

SAUDI STUDENT PERSPECTIVES OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAMS
AT AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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DEDICATION

My parents have been supporters of education and encouraged me to fulfill my dreams through education. They supported my educational growth no matter what the price would be.

Therefore, no amount of thanks can express my appreciation for them, and this is a simple work dedicated in honor of their support and encouragement. With the deepest hope they follow in my steps and go even farther, this work is also dedicated to my wife, Hanan, and three gifted daughters: Sadeem, Reema, and Sarah.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand Saudi student perspectives about their participation in experiential learning programs (ELPs) at an American Midwestern university. Social exchange theory was the theoretical framework used to explore ELP workplace benefits and challenges that accompanied Saudi student participation. The study employed an interpretive qualitative design. Data collection comprised 16 individual semi-structured interviews with junior and senior Saudi male and female students enrolled in the colleges of business and engineering.

Findings revealed an overall level of satisfaction among participants, especially with respect to gains in academic knowledge, personal growth, and leadership skills. ELP workplace challenges largely related to the educational, social, and cultural backgrounds of the study participants. Sociocultural benefits were inconsistent, most notably regarding gender and group interactions between Saudi and American members. In the final analysis of gains and costs, ELP experiences point to a promising future for students returning to workplaces within the larger Saudi society. The study addresses ways to improve the ELP experience for Saudi students along with implications for American institutions of higher education, ELP program facilitators, and future Saudi students who choose to study in the U.S.

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CHAPTER 1

In a globalized and rapidly changing world, institutions of higher education have come to recognize the strategic importance of offering work-integrated learning opportunities for enhancing post-graduate employability (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). One popular approach found on many college and university campuses is known as experiential learning, or the idea that practical experience plays a central role in the learning process (Kolb, 1948). The key to practical experience as a source of learning and development is active involvement. According to Kolb's model, a person cannot learn effectively by passively reading about or observing an activity. This holistic approach is also referred to as learning by doing because participation is fundamental to experiential learning. Kolb laid out the principles underlying experiential learning in a four-part process. In the first stage of the cycle, students have or participate in a concrete experience. Second, through reflection and sensemaking from a variety of standpoints, students come to deeply understand the experience before progressing to the third step, which is the abstraction of meaning from the new experience. Finally, students attempt to apply what they have learned through a process of active experimentation (Cowan, 2006; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Lewis & Williams, 1994). The completed cycle is iterative in that it contributes to subsequent rounds of learning and the continuing accumulation of concrete and increasingly sophisticated experiences.

Experiential learning programs aimed at equipping students to face the complex challenges of the workplace have been expanding for years (Wilson et al., 2016). Colleges and universities in the U.S. currently provide experiential learning opportunities for fostering students' knowledge and vocational skills that will prepare them for future career pathways (Hunter, Laursen, & Seymour, 2007; Lilia, 2017). These programs offer a diversity of

experiential and career-related objectives to expand students' capabilities in adapting to cultural and workplace complexities (McFadden, Maahs-Fladung, & Mallett, 2012). By 2006, for instance, more than 40% of American universities had broadened their visions to include programs that allowed students to share their academic experiences in various settings locally and abroad, compared to 28% in 2001 (Green, Luu, & Burris, 2008). Such programs typically involve students from different cultural and social backgrounds hoping to attain practical knowledge and experiences that will be transferable to other settings and places (Hayter & Cahoy, 2016). In particular, experiential learning programs (ELPs) can be instrumental in helping students from different backgrounds learn about and prosper in work cultures that are dissimilar to those they already know (Wilson et al., 2016).

In U.S. colleges and universities, international students who represent different ethnicities and cultures provide a potentially fruitful population for supporting ELP activities (Lewis, 2005; Sherraden, Bopp, & Lough, 2013). The U.S. ranks first among developed countries for hosting international students. In the 2017-2018 academic year, the population of international students on American campuses reached its highest level to date--8% of the entire enrollment. With 1.1 million students enrolled from various foreign countries (Institute of International Education, 2017), this growth trajectory represents a 56% increase over the previous decade. In ELPs, international students are compelled to integrate their personal, educational, social, and cultural orientations with a range of unfamiliar orientations they would be unlikely to encounter outside of ELP participation.

Saudi Arabia has a demonstrated interest in sending students to a culturally diverse country such as the U.S. For the 2017-18 academic year, there were 53,000 Saudi students pursuing their education on an American campus, the fourth largest contingent of international

students (Institute of International Education, 2017). Most Saudi students receive full financial and supervisory support from the King Salman governmental scholarship program, part of the Saudi government's 2030 Vision. This scholarship is awarded based on academic status and Saudi marketplace needs. Selected students attend a 3-day orientation before departing for the host countries. Topics discussed in the orientation include detailed descriptions of the host culture, expectations for academic performance, techniques for coexisting in a foreign country, safety systems, and general rules and regulations of the host society.

Those students are expected to return home with newly acquired educational, cultural, and social insights they can then put into practice in Saudi society and workplaces (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 2016). To this end, studying in American universities has the potential to fulfill the Saudi government's need to broaden students' cultural awareness. However, matriculation into American universities is not necessarily an easy transition for Saudi students who may be living and studying outside of their own country for the first time. Challenges such as cultural misconceptions and intercultural communication are crucial components that can adversely affect the quality of workplace learning experiences. These factors may hinder Saudi international students' academic performance and contribute to sociocultural discomfort in the host country (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010; Razek & Coyner, 2013). To understand how the benefits and challenges associated with living and studying in the U.S. can be enhanced or mitigated through participation in workplace ELPs, this study describes and examines the perceptions of Saudi students regarding their ELP participation.

Research Problem

Experiential learning programs are an integrated learning approach that refines student classroom knowledge through practical skills gained in real-world contexts. Experiential

learning typically goes by other names such as applied, discovery, service, project-based learning, practicums, and internships (Illeris, 2007). In areas of student personal growth, academic achievement, and workplace readiness, Jackson, Caffarella, and Jackson (1994) defined ELPs as pedagogical activities that allow students to apply their academic experience in cooperative environments for developing personal skills and workplace accountability. In this study, ELPs are defined as course-related activities and projects that occur outside the traditional classroom. This range of settings includes non-profit or for-profit institutions, community organizations, governmental or non-governmental organizations, and businesses. International students can apply didactic knowledge, gain vocational and intercultural competencies, and develop personal skills through direct interactions in workplace environments (Akanwa, 2015). To assist students in attaining meaningful workplace experiences, Illeris (2007) and Jackson et al. (1994) indicated the goals of experiential learning programs should be directly relevant to students' educational disciplines and explicitly spelled out for both the student and industry leader participants.

For Saudi students, who tend to grow up in a monocultural social environment and resist intercultural interactions outside their native community, experiential learning can be a powerful mechanism for understanding intercultural contexts and communication within culturally diverse work groups (Al-Zahrani & Kaplowitz, 1993; Alfares, Al-Haboubi, & Al-Zahrani, 2013). Sue (2004) defined monoculturalism as a set of invisible and insular attitudes possessed by a particular group and that are usually rooted in beliefs about their own cultural superiority. In terms of cultural diversity, monoculturalism is the antithesis of multiculturalism and is viewed as a form of cultural decay.

By interacting with American peers, instructors, and workplace leaders, Saudi students can examine their cultural preconceptions and ideas (Hovey & Weinberg, 2009). Extensive exposure with persons of heterogeneous backgrounds can effectively foster intercultural communication that enable Saudi students to understand potential workplace concerns (Trice, 2004). Such occupational engagement is key to broadening the intercultural and cross-cultural perspectives of Saudi students (Forum on Education Abroad, 2017). The interactions that occur outside of the traditional classroom environment can familiarize Saudi students with new communities and cultures that may expand their experiences and help them to acquire global workplace skills (Lovett & Chi, 2015). Lewis and Williams (1994) affirmed the value of ELPs for building students' experiences and employability skills such as cultural awareness, communication skills, interpersonal relationships, and leadership. ELPs additionally allow Saudi students an opportunity to build self-confidence and rethink social responsibility while developing a sense of belonging to the wider community (Hudzik, 2011; Ibrahim, 2012; Knight, 2004).

Although a variety of benefits and advantages may accrue to students through ELP participation (Gill, 2007; Ibrahim, 2012; Valentine & Cheney, 2001), benefits are not guaranteed. Elwell and Bean (2001) noted students should be aware of non-academic outcomes as much as the academic outcomes associated with ELPs. For instance, communicating the significance of different experiences is important to facilitate students' differing capacities to understand the globalization of the workplace. Wildavsky (2012) noted that ELP participants should be proactive and positively interact with the local individuals in organizational settings if they hope to achieve social and cultural rewards. For Saudi students, specific challenges and difficulties include students' prior cross-cultural experience and their current ability to connect

with different cultures. Al-Zahrani and Kaplowitz (1993) reported that some Mideastern students raised in insular social and cultural circumstances are ill-prepared to live in multiethnic and multilingual societies (Deeley, 2010; Miller & Gonzalez, 2010; Trice, 2004).

Students often resist the influences of unfamiliar cultures, habits, and traditions and Saudi students may harbor negative feelings toward new environments that contrast strongly with their own backgrounds (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010). Saudi students have generally had limited ELP participation prior to coming to the U.S. because such programs are not a common practice in Saudi educational institutions (Alfares et al., 2013). Moreover, during study abroad, Saudi students tend to interact with mono-national classmates even when enrolled in an ELP (Al-Zahrani & Kaplowitz, 1993). Saudi students involved in an ELP may feel the expected personal costs of participation outweigh the gains. This could result in Saudi students acquiring fewer beneficial outcomes than their non-Saudi peers and returning home with few new educational, cultural, and social experiences and insights to put into practice in Saudi society and workplaces. Experiential learning benefits are attainable for Saudi participants so long as their prior learning experiences and cultural attitudes do not negatively influence their participation. In the next section, I discuss how Social Exchange Theory provides a theoretical lens for interpreting the nature of ELPs from the perspectives of Saudi students.

Theoretical Framework: Social Exchange Theory

A theoretical framework serves as a guide throughout the research process. It identifies the research problem, informs the research questions, and sets the study boundaries (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As laid out by Homans (1958), Social Exchange Theory (SET) presumes individuals are motivated by what they get out of their social interactions after weighing the costs and benefits. Ap (1992) defined SET as “A general sociological theory concerned with

understanding the exchange of resources between individuals and groups in an interaction situation” (p. 668). Homans (1958) asserted that sociological, psychological, and economic circumstances often shape human perceptions and their interactions. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) found that some social relationships are characterized by a give-and-take arrangement in which people attempt to obtain rewards by refining the behaviors and skills they already possess.

Trust levels between persons often determine the strength and weakness of social interactions. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) expressed SET in two phases. In the first and early phase, individuals weigh the expected costs associated with a relationship against the rewards that could be gained. In the second and latter phase, individuals realize that some of the initial challenges have become benefits and some of the initial benefits have become challenges. The first phase is called the Comparison Level (CL) and the second phase is called the Comparison Level of Alternatives (CLalt). The Comparison Level describes an individual’s negotiations about achieving a deep experience from a specific relationship by assessing whether the benefits outweigh the costs. The Comparison Level of Alternatives describes a situation where a person perceives achieving no or only a single benefit. In some cases, a single benefit could be sufficient to outweigh the challenges but people who experience more challenges than benefits tend to discontinue a relationship. I analyzed my study data for these two levels of SET after Saudi students completed their ELP participation.

Social interactions frequently generate beneficial elements for all involved parties. The maximization of personal benefits while minimizing personal costs is a key component of SET. In social interactions that occur during the beginning phase of SET, Thibaut and Kelley (1959) observed the rewards gained by one individual or group directly affected the costs shouldered by the other participating individual or group. They referred to this reciprocal relationship between

individuals or groups as a zero-sum game and expressed its variables in the equation, A (rewards) + B (costs) = 0. In this equation, individual or group A derives rewards that increase the costs for individual or group B . Thibaut and Kelley concluded that a relationship is likely to remain stable over time when the rewards and costs for each party are more or less equitable. When social and cultural differences are present in a relationship, as with Saudi and American participants, the parties involved are assumed to be in a largely equivalent position to receive from and provide valuable life experiences to the other.

Experiential Learning through a SET Lens

The academic, social, and cultural outcomes of Saudi students' participation in ELPs were interpreted through a SET lens. SET provided a framework for demonstrating student participation in terms of the benefits and challenges experienced in the workplace, especially the opportunity to understand the nature of Saudi student interactions with peers from different social and cultural backgrounds. Saudi students assessed the value of their workplace interactions by weighing what they bring to the exchange versus what they receive (West & Turner, 2000). In this study, "challenges" refers to the negative values and perceptions of Saudi student interactions whereas "benefits" refers to positive values and attitudes gained through student interactions that fulfill individual needs (Roloff, 1981).

Experiential learning programs create various types of interactions where students work as a team or with organizational members in collaborative environments (Lewis & Williams, 1994). However, intercultural interactions tend to be extremely complicated and ambiguous when examined within a challenge-benefit context (Foa & Foa, 1974). Mutually rewarding relationships are a crucial concept in SET and likely occur to different degrees in ELPs based on

the objectives of the project whether field research, internship, or service-learning (Asghar & Rowe, 2017; Emerson, 1976; Laplante, 2009).

Lastly, SET can illuminate a level of reciprocity often found in ELPs that has not been widely studied from a Saudi student perspective. In the context of an ELP, Saudi students are compelled to navigate unfamiliar workplace organizational issues by applying their academic experiences to a range of difficulties they encounter regarding the intersection of different cultural discourses and their personal reflections on how well they are able to adapt. Hence, SET can frame Saudi student's experiences, relationships, and the reciprocal interactions that take place during their ELP participation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the workplace experiences of Saudi undergraduate students who participated in course-related ELPs at an urban, public university in the American Midwest. The study adds to the body of experiential learning research by examining the perspectives of Saudi undergraduate students, an ethnic population increasingly prevalent on American university campuses but one that remains largely understudied. In this study, I investigated workplace academic, cultural, and social interactions by providing an interpretive analysis of Saudi students' participation in ELPs. The outcomes of this study can improve the quality of the ELPs by guiding program facilitators in designing more efficient and effective ways of encouraging intercultural student engagement in globalized work environments. By exploring the nature of Saudi student interactions in ELPs provided by my selected research setting, the findings of this study can inform methods for enhancing the ELP experience across a broad segment of American college and university campuses.

Research Questions

To achieve these purposes, the overarching research question guiding this study was, “What are the academic, social, and cultural experiences of Saudi undergraduate students who have participated in at least one workplace ELP?” Accordingly, the sub-questions framing my study were the following:

1. What are the attitudes and beliefs expressed by Saudi students toward ELPs?
2. How do Saudi students describe the benefits associated with their ELP participation?
3. How do Saudi students describe the challenges associated with their ELP participation?
4. What are the expectations of Saudi students regarding the application of their ELP experiences when they return home?

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

The concept of experiential learning expresses a practical learning approach embraced by a growing number of American universities (Daniel & Mishra, 2017). This pedagogical method is an empowering experience that helps students apply the knowledge and skills acquired in an academic discipline and broaden their learning perspectives in a workplace setting (DeGiacomo, 2002; Gresham & Clayton, 2011; Russell, 2007). In the field of experiential learning, there is a limited supply of studies that address the perceptions of international students who possess unique cultural characteristics regarding their engagement in experiential learning programs (ELPs). This literature review provides comprehensive information about experiential learning and spotlights experiential learning approaches as pedagogical programs that offer academic, cultural, and social opportunities for international students.

Experiential learning as a form of education has been acknowledged since the 1930s. Proponents of human learning theories, notably John Dewey and David Kolb, gave experiential learning an essential role in student academic development and personal growth. They considered experiential learning an ideal way for students to share their thoughts and ideas where knowledge was not limited to what was learned in the classroom (Dewey, 1938; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The meaning of this kind of educational experience is quite broad and often reflects the different points of view of stakeholders and practitioners (i.e., students, program facilitators, organizational leaders, and members).

The literature review is divided into four main sections. The first part articulates the broad meaning of experiential learning, the types of ELPs in institutions of higher education, and the social roles played by ELPs in the community. In the second part, I discuss the features of

ELPs including achieving diversity in cultural knowledge for international students and ELPs as a reciprocal activity. The third section discusses the contributions of ELP in developing the intercultural competency of international students. By participating in an ELP, international students can increase workplace skills and contribute to their personal growth, leadership qualities, and sense of social belonging and responsibility. Lastly, this literature review explains the expected academic and social challenges for international student engagements. These challenges include unfamiliarity with American teaching-learning patterns, collectivist traits versus an individualistic community, and intercultural communication issues.

The Meaning of Experiential Learning

The process of developing a common definition of experiential learning is ongoing because experiential learning is a broad concept and does not have a single meaning (Illeris, 2007). At a fundamental level, experiential learning is described as “learning from experience or learning by doing” (Lewis & Williams, 1994, p. 5). The common facet of experiential learning is dealing directly with the recognition and application of a student’s previous experiences in both formal and informal learning environments. For scholars who focus on the workplace, as this study is conceptualized, experiential learning is primarily associated with practice-based learning (i.e., active learning) as a complement to the traditional classroom (Illeris, 2007).

Experiential learning is a transformative learning process. Transformative experience is a learning theory that confers academic benefits and skills onto participating students (Brewis & Holdsworth, 2011; Gresham & Clayton, 2011). Transformative learning is defined by Gresham and Clayton (2011) as an intentional process that can change an individual’s assumptions and values and produce deep experiences by reflecting on the changes they achieve. Mezirow (2000) explained experiential learning opportunities as transformative learning that provides college

students with a smooth transition to workplace settings and a sense of belonging to the served institution. Students find meaning in new experiences by reflecting on their personal skills. Transformative learning, however, reaches its highest level when college students broaden their minds, are open to challenges, and debate new ideas (DeGiacomo, 2002).

ELPs emphasize learner experiences that occur outside of the traditional classroom environment. Through transformative processes, students have opportunities to reflect on the meaning of their academic knowledge in authentic, real-world settings (Kiely, 2005). Growing interest in experiential learning has substantially modified the ideology of learning from lecture. Kolb's, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (1984), has been influential in promoting changes in teaching and learning patterns in higher education. Kolb articulated an experiential learning cycle that includes phases of experience, reflection, generalization, and testing (Cowan, 2006). This curricular experience is exemplified through the value of “no one size fits all” as students who differ in learning styles and motivation stand to benefit from a variety of teaching methods, especially real-world practices that occur outside the enclosed classroom environment.

Fostering students' knowledge and exchange experiences are essential phases in ELPs. Kolb (1948) indicated that learning is a cumulative process where learners provide and perceive experiences. Kolb's transformative learning scheme starts with concrete experiences and moves to reflective observation. Students then can engage in abstract conceptualization and finish with active experimentation. Kolb provided these stages in a holistic adaptive process that describes two aspects of learning: how learners understand new experiences and how they transform what they learn. Students observe and analyze data, obtain feedback, and modify new behaviors throughout their experiential learning participation. These steps help students reveal the deeper

meaning of what has been learned and how it can be employed in everyday life (DeGiacomo, 2002; Fenyes & Pusztai, 2012). Hicks (2012) highlighted that higher education students, particularly international students, have opportunities to transform and reform their own academic knowledge and cultural and social identity through ELPs. In general, transformational learning occurs when students tie their prior experiences to new ones and apply their academic experiences to vocational situations (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). Such actual practices help students handle common concerns they may encounter in their chosen career.

Types of Experiential Learning in Institutions of Higher Education

Institutions of higher education have developed learning methods and social programs that incorporate Kolb's approach to experiential pedagogy across the curriculum. Lewis and Williams (1994) claimed that ELPs are differentiated from the traditional classroom and other voluntary work by two phases: student immersion in active practices and student reflection about the experience. This type of education facilitates student understanding of the workplace by providing vocational opportunities with the power to shape future career orientations (Clements & Cord, 2013).

The objectives of experiential learning programs are determined according to the field of study or community needs and concerns. To distinguish effective experiential learning projects from those that are not, Dewey, in *Experience and Education* (1938), referenced two crucial facets of ELPs. The first was continuity between the present learning experience and previously acquired expertise that makes learning applicable to future endeavors. The second facet was the nature of interactions between the learners in the workplace environment. Students often interact with professional experts in the field that cause some academic, social, and cultural changes. Experiential learning is a style of liberated learning because it utilizes a degree of freedom in

teaching and learning methods, learner interdependency, and learning environments (Illeris, 2007).

Experiential learning in higher education is divided into distinct categories based on where the learning takes place. Lewis and William (1994) described two key approaches to this kind of experiential learning: workplace experience and classroom experience. Workplace experience, the first type of program, gives the learner an opportunity to observe different aspects of occupational fields outside of a traditional learning environment. Workplace experiential learning programs represent a set of models in higher education such as internships, cooperative learning, practicums, and service-learning. Some of these programs occur in non-profit organizations that are interested in providing advice, authoritative information, and social responsibilities (DeGiacomo, 2002). Other programs occur in for-profit organizations that mostly aim to foster employability skills such as paid internships that provide financial benefits for students (Akinde, Harr, & Burger, 2017).

The second type of experiential learning takes place in the classroom. Presentations, discussions, case studies, games, and group work are types of this kind of experiential learning approach. The common element between in-classroom and out-of-classroom experiential learning is the diversity in teaching-learning methods and the direct interaction between participants. In-classroom experiential learning is not included in this current study because my focus was on the widely interactive experiences that occurred in workplace environments.

The composition of experiential learning makes it difficult to determine exactly what activity is or is not experiential learning (Illeris, 2007). Chapman (1995) described a set of holistic principles that are neither linear nor cyclical but should be present in varying degrees to classify any program as an experiential learning methodology. These principles include:

A mixture of content and process, absence of excessive teacher judgment, engaged in purposeful endeavors, encouraging the big picture perspective, teaching with multiple learning styles, the role of reflection, creating emotional investments, the re-examination of value, presence of meaningful relationship, and learning outside one's perceived comfort zones. (p. 234)

Chapman's principles articulated experiential learning from the perspectives of program facilitators and mentors. However, other classifications of experiential learning tend to identify the project's purpose and objectives. ELP settings comprise three main elements: student, project, and the social organization itself. Boud (1989) indicated that experiential learning is determined and shaped by the recipients of the enterprise and program. Student-centered experiential learning programs focus on students' academic, social, and cultural benefits. Community-centered programs concentrate on community needs more than student benefits. Project-centered programs prioritize implementation of the project regardless of the benefits paid to students and community. All of the above classifications of experiential learning were considered in my exploration of Saudi student participation in ELPs.

The Social Roles of Experiential Learning

Community partnerships are an institutional responsibility of colleges and universities. Experiential learning programs are a popular option for activating these partnerships with roles tied directly to community needs. Recent research has examined how the social aspects of ELPs foster college student perceptions regarding non-profit and governmental agencies (Bok & Bok, 2009). The importance of experiential learning as social programs is to provide mutual benefits for both college students and the local community. In these programs, students are asked to integrate curriculum requirements that fulfill community needs. Typically, the social dimensions

of ELPs help program facilitators bridge the gap between educational institutions and the wider community (Lougee, Boyer, & Horowitz, 1988a). According to Lougee et al. (1988b), institutions of higher education should redesign their community-integrated ELPs in ways that encourage students to become more active participants in society. Astin (1996) articulated the role of preparing college students to interact positively with the community where students are exposed to instructional opportunities that facilitate in-class learning in community contexts.

Community-based experiential learning has received significant attention from theorists and researchers in postsecondary education. Edwards, Mooney, and Heald (2001) considered community-based experiential learning as a pedagogical approach in which the community plays a vital supportive role in the learning process. Community-based experiential learning assists students to shift from traditional learning toward a comprehensive experience aimed at developing either locally- or globally-minded communities (Astin & Astin, 2000). Jackson et al. (1994) mentioned that college students possess academic disciplines that can address community issues when directly consolidated through ELP projects. However, the activation of the social roles of ELPs requires the establishment of resourceful connections between program facilitators, students, and the non-profit, for-profit, or governmental organizational leaders (Gibbs, 1988; Henry, 1989). In this context, Greenleaf (1977) indicated that higher education institutions must reshape their missions and fulfill community concerns through various modalities, one of which is employing student skills and knowledge to improve community.

Features of Experiential Learning

ELPs provide academic, social, and cultural frameworks for student involvement (Dorasamy, 2009). For example, students can align their academic knowledge with practical skills, observe and appreciate different cultural attitudes, and expand their social values in

diverse workplace settings. These advantages of ELPs can influence a participant's life experiences through direct interactions with experts in the field of study. Such mutual interactions contribute to increase learning levels and the exchange of social and cultural behaviors for students, project mentors, and institutional members. The following sections discuss ELP features that are particularly applicable to international students such as cultural diversity and levels of reciprocity.

Cultural Diversity

The desire to increase ethnic and racial diversity encourages U.S. colleges and universities to offer initiatives and action programs that broaden students' cultural and social attitudes. Regardless of the purpose of a program, experiential learning opens opportunities for students to attain positive experiences through exposure to people from various backgrounds (Trice, 2004). One way to access the diversity benefits offered by ELPs is by fostering deep cultural discourses on an academic level (Dorasamy, 2009; Glass, 2012). Offering structured discourses out of the classroom facilitates the simultaneous delivery of both course objectives and sociocultural experiences. Since many Middle Eastern students and American students have parallel lived experiences, experiential learning environments provide a significant opportunity to increase social and cultural familiarity for them (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

A diverse workplace environment provides an ideal opportunity for deepening students' cross-cultural understanding. In these cooperative environments, foreign students may be inclined to initiate intercultural conversations with organizational members that foster their academic adjustment and social concerns (Scott & Etten, 2013). Experiential learning marked by cultural discourse helps students adapt to ethnic diversity in a workplace. Such skill is described as the cultural intelligence of employees, which is defined as the ability of individuals

to manage and function efficiently in culturally diverse settings (Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2009). Valentine and Cheney (2001) equated experiential learning to intercultural communication programs. They found experiential learning an exemplary tool to produce multicultural experiences among students. They concluded that students could increase academic experiences and share cultural concerns in differentiated workplaces. However, they indicated that applied learning programs that contained a mix of experiences (i.e., ELPs) did not achieve cross-cultural goals unless students elected to discuss issues from different perspectives.

Working with international teamwork members contributes to the quality of multicultural experiences in ELPs. Glass and Westmont (2014) emphasized that international and domestic students who engaged in projects with multicultural dialog reported a higher level of intercultural understanding. Cooperating with culturally diverse individuals in work environments helped students gain skills that could be taught in the classroom such as global competence and cross-culture awareness (Valentine & Cheney, 2001; Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). Trice (2004) surveyed 497 international students about their social engagement patterns in college programs and events and concluded that cultural diversity in action learning projects encouraged the social participation of international students while increasing the probability of graduation.

Experiential Learning as a Reciprocal Activity

Experiential learning programs typically produce social exchange among participants through various give and take activities (Porter & Monard, 2001). The reciprocal levels in ELPs differ based on project objectives. Alignment of student educational disciplines with organization needs helps students deliver a high level of benefits for the served organization that simultaneously meets their academic requirements. For example, service-learning programs theoretically represent the highest level of reciprocity among ELPs (Berman, 2006). Give and

take relationships begin when all involved--students, faculty, and organizational members--share a project's objectives. These groups communicate to each other as a team and these connections often achieve benefits for each party (Jones & Hill, 2001).

Mutual connections in ELPs provide opportunities for students to understand the nature of a workplace by utilizing prior academic knowledge. International students with dissimilar background experiences strive to share and expand academic and cultural norms and ideas. Porter and Monard (2001) found the interactions engendered by ELPs empower international students and organizational members to achieve more than they could individually. To maximize project benefits, Porter and Monard encouraged these reciprocal relationships to be thought of as covenants, not contracts. As a covenant, students share beliefs and perceptions, show commitment to the served organization, and bring their academic experience to accomplish the goals of the project. However, high levels of reciprocity can be difficult for international students to achieve. Program facilitators might encounter challenges integrating foreign student experiences with local community needs (Jackson et al., 1994). Other challenges may appear if participants desire to focus only on achieving their own goals. Jones and Hill (2001) reported that high levels of reciprocity are realizable when both parties act selflessly, and reciprocity can break down when purposes conflict.

Developing Intercultural Competency through ELPs

Intercultural competency is a primary component in many educational theories and programs. Social exchange theory (SET) in this study was used to examine how intercultural competencies and cross-cultural perceptions are shaped and acquired through deliberate interactions in ELPs (Pillay & James, 2015). Homans (1958) confirmed existing intercultural competency through social interactions that occur between dissimilar groups or individuals.

Through social engagements such as ELPs, Homans indicated that individuals receive a variety of benefits depending on their desires and needs and when social and cultural backgrounds, whether tangible or intangible, are exchanged. A balance of intercultural competencies can only exist when students give as much as they gain.

International students can heighten their experiences by immersing themselves in cultural and social attitudes different than their own. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) outlined three key facts of SET regarding cross-cultural relationships that contribute to developing a student's intercultural competency. First, the foundation of social relationships is establishing cross-cultural interactions, typically based on the expectations of the participants, whether individuals or groups. Second, the exchange of cultural values is an essential part of social relationships and reciprocal experiences balance the interaction process. Third, if relationships between groups do not provide valuable social exchange, intercultural competency will tend to disappear or break down.

However, social interactions associated with experiential learning activities are determined by the benefits enjoyed by each party and control the strength and duration of relationships (Buchan, Croson, & Dawes, 2002). Thibaut and Kelley (1959) examined individual satisfaction levels as a critical factor influencing the nature of social interactions. Interpersonal relationships in academic programs in diverse workplace environments, such as experiential learning, strengthen intercultural understanding among participants. Experiential learning activities have a number of potential benefits for equipping international students for future careers by increasing 21st century competencies such as global perceptions, workplace skills and knowledge, personal growth, and an appreciation of community issues (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2011). These benefits are described in more detail in the following sections.

Global Perceptions

The increase of student numbers who study abroad is linked with the growth of globalization in societies and marketplaces. Globalization and internationalization are sociological concepts that come originally from marketing and business studies and recently have been applied to the field of education (Akinde et al., 2017). In this study, globalization and internationalization are used interchangeably to express international students' cultural exchanges and the broadening of their perceptions about local community norms and attitudes. Internationalization is attainable when students are involved in international pedagogical activities and projects outside classroom environments (Valentine & Cheney, 2001). The immersion experience provided by ELPs has the potential to promote cultural exchange that can help international students address their concerns about understanding global norms (Crabtree, 2008; Leong, 2015). In this regard, American university and college campuses are highly attractive to international students (Institute of International Education, 2017) and international students look to them as exciting places to gain global skills and multicultural awareness (Kretovics, 2011).

Experiential learning appears to be a viable method for international students to develop globally beneficial perspectives such as the acceptance of new ideas, willingness to change, and the flexibility to learn. These experiences do not rely solely on academic courses delivered solely in classrooms but on cultural and social interactions within workplace settings (Wilson et al., 2016). International student engagement in projects relevant to their majors foster their identity regarding globalization (Crabtree, 2008; Lewis, 2005). Coryell, Stewart, Wubbena, Valverde-Poenie, and Spence (2016) pointed out that engagement in active learning and social programs played a prominent role in increasing students' internationalization. By uniting study

abroad purposes with an experiential learning component and community program engagements, Parker and Altman Dautoff (2007) indicated that international students can become global and mindful persons by increasing their social engagements.

Workplace Skills and Knowledge

A primary concern of students is to master the content of a specific major. These students desire to attain high proficiency in workplace skills that will prepare them to compete for future careers (Collins, Hannon, & Smith, 2004). Experiential learning activities typically include learning strategies that allow students to gain occupational knowledge in real world workplace settings (DeGiacomo, 2002; Kiely, 2005; Lewis & Williams, 1994). Experiential learning that occurs in a work setting affirms students in their chosen academic discipline in a relevant industry arena. The essential purpose of these programs is to equip students with knowledge and practical skills for innovation in a future career. The benefits of ELPs when they include work-integrated learning objectives were clarified by Clements and Cord (2013) as follows: encouraging students to practice activities relevant to their academic knowledge, engaging students in sociocultural issues within workplace domains, and demonstrating work and vocational skills through completion of project activities.

International students have a desire to share experiences that deepen their knowledge in diverse workplace environments. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2018) reported that students who participated in study abroad programs showed a strong willingness to join groups and engage in activities that increased their knowledge about varied cultural, social, and racial perspectives. International students' satisfaction regarding their academic performance has been linked to the quality of outside classroom projects that enabled them to better understand complex workplace environments (Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005). To realize actual

benefits for international students, Boud and Solomon (2001) claimed that co-curricular and work-integrated programs in college needed to be “flexible and responsive to the circumstances of the learner and of the work setting” (p. 46). Additionally, they confirmed that work-based or work-integrated activities and programs must be concentrated on the learner’s benefits and not only focus on engaging students in societal participation but also on students’ work skills. Students needed integrated programs and practical learning to increase their abilities and understanding of global workplace needs. These programs typically included professional members from varied demographic characteristics and were considered worthwhile opportunities for international students to interact with people possessing different expertise and skills (Crabtree, 2008).

Personal Growth and Leadership

College students need to improve soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, and problem solving that qualify them for 21st century marketplaces and jobs (Green, Comer, Elliott, & Neubrandner, 2011). Contemporary workplaces are knowledge-intensive and increasingly require the development of interpersonal skills such as influencing group members, technology usage, and creativity (Dorasamy, 2009). There is a demonstrable need to involve students in applied learning practices that equip them to handle the realities of the workplace and international students who participate in ELPs have an opportunity to broaden their perceptions about working in professional environments (Fontaine & Todd, 2011). Structured work-integrated projects allow these students to gain new insights and workplace experiences, especially rapid adaptation to diverse groups, teamwork, and improved communication skills (Ogden, 2010). Crossman (2011) and Glass (2012) asserted that experiential learning was a powerful tool to encompass intergroup communications that yielded positive impacts on campus

diversity and student career development. In addition to promoting what is learned inside the classroom, experiential learning broadens student thinking and develops personal skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and decision-making. These skills make students more self-confident when engaging in individual or group discourses in the workplace (Valentine & Cheney, 2001). ELPs provide opportunities for international students to practice decision-making by weighing all positive and negative aspects of their options and comparing alternative career paths (Glass, 2012; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002).

Experiential learning as an alternate learning method reinforces students' connection with course objectives and prepares them for varying practical leadership experiences (Ladd & Ruby Jr, 1999). During ELPs, international students are directly exposed to domestic peers, their course instructor, and organization or business members where the experience is taking place. Kampman (2011) asserted that participation in active learning programs strengthens the connection of students with their instructors, which helps international students address their educational concerns and broaden their understanding of the concept of leadership. Leadership attributes potentially acquired in the workplace include interdependency, responsibility, and the ability to share thoughts with team members (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; DeGiacomo, 2002; Eyler & Giles Jr, 1999; Russell, 2007). International students may also have opportunities to practice improved methods for the delegation of responsibilities that will enhance their management skills. Welch (1999) concluded that a variety of applied learning programs and activities allow students to deal with frustration and learn stress management in the workplace. Personal benefits to international students involved in ELPs include increasing persistence, reinforcing life satisfaction, and exploring the needs of the workplace (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles Jr, 1999).

Appreciation of Community Issues

The traditional definition of community is described by geographical locations that refer to specific places (Dunham, 1986). The benefits of experiential learning extend beyond traditional educational objectives to opportunities for students to deepen their appreciation of community issues. Students treat a variety of folks from different socioeconomic classes and deal with social issues in workplace (Ng et al., 2009). Russell (2007) found that engagement in societal programs (i.e., experiential learning) often push international students to increase their curiosity in regard to understand local community norms and attitudes. Crabtree (2008) affirmed this finding by concluding that student interactions with various communities provided positive attitudes such as respect and admiration for social values different than their own. These opportunities typically enhanced international students' social commitment, civic responsibility, and sense of belonging (Glass, 2012; Kusek, 2015; Valentine & Cheney, 2001).

ELP participation likely increases loyalty and altruism to the host institutions and local community. Paull et al. (2015) indicated that students demonstrate more altruism and loyalty in applied experience settings than academic ones. International students are typically praised for their efforts and services by a host community. This appreciation is matched by a high level of optimism and solidarity from the students themselves that can encourage them to address social concepts often discussed in the workplace such as human rights and social justice (Rawlings-Sanaei & Sachs, 2014). Everett (1998) reported roughly 87% of students who participated in social programs while studying abroad enriched their perception of social justice issues in their own society. As an instructional approach, ELPs can broaden international students' social belonging and responsibilities regarding host community issues such as poverty and social inequality (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004).

Achieving academic, personal, and sociocultural outcomes for international students in the workplace requires deliberate effort. By integrating students from different backgrounds in an unfamiliar setting, Miller, Berkey, and Griffin (2015) indicated that international students should be conscious and mindful about adapting their old experiences to new social practices to become more harmonious with host organization members. Host organization leaders, on the other hand, should develop students' sense of organizational belonging and commitment by creating a healthy work environment structured around combining their role as leaders with students as followers (Buschlen & Reusch, 2016).

Influential Factors on International Student Engagement

While experiential learning program outcomes are in many respects beneficial, several factors may hinder international students from gaining academic and non-academic benefits. Mitigating issues such as cultural misconceptions, ineffective interactions, and limited network connections potentially erect formidable barriers for international students (Wilson et al., 2016). These challenges mostly restrict international students' social participation and negatively influence course outcomes (Renn, Brazelton, & Holmes, 2014). For example, Yan and Berliner (2013) indicated Chinese students suffered misunderstandings on campus environments regarding American cultural and social habits. They concluded that international students needed to learn how to open up more effective communication channels with their new community. Through experiential learning opportunities, international students should achieve benefits from exposure to different experiences that can collectively enrich their knowledge and cultural familiarity (Crabtree, 2008; Lewis, 2005).

Contrasting social and cultural habits produce adaptive challenges for non-Western students living and studying in Western societies (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, &

Utsey, 2005). Isolation, loneliness, and adjustment to new social and educational environments are common challenges faced by non-Western students on American campuses (Nyland et al., 2007). Additionally, differences in American classroom structures, protocols, and learning methods may adversely affect retention rates and academic standing. Stoyhoff (1997) found that international students with the drive to work hard and study long hours can keep up academically. Andrade's qualitative study (2005) investigated international student experiences and reported that international students needed to sacrifice much of their free time to achieve more academic success. The following sections discuss factors that frequently challenge Saudi students in American universities and influence their experiential learning participation. American teaching and learning methods, values about individualism and collectivism, and intercultural communication are factors that likely limit Saudis' effectiveness through their ELP engagements.

Unfamiliarity with American Teaching and Learning Patterns

American learning and teaching patterns are different than what is routinely practiced in Mideast countries. Eland, Greenblatt, Smithee, and Eland (2009) reported that higher education pedagogy in the U.S. is focused on the student as an independent learner. For instance, it is common for American college students to employ study groups, online Blackboard discussion forums, and other forms of technology as sources of learning. These methods are new to most Saudi students who have learned in a traditional education system reliant on two key information sources: what the instructor and textbooks offer. Aubrey (1991) studied the academic habits of international students and observed that most Middle Eastern college students sit silently in classroom discussions. They have been trained not to question the wisdom of their professors or

express their own perspectives but to write verbatim notes that enable them to memorize and prepare for final exams.

In collaborative learning programs such as ELPs, student-student interactions and those that occur between students and instructors are necessary to achieve quality outcomes and well-educated graduates. Participation in American coeducational learning environments can be a significant change for Saudi students. The Saudi education system imposes gender separation across all education levels — elementary and secondary schools and institutions of higher education. To achieve constructive interactions on American campuses, Saudi students must rapidly adjust to opposite gender instructors and colleagues (Al-Banyan, 1980). Andrade (2005) reported that in a classroom discussion or even in study projects outside a classroom, Saudi students found it challenging to express their perspectives when dealing with different gender students.

Individualism versus Collectivism

Student social and cultural engagements are also affected by their individualistic or collectivist backgrounds. The concepts of individualism and collectivism are often tied directly to intercultural studies. Students are influenced by their individual perceptions, goals, beliefs, and roles in society. Collectivism embraces a set of beliefs, values, and conceptions that tie groups of people together and shape their relationships. Students from collectivist cultures are generally interested in fulfilling the social concerns of their group (Darwish & Huber, 2003; Ma & Schoeneman, 1997). Individualistic students, on the other hand, are primarily interested in accomplishing their personal goals and care most strongly about themselves and close family members (Darwish & Huber, 2003; Ma & Schoeneman, 1997). In a collectivist society, knowledge and experience are mostly passed down from older generations. Students in this kind

of society do not attempt to verify their own insights and unique interpretations because they feel the opinions and experiences of their elders are fundamental and unchangeable (Auyeung & Sands, 1996). Abdel Razek (2012) emphasized that collectivist students in individualistic societies encounter challenges their peers do not experience.

Saudi students with a collectivist approach most likely encounter psychological challenges and difficulties through engagement in American society. These individuals mostly resist pressure to alter their own social environment and behaviors and adapt to an unfamiliar lifestyle (Youn, 2000). In a comparative study about American and Saudi college students regarding their collectivist and individualistic attributes, Al-Zahrani and Kaplowitz (1993) emphasized that Saudi students showed a high degree of inter-group bias and less out-group involvement. Saudis also appeared more collectivist toward their groups than Americans, who were more individualistic in temperament. The social and cultural values of Saudi students may be protected by staunch resistance to worldwide changes during their study abroad. Most Saudi students coexist within closed social circles instead of adjusting to new variables (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). Saudis also attempt to maintain their original attitudes and traditions as cultural touchstones, even when they live for long periods outside of their native society (Alalwi, 2016). Alhazmi and Nyland (2010) noted many aspects related to entrenched attitudes and traditions that could limit Saudi students' overseas social engagements. One such insulating attitude is a commitment to study in the U.S. for only a certain length of time before returning home (Alalwi, 2016).

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is crucial in improving the quality of foreign student social engagements. The concept of intercultural communication is defined as a two way interaction

between two or more persons from different cultures (Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004). The benefits gained from intercultural communication vary but generally include increases in student confidence, satisfaction, and handling of their cultural and social concerns (Gareis, 2012; Gresham & Clayton, 2011). International students who participate in community programs find it beneficial to their cultural understanding because they communicate directly with domestic students and community members (Trice, 2004).

One of the essential factors that facilitate intercultural communication is linguistic competence. Previous studies confirm that language proficiency has a critical influence on intercultural communication between students (Harrison, 2012; Trice, 2004; Ying, 2002). Kao and Ganseder (1995) affirmed that foreign students who have insufficient English language proficiency interact less with local students in academic activities, which influences their benefits and satisfaction with their studies (Gareis, 2012). Hinchcliff-Pelias and Greer (2004) reported that some international students unwittingly put themselves in an embarrassing situation due to the limitation of their language proficiency and knowledge about the host culture. Consequently, language skills mostly form obstacles that are negatively correlated with Saudi student educational and social engagements.

Misunderstanding the local culture and insufficient language skills can block workplace conversations between international students and organizational members (Hinchcliff-Pelias & Greer, 2004; Ying, 2002). Jackson (2011) found that international students often think of themselves as observers, which limits meaningful engagement and dialogue with local community members. These negative perceptions, attitudes, and habits limit the benefits and increase the costs of Saudi students' ELP participation.

CHAPTER 3

Research Design and Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of Saudi students who have participated in experiential learning programs (ELPs) about their workplace engagements. As articulated in the theoretical framework and literature review sections, ELPs involve academic, cultural, and social interactions. The current study was conducted using an interpretive qualitative methodology. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated that an interpretive qualitative study concentrates on the naturalistic description of a phenomenon and is a meaningful way to understand social interactions that occur in ELPs. This methodology enabled me to provide in-depth descriptive information regarding academic, cultural, and social interactions viewed through Saudi student perspectives (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, the structure of interpretive qualitative inquiry allowed me to gather rich, thick data by applying a social exchange theory framework, particularly the benefits and costs (Maxwell, 2012). The following section explains the study design including a view of the research context, details about the study participants and the selection process, data collection procedures, analytical techniques, study quality, ethical concerns, and researcher positionality.

Research Context

I conducted this study at River Falls University (RFU), a pseudonym for an urban public university located in a Midwestern state. Data for the 2017/2018 academic year indicated an enrollment of approximately 15,000 students. Of this total, international students comprised 11% of the student population, or, 1,542 students. These students included 1011 undergraduate and 531 graduate students. Saudi students represented 19% of the total international student population, the second largest population after Indian students. Approximately 90% were

enrolled in undergraduate programs (see Table 1). A large proportion of Saudi students received financial supported from the King Salman Scholarship Program (Office of International Education, 2017).

Table 1

Saudi Student Enrollments, Fall 2017.

College	Undergraduate	Graduate	Total
International Students	1011	531	1542
Saudi Students	235	25	260
Percentage	23.2	4.8	28

Participant and Selection Process

I selected study participants by utilizing a purposeful sampling approach. Purposeful sampling helped me identify participants who could best achieve the study purposes and inform the research questions (Creswell, 2012). A key advantage of purposeful sampling is recruiting participants who can provide rich and informative data. Patton (2002) asserted “information-rich” cases can assist a researcher “to learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 230). For this study, I employed several criteria in the identification of prospective participants such as selecting Saudi students who completed at least one experiential learning project while enrolled at RFU. Other selection criteria captured relevant and comprehensive aspects of Saudi student experiences with ELPs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For instance, only Saudi students currently enrolled at RFU in the Fall 2018 semester were eligible to participate. Study participants were juniors or seniors because I considered advanced undergraduates better adapted to American learning methods and lifestyles.

Participants were engineering or business majors since most Saudi undergraduates enrolled in these two colleges (see Table 1), and 67% or 682 undergraduate international students are enrolled in these colleges (Enrollment Data, 2018). This gave Saudi students broad opportunities to interact with peers from other countries during their participation in ELPs. Moreover, the College of Engineering's 2020 Program is designed to ensure that each graduate is thoroughly prepared for a future engineering career. This program has six different sub-programs that contain an ELP component: undergraduate research, cooperative education-internship, global learning, service learning, leadership, and multidisciplinary education. Attendance in three of six strands is required for graduation (Wichita State University, 2017). Undergraduate business school students have an opportunity to enroll in the Professional Edge Program, a co-curriculum program that provides skills for enhancing employment opportunities and a successful career upon matriculation. It includes a set of experiential learning projects and since some ELPs are offered as course requirements, I contacted the program coordinators in both colleges to inquire about the classes that include experiential learning tasks.

I employed as gatekeepers the Student Engagement coordinators in the Colleges of Engineering and Business and the direct advisor of Saudi students in the Saudi Arabia Culture Mission, a governmental agency that aims to meet the educational and cultural needs of Saudi students in the U.S. The gatekeeper concept was defined by King and Horrocks (2010) as those persons who have the authority to access likely participants' data and have the ability to facilitate that access. I asked gatekeepers to provide me with updated lists of Saudi students in both colleges including their names, majors, and email addresses. I selected participants from the total number of Saudi male and female undergraduate students (154) (see Table 2) and solicited their voluntary participation by sending an invitation email to all students. Seven students

showed their willingness to participate by replying to my email with a preferred time and place. I used snowball sampling to identify other prospective participants. In snowball sampling, one participant suggests other potential participants who possess meaningful information or perspectives relevant to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). I was able to add nine additional study participants using this technique.

Table 2

Saudi Undergraduate Male and Female Students in Colleges of Engineering and Business at RFU, Fall 2018

Undergraduate Students	Engineering College	Business College	Total
Male	102	29	131
Female	19	4	23
Total	121	33	154

In qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that sample size is determined by informational considerations. When the purpose is to gain structured data, the sampling is complete when no additional information is forthcoming from newly sampled members. Additionally, qualitative researchers emphasize the quality of data rather than the quantity of data in addressing sample size (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Padgett, 2008). Given these considerations, my study included 16 participants; 12 males from the College of Engineering representing different departments such as Biomedical, Industrial, Mechanical, and Electrical and four females, one enrolled in the Business College. I stopped collecting data when the study reached saturation, that is, a point at which the participants started to replicate information from prior interviews and no new data were gained.

Data Collection

The primary source of data collection in the current study was individual interviews. It allowed me to discuss in-depth the personal experiences and perspectives of Saudi students regarding their experiential learning engagements. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that personal experiences and perspectives are not data that can be elicited adequately by surveys or observations. Thus, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews, a suitable format for gathering data that achieved the purpose of study. This type of interview allowed me to ask open-ended questions that offered flexibility for Saudi students to share their thoughts and experiences and provide important information regarding experiential learning programs. I designed my protocol questions to loosely guide these discussions by prompting participants to share ideas that could enrich the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I listed the protocol questions in Appendix A.

I piloted the protocol questions beforehand to ensure the data I collected fed into the purpose of the study. I also practiced interview procedures and reviewed the wording of protocol questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It was important for participants to understand the interview questions so as to provide correct and meaningful responses (Patton, 2002). The piloting process involved interviewing a Saudi student not involved with the study. I discussed minor changes that specified the objective of some interview questions. I digitally recorded this interview and used field notes to keep track of physical responses. Afterward, I transcribed the interview and shared the transcript with the interviewee to assess the clarity of the protocol questions and avoid any misunderstanding.

During the interviews, I asked follow-up or probing questions when participant responses required additional clarification. Interviews were digitally recorded to capture each participant's

exact words and facilitate accuracy when transcribing the data. I kept field notes for interpreting body language and vocal pauses when participants were unable to fully express themselves verbally. Digital recordings and field notes were instrumental in transcribing the interview sessions. I conducted the interviews at different times and in different places, based on the preference of each participant. I conducted one interview with each participant and each interview lasted 25 to 65 minutes.

I conducted the interviews in English with occasional uses of Arabic if clarification was needed. Most participant responses fluctuated between English and Arabic. However, a few participants felt more comfortable speaking Arabic instead of English. Arabic, the native language of Saudi Arabia, enabled students to share their perspectives free of any constraints imposed by limited English proficiency. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. I used a software for slowing down interview discourses that helped me increase transcription accuracy. Because translation influences the trustworthiness levels of the study (Birbili, 2000), Arabic quotes represented in the findings section were double-checked by bilingual experts fluent in Arabic and English and not involved with the study. Arabic linguistic tones were considered during the translation into English to limit the influence of the language and cultural habits (Chen & Boore, 2009). I employed my knowledge and cultural experience to increase the reliability of the translation (Birbili, 2000).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a process by which a researcher derives meaning from the data in the context of the research purposes and questions (Patton, 2002). Data analysis is a continuous and inductive process. It begins with the first moment of data collection and ends when study themes have been identified that comprehensively express the meanings contained in the findings

(Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2012). Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous process of making sense of overlapping data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After transcribing the interviews, I unitized the data into segments where each segment contained one idea, concept, or thought. I entered these segments into an Excel spreadsheet that enabled me to organize the data and begin the coding process. Data were carefully coded based on the similarity of emergent ideas and concepts related to the study purposes and questions. The Excel spreadsheet also helped me compare data, become aware of repetitions, and sort similar content into relevant categories. A constant-comparison technique described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) allowed me to connect similarities and compare differences within the ELP data. This technique helped me identify possible categories to investigate (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After sorting the data into reasonable and manageable categories, I applied a Microsoft Word graphic organizer to synthesize and sort findings into major and minor concepts. The graphic organizer also paralleled emergent themes within the study literature, the theoretical framework, and research questions (Maxwell, 2012). Once the content had been placed into coherent categories, the categories were sorted into preliminary themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Quality of the Study

Research quality refers to the level of validity and credibility of study statements and arguments, a concept known as trustworthiness (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). To increase the trustworthiness of my study, I used valued methods and suitable research strategies during data collection and data analysis. Validity and credibility depend on whether study findings are elicited directly, clearly, and completely from gathered data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I supported the study arguments and statements by using realistic and valid sources such as peer

reviewed journal articles (Creswell, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that trustworthiness in a qualitative study contains methods for assuring credibility, dependability, and transferability. The following sections describe how I addressed and maintained each of these research qualities.

Credibility

Credibility refers to a researcher's efforts to maintain accuracy during data collection, analysis, and the research findings. Accuracy, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) mentioned, is represented during all research phrases (i.e., identifying the problem, research questions, data gathering, and study findings). I maintained credibility by using a variety of methods including thick descriptions, triangulation, member checks, and peer debriefing (Tracy, 2010).

Thick descriptions are typically in-depth contextual details. When analyzing and writing up the study findings, such descriptions helped me clarify and justify what was said in interviews and connect this material with the literature review and theoretical framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Triangulation is a qualitative research technique to increase credibility. One type of triangulation relies on multiple data sources. I triangulated the study data to compare similarities and differences in student responses about the different types of ELPs and workplace settings. I compared data from all participants by using interview transcriptions and personal notes. Afterward, I triangulated the collected data with my research questions, theoretical framework, and literature review before sorting the data into categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Member checking is an approach that allows study participants to address changes or concerns they may not have considered during the interview (Maxwell, 2012). I sent a copy of the interview transcription to each participant and asked them to correct or approve the data.

Member checking increases credibility and validity because data are confirmed by two sets of eyes. A last method to increase credibility was peer debriefing, which helped me validate my data analysis and ensure I did not misinterpret the data. To enhance study credibility, Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer (2012) suggested peer debriefing before drafting the findings. During and after data analysis, I periodically solicited my advisor's comments and recommendations regarding any oversights or bias I might have missed (Tracy, 2010).

Dependability

Dependability is defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as evaluating the accuracy and consistency of findings to verify that interpretations and conclusions are supported by the data. To raise the confidence level in my findings, I conducted in-depth individual interviews to elicit complete descriptions of Saudi student engagements in ELPs. As mentioned above, I triangulated the data from different points of view—different ELPs and different workplace settings—that increased study dependability. To increase my confidence that I was accurately identifying themes in the data, I compared students' perspectives from prior interviews during the data collection process (Creswell, 2012). Analysis from transcribed interviews and my own field notes also helped in revealing participants' thoughts and ideas.

Transferability

Transferability is similar to external validity because it assures the study findings are applicable in new contexts and with new practitioners (Lapan et al., 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I described my study findings and conclusions in rich detail to enhance transferability. Thick descriptions also help readers decide if the findings are directly relevant to their own interests and contexts (Tracy, 2010). Differentiation in participant perspectives and study settings increased the potential transferability of the findings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Hence, the inclusion of detailed descriptions allows other researchers to determine to what extent the study findings are transferable and can be employed in different but related contexts (Patton, 2002).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations relate to a researcher's efforts to protect the rights of study participants. I acquired RFU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to collecting data. I reduced risk levels by reviewing and discussing the meaning of informed consent with participants before each interview. I explained the study purposes, the interview procedures, and the protection of rights that allowed participants to understand their rights and encourage them to respond openly to interview questions. Through informed consent, I confirmed that participation was voluntary and withdrawal from the interview allowable at any time. I concealed participant names, workplace settings, and other personal or institutional identifiers by using pseudonyms. Pseudonyms provided protection of the participants' identities and confirmed I was trustworthy in carrying out my study in an ethical manner (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants signed two copies of the informed consent prior to engaging in the interview, one for them to keep and one kept by me. Lastly, the study data and electronic digital records were password secured and hard copy transcripts locked in my advisor's office.

Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality or reflexivity is crucial for exploring a researcher's thoughts, reflections, and biases about the study topic and participants (Creswell, 2012). Since I was the primary instrument of data collection, reducing undue influence on the data was important. Qualitative researchers need to be honest and forthcoming regarding their personal identity and experiences (Lapan et al., 2012; Maxwell, 2012). Peshkin (2000) noted that qualitative

researchers benefit from having systematic guidance about subjectivity during the research. Positionality emerges from a variety of researcher experiences, relationships, and personal perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although assessing my positionality was primarily my responsibility, I benefited from my advisor's comments as a peer reviewer. His expertise increased awareness of my subjectivity, perspectives, and value orientation. Being transparent about my positionality increased the study's findings and credibility.

My research topic tied directly to my career experience. I had 9 years of experience as a high school mathematics teacher. I felt a responsibility for facilitating change in the Saudi teaching-learning system and education programs that enhance students' social and cultural understandings. ELPs are an important tool for improving student knowledge, experiences, and career skills. I realized that much of the knowledge and experience gained during my study in the educational leadership program has been applied knowledge. ELPs helped me understand global skills before coming to the U.S. and this shaped by interest in experiential learning when I entered the program.

In the fall of 2013, I started my English language study in the Language Center. As a newcomer, besides what I gained from my father's experience, I often needed a facilitator who could explain academic and social changes and help me overcome intercultural problems. As a result, I served as a volunteer in non-profit organizations that helped increase my cultural awareness and understanding of local attitudes and behaviors. Although managing the time commitments between volunteering, studying, and family was a challenge, intercultural communication with diverse community members widened my insights on life. These limited engagements exposed me to community members I would not have otherwise met and enabled me to build friendships outside of RFU's Saudi community.

Through my experience as a doctoral student, I have participated in field study experiences that are a kind of experiential learning program. I enjoyed various benefits from interactions with individuals and experts from diverse educational positions. I recognized the significance of these programs in helping students to understand the importance of practical experiences and intercultural interactions. While I believe most Saudi students have limited appreciation for the multilayered purposes of experiential learning and its academic and non-academic benefits, I strived to keep in balance the benefits I gained and the challenges I encountered during my voluntary work and field study experiences when I collected and analyzed the study data.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore Saudi undergraduate student perceptions regarding their experiential learning participation at a Midwestern urban university. The findings represent the cumulative data obtained by conducting individual interviews with 16 junior and senior Saudi students in the Colleges of Engineering and Business. Twelve participants were male, four were female, and their ages ranged from 19-28 years old. I recruited participants by sending an invitation email to all undergraduate Saudi students in the Colleges of Engineering and Business (154 students). Seven participants responded directly; I used a snowball sampling technique to locate and recruit the other nine. Three of the interviewees had their workplace experience through optional participation in experiential learning programs and one had been involved in experiential learning related to their academic discipline in an off-campus non-profit organization. I conducted 10 of the interviews on campus, five in coffee shops, and one at a participant's home.

I categorized student responses into several themes during the data coding process. The first theme, Attitudes and Perceptions about Participating in an ELP, includes Saudi students' initial impression regarding their first ELP engagement. The second theme, Academic Benefits, represents ELPs as a learning method and the practical experiences that reflect on student personal developments. The third theme, Sociocultural Benefits, describes non-academic benefits of ELPs that include sociocultural practices and observations that are not part of the formal curriculum. The fourth theme, Group Interactions, discusses two types of group interactions: one with Saudi peers and one with American students. The fifth theme, Saudi

Experiences in American Workplaces covers various types of group and workplace experiences with peers, instructors, program facilitators, sponsors, and employees. The sixth theme, Core Challenges Faced by Saudi Students, illustrates pervasive issues that hinder or limit student benefits in the ELP workplace. Lastly, the theme titled, “Prospects for Changing Saudi Workplaces,” details student willingness to make developmental changes in Saudi workplaces and how they perceive the challenges that accompany the changes.

Attitudes and Perceptions about Participating in an ELP

Experiential learning programs were a new pedagogical experience for most Saudi students. The prior instructional experience of these students was a traditional classroom that one participant succinctly described as, “Teachers fed us knowledge.” Saudi students explained the significance of ELPs by explaining program ideas and their shared roles regarding participation. The following sections describe the initial perceptions of Saudi students in ELPs and their contributions to align theoretical experiences in project problems.

The first ELP engagement was an exploratory learning experience for most students. Saudi students were familiar with receiving content knowledge and concepts from teachers and memorizing this knowledge to pass the final test of a course. Participants described their ELP experience in an American university as an opportunity to practice a new learning approach that was unavailable in Saudi universities. A student compared, “Practical exercises on labs, techniques using applied projects, and working in groups outside of the classroom are some of the learning differences between American and Saudi universities.” Another student confirmed this sentiment, “Our studies in Saudi Arabia mostly involved receiving information. When I came here to the U.S., it is wonderful to be involved in practical training in real life before graduation.” Saudi students recognized that ELPs incorporated into their study abroad program

were a once in a lifetime opportunity. As one student explained, “I got that [ELP involvement] and attempted to distinguish myself compared to students who study in Saudi Arabia.” Another student discussed the relative importance of the opportunity: “This opportunity does not repeat itself and I was interested in developing myself,” he said.

ELPs as a practical learning method resulted in a set of initial challenges for most participants. One said, “I just had confusion in the beginning. It was depression or something like that. I was not familiar with such projects.” Importantly, students described their ELP assignments as anxiety producing in statements such as, “In the beginning, I was afraid of how I could work with people who understood more than me,” “The first time I participated, I was scared. I had no idea about applied programs. I do not like to be fully worthless in the project,” and “I was kind of scared about ELP outcomes. I was wondering if I could get more benefits or if I was just wasting time.” There were uncertainties about the organizational workplaces where the ELPs took place. For example, one student reported being “worried because I never had experience in organizations in the U.S. and had no idea I would be a trainer.” Another student remarked, “I was wondering how these programs [ELPs] could allow me to work outside the classroom and work with employees.” All but four study participants who had previous work experience in Saudi Arabia mentioned the ELP workplace as a new environment with mentors and guides necessary for their success.

Saudi students looked for opportunities that would help them understand the foundation of ELPs and prepare them for what was to come. A few participants asked instructors to inform them of what to expect but not always successfully, as one noted, “I faced difficulty because instructors were busy and did not have sufficient time to train us adequately.” Others used local American students with ELP experience as sources of knowledge. One participant explained his

ELP experiences were of little value until he sought help from local students who had deep understanding and knowledge of the workplace.

At first, students had a hard time understanding how to align their theoretical experiences with real life. Student explanations indicated the range of these difficulties. For example, “I could understand the fundamentals of the course and could apply them on a written exam, but in real life, it was hard.” This difficulty likely was rooted in the participant’s previous learning experience: “The ELP situation was totally different. I remember on the first project, there was disorientation. I was lost.” Some students were skeptical in the beginning, as this one affirmed, “I assumed there would be some difficulty in fairly assigning the tasks needed for the ELP because one student could work more than the other group members.” This student wondered, “Why is the grade for the final project a group grade and not for each student’s work separately?” Such concerns about grades and task fairness created initial doubts about the benefits of working in a group.

Academic Benefits of ELPs

Participants described the academic advantages of ELPs in various ways. For example, perspectives on the pedagogical value of ELPs included the following comments: “ELPs are a smart method for students who want to broaden their resources and knowledge,” “ELPs helped me gain more information that I would retain for a longer time,” and “I have found knowledge is quite realistic through applying it.” Experiential learning strongly influenced how and what Saudi students were able to learn. They described ELPs as a comprehensive mechanism that improved their learning, personal growth, leadership, and employability skills. In this section, Saudi students reflect on ELPs as a hands-on learning context that combined traditional classroom concepts with real world, practical benefits. Participants also discuss how ELPs

contributed to professional development by providing them with leadership roles within a dynamic group setting.

The Hands-On Learning Context of an ELP

There were a range of perspectives regarding the intersection between ELPs and classroom learning. As a type of instructional technology, ELPs aimed to interconnect with primary course concepts, a structural similarity they share with problem-based learning. Projects due at the end of the semester usually summarized the concepts taught in class. “Whatever you have learned, you should apply to the project,” said a student. “I studied about 9 or 10 weeks in the classroom and after that, we split into groups for a project. We tried to apply whatever we learned in the project.” Projects included whole class concepts and project topics tended to be highly relevant to the course. However, when ELPs did not directly align with coursework, students needed additional time and effort to find resources and mentors that could address those specific problems. The unfamiliar space between ELPs and classroom objectives provided an opportunity for students to broaden their knowledge and increase their problem solving abilities. One participant summarized his satisfaction when solving a project problem: “Compared to my doubts when I started, I had a great impression by the time I finished the project.”

Projects enabled Saudi students to directly feel the value of practical knowledge. One student provided an example from her personal life: “I remember how I learned cooking. I did not learn it through speech or theoretical explanation. I learned it by using actual quantities of materials. It was purely practical through observation and application.” In this regard, participants appreciated how ELPs encouraged them to employ methods and locate informational resources outside of textbooks. This process enriched and thickened the learning experience. Two students shared similar statements: “The projects taught me how I can learn” and “In some

projects, I developed my thoughts by seeking additional information.” Another student explained that a project was an opportunity to broaden his reading, research, and learning patterns.

ELPs were a valuable approach that increased students’ problem solving ability in the workplace. One student said: “The ELP helped me to solve problems through the training experiences I had from the projects.” Another participant indicated, “In an ELP, I seek information for understanding what happened.” Other students talked about working with team members to figure out project issues, an activity that occasionally required their facilitator to intervene:

We first try to simplify the problem. Then we read similar projects. In the end, if we did not find a solution, we would ask the project instructor for help. In this case, the instructor discussed the method that we used and why it could not give a solution.

One participant described his typical approach: “I would take notes in every meeting, asking questions and seeking additional information. I found this method beneficial.” Another student noted that project themes required them to engage in deep and systematic reading: “The project I was involved in forced me to go back to search official websites to get ways that could help. This broadened my perspective.”

Additional benefits came from workplace colleagues themselves, a benefit for students who were uncomfortable contributing their ideas in a classroom. Through direct exposure to colleagues in group and workplace settings, “It was possible to learn from each other.” Students who did not understand something could ask for help in a cooperative environment. One said, “I am shy to ask in the classroom but with a limited number of students, I ask naturally.”

However, a few students struggled to successfully employ ELPs as a learning method. A student in this situation said, “The applying and creativity were so difficult.” She had been more successful in her previous studies because they were mostly theoretical. Another student stated bluntly, “I had no idea how to apply what I learned.” The additional time and effort needed to find solutions for project assignments did not necessarily connect to achieving high educational benefits.

One participant differentiated ELPs from classroom learning by two crucial elements. First, in the classroom, it is possible to pass the class without a deep understanding of the concepts. A student could memorize information more than understand it. However, in an ELP, a student deals with tangible problems. Students need to know how to address them to pass the project. Second, students have to work with others in applied learning settings. This means you are not going to learn well if you are an introverted person. It is the opposite in theoretical studies. You can be introverted and study by yourself successfully. The theoretical section presented in class teaches students the general concepts but does not teach them how to practice it. A student provided an example: “When I study a new concept, I have to complete this concept by knowing how to apply it in the workplace environment. How to apply the concept is most important.” Another student affirmed this view: “Equal importance is placed on what is learned inside the classroom and the workplace. But how the student communicates this knowledge in the project is key.” A student further described this connection: “Knowledge might be deficient if it loses its application side.” One student even proposed a ratio for classroom and project learning experience: “I consider knowledge given in the classroom forms 10% of learner understanding and applying the knowledge forms 90%.” A different student pointed out that application mistakes could be costly:

In the classroom, the mistake is on paper and that affects just me. So, I may receive a zero for the assignment. But at work if I make a mistake such as turning on or off the equipment even a little bit late, that could cost the organization a lot.

Most study participants were interested in applying the theoretical knowledge they attained in the classroom to actual workplace problems.

Leadership Development

Participation in an ELP helped students develop professional leadership skills.

Participants described different opportunities for practicing leadership skills such as delegating project tasks and personal and group time management. They characterized ELP workplaces as attractive environments for sharpening employment skills such as respect for time, increasing responsibility, and accountability.

Project engagements helped Saudi students gain insights into their own strengths and weaknesses. “I knew myself better when I got out of my own ELP community and had to deal with dissimilar people,” someone stated. Several students reported ELPs required them to learn how to handle different perspectives because in the projects, Saudis students met people from different places with different perceptions and backgrounds. A participant commented how she “started to think about ordinary issues from different viewpoints.” ELPs were a mechanism that pushed Saudi students to increase their consciousness regarding the perspectives of others. Students’ self-awareness and appreciation of others was also affected. As one reflected,

I feel my perspective regarding judgment and assessment has changed. My awareness and perception level are broader. I have come to recognize that when I deal with persons from different cultures, which I could not do before my ELP engagement, I need to respect other cultures.

The level of responsibility expected of students grew faster and larger through the ELP experience than with individual work or classroom courses. Participation in an ELP led some students to give more priority to project tasks. One student changed her weekly routine at the time she enrolled in a project: “I remember the project meeting time was Tuesdays and I started the next day with my project assignment. I could think about my individual homework later.” Explained another, “We had a project presentation due at the end of the semester. I was very sick but pushed myself to complete my task. However, due to my health, my performance was not satisfactory, which affected the project’s final evaluation.” This participant took full responsibility for the lower grade and talked with the instructor about how she evaluated projects. The added responsibility of project tasks intensified the concerns and pressure for Saudi students because they wanted to contribute to the success of the project by completing their work perfectly.

Some study participants learned to better manage their time around project tasks and meetings. One student explained how his drive to copy the American style altered his daily schedule: “During business days, I concentrated on doing school tasks. Weekends, I practiced my hobby personally.” This interviewee joked, “If you send a work related email to any employee on the weekend, you will not get a response until Monday.” He believed this was common practice in the U.S. Successfully determining task priorities, meeting time commitments, and managing worktime and daily assignments were important skills practiced by students through their ELPs and some students expressed high satisfaction with the skills they developed. As one stated, “If I gained just these two skills [respect for time and shared responsibility] through project participation, I would be satisfied.” For a few, however, time constraints formed an unmovable obstacle that increased their anxiety levels, as exemplified by

this statement: “I have to study, take care of my house, and attend project meetings, all at the same time.”

ELP projects encouraged students to volunteer to be a group leader despite the differences in tasks between leaders and members of the group. One student commented, “I fight to be a leader even though assigning the work for group members means doubling my responsibilities.” Another student reported the opportunities to practice leadership had affected his attitude: “I noticed that my personality and self-confidence improved whenever I worked as a group leader.” Another student utilized ELPs as an opportunity to apply practical leadership skills originally discussed in the classroom: “I nominated myself to be a group leader since I had studied a chapter related to leadership in a management principles course and found this a good opportunity to gain new leadership skills.”

Students who did not have an opportunity to be a group leader were still able to observe the functions needed for leadership. For example, one participant observed a supervisor’s style of interacting with employees in the company. When I asked if there were different leadership roles learned through ELPs, participants replied affirmatively. Planning was one of these roles. “Students agreed on a plan, and we proceeded accordingly. Then we met again to evaluate the process,” a student explained. Another student shared his efforts to coordinate teammates: “I tried to do my best to make sure everyone was on the same page so that everyone completed the job on time.” A third student found that understanding the personalities of the group members he worked with increased work quality: “It is important to know your teammates’ capabilities and interests because you can utilize their strengths to benefit the entire project.” It is unlikely students could have observed these skills if they had not participated in an ELP.

However, not everyone had an opportunity to actively practice leadership roles and responsibilities. Based on the assignment, a leader's responsibilities came with certain restrictions. One frustrated student commented: "Teamwork included three or four students, but leaders did not do any work outside the group. Basically, their role included determining the location and time of meetings." Additionally, a few students indirectly learned a valuable lesson: they disliked being a leader. They preferred to be members. As one commented, "I do not want leadership responsibility since a lot of problems and effort come with it." These students preferred concentrating on acquiring personal benefits rather than practicing leadership in ELPs.

Sociocultural Benefits

The ELP classes involved students from different countries and cultures in the same workplace. This direct exposure to diverse student backgrounds and perspectives enabled Saudi students to gain a set of non-academic practices and understandings. A few Saudi students reported that collaborating with students from different cultural backgrounds was a crucial source in understanding the meaning of diversity. ELP workplace environments allowed them to befriend local students, alter their social and cultural behaviors, and increase sociocultural awareness. However, half of the study participants thought ELP classes were not conducive to sociocultural growth and exchange. As one participant noted, "I felt it [the project] was not an appropriate place to talk about my cultural and social background." The next sections articulate Saudi student perspectives about the opportunities for social and cultural development available in ELP workplaces.

Respect and Appreciation

Saudi students involved with multicultural ELP group activities reported changes in their behaviors. One said, "Whatever you find could be new." Two examples emerged that referred

to changes regarding student social attitudes. One was a significant enhancement of their respect and appreciation for the opinions of others whose views differed from theirs. One said, “I share my ideas and should respect other people’s ideas. That’s what I have learned.” This behavior mostly occurred in workplaces where students were allowed to discuss different instructional ideas. “Try to prove your thoughts and acclimate yourself with other opinions,” a student explained. About his new discursive approach, he explained, “I should not say, ‘No, this is a wrong idea,’ even if it was. Instead, I should say, ‘I have an idea, how about if we do this?’ or ‘I do not know about you guys, what do you think?’” A different student observed changes in accepting others’ opinions and persuading others about his ideas. He stated, “My thoughts about discussion were changed. I came to understand that being convinced by others does not mean weakness in my personality, which was what I had been thinking.”

The second social attitude mentioned by students was the culture of being on time. A participant reflected,

When meeting, do not say, ‘I need 5 minutes’ and then take 20 minutes to show up. This is disrespectful here in America. I originally thought it does not matter if you come late sometimes. But it was really important, and I paid attention to it.

These two situations exemplified changes in students’ attitudes and behaviors in response to direct interactions in ELPs.

Rapport and Relationships

Integrating ELP students into workplace sites tended to create healthy social environments. Many students responded by showing a desire to engage non-Saudi groups and alter their experiences with people from other cultures. They realized that people from different cultures and different nationalities could provide different ideas and ELPs, where managers,

staff, workers, and students were all working in same field, were an important environment to use as a cultural benefit for Saudi students. One participant stated, “We considered it a home for all of us.” Such expressions of warmth and belonging encouraged Saudi students to engage further in the ELP workplace and provided deeper learning experiences. Social conversations in the workplace influenced student performance and capabilities. A desire to build social relationships in the workplace was significant for many participants. As one student commented, “Social relationships are important because those students could meet each other someday in the future and help each other.”

Saudi participants used certain social practices to develop rapport with project members. For example, a student invited his teammates to bring snacks during the meeting time to improve their social bond. He said, “I plan to break the ice from my side as much as I can. I try to create a positive social atmosphere for us [team members].” Other participants initiated social communication by introducing Saudi social and cultural traditions that helped them open communication channels with their non-Saudi project members. One participant shared this example: “They [non-Saudi colleagues] love to know more about Saudi Arabia. They were happy that I talked about my culture and country.” These participants believed social conversations broadened their vision. They assumed they were working in organizational and social environments populated with open-minded members.

Integrated workplaces provided a suitable opportunity for making American friends for some Saudi students. Study participants found it difficult to meet new American friends if they did not have a connection like the ELP projects. Three study participants commented on creating meaningful friendships with team members. One said, “I had the opportunity to meet an American friend and built a relationship with her through my project work.” A second student

got a couple of invitations to attend American social events. He said, “I got in a conversation with local students and they told me ‘We’re having a social gathering.’” These friendships forged through the ELP contributed to raising his social awareness. A third participant told a different but related story about the social atmosphere in ELPs: “I widened my friendship circle. Once, I got a chance to invite my group members to drink Arabic coffee in my house. The invitation made them happy and I saw it as a good experience.”

However, for a variety of reasons, other students did not treat social relationships as an important aspect of project completion. For example, one student explained, “I did not plan to build social relationships since I know that my staying here [in the U.S.] is limited by my study period.” Time pressures constrained other students from putting effort into building social relationships. A student responded about the possibility of building social relationships during ELP classes, stating, “In fact, no. Meeting times usually were very limited and I do not have free time. I do not have time to stay longer than the specified meeting time.” Another participant said, “I did not expect to attend local social events as part of my participation in projects.”

Overall, various opportunities existed for Saudi students to broaden their relationships with local students. Some participants expressed an ability to adapt themselves to the American habits of project members without encountering educational, cultural, and social obstacles.

Group Interactions

The structure of most ELPs was as interactive team activities that differed according to program patterns and objectives. Saudi students who worked on projects engaged in group activities, some a result of their own choosing and others assigned by program facilitators. Saudi students had numerous opportunities to interact with each other and with non-Saudi students in group projects. Students reported advanced levels of collaboration when sharing thoughts and

ideas with their group. One participant mentioned her group members were working on a goal that promoted valuable academic collaboration: “Group members were united because we had a single project goal.” Working with a group encouraged Saudi students to share project problems. Group work also helped students identify and address major project concerns. A participant continued, “When group members faced a problem, we communicated with each other and tried to discuss solving this problem.” Another expressed his appreciation for the chance to collaborate with team members: “I personally love that atmosphere of meeting outside the classroom where each one discusses his ideas very comfortably.” Students saw brainstorming as a worthwhile learning experience. During these sessions, students comfortably contributed their idea or point of view. A student stated, “We have good ideas and we get to share them with each other.” Another analyzed how fresh ideas emerge through group discussions: “We are given workplace tools and use brainstorming to decide how best to use them to achieve our goal.”

ELPs designed to increase student involvement assigned students to groups in different ways. Some study participants completed their ELP experience within the first 2 years of study when most group activities were optional coursework ELPs. In the senior year, however, group assignments were mandatory with no choice for students. A participant described how the logic of assigning ELP groups depends on the project and the course:

I might remember a way that an instructor divides the groups randomly based on their student ID numbers without looking for their knowledge or their culture. I mean good luck! There are problems putting names randomly in a group. Students complained because some students were not in good academic standing in the course.

A few participants claimed this method weakened overall group performance. One person stated, “Making random groups may be fair in the program facilitator’s opinion. Of course, I

disagree with him because if he wants to divide the students in groups, it should be based on their academic performance and discipline.” In contrast, program facilitators had the option to use the natural variation in project topics as a way of selecting teams where students formed groups based on their interest in a topic. As mentioned earlier, students would typically vote on specific project topics based on their interest. One student explained why he supported this approach: “I had a class and was assigned a group project based on a topic that we [team members] were interested in and wanted to pursue further.”

The study surfaced disagreements about the role of students in identifying project ideas and problems. For the most part, program instructors provided project topics and each student selected the one that best fit his or her interest. Commented one, “The way of selecting project ideas by instructors was excellent.” At other times, students had an active role in choosing project topics and a few thought the selection of project topics should be the responsibility of the student rather than the instructor. They preferred asking each group to identify several ideas in the first meeting. Afterward, students could vote for the idea that appealed most to them. One explained, “Each student should provide his or her idea and then group members can debate the value of the ideas.” Another student shared, “It is hard to satisfy everyone in a group when different ideas are suggested.” These students preferred more flexibility in determining the ELP topic they would eventually address.

In terms of ELP implementation, participants described their individual roles as limited since they were required to complete project tasks as a group. A participant indicated, “I was assigned to do a specific role. That was it.” Another described, “I was not a developer; I was an implementer.” He explained, “I implemented what was required. I had limited options that were reviewed in the first meeting.” Other students described their disappointment working in a group

because they lacked a distinct individual role to fulfill. As one explained, “We always separated into groups of three guys to work on a specific part of the project.” Nonetheless, creativity in student roles and contributions was usually encouraged. As one participant said, “Some projects allowed us to generate additional ideas and roles.” The majority of participants possessed prior academic knowledge and skills that helped them enrich program ideas and assignments. A student mentioned, “I had to reread previous textbooks and PowerPoint slides to fulfill the required roles of the project.” Another participant shared how core course experiences were beneficial in developing project ideas. In general, participants were satisfied with their opportunities to contribute to the ELP.

When asked which approach to student involvement was most beneficial, interviewees discussed various ideas. Many of them preferred the option of choosing their own group members because as one person stated, “It makes it easier to discuss project ideas. In my opinion, it is the best way.” Other students felt it was unnecessarily challenging and stressful to work with unknown students on group projects. “It is not good to have additional psychological pressure,” someone offered, explaining there was already enough pressure working with all the new people in the workplace. In certain situations, students were not allowed to choose their project members. One participant felt strongly, “It is not fair! All excellent students should be involved in one group and lower performing students in another.” Countered a second participant, “Instructors know a student’s ability and try to balance that within groups. They recognize that not all students are on the same education level.” Students perceived group assignment based on academic standing as a more equitable way to achieve project balance. The benefits from exposure to excellent students outweighed other disadvantages. Participants

distinguished between two types of group interactions: one with Saudi peers and one with American students.

Co-national peer interactions. Participants described their interactions with fellow Saudi students as both positive and negative based on various instructional and cultural considerations. Most participants thought dealing only with Saudi members improved communication and diminished cultural barriers. One student explained, “We know each other, we are from the same culture, and almost the same educational background. There are no differences in the way we think.” For other participants, similarities of language and culture were a significant advantage: “With Saudi students, I can communicate with no language difficulties.” Participants noted the advantages of working with Saudis were their ease and flexibility in delivering project ideas. “Our thoughts are so close,” explained a student.

Participants also were more confident collaborating with Saudi peers. Similar lifestyle patterns and attitudes helped Saudi students schedule group meetings. As someone observed, “belonging to the same identity group was better.” One student confided that collaboration with Saudi peers made it easier to control project tasks: “Honestly, Saudi students are very cooperative with each other.” In contrast, several participants felt collaborating with fellow Saudi students made achieving beneficial project outcomes less effective. Reflected one student,

We Saudi students come from the same country and speak the same language. Some students take that as an advantage and say, “Saudi group members would not ask me to complete a task if I could not do it.” These students believe that Saudi group members will not blame them for deficient work.

Another participant shared her personal experience with a Saudi student in a group project:

Once a project had only two members, a Saudi guy and me. We split the tasks. I thought from the beginning he was not paying attention and later on, 3 days before the due date, he said, “I do not know what to do. I’m lost.” I think he wanted me to do his work.

A couple of participants offered harsh judgments of the Saudi group conversation style. “It can be hurtful,” said one. Commented another, “It’s like getting the door closed on your face. They say, ‘You are wrong and must do such and such’ but without convincing you why.” Students considered this communication style a waste of valuable time. It was preferable for group members to focus on achieving project goals rather than engage in heated discussions.

Some students, however, responded more diplomatically when asked about Saudi student attitudes and interactions in ELP groups. One student said, “Saudi students are not similar. Some are better educated and have to work together in projects as best they know how.” Another student mentioned an Arabic epigram, “The fingers on your hand are not the same,” an expression suggesting that although each finger is uniquely different in size, shape, and orientation, the hand, nevertheless, is one of the most adaptive parts of the body. The psychological aspect of participating within a cultural peer group was a feeling of safety. A participant observed, “Saudis are relieved when they can participate together. When they are removed from their group, they can feel uncomfortable. People can feel scared, especially if they expect people to judge them.” Saudi students placed high value on operating within their comfort zone, even if this familiar choice deprived them from gaining other ELP benefits.

American peer interactions. Many study participants felt uncomfortable if they were assigned to work with Saudi partners in ELPs. These students preferred working with American and other international students. Saudi students who got an opportunity to interact with American students reported many benefits along with a few misunderstandings. Less than half

of the study participants preferred mixing with group members they did not know because they believed working only with their Saudi peers might limit their experience. They expressed interest in getting away from students who possessed similar cultural norms. As one asserted, “With the non-Saudis [Americans], I can ask for what I want. I do not feel favoritism.” Another commented, “I try to stay away from people who know me. The separation,” he explained, “keeps me from feeling embarrassed for others. I know some Saudi students have a low performance level when it comes to work.” Students had other reasons for preferring mixed groups such as exposure to dissimilar ideas, developing new ways of thinking, and attaining different academic benefits.

Dealing with project tasks from a different cultural perspective was the main reason for interacting with a heterogeneous group. ELPs were an excellent opportunity to work closely with American team members, meet local students, develop English language proficiency (“I was aiming to learn the language well”) and broaden thinking patterns. One specified, “I prefer American students in the group. I mean, the diversity is very important. It gives me an opportunity to get ideas from a variety of sources. I get broader thinking and the group's capabilities are stronger.” Those students believed that Saudis should practice dealing with unknown members because in the workplace, they were going to meet people they never dealt with before. Working with close friends is likely to create barriers regarding project plans and goals, particularly for Saudi students looking for the easiest way to complete their tasks. As long as they were studying in U.S universities, Saudi students should make an effort to benefit from all available resources by taking advantage of their ELP classes to obtain a wide range of social and cultural experiences. One stated, “They [Saudi students] have to use all available opportunities in ELPs to develop themselves.”

Involvement with American groups raised expectations for Saudi students. For example, American teammates often presented a well-defined plan and a clear vision. During project time, American students specified group goals and how to achieve them. Before the meetings, American group members typically determined the topics the group would be discussing. A student said, “This helped me prepare and ask questions.” American students had a clear roadmap and high commitment for achieving their goals. Exclaimed one participant, “They know what they are doing!” Students described working with American peers as a motivating environment. A participant stated, “An American in our group asked all the members what our opinions were. With this approach, I can pose my ideas. There was no favoritism in the project and everyone took the work seriously.”

American students had more ELP-type experience and a deeper academic foundation that added to the quality of the Saudi learning experience. One student mentioned, “I thought the ideas of American students were often as good as or better than mine and I could discuss them.” Americans wielded greater influence in the group: “I found their knowledge deep and strong about experiments and laboratories. I know less because I did not have opportunities to practice these types of education at home.” However, this educational gap between Saudis and their American peers sometimes negatively influenced communication during project meetings. Indicated a student, “I was outside the circle of dialogue and did not contribute because I was less knowledgeable than other group members.” Others were intimidated participating in ELPs with local students: “I felt I did not have the right qualifications to contribute to their thoughts.” The prior knowledge and ELP experiences of American students led some Saudis to settle for roles as passive listeners instead of active discussants.

Study participants described several misconceptions and misunderstandings that arose between Saudi and American students. For example, Saudi participants were often at odds with the American approach about the distribution and sharing of project tasks. The individualistic culture of American students preferred everyone to commit to a single task, finish it, and then bring it back to the group. “They [American students] only participated in the part allocated to them,” someone explained. The difficulty of scheduling group meetings with American students was another source of group tension. A participant reported,

They [American teammates] sometimes favor meeting times in the evenings and I prefer to sit with my family at that time. I have time in the morning but they are busy. We found time to meet on the weekend but it was limited to just an hour and this was not enough, from my point of view.

A couple of participants recounted situations where they believed stereotyping was evident since there was an expectation that American students would have preconceived ideas about Saudis. “It is possible they had a previous experience with Saudi students or heard about us from someone else,” a student explained. “On the day you join them and they see you are a Saudi student, I can see their facial expressions change. Maybe they tell themselves, ‘This Arab guy does not know anything or is ignorant.’” A second student described feeling that American students did not fully expect Saudi students to complete their assigned tasks in a satisfactory manner. He said, “Maybe they did not trust me to finish the work in the way they would have liked.” Despite these problems, participants who engaged with Americans peers largely agreed that sharing group projects with American students was more beneficial than it would have been without them.

Saudi Experiences in American Workplaces

Exposure to American workplace environments was largely seen by Saudi students as a privilege with direct communication with knowledgeable employees being the crucial feature. The cultural and educational diversity of this workplace exposure provided multiple benefits for Saudi students. One student reported, “I was able to improve my performance and learn about many universal ideas that I could not find somewhere else, even in a Saudi workplace.” Some participants believed an ELP in an American institution would be a strong reference in their future occupational life. “For me,” a student indicated, “I observed American employees closely and some of them were a good example for me when I get a job.” Another affirmed, “It added a lot to my limited experience dealing with work pressure.” One said metaphorically, “It was like killing two birds with one stone,” implying he obtained valuable theoretical and practical knowledge in the ELP workplace and would benefit from the diversity he experienced when it came time to find a job in the Saudi marketplace. Study participants reported having numerous opportunities for connecting with program facilitators, course instructors, and organizational members (i.e., non-university personnel) in their various workplaces assignments and the following sections describe Saudi student perspectives of their interactions with a few of these individuals.

Interactions with ELP Facilitators

Saudi students had exposure to ELP facilitators whose titles included project instructor, professor, and sometimes a graduate student in a teaching assistant position. These direct interactions were important for simplifying program instructions. Most Saudi students encountered a new way of learning within the structure of an ELP and communication with facilitators was necessarily informative. “They were very resourceful and cooperative,” said a

participant. Another student explained program facilitator monitoring was necessary because Saudi students, especially at the beginning, needed guidance and help to make full sense of the experience. A couple of participants reported having problems interacting with program facilitators who discouraged Saudi students from talking to them. One student reported an instructor telling him somewhat icily, “Do not try to be friends with me” and these unsatisfactory exchanges ended up negatively influencing their performance and final grades.

When asked for details about their relationships with program facilitators, most students reported having a helpful and trusting relationship during project time. A student commented, “He [the program facilitator] trusts me and treats me based on my personality, not my nationality. He knows my seriousness and credibility in the work. He was proud I was one of his students.” Project and workplace interactions could be friendlier than what students typically experienced in class: “I found the instructor’s relationship with students in the project quite different than in class.” As this student explained, “In class, the instructor deals more with the material than with the student. Conversely, in projects, the instructor deals more with the student than the project or project idea.”

Additionally, a majority of study participants reported having program facilitators who demonstrated a high level of interest, an attribute that helped Saudi students successfully fulfill their project requirements. One student reflected, “She [ELP facilitator] did some modifications to our writing style. This was not her job in the project but she did it anyway. We used to email her when facing any problem and she would quickly reply.” Such help was greatly appreciated and highly valuable, as one confirmed:

Honestly, dealing with him [facilitator] was beneficial to me despite the fact that he was overseeing around 50 students in the project. I appreciated the pressure he was under

because the entire group asked for his help. He did the best he could by giving us basic instructions and rules about the project at the beginning of the semester.

Periodic meetings with ELP facilitators were instrumental in articulating project ideas and outlines for Saudi participants. These meetings differed based on ELP type. In some projects, students had a mandatory meeting with project facilitators once a week for an hour. At that time, each student explained the upcoming steps and potential concerns about their project. A few students were fortunate to have an opportunity to talk with their project facilitator outside of the designated meeting time. According to one participant, “I personally met the facilitator outside the regular meeting time and asked him questions about possible issues and difficulties I encountered.” These students showed how such practices helped fill the gaps in their limited ELP experiences.

Interactions with Organizational Members

ELP requirements meant that workplace interactions with organizational members often took place through conversational interviews. Students referred to this as a third phase of the ELP experience along with on-campus meetings with group members and program facilitators. Students interacted with two categories of organizational members. One was sponsors who represented the organization and dealt directly with students by advising them in the workplace and the second was skilled employees who trained and mentored students.

The quality of interactions between Saudi students and their sponsors were mostly encouraging. One of them reflected how the sponsor asked about project problems and trainee needs. “He was willing to help us overcome any obstacle we faced in the workplace,” this student explained, “like the time he assigned an employee to meet us in a campus lab to train us on a specific program that could solve a project problem.” Other students discussed concerns

and ideas during regular meetings with their program sponsor scheduled throughout the semester. Students reported being free to talk, critique, or suggest project tasks. Said a student, “I got a chance to discuss my ideas without any worries” whether it was information he needed, or a problem encountered in the workplace.

Most students felt the skilled employees of the organization were supportive coaches in the workplace. “If you need something or have an emergency situation, they fully take care of it,” one commented. Students were generally upbeat about interacting with employees. For example, one said, “I felt positive things that could help anyone succeed.” A second expressed his dealings with employees, “I felt as though I had worked with them for a long time.” Students reported being treated as experts in the workplace, not apprentices. “It was more like we were official workers, not student trainees,” a student said. Someone else reflected, “I felt like a specialist in the field, not like a student. I felt they were pleased with my suggestions and ideas. They made me feel like I was a person with extensive experience, a conscientious person.”

Organizational employees used motivational techniques to improve workplace skills and knowledge such as sharing the work and achievements of former students. One student commented, “They would tell us a former student did such and such, but we know you can do better.” Sharing responsibility for mistakes was another technique utilized by employees to boost a student’s spirits. A student remarked, “I was surprised about the cooperation in the organization, no matter how bad a mistake I made! The employees would say reassuringly, ‘Don’t worry about this. This was not your mistake.’”

The guidance and facilitation provided by employees was vital to workplace relationships and a mutual benefit consistent with the tenets of Social Exchange Theory. The result was a high level of satisfaction among students and perhaps a more productive workplace. “We convinced

the sponsor we could solve the issues related to our major. He was looking for an answer to a specific problem, we accepted the challenge, and did our best.” Observed another student, “We never hesitated to offer solutions wherever they needed help.”

Core Challenges Faced by Saudi Students

During interviews, I asked participants if their prior attitudes and habits impeded making strong ELP connections or somehow influenced their participation. They mentioned several obstacles that limited their experiential learning performance, particularly in the beginning. These obstacles included linguistic, social norms, and cultural issues that under different circumstances were identified as delivering benefits to Saudi students. Most students eventually overcame these obstacles, but others said they struggled to get out of their “comfort zone.” The following sections address group dynamics and public participation, linguistic issues, and adjusting to gender-integrated workplaces.

Group Dynamics and Public Participation

I asked the study participants to provide suggestions that could increase the benefits to Saudi students enrolled in ELP classes. Their suggestions included changing student attitudes and behaviors while participating in group projects and workplace interactions. For example, a student said, “Love what you do until you do what you love.” His love of participating in the ELP drove him to high performance and enabled him to accrue benefits from the experience. Another emphasized, “Participate, participate, and participate.” Asked to clarify the meaning of these repeated words, the student confirmed two things: students should push themselves to participate more in ELPs and they should positively interact with workplace environments. “Participate means interacting as much as you can!” said the student. Another advised, “If you hang onto your old thoughts and habits, you will not benefit. American businesses do not treat

you as a Saudi.” Some students reflected on their ELP journey by noting that although it was never easy, their efforts were rewarded in the end. Their collective message focused on one piece of advice: cultural differences naturally influence the quality of interactions in a workplace and students should be patient because it could increase their benefits. Other students cautioned their Saudi peers not to seek advice from inappropriate sources such as individuals who had a negative ELP experience. “Everyone has their own experience,” suggested a participant. Students can increase the likelihood of having a productive ELP if they avoid repeating someone else’s mistakes.”

Study participants provided several tips for program facilitators and program sponsors to promote Saudi student participation. For ELP facilitators, many students observed inadequate supervision of group members. One student blamed a program facilitator for implementing a project without proper follow up, creating a big gap between the instructor and the students. To avoid this problem, the student recommended that program facilitators assign a group leader. He stated, “Projects are not as simple as dispersing students into groups and that’s it.” Other students requested an individual assessment beside the group assessment. He stated, “This serves as a kind of equity. Students could be evaluated individually regarding their part of the project assigned to him.” He thought this approach could deter students from being negligent while encouraging them to work hard.

Creating academic and cultural diversity among group members was seen as a program facilitator responsibility. Course instructors typically divided students into groups based on their academic performance, cultures, and nationalities. In this regard, some study participants asked program facilitators to encourage American students to volunteer as mentors for international students. With their limited experience in the U.S workplace, Saudi students needed time to

properly understand workplace basics. Other advice related to scheduling group meeting times and sites. Students who struggled to arrange project meeting times wanted program facilitators to preschedule meeting times early in the semester, even at the first class meeting. Others suggested incorporating project meetings as a part of each class in order to force students to attend. A student explained, “On weekends, we need to review and study the courses. Meetings should take place during class time.”

Additional concerns related to the practical experiences learned in the workplace. In some cases, a project task was irrelevant to a student’s major, hindering them from obtaining much in the way of academic benefits. A student said, “Some projects put so much pressure on students that it outweighs the academic benefits.” This student wanted program sponsors to offer numerous options for students to help expand the benefits. Another participant expressed concerns that irrelevant project topics could negatively influence her future career. She explained, “I expect one of the interview questions you will be asked when applying for a job will be about your ELP project. If you talk about a project that was unrelated to your major, they probably will not hire you.” Saudi students expressed a need for additional layers of support and guidance, especially when interacting with different cultural surroundings. One stated, “I fully believe that all Saudis want to maximize the benefits from their ELP classes but to do this, they need close monitoring and good advice.” Students noted that their lack of prior knowledge about ELPs made it incumbent on coordinators to guide them through a successful and meaningful project in the U.S. workplace.

A common difficulty that came up in the interviews was fear of making a mistake. Saudis do not want to make a mistake since they believe teammates or program facilitators would judge them by their mistakes and perceive them as academically poor. Such fears limited

student conversations and made students reluctant to offer their perspectives. This reticence constrained progress in group projects and growth of personal skills. One commented, “I am uneasy discussing my mistakes or misunderstandings with my colleagues.” A student who had participated in several ELP classes offered this advice to his hesitant peers, “Make a mistake and don’t be scared or you will never learn.” He offered his personal experience as an example: “My English proficiency is good now. I can deliver my ideas easily, but I had to make thousands of mistakes to get to this level.”

Being away from family was a big challenge that adversely affected student performance and productivity in ELP projects. Explained one, “It was difficult to face all of life’s problems alone and be able to perform at full capacity.” Lonely Saudi students who attempted to reach out to American classmates found it difficult establishing friendships with American peers because of divergent social norms. Some students reported a stereotype they held about American students that conflicted with Islamic religion and traditions. One indicated, “Most American students like to drink alcohol and go to bars, but I do not feel comfortable with that, especially since I don’t drink.” A few students reported that in Saudi Arabia, they depended on family and friends to help them complete their schoolwork. Being an independent student in the U.S. was an influential factor in an ELP class that required additional effort compared to what they would have normally invested back home. Overcoming social challenges was possible through patience and persistence but not all students experienced the same degree of success.

Linguistic Issues

As with most international students, Saudi students encountered language issues communicating in their workplace ELPs. Language ability and skills varied among study participants, especially among those who relied on their previous preparedness. For instance,

some described having weak reading skills. One commented, “The English language formed a challenge for me and gave privilege to American students in ELPs.” This participant focused particularly on reading proficiency: “Local students had strong reading skills and they could cover a lot of material in a short time.” Another participant encountered similar reading difficulty: “The challenges I encountered were because I personally need time for reading long articles. I was not an ideal reader which means I could not focus on reading for a long time.” Another common difficulty was sharing ideas with teammates and organizational members. A student explained the need to expand his reading to gain more ideas about the American workplace: “I spent additional effort reading in order to pose my ideas with deep understanding. Reading helped me determine if my ideas were ordinary or not.” A number of other participants affirmed needing additional time and effort to formulate and deliver their ideas.

A couple of study participants articulated having insufficient writing skills that limited their ability to express their thoughts. “A big challenge was academic writing and how to write up findings and interpret them. Even when I understood the project topic, I could not write a report correctly,” one admitted. This student further described what his experience was like, “In the project, I was compared to others who were more experienced in writing. Recently, with practice and application, my skill improved, and writing is not a problem anymore.” Writing was necessary to shape the final ELP report. A student acknowledged being confused because there are more writing styles in English than in Arabic. He noted, “Honestly, using the proper writing style was difficult. There were many styles for writing that I did not know about.” This participant compared himself to local students: “I just learned a basic style. For the American teammates, they knew and studied all these styles, so they were easy for them.”

Delivering thoughts and ideas orally to teammates and program facilitators was a daunting task for a number of Saudi students. One participant described coming up with a good idea in the project meeting but taking a long time to explain it adequately. “I attempted to explain it, but it took a long time to communicate what I meant. Once my teammates understood my idea, they liked it and took it into consideration.” Another participant reported difficulty explaining a question well and being misunderstood. As a result, the answer he received “could be wrong or about something else.”

The official presentation that took place at the end of a project caused a lot of anxiety. One participant laughed and stated, “The two American students I worked with on my project stole my idea.” He explained how this happened:

Since they [local students] speak better than me, they took over the project. Anyone in the audience who watched the final presentation would assume those two speakers did the whole project. Actually, these two students took what I did verbatim and presented it as their own work. Because I was not very fluent in English, I behaved like a very introverted person.

A second participant, who was engaged in an ELP at the time I interviewed him, acknowledged having a similar difficulty. He said, “I recently encountered a challenge regarding the final presentation. It was a nightmare for me.” Because students usually did not practice their presentations in front of colleagues during project meetings, public speaking could be a big problem for Saudi students. When the time came to present, they were unprepared to speak in front of a large audience. Another consequence of language issues was missed opportunities. Students who encountered difficulty receiving and delivering project ideas thought they missed

out on ELP benefits that others received. Still, the majority of participants managed to overcome these issues and complete their ELP projects satisfactorily.

Gender Integrated Workplaces

Tensions existed for students participating for the first time in a gender-integrated workplace. A male student recounted his difficulty dealing with female peers, “I am not accustomed treating female students like male students.” This student was shy asking female teammates certain questions or discussing certain project ideas because he believed it was inappropriate to talk about certain topics with females. A female student also asserted feeling uncomfortable dealing with male project members due to traditional Saudi gender norms. She indicated, “Saudi females do not deal directly with unrelated males. I am expected to bow my head when I talk or avert my eyes, which means no eye contact.” Such behaviors influenced how Saudi females treat male teammates in the workplace. A female student described her first ELP participation with group members--all of whom were Saudi males. She stated, “I acted like a perfect lady among them. I was mostly silent through the meetings and did not contribute. I felt shy about speaking up, but they chose not to talk to me.”

A male participant analyzed the difficulty most Saudi males and females encounter when they meet together on a team project:

Saudi males are not familiar dealing with Arab females who have common cultural customs. When both genders were raised where gender integration is forbidden, everyone present is liable to consider the other person’s attitude as wrong. What emerged was a wall of misinterpretation. Each person would say, “I am concerned my behavior is being wrongly interpreted.”

This student explained it was actually less tense for male and female Saudis to meet students with different customs, such as Americans. “There is no problem since they do not have common cultures that frame their behaviors. Since I grew up in an environment where specific values govern male-female behavior, I am more comfortable participating with non-Arabic students.” A male student described the value of having an American female student on his project team: “I saw females as more professional in art and design than males. We needed her assistance. So gender diversity in our project was significant.” Overall, Saudi males found their American female peers to be friendly and hardworking and learned that a gender-integrated workplace could be beneficial for Saudi students who gradually became comfortable with it.

Prospects for Changing Saudi Workplaces

Some participants outlined their intentions to use the knowledge and skills acquired through their ELP classes to transform Saudi workplaces. They even aspired to change certain attitudes in workplace, so they more closely resembled American norms. Students who acquired ELP employability skills along with other gained cultural attitudes appeared likely to enrich Saudi workplaces. In this final section, I describe the willingness of study participants to make a difference in Saudi workplaces and society.

Transforming entrenched attitudes and implementing positive changes in Saudi workplaces was essential for most participants. After having an opportunity to study in the U.S. and after being apprenticed into U.S. workplaces, students intended to introduce similar programs to Saudi Arabia. Reflecting on his workplace experiences and applying his newly acquired occupational skills, a participant said, “Now, I am thinking how I can use my experience in the U.S. workplace to benefit Saudi Arabia.” This student described his developmental vision: “When I visited U.S. companies in my ELP classes, I was thinking about

what I learned and how I can utilize these experiences when I get a job.” Another student expressed a similar idea: “I expect that when I am done, I will take my whole positive experience back to the Saudi workplace where I expect to be an exemplar of a hard worker.” This participant’s strategic plan included returning home to Saudi Arabia with full understanding of work cultures practiced in U.S businesses. Most study participants agreed that ELPs were an opportunity to facilitate career development in spite of all anticipated and unanticipated challenges.

Some participants believed changing local mindsets should be the responsibility of students who study abroad. The role of these students to implement changes should be aligned with governmental reforms and developments across all Saudi workplaces. However, importing the full range of ELP experiences into Saudi workplaces could be extremely difficult. They reasoned that Saudi workplaces needed time to adjust to such large changes. A participant mentioned, “Our role is to make changes, but all of these changes will take time.” Study participants believed that social and cultural resistance in Saudi society would be unyielding at first but was likely to diminish over time.

After returning home, students would need to consider the resistance of people to change. This was important because the students aspired to become influencers when they return home. One indicated, “Even if I encounter obstacles in the Saudi workplace, my expectations are high and I don’t want to get frustrated.” Other participants expressed cautious optimism, acknowledging that established workplace cultures are difficult to change. However, most study participants believed that with persistence, enacting change was possible. A student commented, “The persistence and commitment of students like us who study abroad could eventually overcome the resistance of Saudi managers and employees to change.” He shared a story about a

friend who learned numerous occupational skills in the U.S. “Back home, he is distinguished by his commitment to his job. Everyone praises him!”

Study participants diagnosed Saudi workplaces as needing to attract international expertise to develop local leadership and improve worker productivity. Future Saudi workplace reformers had a lot to gain from their time spent in American workplaces:

Most U.S. companies provide work opportunities for international students. They know international students come from different backgrounds and share ideas that may be new to American organizations. They try to benefit from these multicultural experiences by applying them to ongoing problems.

This student hoped to see Saudi organizations pursue greater collaboration with advanced global organizations. Another participant noted that American organizations were more open to sharing ideas coming from top administrators and workers in lower positions. This student used the phrase “encourage a leadership style” to describe employees who recognized that benefits to the company could benefit them as well. Another student with previous work experience in Saudi Arabia compared the culture of shared leadership: “In organizational meetings in Saudi Arabia, the administrator talks, and all the members are silent. Meetings are managed differently here in America. All members are involved, and I cannot always tell who the administrator is.” In sum, putting ELP experiences into practice back home was the bottom line for Saudi students. Participants dreamed of taking the knowledge and skills learned in their ELP classes and transferring this knowhow into Saudi workplaces and society.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications

Conclusions are derived from study findings through the lenses of theory, research questions, and literature review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study examined the perceptions of Saudi students regarding their ELP engagements at RFU, a Midwestern urban university. ELPs tended to benefit Saudi students as long as their prior instructional experiences and sociocultural norms did not present too great of a challenge. In keeping with the principles of Social Exchange Theory (SET), I analyzed the study findings to contrast the benefits of participating in an ELP with the participatory costs imposed on students.

The findings showed that no specific benefit and no specific challenge applied to all Saudi students; they differed from one to another. Most participants enthusiastically used the opportunity provided by their ELP class to immerse themselves in a diverse workplace environment and maximize whatever social and cultural benefits they could. A few students found a high degree of immersion particularly difficult to achieve, however, because reaping ELP benefits from workplace interactions required them to operate outside their comfort zone. The implications of this study are transferable to other institutions that incorporate ELP classes in their curriculum. The implications can also inform American university administrators, program facilitators, and course instructors about what the ELP experience is like, not just from the perspectives of Saudi students, but other non-Western students as well. In the sections that follow, I analyze and interpret the meanings of the major themes identified in the findings.

Benefits versus Costs

ELPs allowed students to collaborate with each other as a team and with program facilitators in workplace settings. According to SET, maximizing the benefits and minimizing

the costs is key in social interactions and relationships (Roloff, 1981). Most study participants appeared to recognize this balance. However, some educational and sociocultural obstacles played an influential role in their ELP outcomes.

Capturing Benefits

Experiential learning projects typically aim to help students gain new skills by applying traditional classroom learning in practical, real-world settings. Saudi students described ELPs as a smart and valuable learning method that allowed them to practice what they learned in classrooms. Unsurprisingly, an opportunity for capturing academic benefits was a significant factor for participants because a basic design feature of an ELP is the expansion of academic learning (Lewis & Williams, 1994). Participants reported different attitudes about the value of the academic benefits they gained based on their ability to employ theoretical knowledge in the workplace. Most of the time, ELP objectives contributed to broadening their reading, research skills, and problem-solving abilities in order to become familiar with experiential learning projects. These findings support Hicks (2012) study that highlighted international students having opportunities to expand their learning perceptions and develop their own academic knowledge by participating in ELP group projects.

The vast majority of study participants admitted personal growth in terms of responsibility, respect for meeting times, and commitment to assignments. They reported an increase in responsibility by giving top priority to project tasks compared to personal tasks. Students appeared concerned about the final project's evaluation where team grades could be negatively influenced by their inexperience with group participation. Importantly, students showed high commitment to attending group meetings by taking into consideration the time these meetings take out of their daily life. Study findings identified an increase in Saudis'

independence when making their own life and school decisions. More than half of study participants saw their enthusiasm increase for becoming independent adults versus receiving assistance by living with close family members. These findings are supported by DeGiacomo's (2002) study that found international students find meaning in new experiences by reflecting on their personal traits. These students opened their minds to new life challenges.

Most study participants anticipated acquiring broader academic experiences than what they had been exposed to in Saudi Arabia. However, attaining social and cultural benefits were inconsistent based on ELP patterns and a student's cross-cultural awareness at the beginning of the course. Some students recognized ELP workplaces as a beneficial learning environment that involved individuals from different educational, cultural, and social backgrounds. These differences increasingly influenced student behaviors such as their competence interacting with American group members, open-mindedness, and global understanding. Some Saudi students, for example, believed they became more broad minded about modifying their beliefs and attitudes about others, such as respecting the views of individuals who did not belong to their culture or religion. Relatively less culturally diverse Saudi students who integrated into diverse American workplace environments welcomed the cross-cultural benefits they received. Glass and Westmont (2014) reported that international students who engaged in projects with multicultural students gained a higher level of intercultural understanding.

Prominent Costs

The more insular educational and sociocultural backgrounds of Saudi students presented prominent challenges in ELP workplaces. ELP participation was diminished by predictable difficulties related to linguistic ability and unfamiliarity with western culture. In this context, there were common challenges identified in ELP project settings such as incorporating new

learning methods, limited workplace experiences, and communication skills. However, dealing with mistakes, cultural misconceptions, and gender-integrated workplaces inspired Saudi student performance in different ways. Study findings showed some students successfully converted these potential costs into ELP benefits. These students appeared more persistent and willing to expand their workplace experiences than other Saudi students who were less successful at making these transitions.

Students entered into ELP classes with minimal applied learning experiences because ELP practices are not common in the Saudi secondary education system (Alfares, Al-Haboubi, & Al-Zahrani, 2013). In the beginning, students encountered a set of core challenges such as the fear of making a mistake and the potential of academic failure. Saudi students experienced disappointments and anxieties in applying theoretical knowledge in practical situations. They thought mistakes in the workplace were not acceptable, particularly when they were dealing with sensitive tools and equipment. Such concerns often resulted in confusion regarding their behaviors and actions. Students responded by attempting to overcome the initial project ambiguity by asking their colleagues for help whereas others spent extra time and effort in looking up additional resources to support their workplace experiences. Other workplace challenges stemmed from cultural misconceptions in which some students felt academically inferior to their American peers. They believed their American peers did not trust their learning ability because they frequently assigned them fewer tasks in the group project. These practices negatively influenced Saudi students' workplace performance and align with the Jackson's (2011) study that found international students often think of themselves as observers rather than participants, which limits meaningful engagement with local community members.

Gender integration in the ELP workplace played a crucial role in the experiences of Saudi students. Study findings consistently showed that Saudi males were more comfortable interacting with American females than with Saudi female group members. Conversely, Saudi females were more comfortable interacting with American males than with Saudi males. Because they shared the same cultural traditions and social norms, study participants expressed concern about having their actions and behaviors misinterpreted by their fellow Saudi peers, a concern that constrained the interactions within ELP groups, especially for females. For example, one female participant avoided eye contact with male group members, because of the Saudi restriction against interacting with males who are not close family members. Such challenges were different for Saudi males and females and sometimes, these tensions resulted in acute workplace discomfort. The study of Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, and Utsey (2005) supports this finding. It is common for non-Western students living and studying in Western societies to experience difficulty adapting to the many sociocultural challenges.

In general, Saudi participants reported being satisfied with the benefits they gained from their ELP involvement. Through their workplace participation, they attempted to learn new knowledge, acquire new skills, and grow their intercultural competence. Most students acknowledged that ELPs were valuable to enhancing their academic experience, personal growth, and leadership skills. In short, they appreciated having an opportunity not to memorize but to learn how to learn. Participants identified the ELP experience as necessary in helping them overcome workplace challenges that stood to diminish the acquisition of benefits. Because of their workplace experiences, students became more confident in discussing their thoughts and experienced less fear of making a mistake.

In SET, satisfaction is tied to an individual's sense of the benefits they accrue (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The interactions during ELPs shaped the positive and negative impressions of Saudi students. Some students were challenged to connect what they had learned in the classroom to a broader appreciation of social responsibility. Others were challenged to overcome difficult intercultural communications, misunderstandings of local attitudes, and perplexing workplace cultures (Hinck & Brandell, 2000). In weighing benefits against costs, a few students described an acceptable level of educational gains; a few students found workplace challenges an opportunity for reinforcing their benefits; while others found workplace challenges detracted from their overall satisfaction of their ELP experience. In sum, Saudi students believed the benefits of participating in an ELP outweighed the costs, gaining more than they gave up (e.g., cultural norms, language, learning styles, and expectations).

Sociocultural Relationships

While teaching-learning experiences associated with ELP classes served to enhance relationships between Saudi and American students, they were also an essential factor hindering Saudi students from developing stronger intercultural communication with American teammates. Study findings emphasized knowledge disparities between American and Saudi students required Saudis extra time and effort to compensate. In brainstorming with American colleagues, for example, most study participants described having ineffective discussions and insufficient time to fulfill project tasks. Students felt they did not have comparably worthwhile ideas to contribute to the projects for reasons having to do with scholastic inferiority and less developed dialoguing skills. Such beliefs created a barrier between Saudi and domestic students. These findings are supported by studies that point out how cultural and learning abilities limit social interactions between western students and those from eastern cultures (Gareis, 2012; Hinchcliff-Pelias &

Greer, 2004; Ying, 2002). According to SET, in group situations where the costs outweighed the benefits, Saudi students preferred to interact with other Saudi students.

A need to align student academic disciplines with ELP objectives was necessary in optimizing workplace relationships. The priority of achieving academic success proved important in opening avenues of communications for Saudi students. At the beginning, when the learning experience did not closely correspond with the ELP class agenda, students preferred to gain experience from Saudi teammates. A majority of study participants acknowledged that similarities in language, trustworthiness, and lifestyle led them to focus their interactions on co-national peers. Because these experiences were relatively safe and affirming, they gave Saudi students more satisfying and effective interactions. This finding corroborates the Al-Zahrani and Kaplowitz (1993) study emphasizing how Saudi students showed an inter-group preference for individuals who belonged to their culture. Certain entrenched social and cultural values of Saudi students proved highly resistant to change during ELP engagements.

However, despite the influence of Saudi social and cultural values, the study data also affirmed that even restricted social relationships with American teammates provided significant benefits for Saudi students. For example, several study participants succeeded in befriending American peers. The outcomes of these relationships resulted in expanded thinking, heightened cultural awareness, and deeper understanding of the American lifestyle. Moreover, Saudi participants attempted to establish reciprocity by breaking down cultural barriers for non-Arab teammates by introducing their own cultural and social mores. This mutual communication provided intercultural benefits even for American teammates where they had an opportunity to ask about Saudi traditions and Arabic cultural habits from a primary source. SET predicts that in any social relationship, social stability occurs in a situation where the benefits and costs are more

or less even. Saudi students who altered cultural and social norms felt they contributed as much as they gained to ELP relationships. The concept used in SET that refers to this balance is a zero sum game. Saudi students who developed effective cross-cultural relationships found interacting with non-national team members at more than a superficial level simplified their workplace challenges.

Direct exposure among participants represented the zero-sum scenario discussed earlier in this study. Saudi students increased the cultural awareness of American workers employed in the participating organization while contributing to the resolution of an assigned problem. It was expected that the assistance provided by Saudi students offset the costs incurred by the participating organization. These costs comprised managing student time and commitment, organizing student efforts, training students, and in some cases, the financial costs associated with paying for the provided service. In return, Saudi students were encouraged to broaden their understanding of non-Arabic cultures and social norms in a workplace environment. During these interactions, Saudi students underwent novel personal experiences that spanned a wide range of challenges and difficulties. Going into the study, I anticipated that Saudi students would be challenged by dealing with quick developments in the American workplace since they were unfamiliar with western cultural and social norms (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010). Likewise, I expected the time and effort to understand different workplace organizational cultures would present a challenge for Saudi students. By and large, the findings affirmed my expectations.

Escaping the Comfort Zone

In this study, Saudi ELP outcomes hinged on weighing achieved benefits against the impacts of the many challenges that affected them. Interviewees reported ELP outcomes in terms of minimal or maximal levels of benefits as framed by one's comfort zone. Individual

comfort zones were determined by a student's effort and struggle to increase their benefits from ELP classes. Minimal ELP benefits included achieving only academic gains such as an outstanding evaluation in project assignments. A benefit such as this was important for students and achieved by focusing almost exclusively on ELP course objectives. By expending little effort on gaining social and cultural benefits, these students remained well within their comfort zone. In contrast, maximal ELP benefits were achieved only when students expended extra time and effort on moving outside their comfort zone, a deliberate decision to raise their social and cultural consciousness in addition to enhancing academic achievement.

The majority of study participants acknowledged that being involved only with Saudi teammates improved their project evaluation. They were fully convinced that by participating with American group members, they would miss important information that would limit their academic achievement. Students who preferred participating within homogenous cultural groups could not perceive ELP benefits unrelated to academics. Enhancing cultural perceptions and social relationships were not their priorities. They intended to achieve project understanding by the easiest method that meant investing the least amount of time and effort. Unfortunately, a dominant focus on academic accomplishments limited sociocultural benefits.

Furthermore, study findings identified several sociocultural conflicts that reduced the likelihood of establishing relationships outside the workplace environment. Saudis did not feel comfortable spending time in locations such as bars because they do not drink alcohol. They also found it difficult scheduling meetings with what appeared to them to be extremely busy American students. However, many students who had a powerful desire to venture outside their comfort zone managed to increase their ELP sociocultural outcomes. Students who were curious about American culture were motivated to get involved with diverse project teammates. They

successfully left their comfort zones and overcame cultural habits by setting goals to attain more than just academic benefits. Some students expanded their global perspectives by broadening their thinking (e.g., “Whatever you find could be new”) and practicing communication that enhanced language proficiency, (e.g., “I learned the language well”).

SET spotlights the meaning of students’ satisfaction when they complete the experience and final program reflection. Consequently, the cumulative advantages and obstacles moved Saudi students between Comparison Level of Alternative and Comparison Level of SET. These levels are considered an evaluation of social interactions by comparing what benefits were provided versus what benefits were gained (Roloff, 1981). Within the Comparison Level, Saudi students revisited the entire ELP experience, particularly the moments that did not offer substantial benefits. In the worst extreme, students viewed their ELP experience as providing no benefit other than receiving a course grade or completing a degree requirement. However, the transformation of expected challenges into potential benefits occurred. For instance, communication and writing skills of Saudi students, who speak English as a second language, negatively influenced their initial reflection and feedback. Over time, these difficulties became benefits among Saudi students who demonstrated an interest in increasing their linguistic fluency. The development of English language proficiency built confidence for Saudi students to discuss workplace issues with non-Arabic peers and colleagues, an example of Comparison Level for Alternative in SET (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

In the context of weighing ELP benefits, some students saw outstanding academic performance as most important. They had concerns that changing their social and cultural habits might hinder their ELP academic evaluation. They represented a high degree of the Comparison Level of Alternatives, where a single benefit might outweigh all other outcomes. A few students

sought to increase their sociocultural advantage by stepping outside their comfort zone rather than just concentrating on academic achievement. Navigating challenges to gain more than academic benefits illustrates high level of Comparison Level.

Looking Ahead into the Foreseeable Future

Students confirmed that the ELP workplace helped them understand organizational regulations and employment rules and was an informative source for planning their future careers. Students gained employability skills by providing academic experiences in occupational activities. Workplace experiences reflected on leadership practices such as responsibility, accountability, and respect of work hours. For example, students modified a previously held belief that “a couple of minutes late does not make a difference” by learning to respect meeting times and arriving promptly. Direct exposure to experts reinforced valuable work habits that might help them handle future workplace challenges. These findings are supported by Kampman's (2011) study that concluded that supportive workplace environments can prepare students to work under pressure and adapt to fundamental changes in new environments.

The diversity of American workplaces distinguishes Saudi student experiences in ELP classes from those who graduated from Saudi universities. They viewed the diversity in ELP workplaces as opportunities for learning global skills and developing occupational experiences that could confer an advantage when the time came to choose a career pathway in the Saudi job market. The belief that good opportunities do not repeat themselves encouraged most study participants to deepen their skills and understanding of American workplaces that could equip them for upcoming jobs. Through ELP workplace experiences, Saudi students expected they had put themselves in a strong position for finding a lucrative and satisfying future job.

Another declared ambition of Saudi students was a desire to put ELP workplace experiences into practice when they returned home. They believed students who study abroad have a responsibility to pass along all positive experiences to the Saudi workplace and society. By involving themselves in advanced projects, students demonstrated their intention to employ their professional expertise to enrich Saudi workplaces. Students expressed a belief that benefits gained from their ELP experience will inevitably be reflected in new attitudes and behaviors. These practices could enhance their work standing while modeling constructive examples for colleagues back home. As a consequence of participating in an ELP, students acquired a point of reference from which to compare current ELP experiences and observations with their prior perceptions of Saudi workplaces. They admitted that Saudi workplaces need more leadership expertise and skills. Anticipating their roles as future workplace influencers, students hoped to address all Saudi workplace issues but specifically those related to Saudi employees' resistance to change. Participants reported having already planned their future careers and expressed a firm belief they are mandated to lead developmental changes in Saudi Arabia.

Implications for Practice

Implications represent study findings and conclusions in order to inform audiences interested in improving experiential learning for international students (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The following sections discuss implications for American institutions of higher education and ELP facilitators. Other implications are directed toward Saudi students who pursue their education overseas.

Institutions of Higher Education

Most ELPs concentrate on achieving practical learning for involved students by launching university-community partnerships. Some universities implement ELPs that focus on

community partnerships rather than on student academic benefits. Programs whose objectives are primarily focused on academic benefits will be less valuable for students. Knowing the far ranging needs of international students is necessary to ensure they receive ELP components that enhance their global perceptions. Therefore, implementing such programs is central for delivering sociocultural benefits for both domestic and international students.

In order to attract international students, American colleges and universities that offer ELP classes should regularly examine the quality of cross-cultural interactions in workplace settings. In the experiential learning field, only a few studies have examined the behaviors of international students in American workplaces. A close application of even these limited study findings can provide a reliable roadmap for university reformers to follow as they seek to better understand ELP benefits and challenges from Arabic and other non-Western cultural perspectives. The expectations of study participants were disparate. Achieving academic benefits was more important than non-academic benefits for most, while a few achieved both. Regular and thorough progress monitoring and assessment of ELPs should enable institutions to clarify educational, social, and cultural interactions for American students, international students, program instructors, and organizational members. Institutionally based evaluators are likely to be well positioned to explore the ELP workplace interactions of American students and other international students and make targeted recommendations for enhancing experiential learning outcomes. Since cross-cultural interactions in ELP projects were such an influential factor for Saudi students in this study, colleges and universities appear to have much to gain by initiating routine program evaluation of ELP classes.

Program Facilitators

Program facilitators, at both the university and organizational level, need to be mindful that some international students lack prior experiential learning exposure. Given that the findings of this study indicated Saudi students would have benefited from an extended orientation period in the beginning stages of their ELP classes, culturally inflected differences in educational backgrounds are likely to result in non-Western students experiencing early and potentially difficult challenges. Clarifying and simplifying ELP rules and objectives would be beneficial for international students, allowing them adequate time to adapt to their workplace environment. Program facilitators could also link ELP objectives in workplace projects with student academic disciplines that would help international students more smoothly and comfortably adjust to the American workplace to which they are assigned. Distributing students in diverse groups and encouraging domestic students to provide additional support for international students could also increase ELP intercultural benefits. The need for guidance and mentoring for international students may be equally as important as implementing an ELP class.

Because student contributions and roles in selecting and designing group projects tended to be small and study findings showed the importance of implementing interactive projects, program facilitators may need to carefully encourage students to connect academic content with workplace experience. It is possible to inject creativity into the shaping of ELP objectives by debating project roles and tasks among facilitators and team members. Study participants were most interested in experiential projects that reinforced their learning. That was as important as achieving occupational experience for study participants. When there was a gap between academic learning and assigned roles in a project, ELP students became frustrated. This situation decreases the expected benefits of experiential learning for all stakeholders--students,

university personnel, and organizational members. Students are the cornerstone of ELPs, thus facilitators can improve the quality of ELPs by accounting for all influences that increase benefits for international students.

Saudi Students

Saudi students who intend to pursue their education in the U.S. can increase their ELP benefits by paying special attention to the dynamics of workplace diversity. Study data indicated that achieving a high level of performance in the group project was important to students. This goal raised the anxiety level of students and led many of them to become involved with only co-national groups to help them overcome unanticipated challenges. This behavior, although logical, nonetheless limited student access to the wealth of cultural and social benefits available in the American workplace. To increase these benefits, participation in volunteer projects, particularly when they first arrive in the U.S., could better familiarize Saudi students with the interpersonal dimensions and expectations of out-of-class programs and group projects. This would inform students with a more detailed picture of American workplace environments. It would also increase the acquisition of ELP benefits at the educational, social, and cultural level. The advantage of initially interacting in diverse workplaces could make Saudi students more open to new experiences.

Because of differences in linguistic and learning backgrounds, the study findings revealed how some Saudis struggled to participate in useful dialogues with local colleagues. Before deciding to study abroad, it is assumed that Saudi students make plans ahead of time to develop language proficiency and cultural awareness. They might also collect advance information about ELPs as an increasingly common teaching method in American colleges and universities. These steps could help them be more prepared for American academic and social life. Study findings

showed that ELPs provide numerous opportunities to alter student cultural perceptions and social relationships. Taking the initiative by introducing Saudi social and cultural habits to American teammates was a smart way to break the ice and enable non-Western students to take better advantage of these opportunities. It also provides a way for American students to realize the social and cultural divides needing to be bridged if the ELP experience is to be improved for all participants. It is important to recognize that ELPs are instructional experiences with a vast potential for offering cultural and social benefits. If Saudi students want to maximize ELPs benefits, they need to actively participate in social and work environments. They need to work harder by engaging in culturally diverse activities and not settling for just academic excellence. Utilizing the quickest and easiest methods for ELP course completion does not produce the best ELP benefits.

Implications for Research

Retention of information by international students is a key issue for American institutions of higher education. Additional research should be conducted with students of non-western culture that blend academic interest and workplace adaptation. The current study demonstrated that ELP learning methods produce positive academic and intercultural outcomes for Saudi students. There were also differences among participant responses regarding benefits and challenges to ELP workplace environments. Because the extant literature contains no studies focusing on the workplace experiences of Saudi students, it may be difficult to transfer this study's findings to other settings. Upcoming studies could substantiate or contest these current findings.

Studies aimed at exploring international student workplace engagements are likely to be insightful because ELP classes are becoming more commonplace. Systematic inquiries could

also examine the perceptions of ELP facilitators, both at RFU and local participating organizations, regarding ways to maximize international student benefits. Since this study examined ELP issues from Saudi student perspectives, conducting a study of counter perspectives could help stakeholders better understand and verify this study's findings. For example, a study could investigate the ELP experiences of American students including their interactions and relationships with group members from non-Western cultures. A comparative study of ELP intercultural experiences between Arabs, who pursue learning in American universities and Arab American students who have already transitioned to the West, would be fascinating.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Individual Interview Protocol Questions

Hello, my name is Sultan, and I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership program at Wichita State University. I appreciate your willingness to assist me by participating in this interview. I am working to understand the perceptions of Saudi students who participate in one or more experiential learning programs. Experiential learning programs are defined as those course-related activities that take place outside the classroom environment. The name of the study is “*Saudi Student Perspectives of Experiential Learning Programs at an American University.*”

You have been selected to participate in the study as an undergraduate Saudi student because you have unique knowledge and experience which will contribute to enrich the research. Please keep in mind that I am interested in your perspective and experience that you have gained through your participation in experiential learning program.

Before we begin, I would like to share few procedures for our conversations. To ensure confidentiality, no names will be used when I report the results of the session. With your permission, I would like to audio-record our session so that I will be able to make accurate analysis directly from your comments. The digital recording of our conversation will be transcribed and again, for confidentiality, the recording and transcription will be kept in a secure location in my advisor’s office for the duration of, and after the conclusion of, the study for three years. This session will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

1. Please, can you share your name, current academic year, and major? How many times have you been connected to EL projects?
2. Prior to your engagement in the EL project, describe your initial expectations regarding workplace environments?
3. Explain your role in the EL project, if you have more than one participation, can you give a brief story about your role in each one?
4. Tell about the opportunity of employing your academic disciplines into EL project? If you are not, what would you like to say?
5. How do you describe the interactions in workplace either with students, program facilitators, or organizational members?
6. How did you align your backgrounds with cultural diversity in ELP? Can you give some examples?
7. How did your EL participation reflect on your social norms and personal characteristics?
8. What advice would you have for Saudi students to improve their ELP participation?
9. In ELPs, what changes would you like to see that would increase Saudi student’s learning experience?
10. How can you describe the opportunity to apply your ELP experiences in a future career?
11. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience in experiential learning programs in the U.S?

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study, titled “*Perceptions of Saudi Students’ Participation in Experiential Learning at an American University*”, the viewpoints of Saudi students regarding the targeted focus on participation in experiential learning programs potentially increase their academic, cultural, and social outcomes. I hope to learn how experiential learning programs are experienced and perceived by Saudi students who involved in one or more experiential learning project in workplace.

Participant Selection: You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your status as a Saudi undergraduate student is enrolled in Engineering or Business college in fall 2018 at Wichita State University (WSU). You possess unique knowledge that will provide valuable information and perspective to the study.

Explanation of Procedures: If you decide to participate, an individual semi-structured interview will be conducted with you. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. Examples of questions that could be asked in the interview:

1. How would you describe workplace cultural diversity and social attitudes during your experiential learning participation?
2. What advice would you like provide for Saudi students to expected challenges that in experiential learning projects? Give some examples?

Discomfort/Risks: Although the risks of participation are minimal, participants may experience some social discomfort associated with sharing their experiences and perspectives with researcher in interviews. Students may feel uncomfortable participating because the similarity with researcher in nationality and some cultural and social habits that could not allow them to express all their feelings toward the interaction in experiential learning program, which may also cause a minimum level of discomfort. Your participation is voluntary. During data collection, you are encouraged to be open in your responses. If you feel uncomfortable with a specific question, you may choose not to respond. The participants' identities, responses, experiential learning program name, and other study data will remain confidential. Additionally, all participants will be able to drop out of the study at any time without reprisal from WSU. The interviews will be conducted in WSU main campus or the participants' can choose any site to reduce potential discomfort.

Benefits: This research is being conducted as a doctoral program requirement in educational leadership in WSU. It will contribute to the field of knowledge regarding experiential learning through the refined and focused use of international student engagements. Research results will be shared with dissertation committee members and WSU graduate school. Benefits include the ability of the participants to share their perceptions about experiential learning program participation. Beneficiaries of this study include Saudi international students participially those study in U.S colleges and universities. Potential benefits

include improved experiential learning programs regarding international student needs as well as improved social engagements and academic performance of Saudi students. The results of the study may be used to alter experiential learning programs in ways beneficial the served organization and the entire community. WSU colleges and instructor will benefit from a greater understanding of the perceptions of experiential learning programs from international students perspectives including whether any stated goals have been met.

Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to keep the study-related information confidential. However, in order to make sure the study is done properly and safely there may be circumstances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are giving the research permission to share information about you with the following groups:

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board;
- The sponsor or agency supporting the study (*Please name the sponsor if applicable*).

The researcher may publish the results of the study. If he do, he will only discuss group results. Your name and school names will not be used in any publication or presentation about the study.

Audio recordings and transcriptions will be kept in a digital file on a password protected online location for a minimum of 5 years.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with WSU. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Contact: If you have any questions about this research, you can contact Sultan Al-Thobaiti at 316-300-5569, ssal-thobaiti1@shockers.wichita.edu. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, and telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

- You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
- You are aware that this is a research study,
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction, and
- You have voluntarily decided to participate.

You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Printed Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date \ \ 2018

Printed Name of Researcher

Researcher Signature

Date \ \ 2018