Finding Purpose: Backpacking in Panama
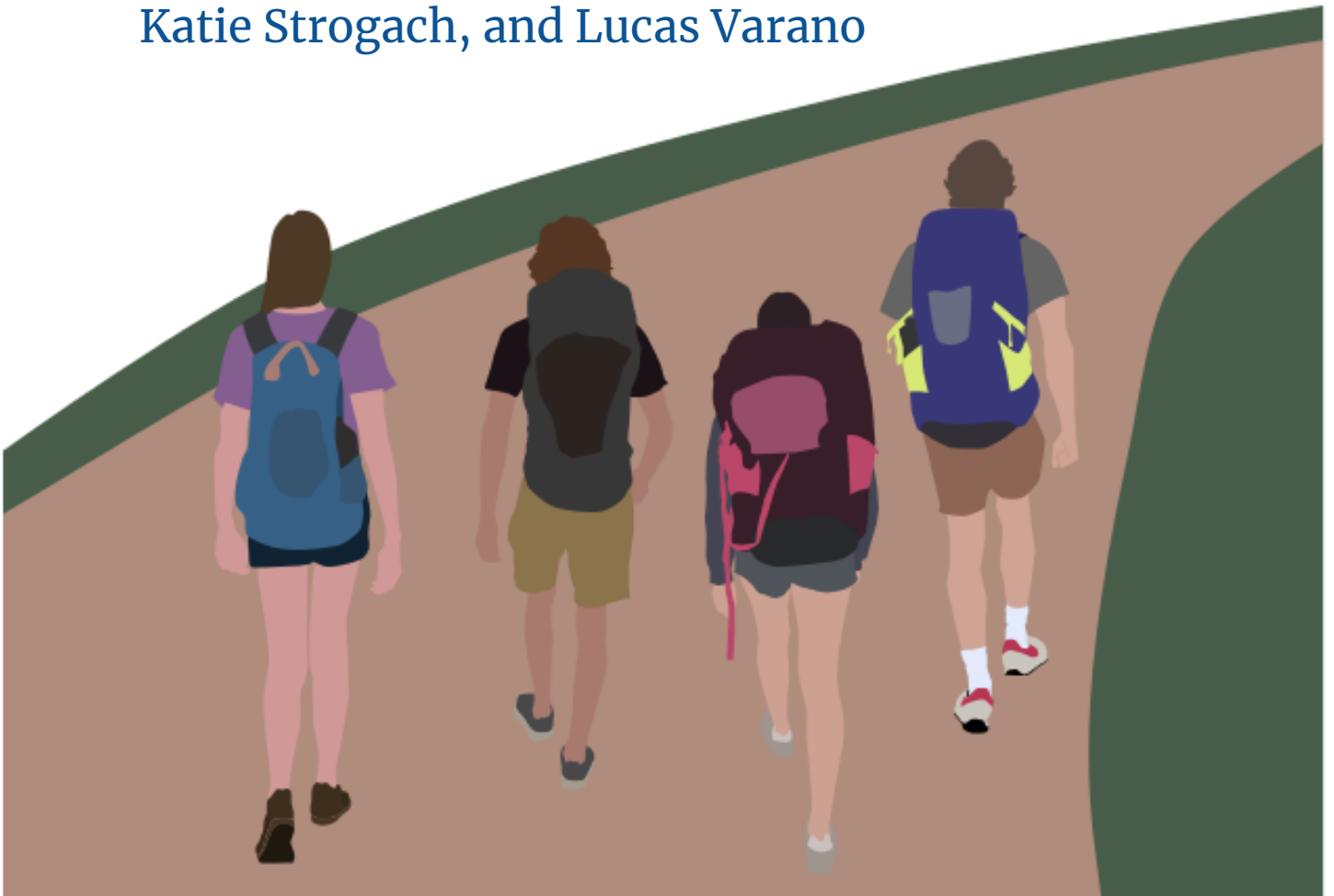
Marina Fongeallaz, Bryce McKinley, Katie Strogach, and Lucas Varano

Finding Purpose: Backpacking in Panama

An Interactive Qualifying Project
submitted to the Faculty of
WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Bachelor of Science

Submitted by:

Marina Fongeallaz

Bryce McKinley

Katie Strogach

Lucas Varano

Date:

October 15, 2023

Project Advisors:

Professors Grant Burrier and Curt Davis

Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Report Submitted to:

Professor Grant Burrier

Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Abstract

In the increasingly competitive world of academics and employment, it can feel like there is a set path you must follow. Backpackers break from this status quo by exploring the world and, in doing so, themselves. By conducting archival research, surveys, interviews, and an ethnography in Panama we investigated the connection between backpacking and developing a sense of purpose. Our findings indicated that, although backpacking does not always directly affect purpose, it does have a positive impact on confidence, worldliness, and independence.

Acknowledgments

Our team wants to extend our thanks to all of the people who made this project possible:

- Dr. Grant Burrier, our project sponsor as well as one of our faculty advisors for his creation of the project and continued help in its completion.
- Dr. Curt Davis, our other faculty advisor for his continued guidance and assistance in the writing of our paper.
- Our project center director, Dr. Aaron Sakulich, who allowed us this amazing experience visiting Panama.
- The staff of Ciudad del Saber whose facilities we enjoyed for the extent of the project.
- The staff of El Machico Hostel, Hostal Yoha, Bodhi Panama City, Hostal Loco Coco Loco, Panama Experience Hostel, CulturaHumana Living and Guesthouse, Zebulo Hostel, Posada 1914, and Hotel Magnolia Inn, for allowing us to post our surveys in their hostels.
- The staff of Las Porrocas Backpacker's, Bambuda Castle, and Bambuda Lodge for being so accommodating and welcoming during our stays.
- All of the amazing backpackers who completed our survey or allowed us to interview them to gather data for our findings.

Authorship

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1.0 Introduction

In our modern world, it can often feel like there is a specific set of steps that we are expected to achieve as we go through life. We are pressured to attend school and achieve the best grades to get into the most competitive college. Then, we have to get a high-paying job and we are expected to continue working until we can retire. This path, however, makes self-discovery difficult since it leaves little room for new experiences. As a result, it can also lead to burnout and uncertainty with life decisions.

Finding one's true purpose can be difficult or even impossible with the countless responsibilities inherited from society and life, but it is an integral part of having a fulfilling life. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the final step necessary for experiencing a fulfilling life is self-actualization (McLeod, 2018). Self-actualization is achieved through finding and aligning a person's experiences with a sense of purpose. Despite the importance of the process of self-actualization, people often do not ask themselves what their true purpose is, nor do they know how to answer such a broad question. Seeking one's true purpose is a spiritual revelation that only comes to light through self-understanding and realization. One potential outline for a way to find purpose and lead a purposeful life is by following the tenants of *ikigai*, a Japanese concept associated with improved health and happiness (García & Miralles, 2016)

Since this method is so vague, there are many ways that a person may find a purpose. Our goal was to see if people can find purpose through backpacking. Backpacking is a therapeutic and eye-opening activity enjoyed by millions. Through the process of traveling through new and foreign areas, people have the opportunity to have new experiences. It also affords people the

opportunity to connect to the world around them, either to nature or the culture of the new area they are exploring.

Our research was sponsored by Dr. Grant Burrier. Dr. Burrier is an experienced backpacker who wishes to see the relationship we will draw between backpacking and finding purpose through this project. He accompanied us to Panama to conduct our research. Panama is an ideal research location due to backpacking being deeply rooted in the country's modern culture and economy. To fully understand the concepts of purpose and backpacking, we also studied how individuals define and pursue purpose as well as the broad impacts of backpacking.

2.0 Background

2.1 Purpose

2.1.1 Ikigai

Ikigai is a Japanese concept that loosely translates to reason for being. In a more detailed explanation, life should be defined by one's talents, passions, profession, and what they can give to the greater world (The Government of Japan, 2022). It is important to note, however, that we take this translation lightly since many scholars seem to agree that *ikigai* is a concept that cannot be accurately translated into English. They elaborate that this isn't a great translation, because *ikigai* is more about how you should live and the finding of purpose is more of an incidental part of it. (Lomas, 2016). More accurately, *ikigai* can be described as the intersection of the improvement of four areas of life viewed as an important part of life as illustrated in Figure 1, and in particular it notes that this should connect parts of life that many people in Western culture tend to separate such as personal and professional life.

In the book *Ikigai, the Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, Héctor García and Francesc Miralles (2016) explore the concept of *ikigai* by comparing it to other traditional and newly emerging practices around the world. Their reason for exploring this is the positive impact that it has on those who have discovered their own reason for living. The authors reinforce this connection with an anecdote, stating:

> In German concentration camps, as in those that would later be built in Japan and Korea, psychiatrists confirmed that the prisoners with the greatest chance of survival were those who had things they wanted to accomplish outside the camp, those who felt a strong need to get out of there alive. (García & Miralles, 2016, p. 32)

Even in the most extreme examples, a sense of *ikigai* can serve as a driving force allowing one to overcome adversity. Kamiya (1966) witnessed a similar experience to what was noted here through her work with leprosy patients. Despite what they were going through, they continued to move forward thanks to their search and pursuit of meaning in their life that they referred to as *ikigai*.

There are other sources of resilience through understanding and being able to control emotions. The ability to still feel, but not be controlled by emotions is a significant tenant of both Buddhism and Stoicism (García & Miralles, 2016). Such concepts can have significant impacts on overcoming hardships but do not mean much without the overarching purpose that can keep a person pushing for the future.

Figure 1

A visualization of the tenants of *ikigai*
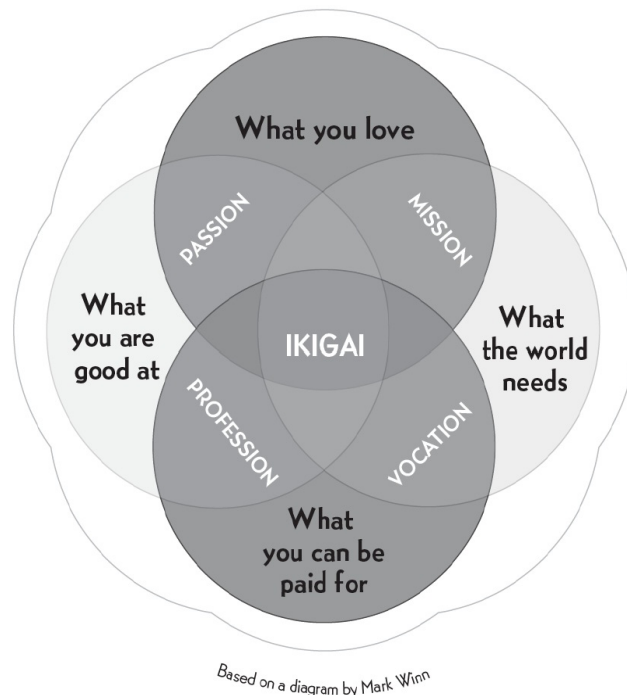
Note. Taken from *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* (García & Miralles, 2016, p. 12)

Additionally, *ikigai* has lifelong benefits since it can be linked to increased longevity. In Japan, it is very common for people to live past 100 years old (Statista, 2022). This can be attributed to a variety of factors including a culture that values a healthy diet and an effective health care system, but arguably the most important factor is staying active all life. Without a sense of purpose, it can be difficult to have the motivation to stay active into old age. The testimonials in the *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* only present a relatively small sample size, but the interviews with many individuals who have lived long and fulfilling lives agree that a significant part of that was continually moving forward as was inspired by the concept of a purpose they have found in their lives (García & Miralles, 2016). Despite extensive anecdotal evidence of the connection between *ikigai* and both mental and physical health improvements, it is difficult to conclude if these results are directly impacted by the pursuit of *ikigai* as opposed to the health-positive actions with which *ikigai* is associated. This false causation was proposed in a review of the literature surrounding Ikigai, which stated that

> [h]ealth behaviors such as exercise, healthy eating, and reducing alcohol and nicotine intake may partially explain the mechanisms for the relationship between *ikigai* and health (Kotera et al., 2021, p. 15)

As researchers noted, there are many health-related practices associated with an *ikigai* lifestyle, so it is impossible to make decisive conclusions regarding which parts are responsible for improved physical health.

Also in the book, García and Miralles explore the tangential concept of logotherapy. This is a method of therapy that stands in contrast to psychoanalysis. The core theory of the practice is that it is focused on the future rather than the past, and in doing so it helps guide the patient to finding a sense of purpose (García & Miralles, 2016). There is a similar practice that has emerged known as life coaching. In this practice, the coach follows the patient's lead on what issues they believe matter most and will help lead them

to appropriate actions. While this does not have the same emphasis on purpose, the idea of following the patient and leading their direction in the future is very similar. Studies into the long-term health effects of this therapeutic strategy have only been done on a small scale so there is not much conclusive evidence, but data shows participants on average did see mild improvements in their self-empowerment (Ammentorp et al., 2013). As has been evidenced here, multiple cultures are starting to come to the realization there may be long-term health benefits connecting a sense of purpose to one's life, thus the ability to find such a purpose should be of growing interest.

Further work has been done to formally study how individuals in Japanese culture include the pursuit of *ikigai* in their lives and the effects they can have on one's life. One such study found that individuals who had repeated valuable life experiences, a tenant of *ikigai* known as *keiken*, were filled with a sense of satisfaction in their lives. The researchers noted that this has previously been connected to a sense of meaning in life in other such studies, but they believe that this idea of satisfaction may be more concrete. Furthermore, the inclusion of this *keiken* in the lives of students provided a clear and approachable way for students to increase their sense of satisfaction and explore parts of their lives they were not otherwise able to explore. This is supported by both a quantitative (online) survey as well as qualitative reports with individuals in person (Kono & Walker, 2019).

2.1.2 *Defining and Finding Purpose*

How does someone define purpose? What steps must one take to pursue their purpose? These questions are hard for many to answer. Since we are going to be asking people what their purpose is, we must have a concise definition of the word. According to William Damon (2008), purpose is an "ultimate concern" or "a deeper reason for the immediate goals and motives that drive most daily behavior" (p. 33). This can be anything from helping stop

world hunger to just raising a family and passing on knowledge to the next generation. Alternatively, Reker and colleagues (1987) offer another similar definition: "[p]urpose refers to intention, some function to be fulfilled, or goals to be achieved" (p. 44). Defining purpose is the first step in trying to achieve it. In fact, Damon (2008) constructed a 12-step guide to reach a path to purpose:

1. Inspiring communication with persons outside the immediate family

2. Observation of purposeful people at work

3. First moment of revelation: something important in the world can be corrected or improved

4. Second moment of revelation: I can contribute something myself and make a difference

5. Identification of purpose, along with initial attempts to accomplish something

6. Support from immediate family

7. Expanded efforts to pursue one's purpose in original and consequential ways

8. Acquiring the skills needed for this pursuit

9. Increased practical effectiveness

10. Enhanced optimism and self-confidence

11. Long-term commitment to the purpose

12. Transfer of the skills and character strengths gained in pursuit of one purpose to other areas of life (pp. 91-92).

Even with the definition and a step-by-step guide, many young lives may feel lost as they drift through the everyday motions of societal norms. These children are pushed through years of education like factory work, and the finished product is a high school or college diploma with no ambitions of

what to do next. William Damon (2008) does a great job in his book, *The Path to Purpose*, exposing these results of our modern society. Teachers, parents, and other influences paint this picture of education and perfect grades above all else. Even when students fail, forgiving parents accept these failures with open arms and a house to return to with little to no rush to move out. A survey from 2000-2006 showed that nearly two-thirds of college students moved back in with their parents, and over half of these stayed for over a year (Damon, 2008, p. 18). How is the youth supposed to take risks and aspirational leaps of faith when an easier path is guaranteed? This is why searching for a path to purpose is the first step to a subjectively successful life.

Similar to *ikigai*, this book demonstrates a way for people to achieve a path to their purpose. Purpose can always be changing and, thus, is never truly achieved in a lifetime. It is a way of life. Although *ikigai* focuses more on what one can do to control their way of life, Damon's book is about how outside forces, such as family and society affect one's journey to achieve purpose. Yet, both are key in defining and discussing what purpose means to someone.

Additionally, different aspects of purpose become more or less prevalent depending on the stage of life that the person is in. The feeling of desire for new experiences and achieving new goals is especially important in younger demographics (Reker et al., 1987). This sense of chasing achievements in both professional and personal life seems to be closely related to the driving force discussed in the benefits of *ikigai*. A unique note of this particular study is the comparison of the meaning of purpose in older demographics. They found that the elderly often look back on the same achievements they worked to reach when they were younger believing that these actions and goals gave their life some form of meaning (Reker et al., 1987). The sense of meaning in life could be associated with more feelings of contentment and satisfaction.

2.1.3 Purpose and Mental Health

We are in a mental health crisis that has been developing over the course of the past century. Specifically at WPI, there has been an increased amount of mental health concerns among students over the past few years due to the fast-paced learning environment and the intense workload. Mental health problems are also apparent in the rates of suicide, especially among college students, as can be seen in a paper discussing the suicidal tendencies of college students, in which Braaten & Darling (1962) wrote:

> ...the incidence during the academie year of 1960-61 was 10.6 per cent of the total case load. In other words, every tenth student patient in college was to a lesser or greater extent concerned about suicide (p. 673).

This connection has been well established, though there is still an argument about how best to manage the problem. One known effective strategy to help in such cases is through counseling. Effective counseling is associated with a significantly reduced risk of suicide in clients, but counseling can not reach everyone. Even those who have it available to them do not necessarily use the available resources:

> ...male students commit suicide at twice the rate of female students and therefore represent 2 out of every 3 student suicides. At the same time, male students use campus counseling centers at only half the rate at which female students do (Schwartz, 2006, p. 363).

Therefore, it would be beneficial to look into more ways that individuals could improve the state of their own mental health regardless of whether they have access to resources.

In the book *Journeys from Childhood to Midlife: Risk, Resilience, and Recovery*, Werner & Smith (2001) talk about the importance of resilience in overcoming difficult parts of life. They found that individuals drew resilience from a few areas of life. Among the three categories of life they discuss, Werner

& Smith discuss the connection between accomplishments in education and practices and increased resilience. Regardless of gender, there was a connection between resilience and being achievement-oriented. Individuals with high resilience were oftentimes focused on improving in a skill-based trade or were doing something in which they took pride (Werner & Smith, 2001). This explanation of a force of improvement in skills closely relates to our definition and understanding of purpose, thus showing the connection between a sense of purpose and developing resilience. It additionally supports the idea of effective purpose being a combination of both personal and professional works, consistent with the concept of *ikigai*. This would be a potential route to improving mental health without the need for outside resources.

2.1.4 Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory, also known as SDT, states that all people have three basic physiological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are required for the motivation to personally develop (Ryan and Deci, 2000), as is displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Core Tenants of Self Determination Theory
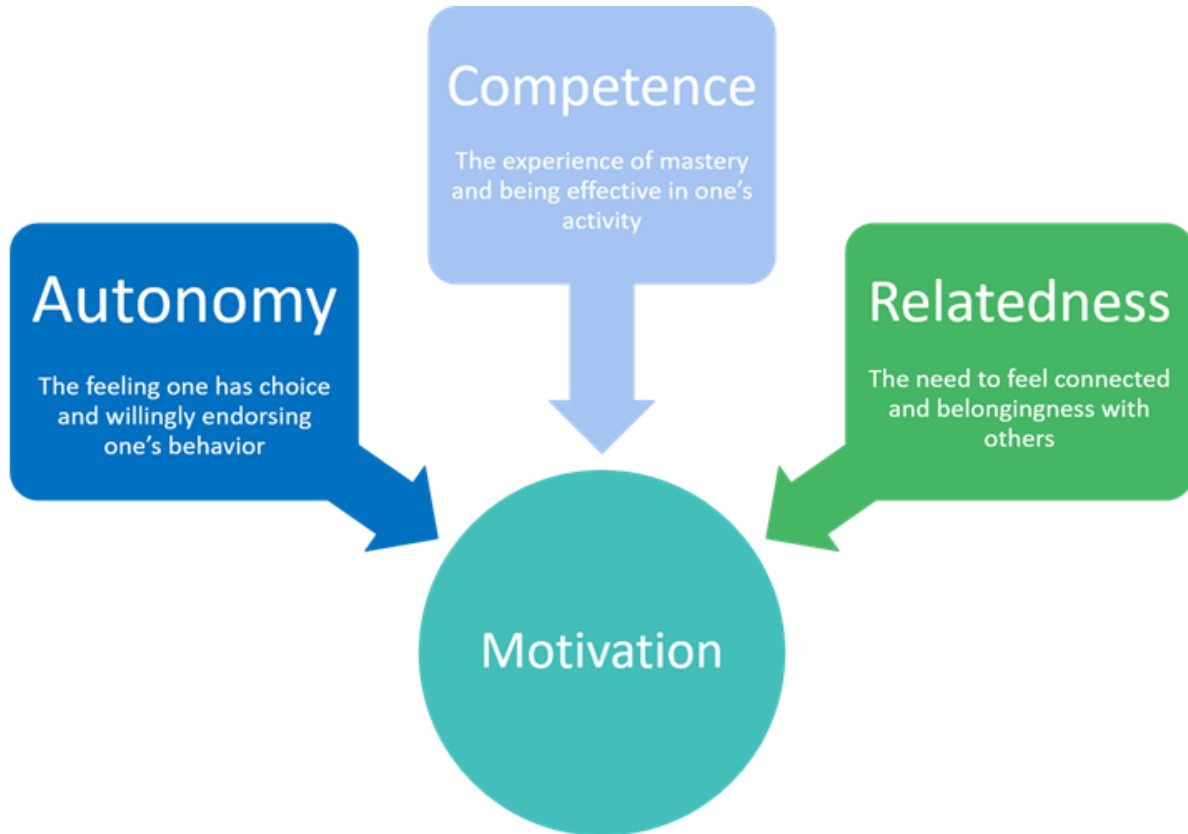
Note. Taken from the University of Rochester Medical Center (2023)

Autonomy is the feeling of having choice, that you are in control of your own actions and can make decisions that are aligned with your wants. Competence refers to one's belief in their own ability to complete tasks that one dedicates oneself to. Relatedness is a feeling of community and being connected with others in a common pursuit. Together these three attributes promote a feeling of motivation, which is necessary to promote positive change in one's life and to sustain mental health (University of Rochester Medical Center, 2023). Backpacking travel can have a direct impact on all three of these aspects, and in turn, promotes the same positive change.

2.2 Backpacking

Backpacking is a low-cost, independent form of travel where you carry everything you need on your back. Perhaps the earliest form of backpacking

was medieval pilgrimage. The traditional pilgrim would bring a staff, a gourd to store water, and a travel pouch or bag (Spaccarelli, 1998). Their journey was of religious and social intent and their final destination was a shrine or religious structure where they sought to reach a form of enlightenment or become closer to their religion's divine one. Upon their return home, their communities respected the travelers and wished to learn of their experiences and newfound knowledge.

> You become an important person. It completely changes your existence in your little town, where the only other important people were the priest and the local noble. Now you're someone.

In this way, the experience of early backpacking was not solely religious, as it had a deep and transformative personal meaning as was described to us in a conversation with Dr. Spaccarelli.

In Christian forms of pilgrimage, many made their way to Jerusalem—Jesus' birth and resurrection place but Jerusalem was not their only destination. Many pilgrims were exiled by their local priests to begin their religious journey and were told to "be exiles for God's sake and go not only to Jerusalem but everywhere, for God himself is everywhere" (Sumption, 1975, p. 96). As these pilgrims ventured out of their homes, they needed somewhere else to stay. Other Christians knew about their holy sacrifices and often offered or even forced hospitality upon the travelers. This unconditional hospitality was traditional as it was expected for the homeowners to share in the benefits earned by the pilgrim. In the twelfth-century guidebook, *The Pilgrim's Guide*, the authors note that "[w]hoever receives them receives St. James and God himself" (Sumption, 1975, p. 198). This culture of traveling for a personal purpose and receiving hospitality from strangers along the way has become popularized in modern times.

Thus, the concept of backpacking has existed for thousands of years, but until recently it was rarely used recreationally. During the 1960s and 70s, the Hippie Trail, which traveled along the Silk Road, became a fad for what we now call backpackers (Conlin, 2007). In recent years it has become popular among young travelers due to the cost efficiency it offers compared to standard vacation options. Backpackers will often stay at inexpensive lodgings, such as hostels or private homes where they will work for their keep. Depending on the work laws of the nation they are in they will sometimes take short-term jobs working alongside locals to earn their keep and become more immersed in the community. Many see backpacking as a more "real" way of experiencing a culture due to its ability to circumvent more tourism-driven locations and allow the traveler to directly meet and interact with the locals (O'Reilly, 2006). Backpacking is primarily undertaken by younger people during gap years, but older individuals also partake during retirement or career breaks. Our group has varying levels of prior backpacking experience, ranging from none to having spent weeks at a time on the trail.

2.2.1 Backpacking and SDT

The connection between backpacking and autonomy is inherent, as backpacking is by design about going out into an unfamiliar setting either on your own or with a small group. This encourages an individual to make decisions for themself, whether it is where to go next or how to deal with a moment of crisis on the trail.

Backpackers' personal development (BPD) is generally gauged on a scale developed by Ganghua Chen, Jigang Bao, and Songshan Huang, and consists of five domains: skill, capability, emotion, self-consciousness, and worldview (Chen et al, 2013). Development in these areas has been shown to positively

correlate with general self-efficacy (GSE) (Chen et al, 2018), the belief in one's own competence to overcome a wide range of challenges.

A study that supported this connection examined a sample of 472 surveys given to backpackers traveling through hostels in a variety of cities in China (Chen et al, 2018). In the sample, 230 responses were from Chinese travelers while the other 242 came from people from a variety of Western cultures. The study consisted of a statistical analysis of the responses collected and concluded that the Chinese backpackers' GSE was positively influenced by an increase in skill, while the Western backpackers' GSE was improved by increases in capacity and emotion. In both groups, BPD's effect on competence, and thus motivation, was demonstrated, though the authors of the study also admitted that the weak relations between the two could indicate that other forms of personal growth could more significantly explain the change in GSE (Chen et al, 2018).

A feeling of relatedness can also be increased by backpacking travel, as it introduces the traveler to new experiences and people. These can be locals in the areas they travel to or other backpackers in the hostels they stay at.

2.3 Project Influence

2.3.1 Previous Research

Before us, there was an IQP group that researched how backpacking affects purpose in Taiwan in the spring of 2023. They found that unlike William Damon's book and the *ikigai* book, which both give a strict definition of purpose, purpose is more fluid in people, capable of changing over time, and is defined by each of them in different ways, all of which give them meaning in life (Boafo et al., 2023). This group used methods of surveys, interviews, and ethnography to get their results. They also attempted to do focus groups to get a better idea of the trends and differences that backpackers have but soon

found that there were too many challenges in arranging these groups, so they removed this method from their research (Boafo et al., 2023).

Through their surveys and interviews, they found that there was not a direct relationship between backpacking and purpose. Nevertheless, throughout their journeys, backpackers have time to reflect on their lives and find solutions to their problems, which helps them move closer to a purpose, but a clear purpose is not found on a backpacking trip (Boafo et al., 2023). This is very understandable because it takes time to find a clear purpose in life, so maybe backpacking does not help find a purpose, but it might help start bringing on some reflection and bringing more fulfillment in life. They also found that for many backpackers, backpacking itself had become their purpose (Boafo et al., 2023).

Their ethnography further revealed why backpacking is beneficial. During their bike trip around Taiwan, they faced many hardships, interacted with new people, and immersed themselves in the culture (Boafo et al., 2023). Specifically, one experience stood out to them when one of their group members had a frightful experience biking through a tunnel with poor visibility. Although he faced fear and many difficulties, he ended up coming out of it with a sense of accomplishment because he was able to overcome the challenging circumstances (Boafo et al., 2023). Through this journey, they discovered that conquering risky and difficult tasks on a backpacking trip can help develop problem-solving skills and give backpackers a stronger sense of accomplishment and fulfillment (Boafo et al., 2023). They also found that solo traveling is the best for self-discovery and meaningful experiences. Being alone pushes people to interact with locals, immerse themselves in the culture, and face challenges alone, which has great benefits (Boafo et al., 2023).

Overall, while backpacking may not have an immediate impact on purpose, they found that backpackers' experiences could help shape their

future and help with reflection, personal growth, and development, all aspects that are needed to find a deeper purpose in their lives (Boafo et al., 2023).

2.3.2 City Wanderer

The inspiration for our project is a similar IQP conducted in Taiwan sponsored by an organization known as City Wanderer. City Wanderer is a non-profit organization that strives to inspire young people through meaningful exploration and soul searching (HundrED, 2019). The organization was founded in 2015 in Taiwan, where an intense test-based curriculum can cause children to place excessive self-worth in their grades. This can cause children to burn out rapidly and even those that make it to college rarely know what they want to do in their life. City Wanderer is attempting to address this issue by helping youth discover their purpose through their "Wandering Challenge"(City Wanderer, 2018).

The Wandering Challenge tasks groups of three youths, ranging in age from sixteen to twenty-six, to complete thirty missions outside of their classrooms in three weeks. The missions are unknown to the participants before they begin and seek to push them out of their comfort zones and into the real world, allowing them to ask introspective, soul-searching questions. The missions are divided into four main subtypes based on what they intend to inspire in the participant: self-awareness, adventure and challenge, connection rebuilding, and social participation (HundrED, 2019).

Self-awareness challenges seek to make the youth look not outward, but inward, focusing on deep questions, introspection, and self-understanding. In such a work-focused and busy world it can be all too easy to ignore your passions in the pursuit of what others deem important. These missions intend to force the participant to step back for a moment and reflect on what mark

they want to make on the world, with challenges such as writing their own obituary.

Adventure and challenge missions push students to develop courage and perseverance in the face of adversity, as well as their problem-solving skills. In the classroom, a specific way of thinking is reinforced by the structures in place, which wonderfully prepare students to face academic challenges, but woefully under-prepared them for the types of adversity they will face simply existing later in life. When you have spent all of your life dealing with the strict guidelines imposed by assignments it can feel disorienting being thrust out of college with no guidance on where to take your life beyond the confines of academia. The Adventure & Challenge missions intend to foster students' ability to step into uncertainty with challenges, such as planning a trip with no money.

Connection rebuilding missions seek to develop the interpersonal relationship skills of the students. Through activities, such as writing heartfelt letters to their parents, the students are taught how to better empathize and connect with those around them.

Social Participation missions are focused on global citizenship, empathy, and social responsibility. By taking on these missions the students are given perspectives of other cultures, societies, and lifestyles, which helps them to more deeply understand their fellow people and become better citizens of the world. These missions consist of activities, such as preparing a meal for the homeless and exchanging life stories with them. Through these missions in each Wander Challenge, City Wanderer helps youths find purpose in their own lives by forging deeper connections with themselves and others and exploring facets of themselves that would otherwise be marginalized by school.

Life purpose means something different for every individual and it may not always be found in the city. We hope to expand beyond the localized urban

environment that City Wanderer focuses on to see if backpacking can have a similar effect on people's sense of purpose.

2.3.3 Sponsor Background

Dr. Grant Burrier is an associate professor of teaching at WPI with a Ph.D. in political science. In the spring of 2022 and 2023, he advised IQP projects in Taiwan that studied how the youth find purpose. In the 2023 IQP, the students specifically studied the correlation between backpacking and finding purpose.

Dr. Burrier considers backpacking to be an essential part of his own life, which fueled him to sponsor this project. He has backpacked through 43 countries and thoroughly enjoys exploring the cultures, people, and lesser-known beauties of a new location. He also considers purpose to be a big part of his life.

In order to gain some insight into why Dr. Burrier was interested in sponsoring this project, we asked him about his relationship with purpose in an interview. He considers life to be an ongoing search, and purpose can change over time. For example, after his subject department was eliminated at the previous college he taught at, he felt lost. He recalls not knowing if he had to move on from teaching:

> But, you know, purpose is ongoing, and particularly at that moment it was like, well, man, am I just going to have to give up on teaching? Like, is this the end of the road for the teaching part of my life? Do I go work for an NGO? Do I go join a government agency? Do I join a diplomatic corps? Do I join a think tank? So those conversations about who you are and what you want in life will be ongoing.

Despite the hardships that fall upon him, he keeps an eye open for new opportunities. We further discussed his opinions on purpose and related them to his experiences as a backpacker in our findings, but his initial interview gave us a good sense of how interesting this project topic was.

In the interview, he also brought up how this project should affect us:

> [T]hat's essentially the essence of your project. Is giving you the opportunity to be a little bit more reflective and actually realize, hey, this is an important moment in life.

He hoped this would resonate with us throughout the duration of our stay in Panama. He mentions that people are constantly making decisions about who they are and what they want to be but don't take the time to reflect on these decisions. He wished that we take our time in Panama to reflect and through that, we will hopefully have more insight into our future decisions. With Dr. Burrier's devotion to backpacking and finding purpose in the back of our minds, we carry out research in Panama.

2.4 Backpacking in Panama

It is essential to take into account how the location can have a unique impact on the experiences of the backpackers involved. Backpacking is a worldwide phenomenon, but we have chosen to study it specifically in the country of Panama. This country is well known for its popular tourism sector which includes a large fraction of backpackers.

Panama's extreme biodiversity, beautiful ocean and rainforest landscapes, historical culture, and vibrant nightlife make it highly sought after by backpackers (St Louis et al., 2022, p. 4). Within the country, there are many popular backpacking towns and cities. A quick Google search of "Panama backpacking destinations" will return multiple pages of respected backpacking articles and ethnographic journals and they mention Bocas del Toro, Boquete, San Blas Islands, and Playa Venao as the best places to visit (AllTrails, 2023; Amy, 2022; Conner, 2023; Cope, 2023; Dyck, 2021; Hubbard, 2019; James & Alvarez, 2023; Schering, 2017; Visit Panamá, 2023). These locations range from hot and humid Caribbean Ocean islands to temperate and mountainous

rainforests, which give backpackers an encompassing experience of the country. Our group will consider these recommendations when planning our own backpacking trip.

Additionally, backpackers have become a key player in Panama's tourism, which has been integrated into its identity and economy. In 2021, Panama generated 3.61 billion US dollars in the tourism sector which corresponds to 46 percent of all international tourism receipts in Central America (WorldData, 2021). The influence of backpacking is most easily seen in the aforementioned top tourist locations. In these towns, hostels can be found on nearly every street, hiking trails carve through the forests and often upcharge tourists, and merchants litter the streets with their booths selling souvenirs.

A study done in Bocas del Toro on the effects of backpacking tourism on the locals showed that many residents became reliant on tourism to earn a living. The findings of this study reported that workers that serve tourists "feel compelled to create a particular atmosphere to entice backpackers" as well as "[t]heir mutual interest in creating an environment suitable to drawing in backpackers … also serves the local economy" (Mach, 2023, p. 254). Bocas del Toro, the most well-known backpacking spot in the country, now has an economy fully dependent on tourism. With this amount of commerce coming from tourists, it is no wonder that backpacking has become a part of Panama's identity.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Purpose and Objective

The goal of this study was to discover if life's purpose can be found through backpacking, specifically in Panama. We have gathered information through different types of data collection including interviews, surveys, ethnographic, and archival research. This information can be meaningful to individuals who may use our findings to assist in their journey of finding a purpose in their own lives. The following objectives were used to help achieve our goal:

1. gathering empirical evidence from backpackers using surveys and 1-on-1 interviews;

2. producing an auto-ethnographic study of the team's experience backpacking;

3. analyzing the data to produce concrete conclusions about the relationship between purpose and backpacking.

In addition to the uses of our results previously covered, we also gained meaningful experiences. Through our backpacking in a variety of environments and our interactions with other backpackers, we strived to find meaning and purpose relevant to our own lives. This discovery of purpose aligns with the objective of the project and allows us to report on our own experiences which may provide the team with insights that might remain relevant to us for the rest of our lives.

3.2 Gathering Information

We have broken down our methods of gathering information into four categories. The first is through archival research and books on our topic. The second research source is through surveys available for backpackers to fill out.

The third is through direct interviews with individuals. The fourth and final source of information in our study is our personal experience of backpacking in both urban and rural settings.

3.2.1 Archival Research

Before we arrived in Panama, as well as during the start of our trip, we conducted background research about purpose. Part of this research included the two books mentioned in the Background chapter (*Ikigai* and *The Path to Purpose*). These books were recommended by our sponsor and acted as an introductory orientation to the concept. When most people are asked about purpose, they do not know how to correctly respond to that question because most of the time, they do not understand the definition of purpose. The two books helped us get a better understanding of what purpose really is and some potential ways of self-discovery. This was helpful when conducting interviews and surveys because we were able to ask different questions, not directly asking about purpose, but still getting the same results. Furthermore, if we did ask about their purpose, we were able to explain exactly what we meant followed by some examples.

Another part of our research included a previous IQP report from Taiwan. Reading their paper gave us some insight on things we could include in our research as well as implementing their recommendations to improve our results. Although archival research is a great start to discovering more about our topic, it is impossible to completely eliminate selection bias. In order to mitigate selection bias, we attempted to pull sources and experiences from different sources and cultures, but it is reliant on only using published research that others have performed. It is not fully representative. In order to get the full picture and learn even more, our group had to go out and make our own discoveries through interviews, surveys, and our own experiences.

3.2.2 *Surveys*

We conducted surveys to gain collective information from a large audience of backpackers. Surveys can be an easy way to obtain a larger sample size since they do not take much work to set up. The success of this method relies on engagement since we require a larger sample size to analyze the data. Engagement was an issue experienced by our predecessors in Taiwan, who recommended future researchers work to increase the responses (Boafo, et al, 2023). In order to improve engagement in our survey, we simplified our questions and used a combination of multiple choice and agree/disagree answers to make the survey easy to fill out. The tradeoff is that answers may not be as thorough, and we may not get the same depth as 1-on-1 interviews when we have the ability to ask follow-up questions specific to the individual being interviewed.

We created a 10-minute survey to understand backpackers' motives and how it has affected their purpose. We did our best to cut down on the duration of the survey to ensure the people taking the survey did not quit halfway through, but we also offered a few free response questions for people willing to put in more time and give us a more thorough understanding of their experience. First, we ask demographic questions regarding age range and country of origin. Next, we determine how fulfilled the individual is in their life. Finally, we ask questions regarding their experience backpacking and its effect on fulfillment in each area of life. The survey was created online using Google Forms and was distributed at hostels in both urban and rural areas using a QR code. We do not believe this will introduce a significant bias since during and after the Covid pandemic, many Panamanian restaurants shifted to using QR codes in place of physical menus. Furthermore, the survey only requires internet use, not any form of international service. We also attempted to address bias due to language by offering the survey in English as well as in

Spanish. We will, however, keep in mind that all these biases could play a role in changing the outcome of the responses. Following the survey questions, we offer the option for individuals to give us confidential contact information which will not be connected with the survey responses. If contact information was supplied, we reached out to the individual to ask more open-ended questions or schedule an interview. See the appendix for survey questions.

3.3.3 Interviews

The team conducted interviews with other travelers to gather first-hand information from backpackers. This method is great for gaining a deeper understanding of an individual's life experience since we can react to the answers and ask follow-up questions that are directly relevant to that person.

Interviews provide a more in-depth look into individuals' experiences that we could not glean with generalized surveys, but they are not without flaws. We were only able to interview travelers in locations that we physically visited, which were generally constrained to popular hostels, inherently introducing a selection bias. Additionally, the language barrier presented a significant obstacle during our interviews. Although we had one member of our group who was conversationally competent in Spanish, we still primarily relied on recording our interviews and translating them to the best of our abilities after the fact so some meaning may have been lost. Additionally, while the information from interviews is more in-depth, it is also more difficult to assess using quantitative strategies.

We located prospective interviewees by traveling to hostels in Panama frequented by backpackers, talking to people we met on the trail, and connecting with people who offered contact information in completed surveys. We attempted to find people from a diverse array of backgrounds, ages, and nationalities to acquire a broader, more representative sample of backpackers,

and minimize the inherent selection bias previously mentioned. During our interviews, consent was first acquired from the interviewee in the form of a signature on a detailed consent form which outlines what we intend to use the data for. The data we sought from these individuals can be broken up into three main sections: whether the demographics of travelers influence their experience, where and when people tend to travel, and what personal, professional, social, or spiritual/religious meaning people have found during the experience. This information was recorded using audio recording devices so that we could be attentive during the interviewing experience and make it feel as casual and friendly as possible.

During the background portion of the interview, we sought to collect information on the life of the interviewee before choosing to begin their trip, including ethnicity, social status, wealth bracket, religion, country of origin, and whether they grew up in an urban or rural environment. We also asked if there was any specific inciting event or experience that inspired the individual to begin backpacking, as well as why they chose to travel in Panama if they were not a native. Finally, during this section the interviewee was asked if they already had a sense of purpose before they began backpacking, and if so where they believed it came from.

During the next section of the interview, we focused on where and when people choose to travel when they backpack. Interviewees were asked about their prior backpacking experience before beginning their current trip, namely where they had backpacked before and how much. If an interviewee was traveling with a group, data was collected on the size of the group and whether that group was assembled before or after the start of the trip. The person was asked whether they tend to travel in more urban or natural environments. To conclude this section of the interview the backpacker was asked whether they intended to backpack again after the conclusion of their current trip.

The most important category of each interview is determining what personal, professional, social, and spiritual/religious experiences people got out of backpacking. To determine this, the outcomes were divided into categories, as shown below.

- The first of these categories is interpersonal connections. This consists of interactions individuals had with other backpackers or locals in the area where they are backpacking. This includes both short-term and long-term relationships.

- The second category covers the outcomes of exercise, which primarily consisted of questions regarding comparisons in both emotions and physical ability before and after their experience with backpacking. For example, asking an individual how their overall happiness and satisfaction with life changed or remained the same after their experiences backpacking.

- The third category of questions is assessing the core concept of our project. Interviewees are asked questions regarding their experience with self-discovery and sense of purpose. Questions in this category could include asking if participants have a sense of purpose in what they do and if this was something that improved with their experiences in backpacking.

- Finally the traveler was asked the most important question of all: Do they believe that backpacking has helped them find purpose in life, or improved how they understand their purpose?

Information from interviewees was recorded using a voice recording app on a phone as well as a speech-to-text app when possible. See the appendix for the verbal consent script and interview question outline.

3.2.4 Ethnographic Research

Both during and following our research, the team experienced backpacking by taking day trips and traveling around to more rural areas of Panama. In doing so, we aimed to better understand and communicate with

the backpackers we interviewed as well as get a better understanding of the concept we were researching. The benefit of this is that we can record direct first-hand experience in an attempt to help answer the research question. The downside of including this method is that our own experiences could introduce bias to our analysis of the surveys and interviews since we may view them through the lens of our experiences. We kept this in mind during the analysis to mitigate this factor.

The team traveled up the Pacific coast of Panama on a backpacking trip, during which we recorded ethnographic information in journals. Along the way, we chose three different places to stay for a few days at a time during which we went on day trips and talked with locals and other backpackers. Following this immersion experience, we returned to our survey and interview questions to record new responses of our own that we could analyze alongside the data we collected. We also reflected on the experiences to determine if we learned anything new about ourselves along the way.

Although going on a backpacking trip of our own was a great way to witness firsthand how backpacking can affect self-discovery and purpose, we understood that we were only doing this for a short period and it would not be possible to get every experience. Many backpackers spend weeks or even months traveling. We simply do not have the time to reach this level of immersion. We also come from a specific background, being college students from the northeast United States with the money and advising to guide us in the right direction. We went into this with an open mind knowing that not everyone has the same experience, and situations occur that we cannot control.

3.4 Data Analysis

Results from surveys were compiled into spreadsheets and analyzed for common answers. Multiple choice and ranked questions were used for

statistical analysis and charts were made with the results. Open-ended answers were analyzed for phrases or concepts that came up frequently across interviews. These answers were also compared against our ethnographic research from our time backpacking. Meaningful results were compiled and reported both to our sponsor and in a published format.

4.0 Findings

Throughout the course of our project, our team has developed an understanding of the relationship between backpacking and discovering purpose. We drew more information from our interviews and personal experience than from our surveys, and from this data, we analyzed the connection or lack thereof between an individual's experience with backpacking or world travel and a perceived sense of purpose in one's life. From the compiled data, we drew our conclusion which was much more complicated than we hypothesized.

Our first discovery was the shocking variety of ways people define purpose. Some believe purpose is to contribute back to the world or society and others take it as simply as having utilization. Purpose is very personal, which explains why every individual may have their own idea of the word. Because it is personal, it can be tailored to one's own ideologies and identity.

Our next big discovery was the various reasons that backpackers started their travel and how they traveled. The inspiration for traveling varies widely across the sample we collected, from wanting to see the world, to wanting to discover more about oneself, to wanting to escape the monotony of modern life. Additionally, the contrast between backpackers' experience traveling solo versus in a group proved to be more dramatic than previously anticipated and reflected in the gains that individuals perceived for each style.

Then, we move on to the impacts of backpacking on different communities. It was shocking to see how many people were affected by backpacking and its influence on tourism and the local economy. In addition, the influence that backpacking had on the individuals. The backpackers we

interviewed revealed how this form of travel altered their lives, and some apply it to a newfound sense of purpose.

Finally, our ethnographies paint a picture of how our backpacking trip affected us individually. Although it only lasted 9 days, we faced numerous problems, tested our mental and physical limits, and shared long-lasting experiences. Each member shared the most impactful part of the trip and how it can be related to finding an individualistic purpose.

4.1 Finding Purpose

To answer whether backpackers find purpose through their travels, we must first define purpose. We asked our interviewees how they would define purpose and were surprised by the diversity in their answers. This contradicts what most researchers argue, which is that purpose has one clear meaning and sticks with people for their whole life. Several variables are attributed to how someone defines a purpose including childhood, quality of life, state of mind, and how they pursue this purpose. Our group reached these conclusions through our interviews, casual conversations with backpackers, and through ethnographic discovery.

4.1.1 Defining Purpose

People define purpose in different and personal ways which leads to living uniquely stylized lives. Defining a broad term such as purpose was found to be difficult and took some brainstorming for most of our interviewees, but we found that they were trying to define their way of life. Their definition sets up goals they wish to accomplish or a daily lifestyle.

Most people develop a definition of purpose by asking themselves what they want to do in their life. Most often, this goal was some form of giving back to the world. In our interview with a rookie backpacker, Shir, she defined purpose as "something that makes you special, whatever value you can add to

the world, people, or the environment." We met Shir on her debut backpacking trip and she is still trying to figure out how to apply her definition of purpose to her life. She enjoys traveling and hopes that she will find something to apply her purpose to while backpacking. In our interview with Freddy, a backpacker and current hostel owner, he had a similar definition for purpose. His current purpose is teaching the local children basketball and believes providing this type of experience to the youth is necessary in his life. On the other hand, he also believes purpose is ever-changing. He told us that although he likes to teach the children, he also likes to cook professionally and travel so his purpose changes depending on what he is currently doing in life. He is currently looking after his friend's hostel so that is a part of his current purpose.

Although personal definitions for purpose can have no limit, there can be one similarity drawn together. An individual's definition of purpose depends solely on what that individual wants it to be. Also, the individual always keeps in mind what their specific purpose is when defining it which adds another level of personalization. This is agreed with in the writing of Damon when he says defining purpose provides a deeper reason for the motives that drive daily behavior.

4.1.2 Following Purpose

We discovered that finding and following a purpose becomes easier after the definition is acquired by the individual. This relationship between defining and following purpose was found in most of our interviews and explains why and how some interviewees use backpacking to follow their purpose.

How can purpose flow alongside the development of life? We interviewed Thomas Spaccarelli, a retired Spanish professor from the University of the South, who guides students along Camino de Santiago, a 215-mile hike across

the country, and defines purpose as leaving in our wake decency, patience, and kindness. One way he exercises this skill is through guiding the younger generation along Camino de Santiago. He tells us that:

> As you hike the route to Santiago, unbelievable things emerge. Sometimes it's anger, sometimes it's tiredness. We hike in a group so sometimes there's people in the group who can't abide and it just seems to me you have to learn to do that … and I hope that's what one learns as one hikes.

Thomas uses the hardships of hiking as a catalyst to share his kindness with the ones struggling. Through this, he hopes that the hikers can feel triumphant after cresting a mountain or overcoming their doubts which he considers an extension to his purposefulness. These triumphant hikers will be affected long-term by Thomas's influence and the euphoric feeling of success after completing this hike. He hopes this influence will help them define their meaning of purpose.

Other individuals do not wish to follow such a clear-cut purpose. Especially in the carefree world of backpacking, purpose is another restriction to freedom similar to a job or paying mortgages on a house. In our interview with veteran backpacker and lifelong Panama resident, Alejandro, he considers purpose to be a "silly idea," he continues to say that "someone that has purpose is to say it was given that purpose by a bigger entity." He prefers to simply live life and do what he feels like doing, in its rawest form. Despite not having a purpose, though, he desires to stay happy and have enough money to support his lifestyle. Alejandro's mindset is a reminder that purpose does not have to be absolute. Happiness can be found through keeping an open mind and doing whatever makes you happy in the moment.

Between these interviews, we see conflicting ideas on following purpose in life. Yet, neither can be argued as correct or incorrect. Both people happily

live the life they pave out for themselves and both use backpacking as a way to achieve this lifestyle.

4.2 Why and How People Backpack

Something we found through our conversations with people was that everyone had a different reason to start backpacking. Some of these reasons were exploring the world, gaining new experiences, or reaching a new sense of freedom. Once the thought was ignited, they found themselves traveling across country borders with a bag on their back and little plans of where they would end up. Additionally, our interviewees shared similar experiences and takeaways from backpacking in a group versus alone. Below, we share their thoughts and our analyses of them.

4.2.1 Why Backpacking?

The people that we interviewed were diverse in their characters, and equally diverse in the reasons that they started backpacking. For some it had to do with gaining new experiences, some wanted to see the world, and some simply wanted to get away from where they were. We found that people do not just set out backpacking because they want to find a purpose in life, even if they do end up getting some direction as a result of their travels. Backpacking offers a freedom that is not found in other forms of travel, and it was interesting to see what aspect of it called to different people and for what reasons.

During one of our earlier interviews, we spoke with Dr. Grant Burrier, our sponsor and an avid backpacker in his own right, who recalled a specific inciting incident that inspired him to begin traveling:

> I remember when I was growing up, my next-door neighbor was kinda a hoarder and at one point she needed us, me and my brother, to, like, help her clean up her garage which was full of all these old National

> Geographics. And I remember looking at Machu Picchu, I remember looking at Angkor Wat, I remember seeing the pyramids in Egypt... It planted a seed and you're like 'I want to go to those places, and I want to meet those people, and I want to see those things' and that did start a lifelong passion that has only gotten stronger as I've grown older.

This mentality of being inspired by media to go out and explore in one's own life was shared by some of the other hikers as well, specifically, one traveler we met in Bocas who stated:

> When you consume, like, a lot of pop culture and see things and movies and TV shows and your, like, this location is really cool I want to go visit it and see it in real life, ya know?

In these situations, the desire of the individual is to experience as much as they can, to see the world, and to live the stories they grew up with. Backpacking acts as a way to realize these dreams.

Some people, like one traveler we spoke with in Boquete, were more interested in getting to know themself than the world around them and found an outlet in the form of backpacking:

> For me, it was after a long period of very intense work in the army, so I did want to, like, open myself to something new and to get to know myself again in a different environment.

Self-discovery as an inspiration for backpacking travel, interestingly, did not come up as often as some other reasons in our research, despite the fact that it was a large part of the takeaway from the experience reported by many of our interviewees. This discrepancy leads us to believe that, although it was rarely a direct goal of the travelers, it is a beneficial side effect of the experience of being introduced to new perspectives, challenges, and cultures.

Finally, for some, it was not about the destination at all but rather the need to escape an unwelcome status quo where they already were:

> I was just working in a call center and I was just working and working and working just to be one more of the system, you know? In [Panama

City], just working, go home, party, work, go home, hang with your friends. There's not much stuff to do. So, after that, I realized that something needed to be changed, something needed to be different.

This quote was particularly interesting to us as it showed the dissatisfaction individuals can feel being locked into the standard lifestyle. Although some people can certainly be content living as our interviewee described, it is far from a universal experience. In their case at least, some remedy for that monotony was found in escaping where they knew and backpacking around Panama.

As for why individuals chose to backpack specifically as opposed to other forms of tourism, the main reason appeared to be the cost and length of the trip. As one of the travelers from Bocas Del Toro told us, "I knew there was stuff out there and [backpacking] was the only way that I could afford to do it". Backpacking is generally a much longer excursion than other forms of travel, often lasting weeks if not months, and the desire to spend longer exploring was reflected in our interviews as well, as one backpacker said, "What determines the length of my trip is how much vacation time I have". These two advantages are connected as well, as in order to afford to spend longer on the trail most travelers must be frugal with their accommodations.

The people we interviewed had an array of different reasons for packing up their lives upon their backs and setting out into the unknown, but one thing that was consistent across their explanations was the lack of the term "purpose". None of the travelers we talked to said that they explicitly set out in search of some greater purpose. Even if they did find some guidance along the way, it was never the inciting force that inspired them to begin their journey.

4.2.2 Types of Backpacking (Alone versus Group)

We discovered that different styles of backpacking, like traveling with a group versus alone, impacted people in different ways. When we interviewed

our sponsor and advisor Dr. Grant Burrier who has backpacked on his own

many times and with friends, he revealed that:

> They're two kinda different trips… I've traveled a lot with Spacc and it's
> through our travels that we've become dear friends… we've had nights
> where we were just chilling on a little riverside town and we have to play
> dominoes to kind of pass the time but we start chatting about whatever…
> so traveling in groups can be very meaningful and very fun and fulfilling.

Dr. Burrier believes that group traveling can be very meaningful because

spending a lot of time together forces people to get to know each other. This

belief is further confirmed through our own ethnography. After spending many

days and nights together, going through many hardships together, and

spending a lot of time talking and exploring, we grew a lot closer, learned a lot

about each other, and developed a bond that will stick with us for a long time.

After that, however, Dr. Burrier continued to say:

> When you travel by yourself, people are more likely to come up and talk
> to you and engage you… And it's kind of funny because you may think
> I've always been social and have a sunny disposition, but I think it's also
> something I learned while I was traveling… I think traveling by myself…
> you learn like oh… this person has something really interesting to share
> but I have to make the first move and I have to say 'hey what's up?'… and
> so both trips have their value, but I think solo backpacking kinda forces
> you to engage locals more and there's more moments of the day when
> it's just quiet and so you also have the opportunity to be more reflective
> and… have your space for your own thoughts.

> Traveling alone brings many personal growth benefits, for Dr. Burrier, it

was learning to be more social and engaging with the local community as well

as having those peaceful moments of self-reflection. For others, like one new

backpacker we met on our own travels, traveling alone has helped with

learning about getting out of their comfort zone and figuring out what they

want to do rather than what others want them to do.

> It's really interesting because it's also like my first time ever traveling
> alone… Because I'm alone right now, I learned to know what I really

want. When I'm with other people... and [they] want something specific I'm like okay I'm willing to not get caught up on something specific. Now that I'm alone, it's more like what do I really want and... what's gonna make me feel the best.

Many other people that we interviewed said very similar things about their experiences backpacking alone and with a group. With a group, it is a lot easier because if you do not know what to do, it is easy to rely on someone else to decide. It is also a great feeling to gain a deeper connection with your traveling partners because of all the experiences that are shared together. On the other hand, being alone allows you to go out of your comfort zone, meet new backpackers, learn about others' experiences, and interact with local communities. Being alone also gives you a lot of time to focus on yourself, reflect on your past experiences, and think about the future. Though these two backpacking styles are both very impactful, we found that almost everyone we talked to agreed that traveling alone is more fulfilling and meaningful.

4.3 Impacts of Backpacking

Damon (2008) wrote that an important part of the discovery of one's purpose is having unique experiences outside of your normal day-to-day life. Backpacking is certainly one way of having new and unique experiences, and it is clear that backpacking had a lasting impact, both on ourselves and the many backpackers we interacted with. By analyzing the experiences of backpackers we were able to determine how backpacking affected different areas of an individual's life. There often was not a direct connection between the backpacking experience and the development of a sense of purpose, but that does not mean it cannot be impactful in this way. Additionally, we discovered many other ways that the experience of backpacking was beneficial to those who experienced it.

4.3.1 Local Communities

The social and economic impact of backpackers on local communities is also an important part of the story of backpacking. Talking with one of our interviewees, Alejandro, was especially insightful on the topic. He is a native Panamanian and also an avid backpacker who, during his travels, became very aware of how large amounts of backpackers frequenting an area can transform it.

In specific Alejandro brought our attention to Bocas Del Toro, one of the most famous and popular backpacking stops in Panama, as well as the finale of our own backpacking experience. He explained that the economy of Bocas Del Toro was once dependent on the growth of Gros Michel bananas, before their extinction due to Panama disease, which forced the islands to adapt:

> [Bocas Del Toro's] economy just got destroyed, and then it got pulled back up by tourism. Which you would say oh that's a great thing, but you go and you see it now and some of these places that used to be really pristine are now full of trash, and full of people trying to sell you things, which is like the reaction to this sort of invasive tourism. You have so many people there and now all of our jobs must shift to catering to these people... it's an overflow of people into a place that really can't handle it.

These perspectives highlight some of both the positive and negative effects of a large backpacker community in an area. Often backpackers are from wealthier countries, and with them comes an influx of money into the local community which can stimulate rapid growth in the economy. Travelers need lodging, food, transportation, and a host of other amenities which they will often be willing to pay more for than locals would. This is a temperamental boon though, as a sudden introduction of foreigners disrupts the identity of the local community and, as people realize that working to accommodate the travelers can pay well, causes a shift towards a tourist-centric economy.

This is all manageable if the town develops infrastructure alongside the growth, but this can be hard to sustain. Alejandro discussed this with us as well, specifically how in Bocas Del Toro, where the well water that the locals use is not recommended to be drunk by foreigners due to amoebas, some foreigners will ignore the warnings and then get sick and need medical assistance:

> This actually suffocates the health system... it's a public health system that [the tourists] go to, and that's a burden on the state, and that's a burden on the local community...Yes, they are bringing money... but they are also contributing to some infrastructure issues.

We got a similar perspective from Dr. Leon Mach, an Associate Professor at The School for Field Studies located in Bocas Del Toro, though he focused more on the environmental damage that backpacking can cause. He stated:

> [Tourism] definitely brings a lot of opportunities to people here locally, and there's also a lot of issues occurring now with really rapid development... There's a lot of conservation and development issues here all the time where it's, like, a beautiful island ecosystem that's drawing a lot of tourism here but then a lot of the tourism interest is inviting a lot of development so we are seeing a lot of forests and land being cleared.

The places that become the most popular backpacking hubs are often the most naturally beautiful, and by being transformed to handle the industry they can lose some of that natural wonder. This can both be in the way of development, as Dr. Mach mentioned, or through littering and trash buildup, as Alejandro said earlier. The rapid development of new resorts, restaurants, and summer homes provides for an even greater number of guests and outpaces the development of local infrastructure, leading to the overtaxed system that Alejandro described.

Our group also saw firsthand in Pedasí the effect of backpackers transforming a town's economy, then abandoning the location as it falls out of

fashion. We visited Pedasí during whale season, which should have been one of the most popular times for tourists to explore the little oceanside village, but soon after arriving, we noticed how empty the town felt. When we went looking for a place to eat the day after we arrived we were shocked to discover that most of the places we found on Google Maps simply did not exist anymore, and the places that were open closed early in the night, leaving the town square in the evening feeling almost abandoned. The same abandoned feeling was present for the gorgeous beaches within walking distance of the town that we visited as well as most of the hostels in town, each only having a few visitors if any at all. When we asked the caretaker at the hostel we were staying at, Las Poroccas, why this was, he explained that the town had come to rely heavily on tourism in recent years, and then COVID-19 had hit the town hard. Many of the local restaurants and attractions had not been able to sustain themselves through the sudden drop in outside visitors and had closed. He mentioned that the vast majority of foreigners who remained were older folk who bought houses there before the crash. Though the town was certainly having hard times, the caretaker remained hopeful for its future, stating that he expected it to bounce back before the end of the decade.

Backpacking in an area unavoidably brings change, some positive and some negative. Trends in travelers have the power to lift a struggling community into being one of the most famous locations in the entire county, but also to cast a town's economy into a steep decline. It is all too easy to get caught up in the story of the backpackers themselves and forget about the influence they have on the places they visit, but we learned that their stories are deeply intertwined.

Figure 3

The eerily empty streets of Pedasí at night

4.3.2 Mental Health

Although it was not talked about as much as other benefits of backpacking, mental health was something that nearly every backpacker we interviewed agreed backpacking had a lasting positive impact on. Through their experiences, almost every backpacker gains some skills, whether it be mental or physical. We learned that developing these skills helps with overall self-esteem. A backpacker we interviewed while we were in Bocas Del Toro, Elizabeth, talked about how her new independence helped her:

> I definitely feel way more confident. Especially in myself, I'm like, okay, I got myself into whatever, I can figure it out... I think that's a huge thing that plays into it. You have to figure it out for yourself... You're just like, okay, I know what steps I need to take to get me wherever I need to get. Yeah, that definitely played a part in a better self-esteem, yeah.

Because of that sense of being able to do something herself, Elizabeth had that accomplishing and fulfilling feeling that boosted her self-esteem and overall

well-being. Many other people we talked to also felt that their mental health improved from these types of experiences. A backpacker we talked to in Boquete mentioned being able to do things on her own: "You feel good about yourself, like that you, you did it."

Although backpacking has all these positive effects on mental health, there are also some moments throughout the process that are not as positive. The same girl we talked to in Boquete also talked about how some days, backpacking alone causes you to go through different emotions all at once:

> My friend told me that I'm gonna feel all the emotions that are possible in one day. And that is absolutely right. I can be really happy and really sad at the same day, with a few hours between.

There are many hardships that come with backpacking, including being away from family, figuring out what to do in tough situations, and many others. These can be very discouraging and have a negative impact on mental health. This was not only reflected in our interviews but also in our own ethnography. We all had challenging moments on our backpacking trip, one example being when one of us got really ill on an island in the middle of the night and there was not a lot that could be done due to our isolation from medical services.

However, in this situation and in all the other situations we heard about, the challenge was overcome. The feeling that results from that is a sense of accomplishment and higher confidence in one's abilities, overall improving mental health and self-esteem.

4.3.3 General Self-Efficacy

Many backpackers that we spoke with reported improvements in their belief in their general ability to complete tasks, also known as their general self-efficacy. A significant part of this for many individuals was how their experiences impacted their confidence in their ability to be independent:

> I can do whatever I want, so I went to the first island [at Bocas Del Toro], like people recommended. Didn't like it at all…I saw an, an American girl. I saw she was waiting for a shuttle. I asked her like about another island…ten minutes I went to this island, like, and spent there like two more days, so, yeah so that was like a, I think like a changing point.

While it was not necessarily something backpackers intended to get out of their travels, this was a common result and something individuals enjoyed about time spent traveling alone. Some, stumbled upon the benefits of this type of travel since they did not initially intend on traveling alone:

> My cousin got her visas ready. We booked the accommodations and the things we wanted to do, like the attractions. And then when we were on the trip, she just kind of had medical issues with her back and had to pull out. …it was kind of like an accidental first solo trip…and I loved it! …I only spent like five days in London, I think. But yeah, that was the driving force of like, okay, I need to come back here and just do things more extensively.

After this backpacker's accidental first solo trip, she proceeded to travel for almost four months across Europe, and she cited this first experience as showing her she was capable and giving her the motivation to do something similar again. This is further evidence that pushing outside of a person's comfort zone and facing some forms of adversary can have positive impacts on a person's confidence in facing new or difficult situations in the future.

Although backpacking can certainly lead to the development of physical skills, most of the wanderers we spoke to put more value on mental development:

> [Backpacking travel] has had a positive effect on my mental health and on my skills, I think. I think I developed a lot of skills, a lot of flexibility, a lot of mental flexibility, and a lot of resistance to adversity. Flexibility in the face of things going wrong. When things go wrong, I don't freak out.

This feeling of keeping calm in difficult situations was interestingly corroborated by another traveler:

> I think [backpacking] helps you to develop patience, for sure. You know, like, more of a kind of go-with-the-flow mentality, because you're in other places where things don't maybe operate the way you expect them to, so you kind of learn to accept things the way they are a little bit and not thinking everything about how things should be operating all the time.

As backpackers witness their own ability to confront the wide range of challenging scenarios they face on the trail, they in turn stop feeling as stressed about future issues. This kind of all-around self-confidence is something that is all too often hard to develop in a standard academic setting, which teaches you to face a more specific, structured, sort of challenge in the form of tests or projects. By exploring new settings and pushing themselves to face a wide array of issues, backpackers, in turn, develop overall confidence in their ability to conquer the unknown, which in turn makes them feel empowered.

4.3.4 Purpose

Finally, the part that our whole project was about: does backpacking have an impact on finding purpose? What we found was not what we originally expected. Although a few people did find purpose while backpacking, most had different opinions. For those individuals who did claim to find a sense of purpose, it was through something that interested them on their travels, through talking to people, or even just backpacking itself becoming part of their purpose. Others said that even if they did not find a purpose while backpacking, it gave them a lot of time to reflect on themselves and push them toward something bigger. Others were still trying to discover their purpose and did not actively seek it out while enjoying the experiences of backpacking.

For someone like Dr. Thomas Spaccarelli, a retired teacher we spoke to, he already knew what his purpose was before he began backpacking, but when he started traveling it became part of his purpose as well. He stated, "Well, I

think I knew from the earliest days that I wanted to be a teacher". He talked about his purpose being teaching Spanish, "welcoming young people into the kinds of joys [he] got from intellectual life", and being able to see his students grow. After hiking the Camino de Santiago trail, he saw how impactful and valuable this experience was, and he ended up creating a program that takes students on this trail. This way, he was able to continue teaching, while also doing another thing he discovered he loved: traveling.

Similarly, a professor and researcher living in Bocas Del Toro, Leon, already knew that he wanted to be a professor, but because of his backpacking experiences, he found another passion and purpose that he would not have discovered without it.

> I mean, that's probably why I ended up being a researcher, because through traveling and going and returning to places that you like and you see them changing really quickly... [you] start asking yourself questions like, "Are locals happy with the change that's happening?" and "Is this a good thing? Is it sustainable?" I mean, so for me it kind of, like, segwayed into my career by, like, developing questions while traveling.

Thanks to backpacking, Leon discovered a passion for research, which turned into his career. This is an example of someone finding a purpose through backpacking.

Others, however, were not as directly impacted as Leon was but still had a push in the right direction thanks to backpacking. A few people talked about having a lot of time for self-reflection on their travels. One example is Freddy, a backpacker who was serving as the caretaker at the hostel we visited in Pedasí. He explained to us:

> Yeah, because of the way you are by yourself, you got time to think of everything. Nobody's there... You just... thinking about everything that you can do, the time that you have, the time that you have waste[d]. You know, you think a lot of little stuff that definitely will make you grow a

> little bit inside... It will make you think... way clearer when you're
> outside... your comfort zone.

Before moving to Pedasí, Freddy was discontent while living in a city. Eventually, deciding he needed to make a change, he moved to Bocas Del Toro and then started backpacking, which brought him greater satisfaction, as well as a sense of control over his life. Freddy felt like being alone on his backpacking trips had helped him grow because of all the time he had to just be in his thoughts. He also talked about a goal he developed on his travels that he likely would not have discovered if not for backpacking, stating:

> ...If I find a place to stay that I can have my own hostel with a little cafe
> and big tables so everybody can gather and eat, that would be a nice
> purpose.

Having his own hostel would combine his love for cooking, his love for a peaceful area outside of a city, and his love for backpacking all together to form one purpose. This realization of what he wanted and what he liked would not have happened if he had not left the comfort of what he was used to and started exploring outside of the city by backpacking.

Although he does not believe in one, life spanning, purpose, Alejandro, another backpacker and teacher we met, felt that his purpose was many little goals like "get this kid to believe in themselves... make this kid feel comfortable... help somebody through the day." On his personal connection of backpacking and purpose, he said:

> ...I think backpacking does bring me a sense of fulfillment. I wouldn't say
> purpose, but I would say fulfillment. I would say it makes me feel like I
> am living a good life... I don't think I would be the same person if I had
> not backpacked. Absolutely not. I think it's taught me a lot. I think it is a
> big part of who I am.

We have found that like Alejandro, many backpackers discovered that backpacking itself has become a big part of their identity, if not their direct purpose.

On the other hand, some people were still finding their purpose. For novice backpacker, Shir, who we spoke to just a week into her debut trip, the objective of backpacking was to gather inspiration by seeing the world and talking to strangers.

> I wanna, like one of the goals also is like to see the world and I think you get inspired from it also... I don't know if it's like a goal to find a purpose... I'm not sure exactly what I wanna do, like as a job now that I'm like opening a new chapter... I think that the realization will come, maybe. I'm not looking at it as a goal for the travel, but I do think it's going to affect what I will want because I will meet people and I always ask them questions about what they're doing because it's very inspiring.

Shir did not see finding a purpose as a big goal of her backpacking trip, but she predicted that she would talk to people and learn things that could help steer her toward what she wants to do for the rest of her life. Another backpacker whom we met in Bocas, Elizabeth was also looking for a change in her life, specifically her career, so she was taking the time to discover herself more by backpacking.

Just like everyone has different reasons for starting to backpack, everyone's experiences and outcomes from backpacking are different. One thing that was consistent across everyone we interviewed was that backpacking proved to positively impact their life. Some people did find a sense of purpose thanks to the experience. Others did not but still reported improvements in mental health and general self-efficacy because backpacking gave them time to focus on themselves and the opportunity to develop both physical and mental fortitude. While backpacking can help certain people develop a sense of purpose in their lives, it did not have a direct effect on all of the people we interviewed, although it is still a worthwhile endeavor because of its many other benefits and impacts on people that make taking a step into the unknown worth it.

4.4 Ethnographies

Our team went on a nine-day backpacking trip to different parts of Panama to see firsthand how backpacking might affect purpose and fulfillment. To save money and immerse ourselves in backpacking customs we stayed in hostels and took buses from place to place. From day one, however, the trip started with a challenge. One of our groupmates, Katie, got sick with a fever, so the trip started a day late and then the next day, started without her. Throughout the trip, almost every person on the team fell ill at different points and could not participate in an activity that other teammates went on, so they were not able to get the full experience. Nevertheless, we each still had our own unique experiences despite these challenges that would stick with us forever.

The first two days Lucas, Marina, and Bryce spent in Pedasí, a beachy area known for its tourism and tight-knit community. We spent the two days biking to the beach and exploring the town. After that, our group all reunited in Boquete for three and a half days, where we went on two hikes (The Lost Waterfalls/Las Tres Cascadas and Volcán Barú), explored the town, and met many other backpackers and locals. The final three days were spent in Bocas del Toro on an island called Isla Solarte. We spent a lot of time simply relaxing and socializing on the island, but we also spent some time on some nearby beaches and restaurants on the main island, Isla Colón.

Throughout this journey, we all kept journals to document our experiences and help us remember these important moments. We learned a lot about ourselves and pushed ourselves to do things we never thought we would. In the following subsections, we will each dive deeper into some of our individual experiences and how they impacted us.

4.4.1 Marina

Our team's backpacking trip turned out to be an extremely trying experience for me, but not in the way I expected. I was going into this project with this section of the trip being the part I was looking forward to most. As much as I enjoyed Panama City, I prefer areas that are a bit more rural akin to the destinations of our trip. Leading up to the backpacking trip, I was excited, but I was starting to feel burnt out on our project work. The survey was not getting the responses we had hoped for despite the work we put into it, and while we had started conducting interviews, it was still difficult to find people to interview. I took on the responsibility of organizing most of our transportation plans, and thankfully, they largely went to plan. Even so, we had to play certain parts by ear since much of the Panamanian bus system, while extremely reliable, is not well documented. Once in the first destination, Pedasí, I immediately felt more relaxed. I was struck by how community-driven the town was. Everyone knew each other and would go as far as to honk to say hi when driving by someone they knew. The time we spent at the beach stuck with me the most. The beach, especially at night, struck me with a feeling of serenity that quieted my mind and put me at peace. We spent at least thirty minutes just looking out at the calm water feeling the soft waves on our feet.

At the next destination in Boquete, I knew I wanted to do two things: hike and taste coffee. The temperature here was the most comfortable I had experienced in all of Panama, and I feel I could spend as long as a month there without getting tired of it. The experience of tasting the coffee in Boquete reminded me of the importance of having new experiences. I had never had coffee with such a floral flavor. It struck me as very unique and I feel lucky to have gotten to try it while I was there and even bring some coffee beans back with me. On a whim, we followed a recommendation from a taxi driver to try

out a hike called Las Tres Cascadas. I was raised as an "outdoorsy" kid since I grew up in New Hampshire with parents who enjoy hiking, but I always had a fear of heights growing up that prevented me from experiencing many of the more difficult hikes in the state. I thoroughly enjoyed pushing myself to complete this difficult hike as it was not like anything I had experienced in my life. An example of a particularly difficult section that required rappelling down a slippery rock face when returning can be seen in *Figure 4*.

Reaching the final of the three waterfalls and swimming in the pool that it fills gave me a sense of fulfillment and a rewarding feeling, and the view over the top of the rainforest felt so surreal and looked so gorgeous. After returning, I told some of my friends that this hike made the entire Panama trip worth it, and it is a good thing I felt that way because this was the point at which the tides changed.

Figure 4

Marina climbing down Las Tres Cascadas

That evening I started to not feel so well, and what started as a little nausea wound up turning into a case of strep throat that would plague me for the remainder of our backpacking trip. As my team geared up for the incredibly difficult Volcán Barú hike, I talked myself out of what I knew would be a

serious mistake. The 6-hour-long hike is difficult and taxing enough as it is without also dealing with an illness. In some ways, I am thankful for this part of the experience, since it pushed me out of my comfort zone. I had an extra day of time with which I was thinking of exploring the town of Boquete solo, but instead, I was invited to go to a coffee farm by a group of various backpackers staying in the same room at the hostel that I met the previous day during dinner. It was fun chatting with strangers over a delicious cup of coffee looking out over an incredible view seen in *Figure 5*. This part of the experience reminded me how much I love meeting and talking to people.

Figure 5

Overlooking the mountains from Bambuda Castle in Boquete, Panama

I wish I had more to say about my time in Bocas Del Toro, but I spent most of my time here just relaxing at the beachside trying to avoid sunburn while recovering from my illness. While here I was definitely reminded of the importance of relaxing. I like to always keep going and doing things, so I had to remind myself that relaxing while we were here and maybe not doing as much as everyone else was okay.

So the big question: did I find purpose through my backpacking trip? I would say no, but it did remind me of many things that are important to me, which will inspire me to think more critically about how I want to spend the rest of my life after graduation. I think I will be going on another backpacking trip in the future. I would like to do one on a larger scale and a little more improvised since the tight schedule was a little stressful for me. I know that regardless of where my life leads me, I want to make sure I keep giving myself the opportunity to have new experiences and push myself but still leave a little time to relax. I think if I keep these lessons in mind, I will find a lot of fulfillment in whatever I decide to do.

4.4.2 Bryce

The experience of our backpacking trip has far and wide been the highlight of my time in Panama. Though the trip was wrought with issues, from Katie and Marina's sicknesses to my own struggles with motivation and mental health, we persevered as a team and as individuals and created a truly unforgettable experience. I found the most comfort during the trip when out in nature. Whether it was exploring the moonlit beaches of Pedasí, slogging through the rainforest to The Lost Waterfalls in Boquete, snorkeling in the coral reefs surrounding Hospital Point in Bocas Del Toro, or surmounting the majestic heights of Volcán Barú, I felt a deep connection with the land around me and even, through that, a deeper connection with myself. I have always loved hiking. My family got me into it at a very young age and I have continued the hobby into my adulthood. Something about setting out under the sky on my own two legs and walking until all signs of human life have faded away makes me feel better. Perhaps it is the introspective nature of being alone with the churning of my feet or the challenge of pushing my body to its physical limits to do things I thought impossible but in many ways I think of hiking as

my therapy. I am not surprised, then, that my experience on Volcán Barú was the peak of my trip.

We set out at midnight from the base, and initially, the full moon hanging above was enough to light my path. I walked without my headlamp for the first hour or so, relying only on the illumination from above and the wane light of Katie's headlamp beside me and it was one of the most magical hiking experiences I have ever had the pleasure of experiencing. Katie and I hiked it together and I feel that the shared struggle certainly formed a deeper connection between us. I knew from the minute that we decided to book a hostel in Boquete that I wanted to hike the mountain, whether my peers joined me or not. I do wonder what the experience would have been like had I climbed the mountain alone. Would I have had deeper conversations with myself, had I not had Katie to converse with? Would I have found another group to travel with and forged different connections?

Figure 6

Boquete at night, as seen from Volcán Barú
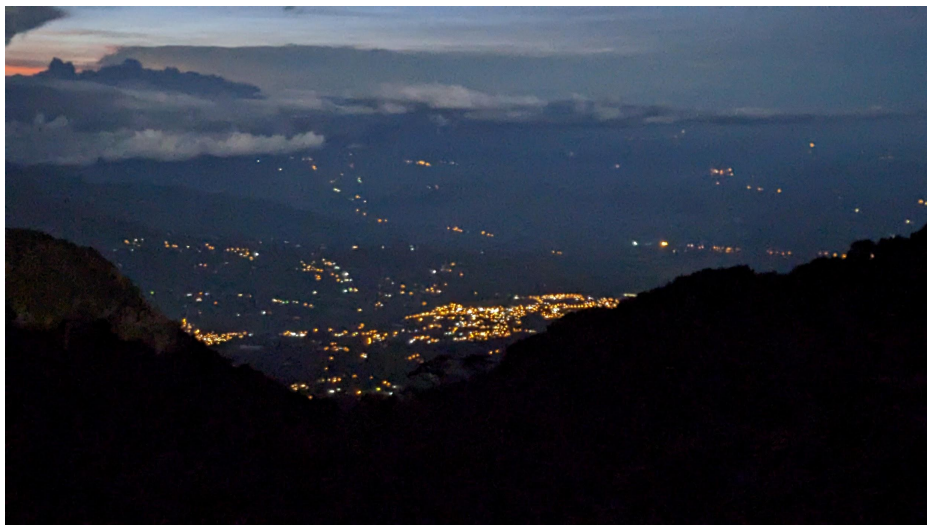
Though Volcán Barú was brutal in its physical challenge, in many ways it was also the easiest part of the trip for me. I know mountains, and I already felt

comfortable among them. People are a very different story. Through this trip, I feel that I have pushed myself to connect with strangers at the hostels and on the buses in a way that would have once terrified me. There is one particular instance that stood out to me, just after Marina, Luke, and I returned from The Lost Waterfalls hike in Boquete. Luke and I went down to the hot tub in the hostel (Bambuda Castle is amazing, highly recommended to anyone reading this) to relax our muscles a bit from the hike, but there was already one of the other patrons enjoying the waters. I felt a spike of anxiety, and a younger version of me would have simply turned away and headed back upstairs at the sight, but after hanging around the hostels witnessing the friendly comradery that everyone seemed to share there I continued on, and in the end was glad I did. We had a lovely conversation with the man, who was all too happy to have some company and share his story. It was so much easier than I expected.

That was a trend I saw again and again on the trip, that the things I worried the most about were rarely actual issues, just fabrications of my mind. In realizing this I felt more confident in talking to others and in my own skills as a whole. I have gone from starting this trip worried about every little thing to wanting to go on a solo backpacking trip in the future. I want to continue making connections with other travelers and explore the concept of making decisions for myself while on the go, something I have often struggled with.

Do I think that I have suddenly found a purpose to dedicate my life to? No, not really. After all our interviews with people wise in their own ways, I am not even so sure what purpose is anymore. I am going to continue making my robots and studying as hard as I can, but I absolutely feel more confident in myself, more connected with the world, and more willing to try new things. There are so many experiences out there that I could never hope to fit them all into one lifetime, but this trip has inspired me to try.

4.4.3 Katie

This trip was extremely eventful for me; it started with me having a fever and ended with me having a fever, not to mention all the illnesses in between, one of which almost sent me to the ER. Through all of this though, I still had some really great experiences and some great challenges. One of the biggest challenges was the Volcan Baru hike because of its intense 16-hour trek, but I will not be going into a lot of detail about that experience because the most memorable experience I had was actually a quite simple one.

It was our second night at Bambuda Castle in Boquete and the four of us and another backpacker we met were just sitting on the balcony trying to figure out how to play Phase 10. The night was so peaceful with birds singing in the background, a breeze in the air, and the temperature just right at around 72°F. After spending many weeks in the humid and hot temperatures of around 86-92°F in Panama City, sitting out on the balcony in this temperature felt like a breath of fresh air. When we finally figured out how to play Phase 10, we just spent the rest of the night playing and talking about anything and everything. I feel like this experience really made us all closer because, for that one night, we were kind of like a family, sitting at the dinner table, relaxing, and playing cards. For a few hours, we got to not think about the project or any of our life problems, and just live in the moment enjoying the peaceful night.

Figure 7

Bambuda Castle at night

That other backpacker I mentioned that was playing cards with us, we had actually met just the day before when she was trying to find someone to go on the Volcan Baru hike with her. The next night, she saw us again on the balcony and recognized us from the night before, so she walked over and started talking to us. We only talked to her for a few minutes before we asked her to join us in our card game. Talking to her that night felt so natural and familiar even though we just met.

This interaction with a complete stranger who very quickly became a friend made me fall in love with the backpacking community. Throughout our trip, we met many other backpackers in the hostels we stayed at, and every time it was so easy to just start talking to them and sharing our stories with each other as if we had been friends forever. Everyone in the backpacker community, from what I have seen so far, is so accepting and kind. Being a part of that for the little amount of time that I got to be a part of it felt magical. It felt so nice to be a part of something so much bigger than myself and be able to connect to others I never would have if not for this experience. Listening to

their stories also allowed me to reflect on certain things in my own life, which I found that many people we interviewed also said happened to them.

Going through this backpacking experience, even for a short time, was so meaningful to me. It gave me time and space away from real life and responsibilities, and it gave me space to connect with others and learn new things about myself and about these communities we were in. It also gave me time to reflect on my own life without any stressors in the way. Would I say I found my purpose? No, but it definitely gave me some things to think about that could push me in the right direction, and it gave me an experience that would stick with me forever. After this trip, I know I would definitely want to do something like this again in the future.

4.4.4 Lucas

Although the trip only lasted 9 days across 3 locations, I made the most out of it. I met really interesting strangers at every hostel and even befriended a couple. I spent most of my days socializing or enjoying the beautiful nature and culture. I experienced hardships, ran into problems, and dealt with pain. Despite the bad experiences, they were all outweighed by the good ones.

The most memorable activity was hiking Volcán Baru in Boquete, which is the highest point in Panama. I spent the steep, 12-hour round-trip trek alongside two backpackers whom I had met minutes before. Through this extremely physically and mentally demanding task we bonded, and by the time we reached the top, we were best friends. As a novice hiker, I did not pack enough snacks or enough water. Luckily, the other two were kind enough to share their portions without hesitation. At the peak, we celebrated, hugged, and were rewarded with the most beautiful view I have ever seen in my life. This is not to undermine how exhausted we were, having hiked from 12:00 AM to 5:30 AM.

The way down added to the leg pain and mental exhaustion, but we had cheerful conversations now that we could enjoy the fruits of our labor. Those being the warmth of the sun and light to view the nature that enveloped us. At the bottom, I felt triumphant and ready to enjoy the best sleep of my life since it was now the morning of the next day and I had not slept in over 24 hours. This had to wait though, because we were now stuck at the base of the hiking trail with no transportation back to the hostel. After many phone calls and a lot of Spanish speaking, I managed to get the three of us a taxi all while the other two were sleeping on the side of the road.

I learned a lot about myself from this one experience. The nature and people I was surrounded by influenced me in a way that opened up my eyes to the world around me. I learned that being put in difficult situations forces strangers to bond and through this bonding can create long-term friends. Despite the fatigue and pain I was feeling on the hike, I could not stop thinking about how thankful I was to have these people next to me and how thankful I was for their unconditional kindness. I also gained a new outlook on solving problems. The three of us were stuck at the bottom of the mountain and I, being the only one awake, had to do something to get us out of there. I stayed calm and collected, not just for my mental well-being but to assure the other two that I could help them just as they had helped me. The relief I felt for paying back their help to me trumped my relief of getting myself out of that stuck situation.

Now, I want to travel more, meet new people, and affect them the same way my new friends affected me. If someone were to ask me if backpacking helped me discover my purpose, I would say yes. As we mentioned, purpose is very personal and through this trip, I found something that influenced me personally.

Figure 8

Lucas (middle) and two new friends after hiking to the top of Volcán Baru

5.0 Future Recommendations and Conclusion

5.1 Recommendations

5.1.1 Recommendations for Future Projects

Our recommendations for future projects largely revolve around strengthening all versions of our methods to obtain data. This could be done by improving outreach and sample size of the survey to provide a proper consensus of the backpacker community in Panama. We only targeted urban hostels to post our surveys and this could be extended to hostels in other regions to remove further bias. This reasoning can also be applied to increasing the quantity of interviews. Our interviewee sample size was diverse which led to conflicting ideas so a larger group could influence the average consensus. Furthermore, conducting an ethnography over a longer period and separating to experience solo backpacking could improve the overall introspective discovery from this section. Most backpackers that we talked to agreed that backpacking solo has major benefits compared to in a group.

We also recommend conducting similar research in other parts of the world. Backpacking is a global phenomenon and of the 8 people we interviewed, only 2 were lifelong Panamanian citizens. It would be interesting to see how backpacking varies in other parts of the world and if those communities view their sense of purpose similarly.

Finally, we believe that further research on the communities affected by backpacking would be worth studying. Our project did not focus on these

groups but it could be worth delving deeper into the people that affect backpackers.

5.1.2 Recommendations for Future Backpackers

After our own experiences on the trail, as well as speaking with more experienced backpackers, we have developed some recommendations for anyone who wishes to follow the same path. First of all, do we recommend backpacking? Absolutely, but it is not necessarily for everyone. Although the experience can be deeply informative, both about the world around you and yourself, it does require a certain amount of competence and planning to be done safely. Listen to recommendations from locals and more experienced backpackers, both online and in person, and make sure to research the area you are visiting before setting out.

One of our main recommendations is to backpack alone. Something we heard consistently from the backpackers we spoke to was that backpacking alone is a very different experience from traveling with a group. It can be much more challenging and stressful, but having no one to rely on but yourself helps to develop skills such as decision-making and independence. Those who backpacked alone reported that they made greater connections with other people they met on the trail and locals, as well as having greater introspective discussions with themselves. Traveling alone can make the experience more meaningful and increase other forms of growth.

Do not shy away from hardship while backpacking. Our research found that facing obstacles and then overcoming them leads to the greatest personal growth. Completing challenging tasks helps to build feelings of general self-efficacy and self-esteem which can beneficially permeate into all aspects of one's life. By facing adversity while backpacking the trip will become much more meaningful.

5.2 Conclusion

In our research in Panama, we attempted to understand the relationship between backpacking and finding purpose. Through archival research, interviewing members of the backpacking community, and conducting ethnographies we found an intricate connection between the two. We also created and dispersed a survey but were unsuccessful in obtaining a sample size large enough to represent relevant data. However, the few respondents we received back up our findings. We discovered the various unique ways that individuals define and apply purpose to their lives. In addition, backpacking improves mental and physical health, heavily impacts local communities, and contains introspective properties that provide a vehicle for people to discover more about themselves. Despite this, backpacking does not always directly influence one's ability to find purpose. Some of our interviewees have had a direct relationship between backpacking and discovering their purpose, though this was not true of the majority. An overarching opinion is that backpacking is an eye-opening and in some cases, a life-changing experience that can lead to self-discovery and personal benefits. We and our interviewees recommend that everyone try backpacking in their life.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Our interviews will loosely follow a script of questions. Although, specifically-tailored follow-up questions will be asked to our interviewees based on their responses.

Demographic
What is your name/pseudonym?
What is your age?
 Between 18 and 29?
  30 and 39?
  40 and 49?
  50 or above?
Where are you from?
Where do you live now?
Did you grow up in an urban, suburban, or rural environment?
How many backpacking trips have you done?

Questions (indented questions are potential follow-ups)
What do you do as a career?
 Response
 Why did you choose it? Do you enjoy it?

Do you have any hobbies that you are passionate about?
 Response
 How did you arrive at those? How do these hobbies influence who you are? How do they give you meaning in life?

Why do you backpack? What do you hope to learn from traveling?
 Response

Describe a typical backpacking trip. What types of places do you go to? For how long? Where do you stay? Do you typically travel alone or with a group?
 Response

How do you feel after backpacking? Do you experience any changes or takeaways?
>   *Response*

Have you met anyone while backpacking that you felt had an impact on you?

Have you met anyone while backpacking that you felt you had an impact on?

Do you feel you will continue backpacking after this trip? Why?

What is your definition of the word purpose?
>   *Response*
>   We define purpose as...

Do you feel as though you have a purpose for yourself? What do you find fulfilling? What is important in your life?
>   *Response*

Before you began backpacking, did you have a clear purpose in life?
>   *Response*

After your experiences backpacking, do you think you have a greater connection with the global community?
>   *Response*
>   What about a greater connection with the local community?

Has backpacking helped improve your mental health or self-confidence?

Are you actively searching for a purpose while backpacking? When you backpack, do you reflect on your experience?
>   *Response*

Do you believe that backpacking has helped you find purpose in life?
>   *Response*

Appendix B: Survey Questions (English)

Link to survey: https://forms.gle/vbDnPn8qaZ2yQFVW7

- How old are you?
  - 18 to 25
  - 26 to 35
  - 36 to 45
  - 46 to 55
  - 56 to 65
  - 66 to 75
  - Older than 75
  - Prefer not to answer
- What is your home country?
  - Short answer open response
- Please answer how fulfilled you felt before beginning to backpack on a scale of 1 to 5 for each category below, 5 being extremely fulfilled and 1 being extremely unfulfilled.
  - Personally?   1   2   3   4   5
  - Emotionally/Mentally?   1   2   3   4   5
  - Socially?   1   2   3   4   5
  - Professionally?   1   2   3   4   5
  - Spiritually/Religiously?   1   2   3   4   5
- Elaborate on why you felt this way.
  - Long answer open response
- What was your experience with long backpacking trips before your current trip
  - None
  - One other trip
  - 2 to 5 other trips
  - More than 5 other trips
- What, if anything, inspired you to begin backpacking?
  - Long answer open response
- How long do you generally stay in each location you visit during your backpacking trips?
  - Less than one day
  - Between one day to a week
  - Between a week to a month

- ○ Between a month to 3 months
- ○ More than 3 months
- Please answer how fulfilled you feel after your backpacking experiences on a scale of 1 to 5 for each category below, 5 being extremely fulfilled and 1 being extremely unfulfilled.
    - ○ Personally?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ○ Emotionally/Mentally?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ○ Socially?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ○ Professionally?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ○ Spiritually/Religiously?   1   2   3   4   5
- If there were any changes in your levels of fulfillment, what do you think caused them? Was it a specific experience or a gradual shift?
    - ○ Long answer open response
- As part of your study, we are also conducting in-person, one-on-one, interviews to go more in-depth with individuals. These normally take a minimum of 30 minutes to complete and we will gladly travel to you. If you would be willing to be interviewed please leave your contact information, in the form of an email or phone number, below. We would love to hear your story!
    - ○ Short answer open response

Appendix C: Survey Questions (Spanish)

Link to survey: https://forms.gle/9zKCTQXP2CEbn7Mi9

- ¿Cuántos años tienes?
    - ○ 18 a 25
    - ○ 26 a 35
    - ○ 36 a 45
    - ○ 46 a 55
    - ○ 56 a 65
    - ○ 66 a 75
    - ○ Más de 75
    - ○ Prefer not to answer
- ¿Cuál es tu país de origen?
    - ○ Short answer open response

- Responda qué tan satisfecho se sentía antes de comenzar a viajar con la mochila en una escala del 1 al 5 para cada categoría a continuación, siendo 5 extremadamente satisfecho y 1 extremadamente insatisfecho.
    - ¿Personalmente?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ¿Emocionalmente/Mentalmente?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ¿Socialmente?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ¿Profesionalmente?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ¿Espiritualmente/Religiosamente? 1   2   3   4   5
- Explica por qué te sentiste así.
    - Long answer open response
- ¿Cuál fue tu experiencia con los viajes de mochileando antes de tu viaje actual?
    - Ninguno
    - Un otro viaje
    - 2 a 5 otros viajes
    - Más de 5 otros viajes
- ¿Qué te inspiró, si es que hubo algo, a empezar a viajar con mochila?
    - Long answer open response
- ¿Cuánto tiempo sueles permanecer en cada lugar que visitas durante tus viajes de mochilero?
    - Menos de un día
    - Entre un día y una semana
    - Entre una semana y un mes
    - Entre un mes y tres meses
    - Más de tres meses
- Responda qué tan satisfecho se siente después de sus experiencias de mochilero en una escala del 1 al 5 para cada categoría a continuación, siendo 5 extremadamente satisfecho y 1 extremadamente insatisfecho.
    - ¿Personalmente?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ¿Emocionalmente/Mentalmente?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ¿Socialmente?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ¿Profesionalmente?   1   2   3   4   5
    - ¿Espiritualmente/Religiosamente? 1   2   3   4   5
- Si hubo algún cambio en sus niveles de satisfacción, ¿qué cree que lo causó? ¿Fue una experiencia específica o un cambio gradual?
    - Long answer open response

- Como parte de su estudio, también estamos realizando entrevistas en persona, uno a uno, para profundizar más con las personas. Normalmente tardan un mínimo de 30 minutos en completarse y estaremos encantados de viajar hasta usted. Si estaría dispuesto a ser entrevistado, deje su información de contacto, en forma de correo electrónico o número de teléfono, a continuación. ¡Nos encantaría escuchar tu historia!
  - Short answer open response

Appendix D: Interview Consent Script

As a group of students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) in Massachusetts, United States, we would like to invite you to participate in an interview for our research to learn more about the relationship between backpacking and finding purpose/meaning in life. The kind of information that we aim to get from the interview are explanations of the impact backpacking has on people's lives. We anticipate that the interview should take about 30 minutes.

This is a collaborative project between us and our sponsor Dr. Grant Burrier of WPI, and your participation is greatly appreciated. Information from our project will be published in a publicly available academic document at the end of our term and we can share a copy of our results if you are interested. No names or identifying information will appear in any of the project reports or publications unless you give us consent to do so.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. This also means that you can skip any questions that you want. Do you have any questions for us about this interview?

For more information about this research and the rights of research participants, you may contact us by email at gr-backpackers@wpi.edu or the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Manager (Ruth McKeogh, Tel.

508-831-6699, Email: irb@wpi.edu) or Human Protection Administrator (Gabriel Johnson, Tel. 508-831-4989, Email: gjohnson@wpi.edu). Thank you very much!

Appendix E: Survey Consent Script (English)

As a group of students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) in Massachusetts, United States, we would like to invite you to participate in a survey for our research to learn more about the relationship between backpacking and finding purpose/meaning in life. The kind of information that we aim to get from the survey are explanations of the impact backpacking has on people's lives. We are only looking for responses from people over 18. We anticipate that the survey should take about 10 minutes.

This is a collaborative project between us and our sponsor Dr. Grant Burrier of WPI, and your participation is greatly appreciated. Information from our project will be published in a publicly available academic document at the end of our term and we can share a copy of our results if you are interested. No names or identifying information will appear in any of the project reports or publications unless you give us consent to do so.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. This also means that you can skip any questions that you want.

For more information about this research and the rights of research participants, you may contact us by email at gr-backpackers@wpi.edu or the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Manager (Ruth McKeogh, Tel. 508-831-6699, Email: irb@wpi.edu) or Human Protection Administrator (Gabriel Johnson, Tel. 508-831-4989, Email: gjohnson@wpi.edu). Thank you very much!

Appendix F: Survey Consent Script (Spanish)

Como grupo de estudiantes del Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) en Massachusetts, Estados Unidos, nos gustaría invitarlos a participar en una encuesta para nuestra investigación para aprender más sobre la relación entre viajar con mochila y encontrar un propósito/sentido en la vida. El tipo de información que pretendemos obtener de la encuesta son explicaciones sobre el impacto que tiene el viaje con mochila en la vida de las personas. Anticipamos que la encuesta debería durar entre 5 y 10 minutos. Al final, tendrá la opción de unirse a un sorteo de $50 que se manejará por separado de sus otras respuestas.

Este es un proyecto colaborativo entre nosotros y nuestro patrocinador, el Dr. Grant Burrier de WPI, y agradecemos mucho su participación. La información de nuestro proyecto se publicará en un documento académico disponible públicamente al final de nuestro período y podemos compartir una copia de nuestros resultados si está interesado. No aparecerán nombres ni información de identificación en ninguno de los informes o publicaciones del proyecto a menos que usted nos dé su consentimiento para hacerlo.

Su participación en esta encuesta es completamente voluntaria y puede retirarse en cualquier momento. Esto también significa que puede omitir cualquier pregunta que desee.

Para obtener más información sobre esta investigación y los derechos de los participantes de la investigación, puede contactarnos por correo electrónico: gr-backpackers@wpi.edu o Junta de Revisión Institucional (IRB): Gerente (Ruth McKeogh, Tel. 508-831-6699, Correo Electrónico: irb@wpi.edu) o Administrador de Protección Humana (Gabriel Johnson, Tel. 508-831-4989, Correo Electrónico: gjohnson@wpi.edu) ¡Muchas gracias!

Appendix G: Photos From the Ethnography

Lucas approaching the third waterfall in Las Tres Cascadas

Lucas, Katie, and Bryce on the summit of Volcán Barú just after sunrise

Bambuda Lodge in Bocas Del Toro