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Who Am I?: LGBTQIA+ Abroad
Lauren Schoenberger

Hannah (H): Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs! I'm Hannah

Zoë (Z): And I'm Zoe! And we are your hosts. On this podcast we'll talk about study abroad from the perspective of the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who make it an experience worth sharing. We'll also bring you travel tips and fun facts from around the globe.

Z: On this episode we talked to Dr. Lauren Schoenberger. Lauren used her own experience studying and living abroad to develop her doctoral dissertation titled "Who am I?: The LGBTQ+ Student Experience During Study Abroad. Let's jump to her conversation with Lauren to hear how study abroad can influence sexual identity formation.

Z: Hi, how are you doing today Lauren?

Lauren (L): Hey, good morning, how's everyone doing?

Z: Good, so to start us off can you go ahead and introduce yourself to our listeners?

L: Absolutely. My name is Dr. Lauren Schoenberger. I myself studied abroad in London in 1999 I also was a Program Assistant after I graduated in London as well so I have a lot of experience with our London Study Centre. I'm a three time Florida State graduate. I earned my communications degrees in Bachelors and Masters and then for my Doctorate I really focused on education and how study abroad can impact certain groups of students. Currently I work at Tallahassee Community College so right down the road from y'all, as the Director of Integrated Marketing.

H: Amazing. We're super excited to talk to you today and we're going to dive in about your dissertation research, so we're going to talk about how you studied how study abroad can influence sexual identity formation and in the beginning of your dissertation you talk about your own experience studying abroad and how that shaped your life. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about your experience?

L: Absolutely. So as I said I studied abroad in 1999 so that was a long time ago and so for me growing up in the 80s as part of the LGBTQ+ community, there was not a lot of representation out there. And so I grew up in a very loving family, I grew up in a place that was very safe but as far as being able to explore my sexual identity I just didn't feel like I had that option. There weren't really a lot of you know TV shows about it like there are today, it wasn't really in the news, and so I felt very alone. Coming to FSU was an amazing experience but then that study abroad experience took it to the next level because I was for the first time in my life able to be whoever I wanted to be, free of any past maybe communities or relationships that I had. And as I said you know, I grew up in a very loving environment, it had nothing to do with that, it was just it was the first opportunity for me to actually take a step back and look at myself and who I was and not be afraid to hide that anymore.

Z: So in your dissertation you note that "All participants expressed that studying abroad has had a lasting impact on their lives, because it contributed to their sexual identity formation. The overall reason for

this was that they found a new community where they not only felt loved but also accepted.” So can you talk more about this quote and the stories that you heard while conducting your research interviews?

L: Yeah, absolutely. The reason I wanted to do my research kind of relates back to my own story and what I just said. It’s that I wondered if students still these days with representation and all the amazing things that we're doing in this world now, Allies and Safe Zones, all those wonderful things that weren't around when I was a student even in you know high school or college, did they still have that same feeling that I had? Did they still have that same experience? And so that's really why I set out on this journey to do this research 'cause I was like “You know what, maybe we're good. Maybe we've done all we need to do and we’re you know, can move on to something else.” But I found that students today still are going through the same things I went through 20 years ago, 20 plus years ago. And what I mean by that is they still feel the same way I felt growing up in safe, loving environments, they had wonderful communities around them, wonderful parents you know, grandparents all these wonderful things, but they also felt they could not truly be themselves because of societal norms and just the pressures that come with that. And so the stories that I heard 20 years later were very similar to my own story and so it really resonated with me that we are doing more than we were in the 90s but there is still more work to be done for students these days.

H: To kind of build on that and the experience from high school to college and what students still go through these days... Much of student development theory today focuses on self-identity and the changes that students can undergo throughout the college experience - why do you think college provides this catalyst in the transition from high school to college life?

L: I mean college gives you this opportunity to kind of reinvent yourself I feel. You know as I said, you do kind of grow up a certain way whether you realize it or not. You know if your church, I mean if your family you know sends you to church then that's fine and that's all you know, if your family has certain political views that's kind of all you know you kind of grow up in what your family wants you to be and I'm not saying that's bad at all. I mean I had a wonderful childhood, I still have a wonderful life with accepting you know family, but I think when you get to college it's the first opportunity that you have to kind of lay the groundwork for who you really want to be. Also you know it's just I think a maturity thing as well you know as you age and become more comfortable with who you are and what you want. I think leaving high school and then heading off to college does provide that opportunity to take a look and self reflect and I think that's the most important thing. If you want to remain the same way as you grew up, fantastic I think that's a wonderful thing but it's also important to self-reflect and make sure that the choices that you make from college onward will help shape your life the way that you want it to be.

Z: I think that's such a great point that college can really open up that space for you to explore who you want to be but obviously your dissertation focuses more on study abroad so taking it even a step further and a lot of your dissertation talks about sort of the anonymity that is found in a large city and how that can help create safe spaces and I think anyone that's been to a large Metropolitan city has likely experienced that anonymity that comes with that. So can you just talk about the importance of anonymity and safe spaces in sexual identity information and how the study abroad experience can provide that?

L: Absolutely so as I said come to college is I think that first step but for me and for many of the students that I've spoken to, of course everyone who actually was in my research the next step that was needed

was that study abroad experience. I think this is for many reasons. First of all with study abroad you tend to mostly study abroad in a progressive location. Some of these bigger cities in the world are much further along than we are. You know for me, London in the 90s was you know eye opening for me to see gay bars and I was like I've never seen this before, it just wasn't a thing. And so unless you're in maybe New York City or San Francisco it can be hard to find cities that are this progressive but luckily with study abroad there are many options to select a progressive city and of course that means they're friendly and supportive of LGBTQ and of course other identities that one may want to discover. I also think that for me this is true and I always when I used to work in study abroad would say this to students "I really encourage you to study abroad independently." Don't take your best friend, don't take your boyfriend, don't take your girlfriend, don't take a roommate. If you want to study abroad, you should study abroad on your own. And I say that because that is the true opportunity to free yourself of any past environments that you may have had. And again these past environments may not be negative. I'm not trying to promote that all your past environments are negative, I'm trying to allow students the opportunity and I allowed myself the opportunity to really start from scratch. And I know a lot of students want to say brought with her roommates and their friends and I understand that and that is important, however if you are able and you're willing I always encourage students to say about independently. Because even when you come to college, especially for those of us from Florida, there's always a connection back home. Whether it's the senior whose mom is best friends with your mom in the bunco club or whatever the case may be. There's always a connection that you have, you know in college. You can always find something, you know it's like the Kevin Bacon rule, you can always find someone connected. But when you study abroad that's not true, especially if you go independently. So I think that the study abroad can actually take it to that next level where you can study in a progressive environment that are already friendly and supportive and open, you can find communities there that except you, you can start from scratch and kind of reinvent yourself even further than you did when you came to college as a freshman. And then of course the thing that it did most for me, and even the participants in my study, is it gives you confidence. I'm not saying that I studied abroad and the next day I was like guess what I'm going to be able to come out to everybody - that's definitely not the way it works - however, you start to gain confidence realize who you are, who you want to be, and what's going to be the best for you as a person and that confidence starts to build up overtime and that really started you know when you had that opportunity to study abroad. And that's not just for self-identity I think study abroad in general, whoever you are, helps provide confidence for everything. You know when you can figure out how to get out of Rome at 3:00 AM without a train ticket, you know you build confidence and so I think that's you know kind of in a nutshell how study abroad takes it to that next level.

L: I think to your point about studying abroad without friends, or if you don't know anyone, I know a lot of students express that nervousness about going alone and I think it's kind of one of those things that like you don't know, what you don't know and sometimes it can be a little scary heading into a situation that you don't know what to expect but it could be one of those things where you're just so grateful for everything you learned even though you weren't quite sure what to expect, so I think that's such great advice for people. That's awesome.

L: Absolutely.

H: So onto our next question. How can the findings of your research shed light on how educators and study abroad providers can support students in the LGBTQ + community?

L: You know one thing I was proud of when I worked at FSU International Programs was that FSU was able to take all the Allies and Safe Zones programs overseas. And so first and foremost I think it's important that students understand that all of our staff overseas are trained you know to be welcoming and to be accepting, they've gone through the Allies and Safe Zones training and knowing the staff that I know that work for FSU International Programs they're all wonderful people who will do anything you know to help a student, regardless. And so you know I really think that the biggest takeaway for me is that I think especially in higher education we think 'Oh we've done so much for this community and I think we're done. Right? You know I mean we got a lot of other things on our plate, so we need to move forward,' but I think that we still have to take the time to understand our students and their experiences and their journeys because we may think they're in a place and they're not quite there yet. Which also means we need to stay up to date on the LGBTQ + issues. It is an ever changing field, which is fantastic, but we need to make it a priority and stay up to date of how we can help our students as things change. And the representation that's out there today and even that's you know in college environments and higher education is fantastic but we can't just say we've done it and we're good and you know rest on that and move forward. We've got to keep building upon the knowledge that we have, we have to keep creating environments that have positive relationships that yield trust with our students and you know their faculty and their staff and their program you know providers and all those things. And so I just think the most important thing is that as educators we make sure we don't get complacent and think 'we've done enough and we're moving on to the next thing.' So I think that's the most important thing, 'cause even myself as part of the community thought, 'I'm sure students these days don't feel the way I did in the 90s,' but they certainly do and so that was that was probably the most eye opening thing for me in my research is to see that there's still a lot of work to be done.

Z: I love that point about you know there's still more to be done, how can we help students and not getting complacent in that, but really progressing and continuing to support students and have that representation as well. In your dissertation you noted quote "...how eager all the participants were to tell their stories and finally be heard. Therefore, it's important to provide an outlet for members of marginalized communities to share their experiences through research," end quote. Do you see ways that your research could be expanded to support other areas of identity formation or other marginalized identities?

L: Absolutely, I think the bottom line is visibility, right? I think students want to be heard and so I don't think that matters what group you belong to, I think everyone wants to wants a place. And so of course that can be extended and you can reach out and allow students to have a platform. I know that you all do a great job with the blog providing spaces for students to you know tell their stories but I think that's it really comes down to visibility because you want to know that there's other students going through what you're going through. But I think that's the bottom line, I think that's life truthfully I think we all want to know there's people that go through what we go through and we're not alone and so I think really visibility probably would be the most important thing for any identity, is that they have a place they can connect they can get plugged in faculty, staff, directors, whomever are trained and understand the different identities that are out there that students might connect with.

H: Thanks for that shout out to the blog, same name Noles Abroad, if you are interested in writing for the blog and want to share your story, if you have something you want to say or something you want to share with students, it's an awesome platform we would love to hear your story. But back to the interview, our last question for you as someone who studied abroad, was a PA, worked in study abroad,

has lived in multiple places abroad, what is what's your advice for students who are considering study abroad, what would what would you say to someone?

L: You know, I think truthfully it's plan ahead and do your research. And now we're talking about research today and so I'll bring it back around. But it's truthfully about being prepared. I am a Girl Scout, that is our motto "Be prepared," and so I think that's really my advice. You know if you even think 1% of you wants to study abroad, then look into it. Look into it now, do your research. I know that FSU International Programs you know has a lot of wonderful resources such as advisors, financial aid folks that can help, and I think the whole point is just to plan ahead and really be prepared because study abroad does take a lot of planning. It's not one of those decisions that can happen overnight. And when you are prepared, you're more likely to get things such as scholarships and you know things along those lines that can help your journey become even easier. I know that there can be a lot of barriers to study abroad but by researching and planning ahead I think you can help mitigate a lot of those. So that that would pretty much be my advice is to plan ahead. Be a Girl Scout, be prepared.

H: As a fellow Girl Scout, I really appreciate that advice, it's always good to be over prepared. But that's also just awesome advice for students about those barriers, that we do know that there are barriers to study abroad or there could be perceived barriers but we can't help you unless you tell us what those barriers are for you. So please just contact our office let us know how we can help you. Even if you don't know the questions to ask, just come and sit down and we'll start asking the questions to figure out how we can help you best. Dr. Schoenberger, thank you so so much for your time this morning and sharing your research and sharing your story, we really appreciate it and we can't wait for folks to listen to this episode.

L: It was my pleasure, thanks so much for having me and as always Go 'Noles!

Z: Before we disembark, we want to talk about IP's Diversity and Inclusion resources. As we heard from Dr. Schoenberger, study abroad is a great time to explore your identities and form new communities. International Programs wants to help folks navigate all aspects of the study abroad experience. The Diversity and Inclusion committee has developed various resources for identity exploration to assist on this journey.

H: These resources can be found under the "Diversity and Inclusion" tab on the IP website at international.fsu.edu. One resource the D&I team has created is the *Mapping Your Identities* guide, which can assist people going abroad as they explore their identities before and during their time overseas as well as help them understand the identities of others. On this webpage, you can also check out the projects and plans the Diversity and Inclusion team is working on, various links to articles and podcasts featuring student voices, and how to contact the team.

<https://international.fsu.edu/Diversity.aspx>

Z: Thanks again to Dr. Lauren Schoenberger for talking with us today and to each of you for listening!

H: This podcast is a production of FSU International Programs. The music for this podcast was composed by John Bartmann. Our logo was designed by Vanessa Guirey, who also does our sound engineering. Editing, transcription, and research is done by us, Hannah Meister and Zoë Crook.