

August 2023

Increasing Study Abroad Participation Among Historically Excluded Students

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Recommended Citation

Scanlon, D. J., & Kline, K. A. (2023). Increasing Study Abroad Participation Among Historically Excluded Students. *New York Journal of Student Affairs*, 23(1). Retrieved from <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/nyjsa/vol23/iss1/2>

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NEW YORK JOURNAL
STUDENT AFFAIRS {OF}

New York Journal of Student Affairs
Article

Volume 23, Issue 1, 2023

Increasing Study Abroad Participation Among Historically Excluded Students

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(First published online, August 2023)

Abstract

Higher education has yet to address the deeper causes of inequities in student participation rates in study abroad programs across student demographics. Factors contributing to inequities include disparities in access to social and cultural capital and neglect of identity-related experiences of racially minoritized and first-generation, historically excluded students. This qualitative study examined faculty and staff experiences in the development of study abroad programs and explored their considerations for the needs of historically excluded students. A consensus among interview participants indicated a central role for intentionality throughout the processes of program development, recruitment outreach, and preparation of students for the study abroad experience.

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Keywords: Study abroad, historically excluded students, inclusivity, intentionality

As higher education experiences a shift in student demographics and an increase in student body diversity, institutions should strive to transform the ways in which a liberal arts degree is attained and to align pedagogical practices with changing student needs (Payne et al., 2017). Chickering and Gamson (1987) noted the potential of student-faculty contact to raise awareness of diverse learning styles and that incoming generations of students are more successful learners when through their relationships with the instructor, with other learners, and with their world. Programs incorporating models of experiential or high impact learning practices such as those encountered during a study abroad program may therefore more effectively reinforce skills critical to advancement in a global economy while concomitantly attending to diverse student needs (Kuh, 2008).

Based in part on Freire's notion of oppressive pedagogies (2000) and Argyris and Schon's (1974) theory of reflective practice, this study investigated faculty and staff perceptions of how to be more inclusive of racially minoritized and first-generation, historically excluded students in study abroad programs (HES). To facilitate this process, the study sought to answer the following questions: 1) How do faculty and staff view their sense of responsibility in fostering relationships with historically excluded students during study abroad programs? 2) In what ways are faculty and staff engaged with students in identity-related experiences and how can these experiences be enhanced? 3) In what ways can faculty and staff co-construct learning for students in ways that enhance social and cultural capital for those students? These questions will be explored in greater detail in the paragraphs that follow.



Study Abroad and a Holistic Postsecondary Education

Student-teacher partnerships are cited as a more effective educational learning strategy among diverse students than traditional teacher-centered models (Matthews et al., 2018; Sotiriou, 2018). The former go-to of the college classroom, described by Paulo Freire (2000) as the banking model of education, is no longer viewed as the most effective learning model, rather, that students require a more active role in the facilitation of their own learning (Arnsperger & Drivalis, 2016; Taïeb, & Doerr, 2017).

The results of a National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) of 25 University of Calgary students on a short-term study abroad program to Mexico provided evidence of increases in the frequency with which students used reflection as a tool of learning by combining ideas or concepts from sources outside of their study abroad courses while working with classmates on assignments (Rourke & Kanuka, 2012). This supports the theory that study abroad enhances students' capacity to think outside the box when provided a more engaging learning environment. Similarly, in an assessment of native English-speaking geology students from the US who participated in a four-week study abroad program in Sweden, participants were asked to evaluate whether working with native Swedish students enhanced their learning experience. Over 85% of student respondents indicated this was the case (Dunning et al., 2008).

In response to an increase in international migration over the last decade, the field of social work has found it imperative that professionals become increasingly knowledgeable of the workings and nuances of other cultures. At a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, study abroad was utilized to encourage future social work professionals to “recognize the extent to which a culture’s structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance



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privilege and power” (Mapp, 2012, p. 727). An analysis of multiple short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs from five different social work majors indicated improved cross-cultural adaptability among student participants. Such experiences may be of significance to students of social work, whereby a deeper understanding of and sensitivity to cultural differences may positively impact their engagement with clients (Mapp, 2012).

In a study of employment recruiters present at a career fair for students of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Harder et al. (2015) highlighted how adaptability translated into marketable skills desired by businesses practicing in a global economy:

The ability to adapt to changing systems and demonstrate flexibility with respect to complex issues . . . with the emerging trends of globalization and diverse stakeholders, it is becoming increasingly important to be flexible and open to the ever-changing landscape of organizational practice (p. 44).

The same recruiters agreed that a preferred candidate had the ability to build working relationships (Harder et al., 2015). As highlighted in these examples, participants in study abroad programs are often charged with facilitating similar working relationships in an unfamiliar environment, resulting in the negotiation of new partnerships transcending cultural boundaries and incorporating new perspectives into the task at hand.

Within the context of historically excluded students arriving from racially minoritized and first-generation backgrounds, Smith et al. (2013) conducted a study analyzing how participants with historically excluded backgrounds benefitted from a study abroad experience, observing increased competencies in attributes valued by potential employers among study abroad participants. Conducted over five years, the study centered on a two-week, fully funded



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study abroad program attached to a for-credit course offered by the University of Tennessee College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural resources. Focusing on the perceived value of the study abroad program by HES, the assessment and comparison of participants' pre-and post-program responses concluded that students gained considerable experience in the areas of knowledge of global affairs and of the focal country, and in interpersonal competence (Smith et al., 2013).

Student Demographics and Study Abroad Participation

There are many causes for low participation rates in study abroad programs among HES. It has been suggested that the presence of fewer minoritized faculty leading study abroad programs contributes to lower participation rates by Black students, who may be more likely to both relate to and follow a staff or faculty member of minoritized status to a study abroad destination (Hembroff & Ruzs, 1993). However, even at institutions where faculty are more representative of the student population, diversity of program offerings – or a lack thereof – is a major factor determining study abroad participation. A survey conducted during a college preparatory program at an HBCU in Texas concluded that many students would choose to go to Africa, as this destination would provide a more relevant context for individuals with African genealogical backgrounds (Penn & Tanner, 2009). There was a perceived lack of destination options to motivate HES to pursue a study abroad program, as most available programs do not offer them an opportunity to experience a more relevant culture and history. This stands in sharp contrast to the multitude of opportunities available to White students to travel to Europe.

Study abroad program content based on contextualization of identities, then, has the potential to serve as an effective recruitment tool. The study abroad experience is a relational one



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whereby inclusion plays a significant role (Johnstone et al., 2020). Positive student experiences and outcomes are dependent upon relationships fostered between themselves and the group, as well as those with the instructor. In a qualitative research study aimed at bringing to light the experiences of African American women during their study abroad in West Africa, Morgan et al. (2002) highlighted the significance of experiential learning by female participants as it related to cultural heritage and identity development. They concluded that to increase participation by underserved students, it was necessary to provide culturally sensitive outreach programs for students regarding available study abroad programs, to offer programs with more diverse and identity-related content for HES and to increase the involvement of minoritized faculty and provide support for the identification of potential barriers at the institutional level (Morgan et al., 2002). If contexts relevant to HES are lacking or absent altogether, students will not be able to foresee the value of participating as it relates to employment or empowerment of minoritized identities (Brux & Fry, 2010).

Salisbury et al. (2011) elicited feedback from 6,828 students from 53 higher education institutions who participated in the Wabash National Study on Liberal Arts Education and found an increase in the likelihood of participating in study abroad if a parent had pursued postsecondary education. The study accounted for both social capital – defined as information and guidance provided through social networks and other sources of support – and cultural capital, or the knowledge of one’s culture stemming from an individual’s parent(s) belonging to a specific class in society (Salisbury et al. 2009; Salisbury et al. 2011). In other words, the amount of guidance an incoming student receives from a parent or other family member’s experience with navigating the college experience is viewed as a potentially significant



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contributor to student access to non-traditional programming. Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2015) noted that students who do not engage in extracurricular activities would also be less likely to intend to study abroad. This may put first-generation students at a disadvantage upon arrival to the institution, lacking the social capital available to encourage increased participation in such programs. Essential to increasing participation by HES lies in what Taïeb and Doerr refer to as the act of “reaching out” (2017, p. 43) to students who have not been guided by parents who have attended a postsecondary institution for at least some period. To increase the visibility of study abroad programs HES, it is necessary to raise awareness of program offerings (Morgan et al., 2002; Yuksel & Nascimento, 2018).

Responses from 37 participants in a short-term study abroad program from Northern College describe how relationship dynamics of a study abroad group played a role in the experiences of multiple identities within the participant group. These experiences were framed as “curricular, intercultural, or intra-group communication elements of programs that are experienced through the lens of students’ self-described identities” (Johnstone et al, 2020, p. 127). The comfort level with their instructor during pre-departure interactions and during their sojourn abroad was highlighted as positively influencing their experience. These positive experiences expressed by students described instructors as addressing the role of multiple identities both before and during the program, which paved the way for a more inclusive group dynamic. As a result, the recognition of multiple identities by faculty allowed HES to feel more secure in their relationships with both group and instructor during their experience abroad.



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Methodology

The constructivist/interpretivist theoretical framework applied to this study seeks to provision a more thorough understanding of the study abroad participation context by eliciting detailed accounts of experiences within this context by multiple participants (Brown & Dueñas, 2019; Glesne, 2016; Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2009). The case study at a mid-sized higher education institution located on the east coast of the U.S. consisted of 10 interviews conducted with faculty and staff employed at a mid-sized higher education institution. While not all participants identified as full-time student affairs/study abroad professionals, each was engaged in at least one of the various stages of program development, recruitment outreach, and preparation of students for one or more study abroad programs. Six interviewees identified as female and four as male. Six interviewees identified as White, while one identified as Hispanic, one as multiracial Hispanic, one as multiracial Latino, and one as Latina. The institution was determined to be a viable source of information within the context of study abroad participation given its status as a minority-serving institution and comparatively higher study abroad program participation rates by HES. The institutional study abroad website cites offering of a diversity of study abroad programs accommodating the diverse needs of all students.

Recruitment of interviewees was accomplished via snowballing, with the institutional study abroad office serving as the initial contact. Faculty and staff who had either led or at minimum participated in the developmental stages of a study abroad program were contacted through this office or through secondary contacts. Conducted during the spring 2021 semester, interviews lasted between 20 and 55 minutes. Due to the concurrent COVID-19 pandemic at the



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time of the study, interviews were held via Zoom. These interviews were recorded using Zoom meeting software, with transcription services provided by Otter.ai.

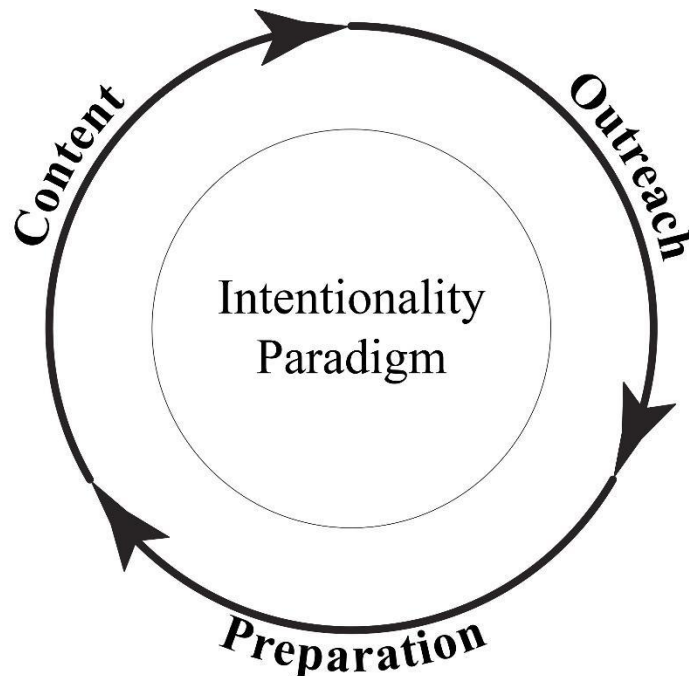
At the conclusion of the interview process, transcripts were coded using the Sort and Sift, Think and Shift method for qualitative data analysis (Maietta, 2011). An iterative process of “diving in” and “stepping back” centered on revisitation of emerging themes and reflection on how they interconnect, this method also maintains an awareness of the analyst’s relationship to the data. Themes were identified across interviews during a preliminary analysis of transcripts. A second round of coding was conducted to provide confirmation of initial codes and to ascribe relevant information provided by interviewees to these codes. A third round of coding served to both confirm existing themes, negotiate potential new themes, and to evidence these themes using specific quotes from participants.

Findings

Faculty and staff responses to interview questions revealed areas of significance related to the process of developing and facilitating a more inclusive short-term, faculty-led study abroad program. Within each of the areas of program content, recruitment outreach, and preparation, there emerged a common thread of intentionality. Feedback provided by interviewees established a recommendation for consistent and intentional reflection of diverse student identities and accompanying needs. To increase access to HES, it was suggested that this intentionality center on inclusivity and representation of the entire campus community. The following depiction of these results is presented as the Intentionality Paradigm for Inclusivity in Study Abroad Programs:



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The intentionality paradigm expresses and reinforces the role of intentional actions taken to increase participation by HES in study abroad programs. Intentionality on behalf of faculty and staff is ever-present during each phase of the study abroad program cycle, which includes program conception, outreach to potential student participants, and preparation of students for the study abroad experience.

Aggregating feedback from interviewees provided a more holistic account of intentionality as seen through the lens of faculty and staff involved in short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs. All 10 interviewees agreed that to increase access to these programs, it was necessary to provide attention to inclusivity by rearing a sense of belonging as it related to multiple identities in each of these phases. Intentionality is thus the result of recognizing diverse student needs, both within and outside of the academy, and actively reflecting on how these needs are potentially met throughout the process. The following sections present a more detailed description of feedback elicited throughout the interviews, broken down into three broad



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categories described by interviewees: content development, recruitment outreach, and preparation.

Content Development

Individual interpretation of student belonging varied among participants within the context of content development. The most prominent means of rearing a sense of belonging among diverse identities in relation to study abroad course content was the involvement of students in the development or design of the course to provide more relevance to HES identities. Five participants suggested realizing this through student-faculty/staff partnerships. Responses included cooperation between students and faculty/staff in the development of “passion projects,” the pursuit of “core interests,” and offering numerous opportunities for “facilitating identity development” as Hawa (pseudonym), a faculty member and short-term study abroad program leader recalled:

We also had a student who went to Zambia. She was really interested in going to Africa as an African American student and exploring how these views of Africa that we have as Americans; how small they are - like all of Africa is the same. She really was excited about going back to something that *tied to her roots* [emphasis added], but also helped her to explore these ideas of social justice and identity.

Similarly, interviewees unanimously agreed on the significance of providing experiences attending to the holistic development of the student as it related to a liberal arts education and to the provision of skills transferrable to future employment. These included the fostering of a multicultural perspective/global citizenship and the rearing of leadership and communication skills through engaging service-learning opportunities. Faculty member Dana (pseudonym) noted



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that during her trip to Chile, responsibilities were delegated to members of the study abroad cohort to increase students' feeling of being vested in the group, assigning duties such as translator and group representative:

By giving students jobs it evens the playing field, and they help us manage and maintain the cohesion of the group. And so *that group is a lot stronger when it's more diverse* [emphasis added] because it allows us to pay attention to things from these multiple points of view.

Most interviewees (nine) noted the potential for program coordination with faculty and staff across disciplines as a means of introducing multiple content areas within one study abroad program. Developing content through collaboration across departments was highlighted as a means of increasing the chances of providing a topic relevant to the interests of HES. The advantages of offering a common thematic thread across majors as cited by participants can be summarized as increasing content relevance by diversifying the number of meaningful connections to course material and decreasing stress factors associated with developing a study abroad program by a single faculty member.

Outreach and Recruitment

All 10 of the interviewees noted intentional recruitment efforts and the central role of fostering a sense of belonging for multiple identities, beginning with where and how faculty reached out to potential student participants. Five interviewees cited the positive impact of representing multiple identities, addressing the question of "Do I see myself here?" with the support of former HES study abroad participants acting as ambassadors during program information sessions. Hawa described the importance of bringing in former participants to



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outreach events as a means of assuring that “the students who are out there sharing their stories represent the students who are in the student body . . . so that they can see themselves as doing that. Our students are our best ambassadors.”

Former participants were seen as providing a gateway to relevance and belonging by sharing their own experiences during a study abroad program and how this related to their HES identities. Six interviewees highlighted the role of intentional outreach to organizations representing diverse identities. All the interviewees agreed that the outreach process involved sharing knowledge of and experiences with the target culture to increase potential participants’ familiarity and comfort with the lived culture of the target location.

Eight interviewees agreed that the outreach phase should begin with building trust between faculty/staff and students. Responses about the approach varied but remained focused on intentionality as it pertained to creating a sense of belonging for all students. This was facilitated through encouragement, through learning more about where students were at, and through fostering a more personal relationship by transforming formal faculty-student relationships into more familiar ones. Faculty member Ben (pseudonym) described intentionality within the context of study abroad programs as a blurring of the more formal lines historically defining teacher-student relationships: “You need faculty members who are willing to connect with students on a level outside of academics . . . to show students that you care about them, that they are interested in them as human beings as much as students.”

In addition, applying empathic listening strategies to student concerns was noted, with half of the participants adding the need for special attention to family concerns, especially for first-generation students and first-time travelers. Also highlighted as key to the recruitment



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process was getting students to see themselves there, referring once again to providing a sense of belonging through the relevance of the specific study abroad program to diverse identities.

Preparation

Interviewees indicated a consciousness of the adjustments that students would need to make during a study abroad program and of the at times demanding nature of leaving comfort zones. Faculty member Damian noted that “I think that the perspective-building of what learning looks like in different environments and pushing yourself to experience that and be open to that are some really unique challenges.” Here, Damian draws attention to the role of faculty in preparing students to reimagine their perceptions of life beyond their own communities and to accept the challenges presented by environments potentially much different than their own. All interviewees agreed in some form or another that this process required an awareness of students’ varying capacities to adjust.

Once a student had decided to participate in a study abroad program, interviewees unanimously indicated the need to continue to provide information on the target culture and travel based on their experiences. The role of faculty was equated to that of a mentor, supporter, ideator, hand-holder, and liaison not only to students but also to families throughout the process of preparing for a study abroad journey, especially to first-generation students and first-time travelers. Interviewees cited the preparation phase as central to fostering student readiness for the study abroad program, citing contexts of respect for individual identities, group cohesiveness, and building relationships that went beyond those typically held between students and faculty and staff. The result was a reconceptualization of relationship building which was adapted to the process of preparation. This process called for a shift from formal to more informal, supportive,



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and collaborative relationships within a group context, as faculty member and study abroad program leader Dana noted:

We want everybody to feel like they have an investment in the group itself, and that everyone contributes in a different way to maintain the health of that group. . . . We also talk about the ways that we can support each other . . . and we try to diminish the authority position of the faculty . . . it becomes a new relationship.

Investment in group well-being required the building of a meaningful connection between course content and experience abroad, cultural nuances and difference awareness/respect, and cultural and social capital. However, connections between students and faculty are also meant to reinforce the coherence of the group by subtly breaking down the boundaries normally present in student-faculty/staff relationships.

Three participants noted the significance of providing a voice for students regarding concerns or insecurities related to HES identities, such as whether racism was as much an issue at the program destination as it was at home. This included concerns for being judged on hair styles. One interviewee noted a concern by a Muslim student regarding anti-Muslim sentiment in the target country. Faculty member Giaa (pseudonym) recalled an experience during a trip to Portugal while walking down a local street: “Some of the students felt that there was a touch of racism there, that the elders were looking at them because they were Black, or Japanese, or Arabic.” After inquiring with Portuguese students as to the possible causes of perceived scrutiny of the group, it was discovered that residents were in fact only intrigued by the closely guarded to-go coffee cups carried by group members as they strolled by, an act apparently rarely



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witnessed by locals. Giaa also recounted the attention and corresponding celebrity received by one of her students for his dreadlocks while studying abroad in China:

One student had long dreads. It was interesting to watch this, because all the Chinese people were walking by with their phones, trying to hide that they were taking a picture of him. So, he would walk right over to them and just kind of gesture “Do you want a photo?” and he would stand right next to them. Here was a six-foot-tall Black man with long dreads standing next to this little elderly Chinese woman, and people are taking photos. *Everybody was laughing and smiling* [emphasis added].

Such examples reinforce the central role of faculty facilitators in portraying the diversity of experiences participants can expect while abroad, pre-departure.

Conclusion

The benefits accompanying participation in a study abroad program are inequitably distributed across student demographics (Yuksel & Nascimento, 2018). Shifts in student demographics should signal a closer look at how institutions address diverse student needs, especially within the context of recruitment for experiential learning and high impact programs. Now more than ever, it is critical for institutions of higher education to reassess how we communicate with students about opportunities within the academy to provide equal access to programs such as study abroad.

Fewer opportunities to study abroad with student affairs professionals or faculty representing diverse identities and a lack of identity-relevant destinations serve as barriers to participation for racially minoritized and first-generation students. For institutions, a related challenge lies in how to address the systemic inequalities embedded within study abroad policies



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and procedures. Representation of HES identities is paramount to increasing participation in study abroad programs (Brux & Fry, 2010; Morgan et al., 2002). Interview content reinforced the critical role of intentional representation, relevance and meaning making throughout the processes of content development, outreach and recruitment, and preparation. This conclusion aligns with previous research maintaining the importance of inclusion of diverse identities during study abroad program development (Johnstone et al., 2020).

Interviews with faculty and student affairs professionals indicate broadly that to increase HES participation in short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs, intentionality should be placed at the center of each of the content development, outreach and recruitment, and preparation stages. Inclusion of multiple identities throughout each of these stages requires faculty and staff to consider potentially unfamiliar social and cultural backgrounds of students, out of which arise specific concerns unfamiliar to faculty who arrive with their own experiences. To foster increased awareness of diverse backgrounds, cultural sensitivity training may be needed for faculty and staff leading study abroad programs – despite their familiarity with destination cultures. The goals of such training should be to increasingly engage students as partners and to foster a greater sense of belonging during the study abroad experience. Developing relationships with students via reflection and empathic listening undoubtedly plays a central role throughout this process. If intentionality remains the guiding tenet from conception to assessment of the student experience upon return from a study abroad program, it carries with it the potential to increase access to these programs by historically excluded students. Citing this observation, we may also consider applying the intentionality core to additional programs within higher education that reflect similar deficits in participation rates among these students.



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