

How Short-Term Embedded Study Abroad Develops Measurable Career Competencies

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Introduction

Short-term, faculty-led embedded study abroad programs are often overlooked as vehicles for career competency development and frequently dismissed because of their short duration. This study challenges that assumption by examining whether intentionally designed, reflection-centered faculty-led global experiences can produce the full range of NACE Career Readiness competencies¹. Through qualitative analysis of student reflective writing, this paper demonstrates that students in a two-week embedded program—when engaged in experiential learning and structured reflection—report measurable development in specific career competencies, showing that such programs can directly impact career readiness.

The study analyzes reflections from twelve students enrolled in the Global Business Leadership course: International Organizational Behavior in the Bahamian Context². The students participated in a two-week embedded program in the Bahamas (January 2026). The findings demonstrate that the program deepened students' understanding of equity, identity, and career direction beyond traditional classroom outcomes. Structured reflection tools enabled students to articulate their experiential learning in career-ready language, with enhanced competency in Equity & Inclusion and Career & Self-Development, as evidenced in their reflections.

This research is situated within the context of The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University (CSB+SJU), partnered liberal arts institutions with a strong institutional commitment to global engagement. Together, approximately 2,860 students are enrolled from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds. The campus community includes students from 40 different states and 21 countries, with 17.3% identifying as U.S. students of color and 3.5% as international students CSB+SJU supports extensive international programming³.



More than 40% of the students participate in a study abroad experience, and CSB+SJU is recognized among the top undergraduate colleges for study abroad participation.

The Competency Gap in Global Education⁵

According to the NACE Job Outlook 2026 survey, 74.1% of employers surveyed stated that participation in experiential learning and/or work during college is one of the top ways in which students can demonstrate skills in preparation for interviews. Additionally, 30.6% ranked career readiness skill certifications as a top hiring criterion.

While some global education programs may lack a framework to document how international experiences translate into career-ready skills, the Global Edge MatrixTM ⁶ maps Global Education to the NACE career competencies. At the same time, short-term programs are often perceived as travel rather than learning, are underfunded relative to semester-abroad programs, and are difficult to assess for outcomes.

¹ National Association of Colleges and Employers, "What Is Career Readiness?," NACE, accessed April 4, 2026, <https://naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/#competencies>

² Note on Evidence Base: All student examples cited are drawn from the *International Organizational Behavior in the Bahamian Context final reflections*, January 2026.

³ College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, "About the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University," CSB+SJU, accessed April 4, 2026, <https://www.csbsju.edu/provost-search/about-the-college-of-saint-benedict-and-saint-johns-university/>

⁴ College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, "Quick Facts About CSB+SJU," CSB+SJU, accessed April 4, 2026, <https://www.csbsju.edu/about/quick-facts/>.

⁵ National Association of Colleges and Employers, "2026 Job Outlook," NACE, accessed April 4, 2026, <https://naceweb.org/research/reports/job-outlook/2026#data>.

⁶ DA Global, "Global Education as a Career Success Imperative," DA Global, accessed April 4, 2026, <https://daglobal.org/career-readiness>

This research is designed to demonstrate that intentionally designed, short-term global programs can produce measurable, assessable career-readiness outcomes aligned with NACE competencies.

The challenge is not the duration of global programs, but the lack of intentional design and assessment frameworks capable of capturing their full developmental impact.

The Opportunity: Embedded Programs as Competency Laboratories

Embedded programs combine academic instruction with immersive field experiences within a condensed timeframe, resulting in high-impact learning environments. Within this framework, embedded global programs serve as “competency laboratories,” where students acquire career-ready skills through structured cycles of action, reflection, and feedback (Kolb, 1984; Kuh, 2008)⁷. Faculty-led program design facilitates the alignment of site visits, guided reflection activities, and course learning objectives with established competency frameworks. The Bahamas-based course, *International Organizational Behavior in the Bahamian Context*, offers a robust learning context, informed by its post-colonial history, entrepreneurial ecosystem, tourism-dependent economy, and opportunities for direct engagement with local professionals.

Research Questions This White Paper Addresses

1. Can a two-week embedded program generate evidence of all eight career competencies?
2. What types of experiential learning moments may produce competency outcomes?
3. How can reflective writing be used as a competency assessment tool?
4. What design principles make short-term programs maximally effective for career development?
5. To what extent does a study abroad experience in a historically marginalized country contribute to the development of career-readiness competencies among participating students?

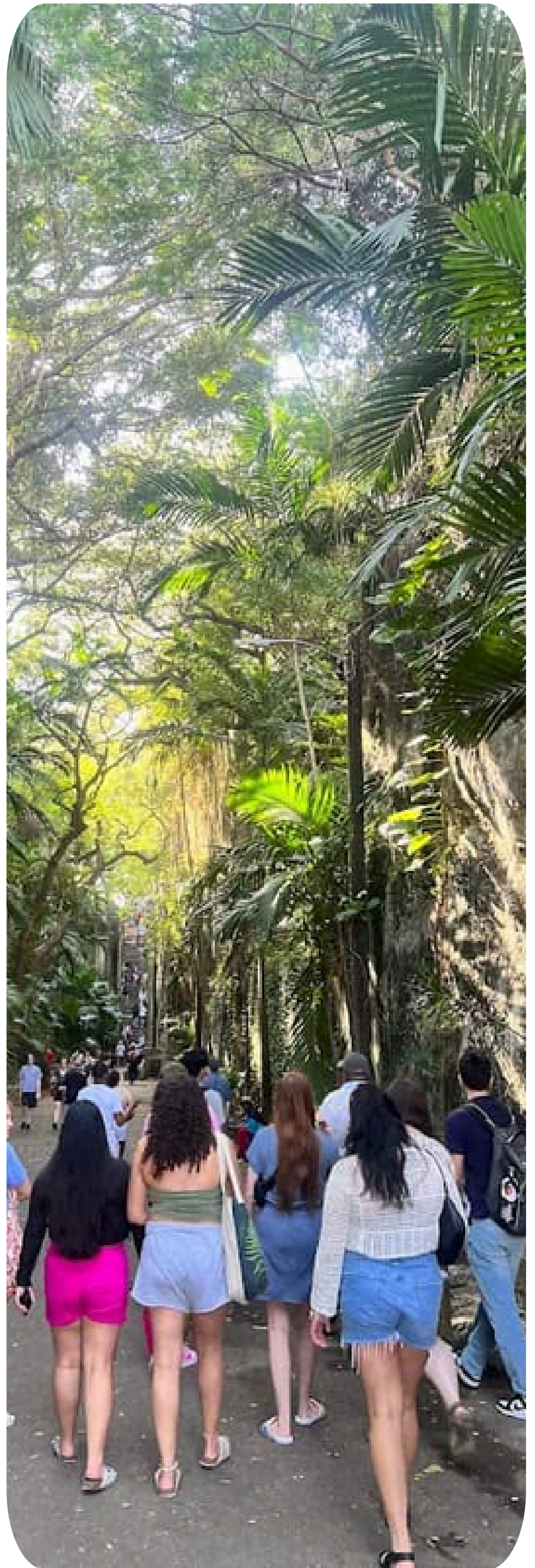


Photo credit: <https://www.csbsju.edu/mccarthy-center/event/the-bahamas/>

⁷ Kuh, G. D. (2008). High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. AAC&U.

Conceptual Framework

A. Career Readiness Competencies (8 Domains)

Global education contexts provide sustained, high-stakes engagement with differences that naturally cultivate career-ready competencies. Students strengthen Critical Thinking and Problem Solving by negotiating unfamiliar systems and ambiguous challenges common in global environments. Communication is strengthened through cross-cultural dialogue, requiring clarity, empathy, and listening. Teamwork develops as students collaborate across cultural, linguistic, and social differences.

Digital Fluency is built using technology to coordinate work and analyze information in global and virtual contexts. Leadership develops as students take initiative, make inclusive decisions, and motivate others in unfamiliar contexts. Professionalism is shown by adaptability, accountability, and resilience amid uncertainty. Career and self-development grow as students reflect on their strengths, values, and career goals shaped through global exposure. Finally, Equity and Inclusion are practiced through cultural humility, ethical engagement, and problem-solving across differing perspectives.

B. Reflective Practice as a Competency Assessment Methodology

This study is theoretically grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984)⁸, which frames learning as an iterative process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

To operationalize this model, the Heart/Brain/Stomach/Ear/Foot/Eye reflection framework⁹ used in the course served as a structured prompting tool that guided students through emotional, cognitive, ethical, observational, and behavioral dimensions of experience, aligning directly with Kolb's stages.

Student reflections generated through such a framework were examined using a qualitative coding approach¹⁰, enabling systematic analysis of demonstrated career competencies.

Coding focuses on the presence of competency-related language, depth of emotional involvement, and expressions of future-oriented behavioral intention, providing rich evidence of learning outcomes emerging from experiential participation. The structured framework guided students to move beyond surface-level observation, while faculty helped connect students' lived experiences to academic concepts. Although the course was not originally designed using the NACE Career Readiness competencies, the reflection framework served as a foundation for retrospectively mapping competencies¹¹ in support of this research.

The program's effectiveness was strengthened by site visits that incorporated history, commerce, community, and culture. Students most frequently identified moments of discomfort—such as confronting colonial histories, coping with social anxiety, or adapting to unfamiliar cultural norms—as the most impactful aspects of their experience. These situations challenged assumptions and required active problem solving, reflection, and emotional management. The research shows that program design should intentionally incorporate experiences that stretch students beyond their comfort zones, rather than focusing exclusively on positive cultural sharing.

The results support a depth-over-duration model for short-term programs. Evidence from two weeks of intensive, faculty-guided immersion demonstrated observable development across all eight NACE competencies when experiences were intentionally structured. Key success factors included purposeful site selection, reflective practices, mentorship, professional interactions, and engagement with authentic workplaces and community partners. When designed as learning settings rather than tourism experiences, short-term programs can function as high-impact competency laboratories.

Equity and inclusion played a role throughout the entire learning experience. Themes related to power, history, identity, and difference surfaced repeatedly across nearly every competency domain, suggesting the importance of engaging with cross-cultural settings.

⁸ Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

⁹ Hub for International & Community-Engaged Learning. (n.d.). *Heart/Brain/Stomach/Ear/Foot/Eye reflection framework* [Practitioner reflection model]. <https://www.hubicl.org>

¹⁰ Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications

¹¹ National Association of Colleges and Employers, "What Is Career Readiness?," NACE, accessed April 4, 2026, <https://naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/#competencies>

Programs that engaged honestly with social inequities achieved more holistic career-readiness outcomes, validating the value of global experiential learning design.

C. The Global Education–Career Competency Mapping Model¹² and Findings: Competency Evidence from Student Reflections

Student reflections from the Bahamas short-term embedded study abroad program reveal evidence of growth across eight core career competencies, demonstrating how immersive, experiential learning environments translate into measurable career readiness outcomes. In critical thinking and problem-solving, students demonstrated the capacity to analyze complex global business dynamics, particularly regarding foreign investment, economic dependency, and entrepreneurial risk-taking.

Their reflections show an emerging capacity to question incomplete information, synthesize multiple perspectives, and evaluate strategic problem-solving in actual contexts. Regarding communication, students emphasized the importance of active listening, cultural humility, and meaningful dialogue. Many described a shift from passive listening to intentional engagement, recognizing that effective communication in global settings requires empathy, openness, and the ability to navigate vulnerability across cultural boundaries.

Teamwork competency was reflected in students' ability to collaborate in unfamiliar environments. Experiences such as joining in cultural traditions and adapting to group preferences required flexibility, compromise, and shared ownership of the experience. Students increasingly viewed themselves not as observers, but as active participants in collective learning. In the area of digital fluency, reflections highlighted an understanding of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence. Students recognized AI as an innovative efficiency tool, while also critically evaluating its significance for employment and ethical use in global markets.

Reflections on leadership revealed an expanded understanding of influence outside official authority. Students identified leadership in cross-cultural exchanges, noting that it can manifest through humility, representation, and the ability to motivate others across contexts.

Similarly, professionalism emerged as students adapted to cultural differences, such as “island time,” requiring them to recalibrate expectations, demonstrate flexibility, and build confidence in unfamiliar social and professional interactions. Many reported increased self-efficacy in networking and initiating conversations, signaling growth in professional identity.

Within career and self-development, students articulated clearer connections between their experiences and future career goals. Exposure to different career paths and professionals prompted reflection on personal goals, lifelong learning, and recognition of non-linear career trajectories. Several students identified newfound or reaffirmed interests, demonstrating increased intentionality in career planning. Finally, the concept of equity and inclusion was an impactful competency area, as students engaged with issues of race, historical inequity, and cultural perspective-taking. These experiences fostered critical self-awareness and a dedication to inclusive leadership practices, with students expressing a desire to create equitable environments in their future careers.

Collectively, these reflections highlight the transformative power of short-term embedded global programs to cultivate not only skill development but also mindset shifts aligned with adaptability, empathy, and global competence.



¹² DA Global, “Global Education as a Career Success Imperative,” DA Global, accessed April 4, 2026, <https://daglobal.org/career-readiness>

Conclusion and Call to Action

Twelve student reflections from two weeks in the Bahamas produced observable, quotable, categorizable evidence of all eight career competencies. The diversity of growth — from AI ethics discussions to confronting colonial history to leading Bahamian high schoolers — demonstrates the unique power of the embedded program format.

Institutions can develop coding rubrics to connect student reflections to specific competencies and implement these rubrics across global programs, ensuring consistency in assessment and comparability of outcomes. Strategic partnerships with career services can further support the translation of student learning into career artifacts, such as résumé language, digital portfolios, and interview narratives. Future research could build on these findings through longitudinal studies examining the relationship between competency gains and career outcomes, comparative analyses across program modalities, and large-scale validation of reflective coding methodologies to increase generalizability.

The analysis of twelve student reflections from a two-week Bahamas embedded program revealed clear, quotable evidence across all eight NACE Career Readiness competencies. Students addressed AI ethics, engaged with colonial histories, and facilitated cross-cultural educational sessions, illustrating how embedded programs can rapidly develop deep, transferable career skills. These findings challenge prevailing assumptions about short-term global learning and highlight its value as a high-impact, assessment-ready practice. Institutions, faculty, and employers are encouraged to invest in, document, and communicate the career benefits of short-term global experiential learning, ensuring that student growth is recognized and applied beyond the classroom.

VIII. Appendices

1. Reflection Framework Reference Guide — Body Parts Debrief¹³ prompts mapped to Kolb's cycle and competencies
2. Competency Mapping Matrix — full 8-competency table with student evidence (Bahamas, January 2026)

¹³ HubICL. "Body Parts Debrief." Accessed April 4, 2026. <https://hubicl.org/toolbox/tools/511/objectives>

Reflection Framework Reference Guide – Body Parts Debrief prompts mapped to Kolb's cycle and competencies

Concrete Experience (Feeling)	
Heart	<p>Heart: Name something you felt, or a feeling you experienced.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is something you experienced that pulled at your heart strings? • How did you feel?
Stomach	<p>Stomach: Explain something that took guts for you to do, or pushed you outside of your comfort zone.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What pushed you outside your comfort zone? • What sick feelings have you felt before? • Was something hard to stomach for you?
Liver	<p>Liver: Explain how you felt things did not go as expected.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where/how/why did things “break down”? • How did things not go as you expected?
Lungs	<p>Lungs: Share about how the experience challenged you or motivated you to think differently.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When was a time when you needed to take a deep breath? • Was there an experience when you felt like you wanted to scream?
Reflective Observation (Watching)	
Ear	<p>Ear: Describe something you heard, or something that was hard to hear.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was a good idea you heard? • What was something that you really listened to? • Was there some feedback that was difficult for you to hear?
Eye	<p>Eye: Share a vision you had for yourself or the group, something you saw, or an observation you made.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was something new that you saw in yourself or someone else? • What vision do you have for yourself/the group? • What qualities do you see in yourself? • How did you see yourself perform within the group? • What was an important observation you made?
Nose	<p>Nose: Tell what you feel “stinks” about the experience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever stuck your nose in somebody else's business? • What was something that “stunk” about the activity? • What is something that “smells fishy” (or you are still questioning) to you about what you learned?

Abstract Conceptualization (Thinking)	
Brain	Brain: Share something new you learned about yourself, a teammate, or the group. ○ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What thoughts do you have? • What did you learn through your experience?
Spine / Bone	Spine/Bone: Tell about your group's strength or "backbone." <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you consider your backbone / the group's backbone? • Who/what is integral to the group's success? • What is a strength you have identified for yourself or the group? • Have you ever felt broken?
Active Experimentation (Doing)	
Hand	Hand: Share how you felt supported or someone you would like to give a hand to after this experience. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what way did the group support you? • Who is someone you would like to give a hand to for a job well done? • How did you lend a hand during the activity?
Foot	Foot: Reflect on what you will leave the activity with. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is something you will "walk" away with after today? • Did you stick your foot in your mouth and say something you wish you hadn't? • What direction would you like to see the group go?

Competency #1: Critical Thinking & Problem Solving		
Competency Outcome	Student Examples from Bahamas Reflections	Primary World Economic Forum Skill(s)
Analyzes complex problems from multiple perspectives and proposes evidence-based solutions	Student 5: "After visiting the Pompey Museum I learned a lot about how African Americans or slaves were shipped over to the Bahamas and that's why we see such a large presence of African American looking people in present day Bahamas. The question that I was left wondering was, who was here before the Europeans, Pirates, and African Americans. On the Clifton National Park tour we learned who they were and they were called the Lucayan people."	Analytical thinking; Reasoning, problem-solving & ideation
	Student 11: "I was very surprised to hear that the largest resorts in the Bahamas including Bahamar and Atlantis are on land that is owned by China. Bahamar also brought in many workers from China to complete the project. Graphite Engineering explained in detail how they had to work with China on the engineering of the hotel."	
	Student 6: "I learned that I have never really considered how culture impacts the way businesses run before. Going to places like Drive Green, Graphite Engineering, and Fusion showed me how crucial it is to apply the surrounding culture to your business in order to have long term success."	
Competency #2: Communication		
Competency Outcome	Student Examples from Bahamas Reflections	Primary World Economic Forum Skill(s)
Communicates clearly and with cultural nuance across formats and audiences; practices active listening	Student 2: "One of the biggest insights I gained was that listening is a form of respect. The value of this experience was learning to slow down and pay attention rather than just hearing information at a surface level. Moving forward, this experience will change my actions by reminding me to listen first before forming opinions."	Empathy & active listening; Communication & collaboration
	Student 10: "I really listened to the music they played and the different instruments they used for the event. I thought it was so cool how they played the instruments for us, and we got to put on a mini Junkanoo as a group."	
	Student 8: "The main action that I will change after this trip will certainly be my ability to welcome people. Welcoming does not just mean being kind when someone introduces themselves; it means actively seeking people out and ensuring that they feel at home."	

Competency #3: Teamwork		
Competency Outcome	Student Examples from Bahamas Reflections	Primary World Economic Forum Skill(s)
Works productively in diverse teams; resolves conflict constructively; builds inclusive collaboration	Student 12: "Fusion Superplex activated my Heart in a different way. It reminded me of the importance of joy, community, and togetherness. Seeing my classmates relaxed, laughing, and interacting outside of an academic setting made me appreciate the bonds we were forming as a group."	Collaboration & teamwork; Leadership & social influence
	Student 11: "Some highlights of the trip include dinners with the entire group, Pat's house, meeting with students from St. Augustine College, and meeting with executives from Atlantis. All demonstrated the Bahamian culture in a different but unique way."	
	Student 8: "We met with former students and supported their businesses. Instead of staying in the hotel, we decided it was better to explore the city, and that generated a great amount of knowledge. We immersed ourselves in the culture, and the backbone of this group is that we were travelers, not tourists."	
Competency #4: Digital Fluency (Technology)		
Competency Outcome	Student Examples from Bahamas Reflections	Primary World Economic Forum Skill(s)
Uses digital platforms effectively; applies data-aware judgment; demonstrates digital fluency in global and virtual contexts	Student 11: "One major insight that I gained was learning about the use of AI in the businesses that we visited. At most places, AI is being used to improve overall efficiency of the business. We had meaningful conversations about our opinions of AI and if it will hurt jobs in the Bahamas for the future or improve them."	Technological literacy; AI & Big Data (awareness)
	Student 4: "She said she loves to use it because it makes her more efficient which allows her to meet clients' needs in a timely manner. It isn't going anywhere, and we concluded that it is great to use as a tool and not a crutch. In the prospective job market employers are looking for people skilled in navigating it but not employees who rely on it."	

Competency #5: Leadership		
Competency Outcome	Student Examples from Bahamas Reflections	Primary World Economic Forum Skill(s)
Motivates others, delegates, and makes inclusive decisions that move projects forward	Student 7: "Walking through that space, learning its history, and hearing stories connected to it made the experience feel deeply personal and real. What made it even more meaningful was getting to learn from the Prime Minister's son, and even more, having the chance to actually walk with him. The way he carried himself, spoke about the country, and honored the culture showed me what true leadership and humility look like."	Leadership & social influence
	Student 8: "Another point that piqued my interest was the amount of foreign investment that comes through the Bahamas. I was never under the impression that some of the land resorts are fully bought by foreign investment. It made me wonder what other countries have this phenomenon of this magnitude, and where the line will be drawn."	
	Student 12: "Hearing her speak about her journey made me reflect on how strength does not always look loud or aggressive; sometimes it looks like quiet persistence and determination in the face of resistance. What took guts for me was truly listening to her story without minimizing it or brushing past the difficult parts."	
Competency #6: Professionalism		
Competency Outcome	Student Examples from Bahamas Reflections	Primary World Economic Forum Skill(s)
Demonstrates reliability, initiative, and accountability; adapts calmly to setbacks and change	Student 1: "From a stomach perspective, this visit pushed me outside my comfort zone. I am scared of heights, so standing on the cliff and looking over the edge took a lot of courage for me. I was nervous, but I did it anyway, and I am glad I did because the view was amazing and something I will never forget."	Resilience, flexibility & agility; Quality orientation
	Student 11: "In the beginning of the trip, I was uneasy about walking around after dark. I didn't know exactly where everything was located, and which places were safe and unsafe. As the week went on, I got more comfortable where I was at, and the group I was with."	
	Student 3: "Throughout this trip, I have learned that I prefer sticking to a schedule, and when there isn't one it can be hard for me to adapt. This experience pushed me to go with the flow and to compromise when the group wants to do something different than I want."	

Competency #7: Career & Self-Development		
Competency Outcome	Student Examples from Bahamas Reflections	Primary World Economic Forum Skill(s)
Builds a growth plan, expands networks, and pursues opportunities aligned to strengths and interests	Student 4 (Bahamian): "She worked for a Fortune 500 company for many years before starting her business. She also had a degree in finance, but her career path does not have anything to do with that. It is refreshing to see a real-world example that you don't necessarily have to have everything all figured out, and you can be successful in many different passions or professions."	Curiosity & lifelong learning; Motivation & self-awareness
	Student 11: "This experience had taught me to step out of my comfort zone and connect with different people. During this trip, I met so many people that are very different from me, and I got to experience their way of life. I now want to go and explore many different cultures and make connections with the people there."	
	Student 9: "Being at the school has made my passion for kids more apparent to me. When I was younger, I always wanted to be a teacher, but I wasn't sure when I got to college if that was the path for me. So being involved in coaching has kind of given me the best of both worlds."	
Competency #8: Equity & Inclusion		
Competency Outcome	Student Examples from Bahamas Reflections	Primary World Economic Forum Skill(s)
Practices cultural humility; designs inclusive solutions; navigates power and perspective responsibly	Student 2: "What surprised me the most was how connected I felt to the history. I didn't expect to feel so emotional in a place I had never been before. I felt sadness, but also a lot of respect for the resilience of the Bahamian people. At the same time, what made me uneasy was realizing how easy it is to ignore these stories when they don't directly affect our own lives."	Empathy & active listening; Social & cultural intelligence
	Student 6: "The Museum of Junkanoo pushed me outside of my comfort zone. The experience showed me what the celebration means to the people of the Bahamas beyond just the loud colors and music. I will admit it was a little uncomfortable as a tourist to draw so much attention from other tourists, but it was a good immersive learning experience."	
	Student 7: "Standing in places where people were once imprisoned, controlled, or sold was very saddening and had an indescribable feeling or presence. It touched my heart because the suffering we were learning about did not feel distant or abstract, it felt real and present, and it made me reflect on things that are happening in the present, especially in Minnesota."	