

Increasing Minority Participation in Study Abroad Programs

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I fear that Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes was right when he said, "What the U.S. does best is understand itself. What it does worst is understand others." We need to understand our co-inhabitants on this earth so that we can compete effectively in an increasingly global economy. As Senator Paul Simon has put it, "We Americans simply cannot afford cultural isolation" (e.g. Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, 2005). Although the diversity of study abroad participation has increased in recent years, minority students are still greatly underrepresented in study abroad. During the previous decade, study abroad participation has enjoyed substantial growth, and postsecondary policymakers have increasingly recognized the fundamental importance of international understanding and cross-cultural communication skills in the new global economy (e.g. Friedman, 2005; CIEE 2008; Lincoln Commission, 2005). This belief is supported by extensive research on study abroad that suggested numerous benefits for participants across a host of cognitive, affective, and interpersonal dimensions (e.g. Douglas & Jones-Rikkens, 2001; Gammonley et al. 2007; Langley and Breese, 2005; McKeown, 2009; Milstein, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Additionally, study abroad researchers have found that participation can be particularly influential in improving international awareness, intercultural competency, and foreign language skills (e.g. Anderson, 2005; Black & Duhon, 2006; Lewin, 2009a; Magnan & Back, 2007; Savicki, 2008; Williams, 2005). Moreover, students who study abroad seem to involve themselves more deeply in integrative and reflective learning experiences upon their return to college (Gonyea, 2008) and may graduate at higher

rates than non-participants (Posey, 2003). Given these findings it is little wonder that higher education institutions and policymakers have advocated strongly for large increases in study abroad scholarship funding to enable further growth in participation (e.g. Lewin, 2009b; Lincoln Commission, 2005).

Yet even as overall study abroad participation has increased, American students studying abroad have remained disproportionately White in comparison to the racial composition of postsecondary students overall (e.g. Dessoff, 2006; CIEE, 2008; Shih, 2009).

Table 1

Study Abroad Students by Race/Ethnicity

| Race/Ethnicity | U.S. Postsecondary Enrollment 2012-2013 | U.S. Students Abroad 2012-2013 |
|-------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| African American or Black | 14.9% | 5.3% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 6.3% | 7.3% |
| Caucasian | 60.3% | 76.3% |
| Hispanic/Latino American | 15.0% | 7.6% |
| Multiracial | 2.5% | 3.0% |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | 0.9% | 0.5% |

Note. The information in the chart above is from the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors* Report and the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics.

Several factors may help explain the disparity between minority student participation in study-abroad programs and that of White students. Some of these are attributable to cultural factors, while others appear to be systemic in origin, perhaps necessitating the rethinking of institutional approaches to study-abroad programs with regard to removing barriers to minority student participation.

These factors may be summarized in five “F’s”:

Family – cultural reasons to not venture out

- Friends – perceptions perpetuated through media
- Faculty – Institutional barriers
- Finances – lack of financial support to participate
- Fear – fear of traveling, of discrimination abroad, of the unknown

Let us examine these factors more closely, considering their impact on minority students.

“F” is for *Friends and Family*

Jackson (2005) described the effects of historical exclusion due to the perception that study-abroad experiences are the province of privileged Whites, especially females. This perception has been historically reinforced through the practice of well-to-do White families who send their daughters to Europe for “finishing.”

Minority families, however, do not have a history of sending young people abroad for the purposes of education.

A report entitled *Educating for Global Competence* distributed by the Advisory Council for International Educational Exchange (2008) reiterated the statement that students who study abroad tend to be from a narrow spectrum of the total population. According to Brux & Fry (2010), “they are predominantly White females from highly educated professional families, majoring in the social sciences or humanities. They are high achievers and risk-takers. Many have had earlier overseas travel or international experience” (p. 54). In conjunction with cultural influences and family support, researchers have suggested that the lack of fictional and real role models contributed to the belief that study abroad is not considered useful or appropriate by many minority families (e.g. Brux & Fry, 2010; Jackson, 2005; Penn & Tanner, 2009; Perdreau, 2003). Popular media may portray study abroad as the province of young, White women (Jackson, 2005).

Additionally, minority students who have studied abroad in the past may not share information about their experiences with potential future participants (e.g. Brux & Fry, 2010; Jackson, 2005; Perdreau, 2003). As noted by Brux & Fry (2010), the ultimate effect of having few visible peer examples available to minority students may be that they “don’t think of study abroad as right for them and they then filter out or ignore information about study abroad” (p. 55).

Googling the term “study abroad” yields preponderance of search results from the blog based on the bestselling book *Stuff White People Like* by Christian Lander, which offered further evidence of the racially based perceptions surrounding study-abroad experiences. As noted by Jackson (2005) the significance of media influence by listing a number of movies that depicted the study-abroad or travel-abroad experiences of

young, White women: (a) *Sabrina* (1954), (b) *Gidget Goes to Rome* (1963), (c) *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* (2003); and (d) the Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen movies. Similar movies featuring minority students were almost impossible to find. As a result of both historical exclusion and media influence, Jackson (2005) referred to a perception on the part of many minority students that study abroad is “not for people like me” (p. 15).

Efforts to combat the negative perceptions of study abroad held by minority students’ friends and family should include *outreach*. Proposed possible avenues of proactive outreach to minority students could include:

Develop special outreach programs specifically targeting multicultural students.

- In addition to target media, broaden the study abroad atmosphere through the hiring of minority students participating in study abroad programs to serve as peers and advisors.
- Utilize multicultural faculty and staff as role models by assuring that they have had travel opportunities of their own.

“F” is for *Faculty*

Faculty and institutional factors may constitute additional barriers to minority participation in study abroad. Some of those particular barriers include curriculum requirements, (a) lack of support for faculty and departments, (b) difficulty in transferring credits, (c) overall campus culture, (d) language barriers, (e) the length of the study abroad program; and (f) scheduling difficulties. Often the faculty, if not the institution as a whole, finds resources stretched thin by efforts to sustain a study-abroad program. For faculty who are already teaching two and possibly three courses per semester,

maintaining such a labor-intensive effort may come to be viewed as a luxury that can be ill afforded.

Proposed recommendations for overcoming these institutional barriers include:

- Working with colleges and departments to create unique academic structures that will specifically benefit minority students;
- allowing liberal GPA requirements and course substitutions to aid in minority participation, and
- removing barriers to faculty, providing incentives for those willing to lead programs.

Additionally, study abroad programs with increased minority participation have addressed:

- *Philosophy and expectations:* When minority student participation in study abroad is an institutional priority, such participation demonstrably increases (e.g. Jackson, 2005; Williams 2005).
- *Buy-in:* Successful institutions are typified by colleges and departments that support the goals of study abroad.
- *Information:* Accurate study-abroad information and effective support services are provided by an efficient central clearing-house.
- *Programs:* Successful institutions devise study abroad programs that meet the needs and goals of minority students.

“F” is for *Finances*

Program cost and other expenses frequently present a difficult barrier for minority students who would otherwise participate in study abroad. According to Brux & Fry (2010) “the average semester study abroad cost is in the \$8,000 –10,000 range and the average summer study abroad cost is in the \$4,000-6,000 range” (p. 61).

Since we know that statistically, our minority college students are, on a proportionately greater basis, drawn from the lower socioeconomic strata, it logically follows that programs such as study abroad that require additional funds would be more difficult for minority students to afford.

In such a setting, it is not surprising that scholarships work to offset the financial barriers to participation by minority students. Since the inception of the Gilman Scholarship Program, minority participation in study-abroad programs has increased by 33% (Lewin, 2009). Scholarships can help reduce racial disparities in participation in study abroad, says David Comp, a study-abroad adviser at the University of Chicago who has done research on minority participation in such programs. He points to the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program, which gives 1,200 study-abroad awards a year to Pell Grant recipients. This program has made an effort to reach out to minority students, especially at colleges with large minority enrollments. In 2005, more than 42% of the recipients of Gilman scholarships were from minority groups. As noted by Comp, the average scholarship is \$4,000, evidence that even a relatively small award can make a big difference.

In addition to scholarship opportunities, institutions may choose to offer staggered payment programs through the university, allowing financial aid, scholarships, and grants to help pay for study-abroad program costs. Institutions may also focus trip

planning on cost-effective destinations that allow monies to stretch farther. They may work with financial aid officers to develop informational materials about local and national sources of scholarships and financial aid.

“F” is for *Fear*

Various aspects of study abroad may seem intimidating to minority students: traveling, fear of the unknown such as new foods, smells, language, and cultures. Questions arise such as, “How is racism over there?”

Thus for the students themselves, parents, and families of multicultural students, several issues exist. As indicated, one of the most basic of these issues is fear of racism and discrimination while traveling abroad.

Proposed recommendations to combat the fear associated with study abroad include:

- *Outreach*: Sponsoring universities should develop special outreach programs to multicultural students, their families, and their instructors and advisors. Such programs may utilize multicultural faculty and staff as role models who can speak to their own enrichment by travel and study opportunities.
- *Educate and communicate*: It is often useful to highlight other minority students' positive study-abroad experiences. Minority and other students should be prepared for the study-abroad experience prior to departure. For example, regular pre-departure informational and planning meetings can decrease the speculation and guesswork surrounding the practical aspects of traveling abroad.

- *Media and atmosphere:* Study-abroad sponsors may utilize posters and other visual materials featuring multicultural faculty and staff as well as minority students who have traveled abroad. The overall message might be something like, "Picture Yourself in Study Abroad!" Brochures might be developed that state the benefits of study abroad and address the concerns of multicultural students and their families.

Additionally, sponsors may wish to establish a resource center with books about multicultural role models who have traveled abroad as well as the academic papers of returning students. Multicultural students who have studied abroad can serve a strategic role as peer advisors and orientation leaders for students contemplating study abroad. (e.g. Alvarez, Penn, & Tanner, 2009) credited the study-abroad office at San Francisco State with making him feel welcome from the moment he walked in the door, just to see what it offered. Until that moment, he had doubted he could benefit from the experience. Now he is among several minority students featured on a DVD, *Breaking Barriers*, put out by the office to inform and encourage participation in study abroad at San Francisco State.

If there is a take-home message from our review of factors contributing to racial and ethnic minority student decisions to participate in study abroad, it is that the process is complex. If access to study abroad is to expand and participation by minority students is to be encouraged, the challenges noted above will have to be addressed. Doing so successfully could lead to participation rates that more accurately reflect enrollment patterns in American higher education.

Summary

The story of who participates in study abroad (and who does not) is pretty clear, having changed only slightly over the course of the past fifty years. The study abroad population is predominantly White, female social science majors of higher socioeconomic status who are enrolled at liberal arts colleges. As a major academic decision point, the choice to study abroad can be understood from St. John, Paulsen, and Carter's student-choice process (2005) as consisting of several stages, from predisposition through search and decision. This process occurs in a particular college context but is shaped by individual and home environments (which are impacted by socioeconomic factors) and school environments such as experiences in college. Although the choice to go abroad occurs on an individual level, it is not made in a vacuum. As noted by Relyea, Cocchiara, and Studdard (2008), "establishing the valence of study abroad programs entails careful consideration of their perceived benefits by prospective students" (p. 87). Prospective students' decisions to participate were ultimately based on the interaction of a number of different considerations, both individual and shared (e.g. Milstein, 2005; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen & Pascarella, 2009; Salisbury, Paulsen & Pascarella, 2010). The influence of family and peers is strong (Paus & Robinson, 2008), and society in general may hold some sway insofar as the need for study abroad as a means of addressing globalization is reflected in national policy. However, the role of the institution should not be underestimated. In fact, some would argue that the institution's role is fundamental (e.g. Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen & Pascarella, 2009). Certainly, to reach the ambitious goals set for minority student

participation, institutions must find additional ways to increase awareness, interest, and participation in study abroad.

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