

Meaningful Words, Meaningful Experiences: Using Student Reflections to Empower Students Abroad

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Institutional Profile: W&L

W&L in a nutshell

- Located in Lexington, Virginia (Rural, Shenandoah Valley)
- 37 undergraduate programs/majors
- Headcount: approx. 1,800 undergrad students

% who study abroad

- ~ 30% study abroad for one term or academic year
- ~75% of graduates have some type of international experience

Background and History: Study Abroad Assessment

Phase I: (required) Center for International Ed (CIE) Practice

- Application essay (reviewed by CIE)
- Survey upon return (registration blocked if not completed)
 - Academic Evaluation
 - Program Evaluation
 - Personal Assessment

Drawbacks:

- Essay was simply part of application - No follow-up
- Survey is subject to penalty if not completed
- Imposed biases

Background and History: Study Abroad Assessment

Phase II: 2015-16

- International Education Committee charged with designing study abroad assessment process
- Creates Reflection Essay Process
- Assigns Review to Global Learning Advisory Committee
- GLAC designs prompt, uses AAC&U Global Learning VALUE rubric

Drawbacks/Challenges

- Faculty Workload (100+ essays per year)
- Scope of AAC&U Rubric much greater than one study abroad experience

Student Learning Outcomes

- Students acknowledge and discuss change in or reinforcement of global self awareness as a result of time abroad
- Students identify an appreciation for new perspectives without prioritizing their own.
- Students demonstrate comfort with and understanding of cultural differences, showing engagement with local cultures.

Background and History: Study Abroad Assessment

Phase III: 2016-18

- GLAC redesigns prompt: Two parts: first impressions, final reflections
- Essays evaluated using the adapted AAC&U Global Learning VALUE rubric
- Student reflections scored against achievement of learning outcomes
- Organizes random sampling process for essay review (30 per semester)
- 2 readers per essay

Drawbacks/Challenges

- Useful and efficient method for outcomes assessment
- A non-trivial number of essays not read
- Analysis subjective and open to reader bias

Background and History: Study Abroad Assessment

Phase IV: 2018-

- Faculty and Study Abroad Adviser (Grajzl and Irby) design textual analysis algorithm
- Capacity now exists for complete annual and time series review of patterns of emphasis, etc. in essay analysis

Drawbacks/Challenges

- Still work intensive, but more manageable

Data Collection

Reflective Essay Pre Study Abroad

Review the statement of purpose you wrote in your application to study abroad. Think about the cultural goals you set for yourself and what you expected to bring back to campus as a result of your experience. Keeping this in mind, please keep a diary of the first week after your arrival in your study abroad location. Write a 250-500 word commentary in which you take note of the cultural experiences that cause you to react the most strongly (that can be positive, negative or indifferent).

Data Collection

Reflective Essay Post Study Abroad

In your final two weeks, review and reflect upon your statement of purpose and those notes from your arrival. Explain how or whether your time away caused you to refine, change or reinforce those original impressions? How has your time away impacted those original impressions, cultural goals and what you intended to bring back to W&L? Also discuss how you feel about that impact. How have you changed as a result of your time abroad? Write a 1,000 word response to that original commentary.

Data Collection

Metadata from student applications - Auto populated from SIS into Terra Dotta

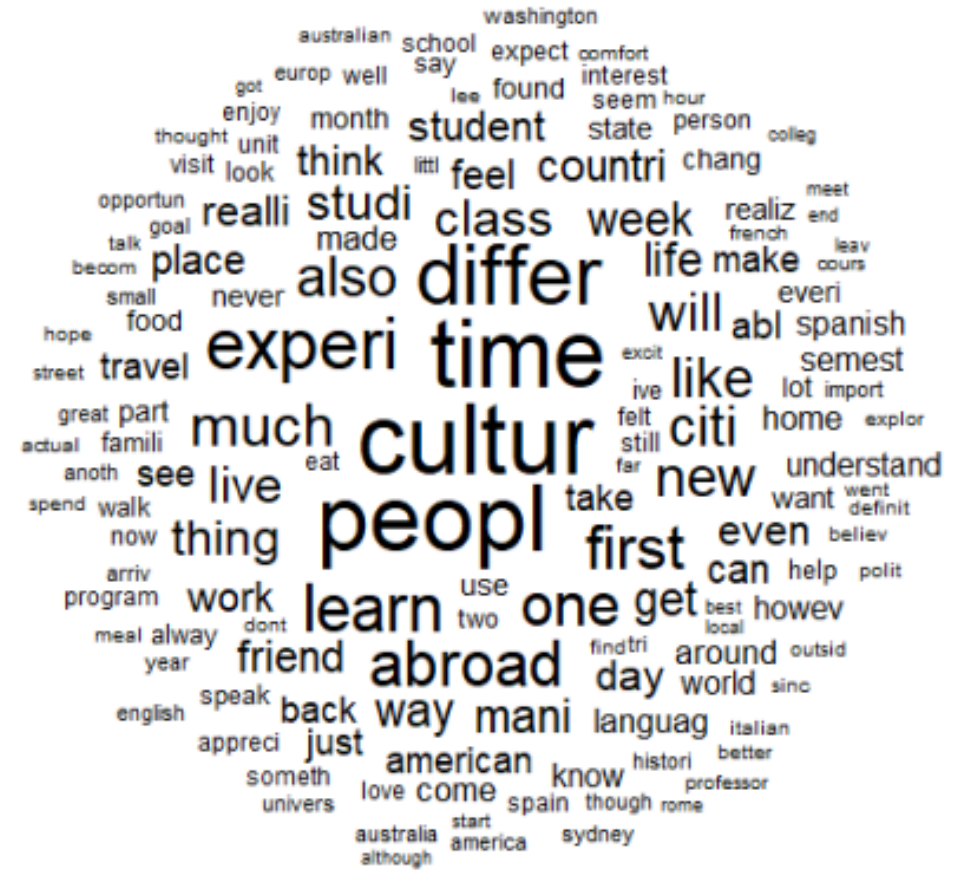
- class year when studied abroad
- length of study abroad
- country, region
- gender
- GPA
- Greek life affiliation
- varsity athlete status
- foreign/domestic status
- financial aid info

Analysis Process

- Data exported from Terra Dotta to Excel
- Work study standardized data using Java
- Text as data analysis using R

Selecting Topics

- Student essays were conceptualized as a mixture of topics
- Prevalence of topics varied across essays and students
- Identified 18 topics



Assigning Topic Names, an Example

Example for one topic:

- Highest probability words (frequent, not exclusive):
 - spanish, spain, time, cultur, differ, eat, peopl, speak, also, sevilla, languag, day, famili, live, citi, meal, first, week, host, use, much, learn, dinner, get, spaniard, food, even, realli, think, abroad
 - FREX words (frequent and more exclusive):
 - spaniard, spain, spanish, madrid, sevilla, lunch, sevilla, eat, siesta, schedul, host, meal, dinner, mom, lifestyl, mother, andalusian, carmen, bread, tapa, semana, toledo, speak, santa, slower, argentina, dialect, feria, famili, late
 - Read essays featuring the topic most prominently
- ⇒ Assigned topic name: Food Culture

Topics

What do students emphasize in their reflection?

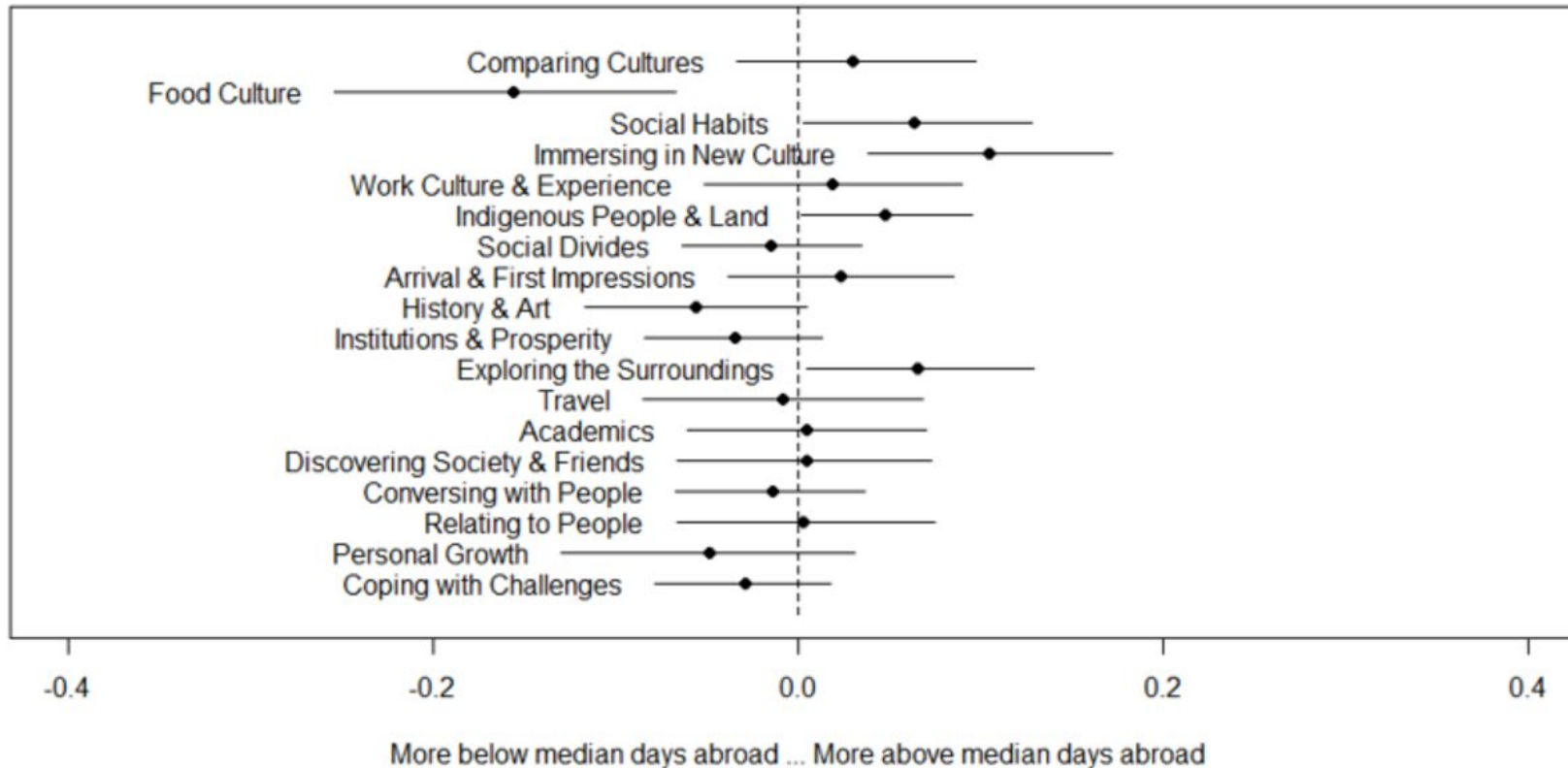
18 topics span four broad domains:

- Distinctly cultural cognition
- Interaction with people
- Physical environment
- Personal change

'cultur' among top 30 highest prob words for all but one topic (Travel)

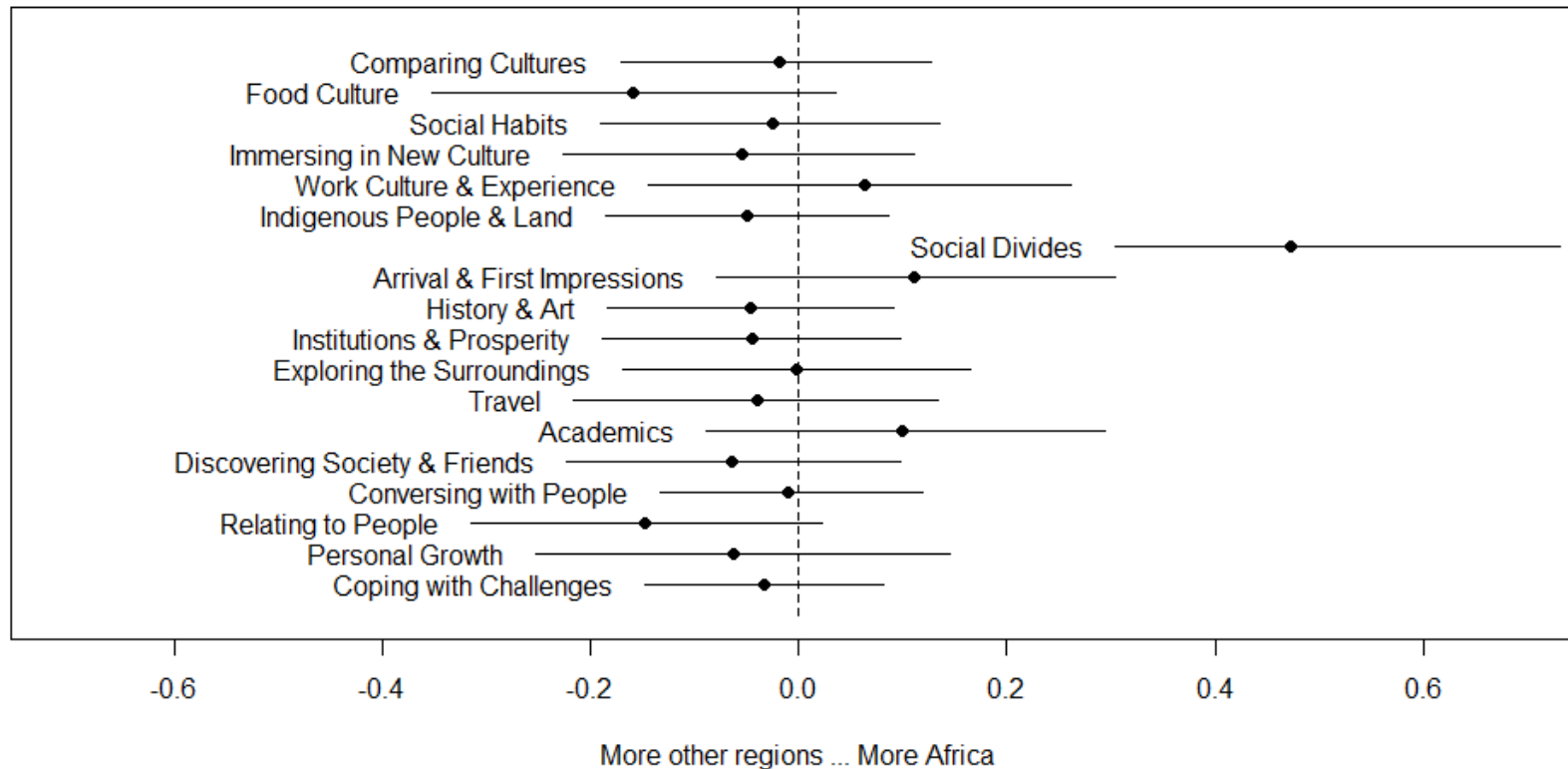
Results

The effect of study abroad duration for ex-post essays



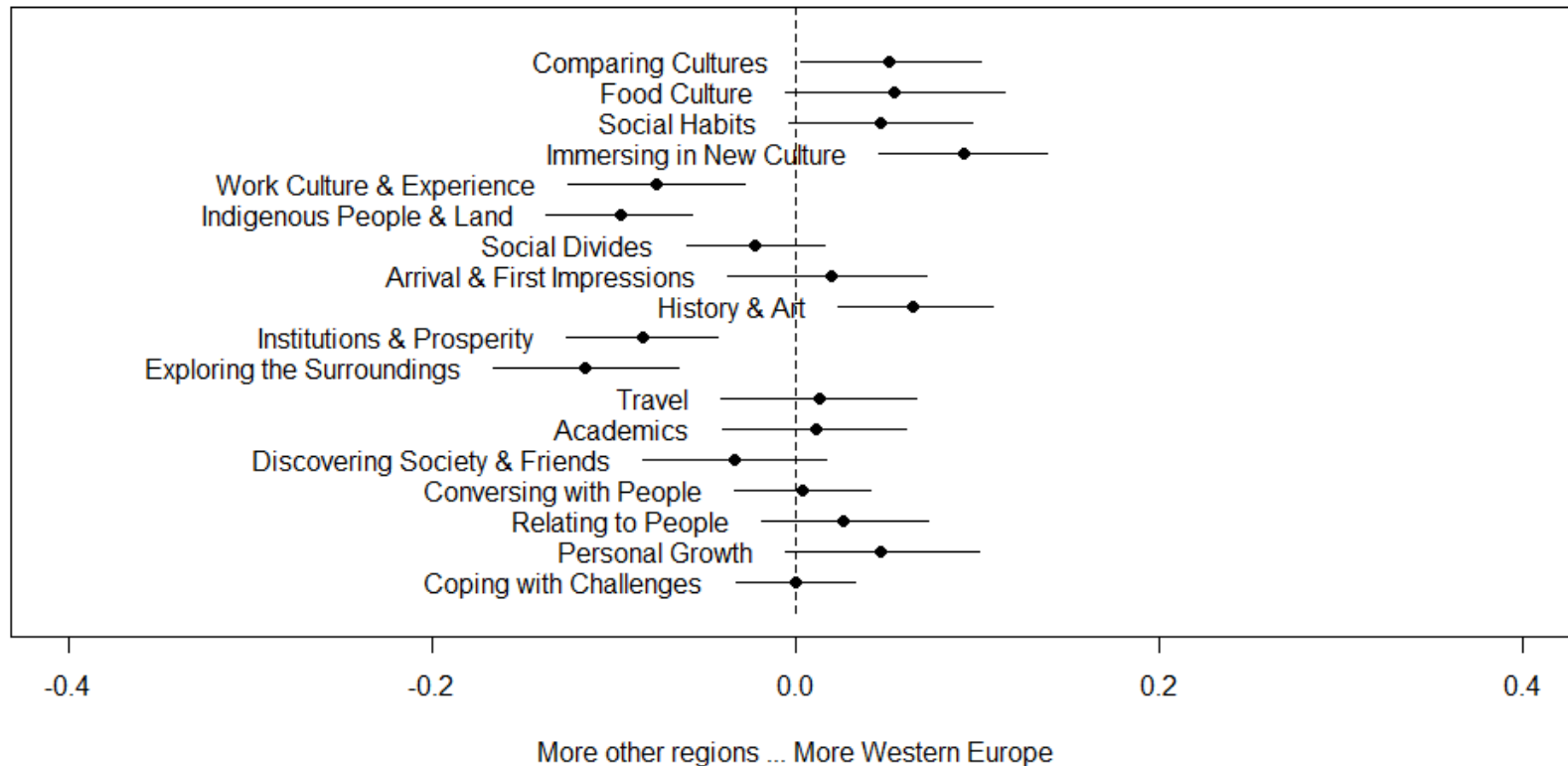
Results

The effect of study-abroad location: Africa



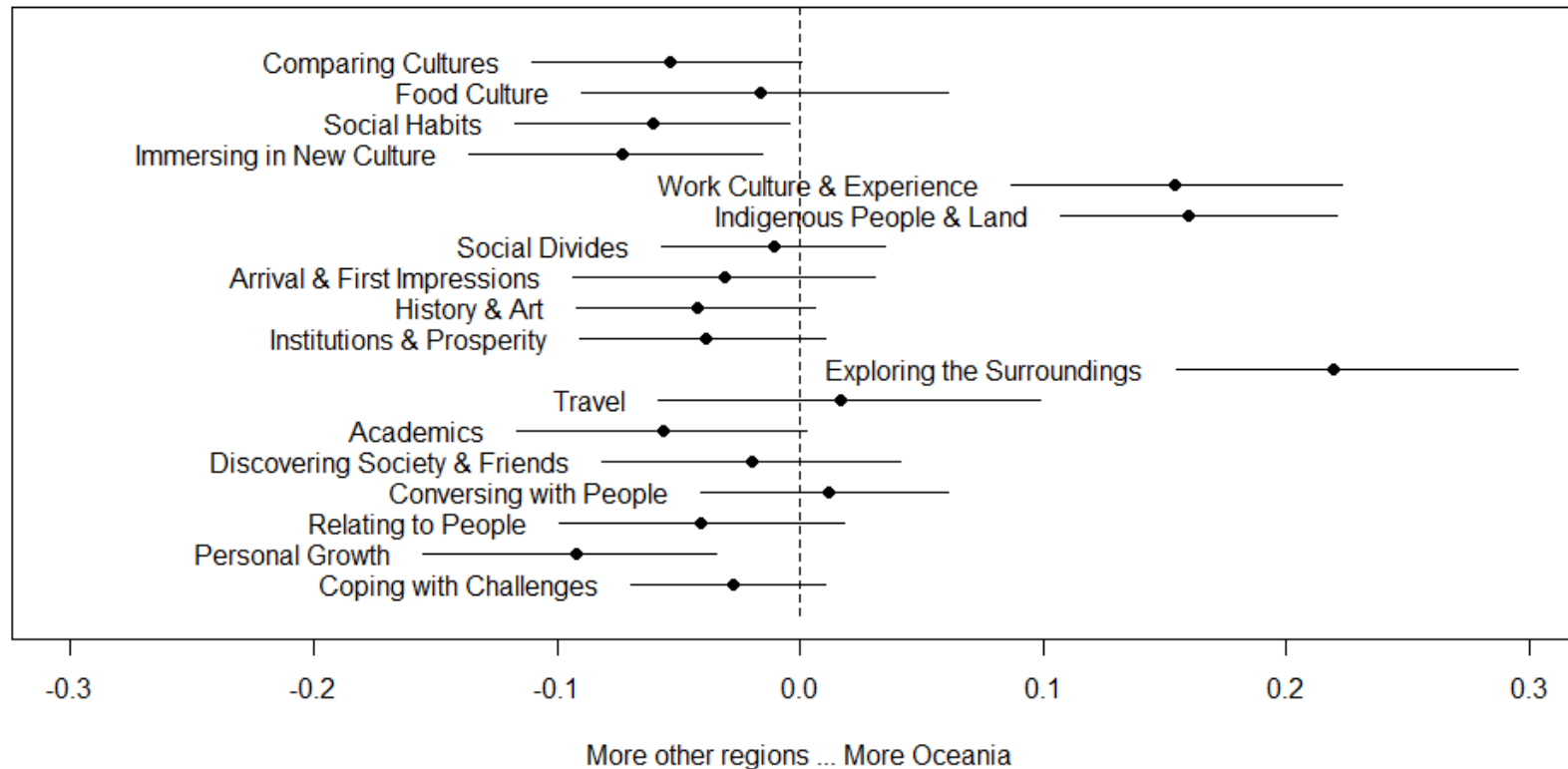
Results

The effect of study-abroad location: Western Europe



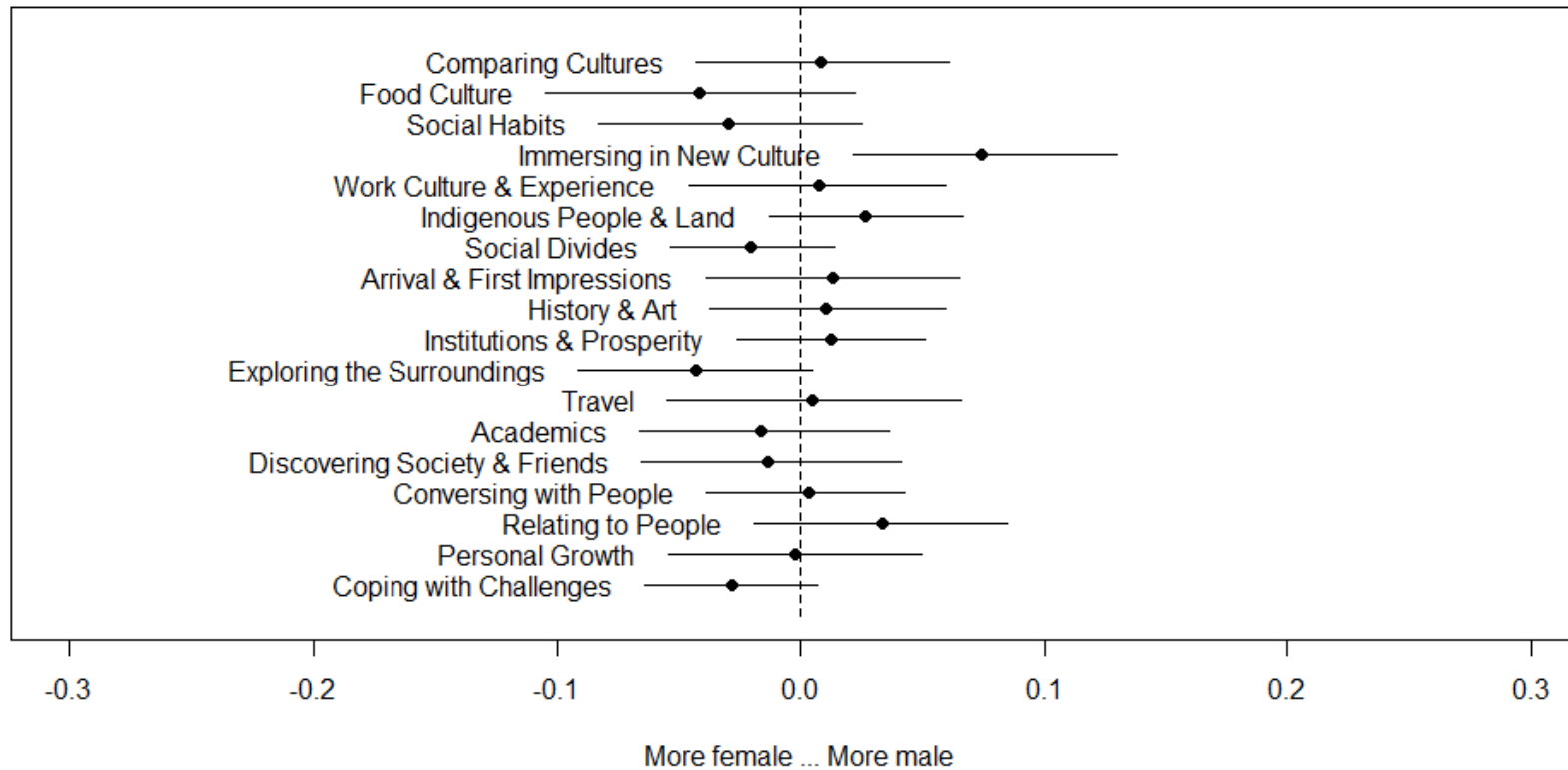
Results

The effect of study-abroad location: Oceania



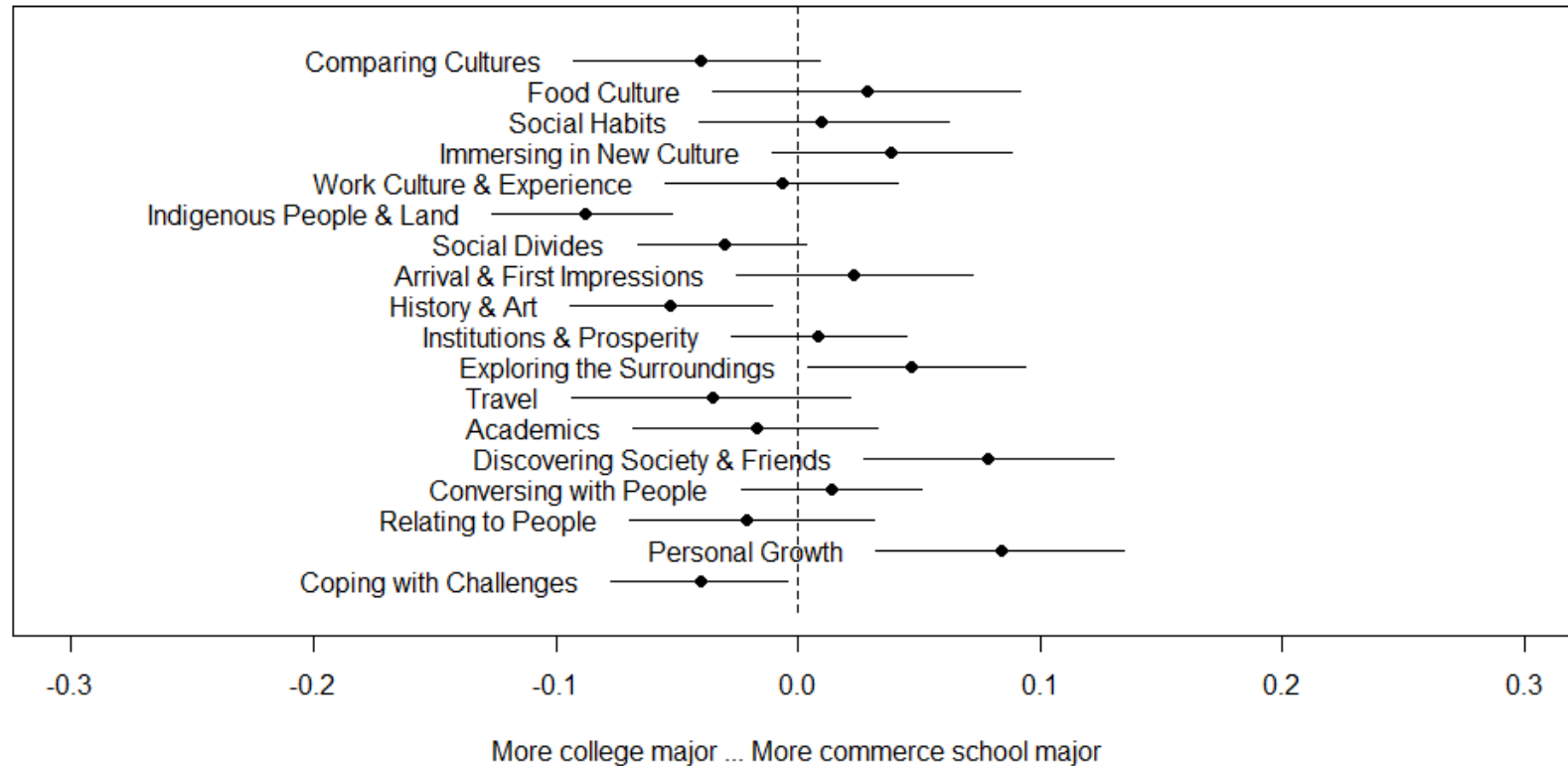
Results

The effect of student's gender



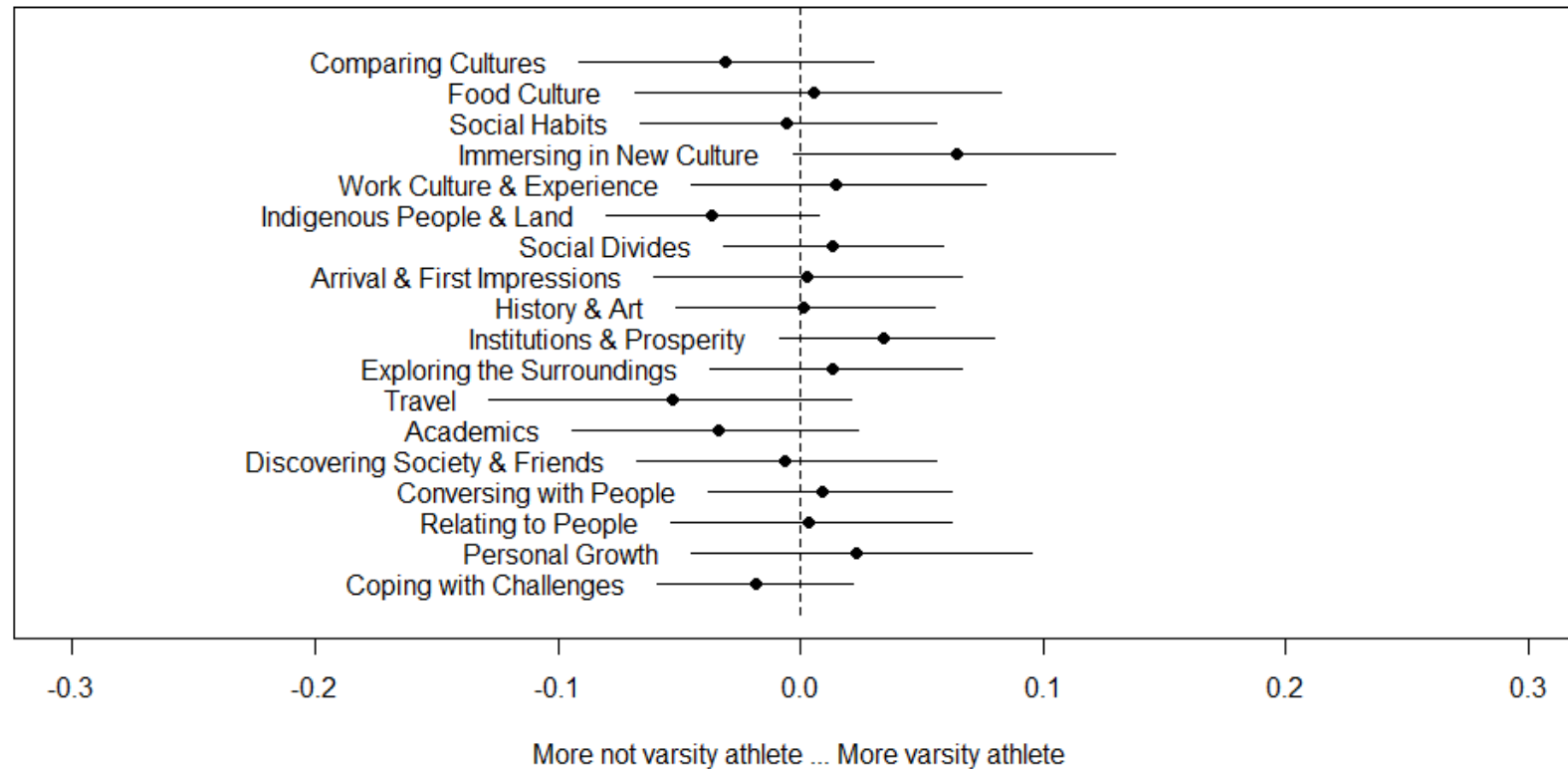
Results

The effect of student's major



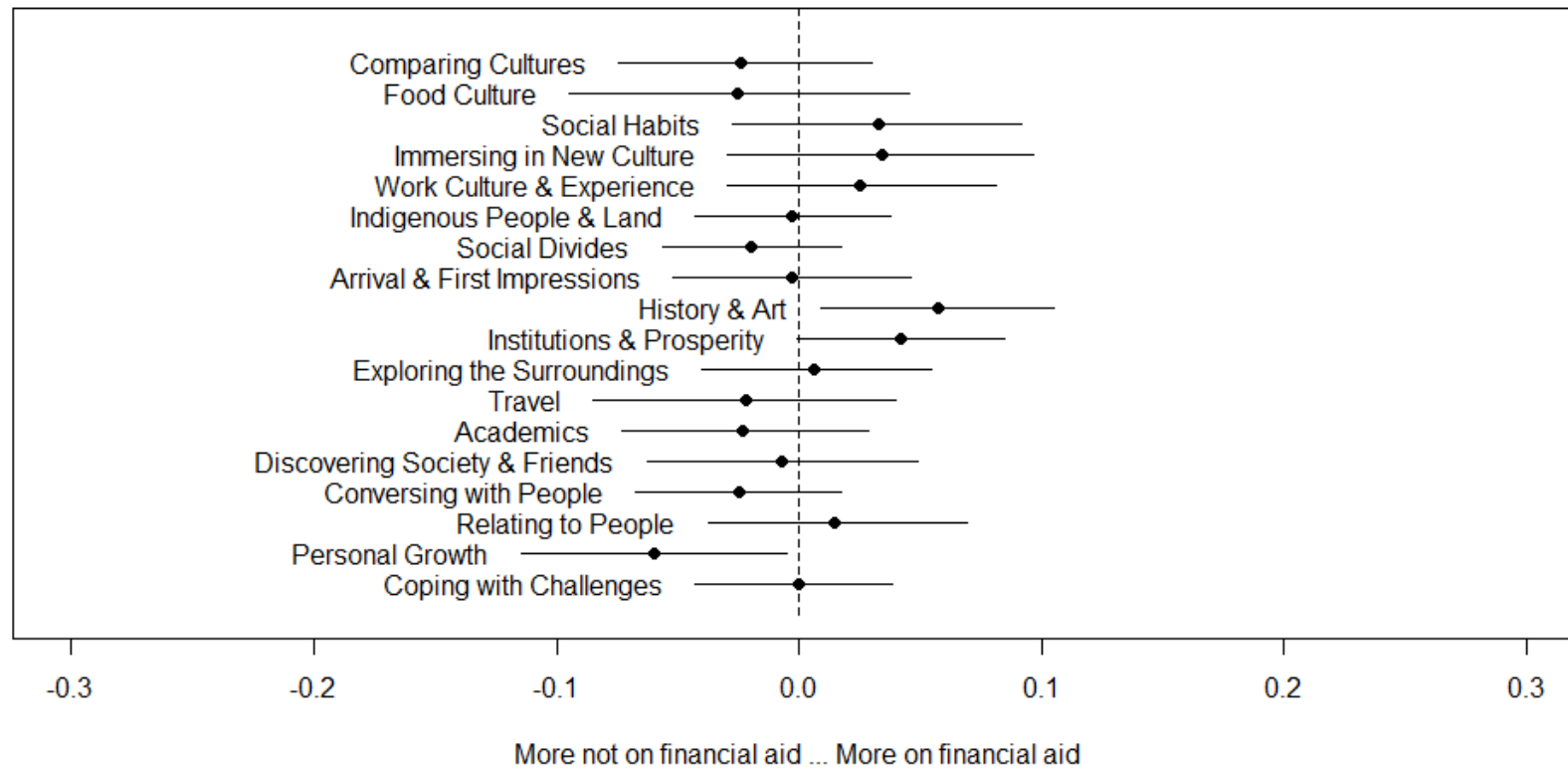
Results

The effect of student's status as varsity athlete



Results

The effect of student's status as recipient of financial aid



Benefits and Caveats of Textual Analysis

Benefits

- Less burdensome than traditional QL analysis
- Objective analysis
 - no response bias
 - no imposed conceptualization
- Large sample sizes
 - all essays can be processed
 - not a random sample
 - allows for comparisons by observable characteristics
- Innovative
 - rich discussion
 - high enthusiasm

Benefits and Caveats of Textual Analysis

Caveats

- Still time intensive
- Macroscopic approach
- Not a substitute for close reading
- Significant findings do not imply causality
- Not intended for outcomes assessment (no imposed conceptualization)

How will W&L use the data?

- **Build larger data set over time, continue to analyze data periodically**
- **As a “thermometer;” to stay in touch with students’ perceptions about their experiences, make sure there are no concerns**
- **Compare types of study abroad experiences: length of stay, locations, etc.**
 - Educational tool for advisors
 - Add additional metadata variables; some already gathered w/in Terra Dotta
 - e.g. on site orientation, homestay
- **Compare the FREX words over time**
 - are they the same?
 - do they change, and why?
 - what do they imply?

How will W&L use the data?

- **In conjunction with other assessment methods to triangulate findings and generate discussions among decision makers**
 - Post-experience surveys (based on CAS standards)
 - Outcomes assessment (rubric used to evaluate small sample of essays)
- **To conduct a needs assessment**
 - What, if any, concepts and skills do students need exposure to before they go abroad?
 - How can we better prepare them for an immersive experience?

Initial Reactions at W&L

- **Textual analysis could be beneficial for other programs and areas on campus**
 - Measurement of perceptions and beliefs without the constraints of pre-conceived constructs
 - Method for extracting meaningful data from reflective work
- **Even in the early stages, has initiated productive collaborations and discussions about the student experience**
 - Center for International Education
 - Provost and Academic Deans
 - Office of Institutional Effectiveness
 - Faculty
 - Students

Student Empowerment, Better Experiences

- Student reflection after return to campus
- Focus groups about textual analysis findings
- Revisiting pre-departure preparation
- Ripple-effect for students
- REFLECTIONS ON STUDY ABROAD: A COMPUTATIONAL LINGUISTICS APPROACH.
The following URL links to the abstract page for this submission in the SSRN eLibrary:
<http://ssrn.com/abstract=3235551>



THANK YOU