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of alumni of the Dominican Fulbright-MESCYT scholarship program who returned to the Dominican Republic.

As the researcher for this study, I will explore how this experience influences the lives of these individuals after their return to their home country, including their ongoing personal and professional goals and their engagement in their local communities.

In order to participate in this study, you must meet the following criteria:

1. You must be from, and currently reside in, the Dominican Republic.
2. You must have completed a master’s degree from a U.S. university with support from the Fulbright-MESCYT Program during the years of 2015-2017.

If you meet the above criteria, but any of the below are true, you are not eligible to participate in the study:

1. You completed a master’s degree in a country outside of the Dominican Republic before completing your master’s degree in the United States.
2. You completed a Ph.D. degree in the United States.

I will hold a series of two interviews to elicit information about your experiences. Each interview will last between 60-90 minutes. Before the first interview, I will ask you to send me a picture that best represents your Fulbright-MESCYT experience.

If you would like additional information or would like to discuss next steps, please contact me by phone at 829-261-1059 or email at joshabel.delacruz@wmich.edu. Contacting me does not obligate you to participate in the study. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time you wish. I thank you in advance for your time in considering this request.
Appendix B

Study Forms

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
IRB Approved
Approved for use for one year from this date:
AUG 12 2020
Amy Nauth
WMU IRB Office

Informed Consent
Western Michigan University
Educational Leadership, Research and Technology

Principal Investigator: D. Eric Archer, Ph.D., CCLS
Student Investigator for dissertation: Joshabel De La Cruz
Title of Study: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Dominican Fulbright Alumni Who Return to the Dominican Republic

You are invited to participate in this research project titled “Exploring the Lived Experiences of Dominican Fulbright Alumni who return to the Dominican Republic.”

STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to explore the lived experiences of alumni of the Dominican Fulbright-MESCOYT scholarship program who returned to the Dominican Republic. This study explores how this experience influences the lives of these individuals after their return to their home country, including their ongoing personal and professional goals and their engagement in their local communities and will serve as Joshabel De La Cruz’s dissertation for the requirements of the Ph.D. in Educational Leadership, Higher Education. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to participate in a series of two semi-structured phenomenological interviews. You will be asked to send a photo that best represents your exchange experience in the Fulbright-MESCOYT Program prior to your first interview. If you are unable or unwilling to share a photo related to your experience, you will not be able to participate in the study. Your time in the study will take 20 minutes to find a photo representing your experience and between 60-90 minutes for each interview.

Possible risk and costs to you for taking part in the study may be discomfort from answering sensitive questions and time to participate in the interview and potential benefits of taking part may be reflecting on your participation in the Fulbright-MESCOYT experience. Your alternative to taking part in the research study is not to take part in it.

The following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.
What are we trying to find out in this study?
The researcher will collect information from you regarding your experiences during the Fulbright program and how you have made meaning of that experience after completing the program. The researcher will clarify information you shared during your first two interviews and explore how the experience has shaped who you are.

Who can participate in this study?
Since the research is focusing on Fulbright-MESCYT alumni from the Dominican Republic and the research will be conducted through phenomenological interviews, participants should meet the following criteria to be included in the study:
1. You must be from and currently reside in the Dominican Republic.
2. You must have completed a Master’s degree from a U.S. university with support from the Fulbright-MESCYT Program between 2015-2018.

If you meet either of the following, you cannot participate in the study:
1. You completed a Master’s degree in a country outside of the Dominican Republic before completing your Master’s degree in the United States.
2. You completed a Ph.D. degree in the United States.

Where will this study take place?
The data collection for this study will take place virtually, using the WebEx platform facilitated by Western Michigan University for students.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
Participants in this study will participate in two interview sessions, lasting between 60-90 minutes each. Participants will have to search for the photo they feel is most reflective of their Fulbright-MESCYT experience and send it to the researcher prior to the first interview.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
If you choose to participate in this study, you will participate in a series of two semi-structured phenomenological interview. You will also have to send a photo that best represents your Fulbright-MESCYT experience prior to the first interview and discuss why you chose the photo. Permission will be requested from participants for publication of their photo within the dissertation. Participants will be asked questions during this session in order to understand their experience in the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. The interview will focus on the participants’ experience of studying in the United States through the Fulbright Program and explore how the experience shaped who the subject is today. You will have the freedom to choose not to answer any of the questions at any time in the interview. You will be asked to respond to questions honestly through each of the interview sessions.
What information is being measured during the study?
The researcher will collect information from you regarding your experiences during the Fulbright program and how you have made meaning of that experience after completing the program. The researcher will clarify information you shared during your two interviews and explore how the experience has shaped who you are.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
There are no anticipated risks related to participation in this study other than what may be experienced in everyday life. However, you may find some questions asked of you in interviews for this study to be sensitive in nature. In order to minimize this risk, you have the right to refuse to answer any questions you are asked and you also have the right to terminate your participation in the study at any time.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
There is no direct benefit to you except for sharing the research results with you. The general benefits of this study will be for the future of the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. The results of this study will help in providing concrete evidence to describe the lived experiences of participants in the Fulbright-MESCYT Program and how they have made meaning of those experiences. Supporting a research with a well-designed tool will help in reducing errors and bias, which in turn will lead to reliable research results that researchers can be self-confident about publishing and will be a value-added to the community and humanity.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There are no costs associated with participating in this study other than your time.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
There is no incentive for participating in this study.
Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
In this study, several steps will be taken to ensure data is kept safe and only the principal investigator, and members of her dissertation committee, have access to the data prior to de-identification of identifying information:
1) Keeping back-up copies of computer files
2) Using high-quality tools for audio-recording during interviews and keeping hard copies and electronic copies for all data
3) Develop a list of all gathered data
4) Protect the confidentiality of participants by assigning pseudonyms or codes for the names
5) Keep all data in a safe place and ensure that the hard copies are in a locked place that no one can have access to it but the principal investigator and the student investigator. The electronic data will be maintained in a password protected and encrypted electronic storage device that the principal investigator will keep in a locked file whenever they are not actively using the material.
6) Finally, when the study is concluded, the data and working papers will be destroyed after five years.

What will happen to my information collected for this research project after the study is over?
After information that could identify you has been removed, de-identified information collected for this research may be used by or distributed to investigators for other research without obtaining additional informed consent from you.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study.

The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.
Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Joshabel De La Cruz at 829-261-2059 or joshabeldelacruz@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

Participant’s signature Date
Appendix C1

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for First Interview
Fulbright Alumni Lived Experience
Western Michigan University

Introductory script: Hello! My name is Joshabel De La Cruz and I am a Ph.D. student in Educational Leadership at Western Michigan University. I am currently conducting a study focused on understanding the lived experience of Fulbright-MESCYT alumni that have returned to the Dominican Republic. The purpose of this interview is to understand your experience during the Fulbright-MESCYT Program while you completed your master’s degree in the United States. There are no right or wrong answers. The goal for this session is for you to say what you think and how you feel. If it is okay with you, I will record our session since it is hard for me to take thorough notes while actively participating in the conversation. Everything you say will remain confidential.

Interview Questions:

1. I want to thank you for sending me the photo that best represents your Fulbright-MESCYT experience. Please tell me how you decided to select this photo.

2. What is it about this photo that makes you feel it best represents your Fulbright-MESCYT program experience?

3. You’ve shared a lot about your experience already, but is there anything else you want to share that we have not discussed yet?

4. Tell me about difficult or challenging moments during your Fulbright-MESCYT experience in the United States.

5. Tell me about a time when you felt particularly proud during your Fulbright-MESCYT experience in the U.S. (or felt good about yourself?)
Appendix C2

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Second Interview
Fulbright Alumni Lived Experience
Western Michigan University

Introductory script: Hello and thank you for participating in this second interview for my study. During our first interview, I asked you to describe the photo you selected that best represents your Fulbright-MESCYT experience. I also asked you about the reason you applied to the program and highlights and challenges you faced during your experience. The purpose of this second interview is to better understand your experience after returning from the Fulbright-MESCYT Program. There are no right or wrong answers. The goal for this session is for you to say what you think and how you feel. If it is okay with you, I will record our session since it is hard for me to take thorough notes while actively participating in the conversation. Everything you say will remain confidential.

Interview Questions to start dialogue:

1. Tell me about your return to the DR after participating in the Fulbright-MESCYT program.
2. How has the Fulbright-MESCYT experience affected your relationship with your family?
3. What role, if any, has your Fulbright-MESCYT experience had in defining your personal goals following your participation in the Fulbright-MESCYT Program?
4. What role, if any, has your Fulbright-MESCYT experience had on your professional goals?
5. Please describe any ways you have participated in community outreach or engagement following participation in the Fulbright-MESCYT Program.
Appendix D

Demographic Profile

Name: ID#:_____
Age:
Did you attend a public or private school when growing up?
Public___ Private____
Did you attend a public or private university? Public____ Private____
Did you grow up in a rural area, suburban or urban area? Rural___ Suburban___ Urban___
Do you now live in a rural, suburban or an urban area? Rural___ Suburban_____ Urban___
Year of graduation from bachelor’s degree _______
Field of study during undergraduate degree _______
Did you participate in any other graduate program (not sponsored by Fulbright-MESCYT) before or after your Fulbright-MESCYT Program?
Work experience during or after undergraduate degree:
Field of study during your Fulbright-MESCYT Program:
Year of entry into the Fulbright-MESCYT Program:
Number of times you applied to the Fulbright-MESCYT Program before being selected:
Did you participate in an optional practical training during your Fulbright-MESCYT Program?
If so, please describe.
Professional experience after the Fulbright-MESCYT Program:
Type of education: ______ bilingual _____ monolingual
Where did you learn English?
Appendix E

Member Checking E-mail

Dear ____________,

Attached please find the transcript from your first interview for your review. Please let me know if this is accurate by next ___ day, ______ 16 at 7 PM. If you don't respond by then, I will believe this transcript is accurate and will work with it for the analysis portion.

If this timeframe doesn't work, please let me know.

Thank you again for participating in my research study!

Kind regards,

Joshabel De La Cruz
Appendix F

Themes and Evidence from Participant Statements

Table 1

Themes and Evidence from Participant Statements

Theme one: Making it Through

Sorting out the homesickness

- I had a very tight study group. These relationships they help you sort out the homesickness, they help you sort out the loneliness, and vice versa. Like, I mean, I saw how do these people cry in, like, very deep emotional cries. And I also experienced some of that, like, their best times there.

- The whole experience can also leave you with this network of people that can also become your emotional support at trying times.

Destroy the logic

- I think that part of it is having professors that have presented their views, but then they made you think about it too, like, find the logic of it and try to destroy the logic. And if you actually came up with a way to challenge the logic in a thoughtful way, they wanted to engage in conversation they wanted to not think that they weren't the final know-it-all.

- I got the most out of my academic institution was not what I learned from books, was what you learn when you interact with a person on the knowledge that they can only embark in interactions in discussions in a way they explain it in the way they ask you. And they challenge you to think it through before they actually need an answer.

- I have always said that the Americans told me how to think. I realized that with a Fulbright scholarship, because I actually went to an American school. Before that, I was already like that. During the scholarship, I definitely realized it, and after it, I have definitely confirmed it.

Learning how to deal

- The day I had to leave was tough, but probably it was tougher to adapt at the beginning, even though I had all this circle of support and a lot of resources and people to help. And it was very hard to learn how to deal with everyday situations, especially in the academic way.

- Even though everything was on my hand and it was very easy to adapt to the administrative things, but adapting to the style of the classes, to the program itself and discovering the weaknesses, and all the things I started to realize that I didn't know, it was difficult at that point.

- I learned to find a way if I had to do something, it's not like let's start crying. Let's call this guy, he will help me or let's go to the library at 3 a.m. and work. God will help.
I prefer diversity

- I think, now, I definitely prefer diversity. And I think I've learned to handle this kind of situation. And I'm more aware about the differences and how we can work on them, and make the best out of everybody's way of thinking, I think now, every time I face an environment, similar, I have like more tools to interact in it, and I enjoy it actually.

- I was ignorantly generalizing stuff, and pinpointing people, because of their traditions, and being exposed to those people made me really understand anything that you see on the TV is not something that you can apply to everyone as uniform. You need to understand people by people treat them try to understand where they come from, like, how their traditions and their upbringing shaped them.

Theme two: Feeling stuck

Come back and be who you were and it’s impossible

- When you come back from the U.S., you are usually thrown at one moment. So, you just feel the flow going by you of everyone else's lives, and you're just there standing in the middle and what you feel is that you are kind of stuck, but you're also making them feel uncomfortable because their lives are flowing. You changed during the program, so like, you're bound to find yourself that with some friends, it's not necessarily that you're enemies now, but you're, you don't necessarily have the same interests as before.

- You pretty much need to quit on being who you are, and become somebody for where you are, and then after that reality will hit you. Because you have to come back and be who you were. And you realize right away, it's impossible.

- The people I've helped get the Fulbright, I've told them if you don't have the character and the strength of mind to come for what you have to deal with when you come back, you better not go.

- We were in different worlds, my friends wanted to talk about certain topics, and I was always talking about my experience and other topics. So, the conversation started to change. I was bringing new topics, and exploring how the people that surrounded me thought about these new topics that they never talked about. And I think it changed a little bit how I interacted with my friends. I had also to control myself sometimes because probably my ideas were very different. So, it was like a process to try to understand them and help them understand.

- The conversations with my classmates were so interesting, culturally open. And, you know, going back to work where I changed a lot, I think, it was hard to get back to the same conversations and the same office gossip and the same dynamic.

My mama hates Fulbright

- Still to this day, my mama hates Fulbright. If you have this conversation with my mother, she would be she would have been crying like an hour ago. She would be telling you that the American changed the system in my brain, which they did.

- My mom hated how much I hated this country. She was like, why are you so negative about the city all of a sudden, and I'm like, you haven't lived abroad, you don't know how positive a city
can be. I think that as I got used to it, I wouldn't say I love Santo Domingo, but I got to tolerate it.

- Choosing between continuing living certain ways of living that I no longer identified with, or choosing to live my life, the way that I wanted to, and that's why my relationship with my family after that point, was not the same. I will spend many months you know, and it was a very hard tension between me and my parents, like, I don't really want you to continue to live in your sin life. If that's something you cannot change, I will probably suggest you go find another place to live.

- And every time my mom and my dad get mad at me, they always, like I say, they always play the greatest hits, which is what happened to you? Where are you going? What are you doing? When I told my mom, my dad, I was like, you know what happened to you, you created a monster and now you don't know how to control him. Because you were the ones who told me how to dream, you were the ones who told me to be better every day, you were the ones who told me how to accomplish more to not just settle down with things and whatever. And I actually went to the top, scratched the sun came back unscathed. Now because I tell you, I can go to the sun and scratch it, you're like, oh, you're crazy.

*No opportunities for people who travel and get degrees*

- This country that I was like very enamored of, and I was like I'm going to change my country and I'm going to change the world and I'm going to do this and that with my degree, and then this same country is the one that doesn't provide the opportunities for people who travel, go get degrees, like, there are no opportunities.

- And then I went back to work, and that was even worse, because it felt that I had become a completely different person. For two years, I had been challenged intellectually, thinking about the biggest questions on how to run the Dominican Republic, or any country, and I felt that the same job I left was the exact same job.

- Part of the process of applying to Fulbright is you have to return to your country, so you create expectations, I will be coming back home, I'll change the world, I'm going to be powerful. With my brand-new degree, I'm going to do everything. And I will advance in my career, so I can imagine that I will aspire to better salaries and stuff. And to me it was a shocking experience, returning back and applying to several positions, and the first offer that I got was earning pretty much the same salary that I was earning before going to the Fulbright experience. You start creating all these expectations, and then coming back home and the situation is not so ideal.

- Well, I came back. I still think about that pretty much every day, every other day. Because I got a job offer. And I remember the guy was I told him like hey, I have a Fulbright scholarship. I have to go back home. He was like, well, we can work with it if you're interested. I remember telling him like, no, I need to go back home. I had this, I had this dumb dream that I could actually do something for this country and I can actually change things. And I just had to come back. And that dream lasted 20 minutes or less.
Theme three: Finding the new me

Neither the authority, nor the boss, but you have to make change

- Most of the technical work, and most of the like leadership work, you need to want to work in settings where you are, sometimes the boss, but not necessarily the authority. And sometimes you're neither the authority, but you're not necessarily the boss, but you know, that you need to find a way to make to change things.

- I took a class on leadership, which for me was awesome. We read a lot of literature of leadership without authority, and how sometimes you don't have the hierarchical power or the authority to do something, but you have to lead or lead from behind or lead from the side or lead in so many different ways. That gave me like the experience and the opportunity to lead my bosses in some analysis or some techniques, or whatever.

If you have skin in the game, stay in the game

- If you have skin in the game, you have to stay in the game, like, you don't get a win, unless you play the game. So the only way for you to actually get a win for the country is if you're there and like, money is, by far, not everything.

- The whole idea of being a politically engaged actor came from the fact that I studied in the US and I realized that policy follows politics, mostly. We've had this version in our minds that's completely messed up about how politics is a bad area but policy is something that should be extremely meritocratic. And that's never going to happen if politics is not filled by people who, are meritocratic.

- I realized that every little thing you want in life is to leave this world a better place. The best place to start is home, by point zero.

- From the beginning, I was inclined to work in the public sector. There's a lot of things to be done in the country, and if the people that have the scarce opportunities that I had, studying in a good high school, studying in a good university, and then studying in a good university abroad, like, if we don't do it, who's going to do it.

Shaping my teaching persona

- Being exposed to these faculty members who were very organized, had a very professional relationship with the student, but at the same time, it was close, you could talk to them about anything, like on a personal level, if you wanted to, but also, there was this this level of respect that comes with knowing that this person is so oriented to their work and so devoted to their teaching, that you created that sense of respect for them. And that's something that I always admired, always aspired to do. Right now, we have reached past that point of half the semester and I always do a review with my students. And I will send like a poll, and I will tell them please like, rate the class so far. I will say that's solely in honor of my Fulbright experience, how I shaped that that kind of persona that I wanted to be as a teaching member.
• I've never had a professor that puts so much thought into his class and tries to take advantage of technology to see who's struggling from the beginning to make the class as good as it can be for most of the students. And a lot of his method is something that I use when I came back here.

*Living up to the Fulbright standard*

• When you get to meet the community, and you know that wherever you go, you find Fulbright people and there's like these high expectations. And you see especially like these Fulbrighters, that have gone away a few years back, and have come and spend 10-15 years working here and doing great stuff. You say, like, wow, like, you really have to live up to that standard.

• I'm challenging myself every day, because I feel I have this seal right here, like, oh, you're a Fulbright-MESCYT alumna, you have some responsibilities you have to take into consideration every time you act.

*Fulbright magic*

• These people go through a process to get there, and, you know, you went through the same process. So, you feel like you have stuff in common. There is like this common belief of, of improving yourself, improving others, and getting the most you can out of every situation. So, I think that that gives you a plus and you feel that it's going to be really interesting, and you feel some kind of reciprocity, like you feel that if someone like Fulbright is coming here, I really want them to write to me. Like I wish I could get the chance to talk because you know that these are like amazing people and you want to know them. So, I think that's part of the Fulbright magic.

• We all were this person at the beginning of the process, and then we were completely different persons at the end of the process, like it was a brief period of time where 13 people will embark on a journey of transformation. And we will meet everybody like before that process, and then at the end of the process and remain in contact and it comes with a set of qualities and skills that when you talk to these people, you know that the conversations are not the same that you will have with any other people from your group of friends. It's different.

• The Fulbright program and the people who have been part of those programs, and I see ourselves and the difference is that at some point, they just put a shot on you and you're changed.

• I was exposed to so many conditions and realities that eventually shaped me into being someone that was way more open way more expressive way more secure about my thoughts and my ideas. And I was not afraid to, to express them anymore.
Appendix G

HSIRB Approval Letter

Date: August 12, 2020

To: Eric Archer, Principal Investigator
    Joshabel De La Cruz, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 20-07-21

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Exploring the Lived Experience of Dominican Fulbright-MESCYT Alumni who Return to the Dominican Republic” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

A status report is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) August 11, 2021 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.

When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at https://wmich.edu/research/forms.

Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.

251 W. Mainwood Hall, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5446
phone: (269) 387-8293, fax: (269) 387-8276

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Date: January 13, 2021

To: Alan Poling, Principal Investigator
    Jessica Frieder, Co-Principal Investigator

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: WMU IRB Project Number 20-07-21

This letter will serve as confirmation that the changes to your research project titled “Exploring the Lived Experience of Dominican Fulbright-MESCYT Alumni who Return to the Dominican Republic” requested in your memo received January 12, 2021 (to revise eligibility criteria to alumni who have completed a master’s degree and returned to the Dominican Republic between 3 and 6 years ago; Revise consent document and recruitment materials to reflect this change) have been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

The conditions and the duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: August 11, 2021