Breaking Barriers: Investigating Study Abroad Obstacles for African-American Students

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Abstract: The international education literature shows that African American students, as well as other racial minority students, continue to be underrepresented in study abroad programs. What is not widely known is why this disproportion exists. The current study increases the currently limited professional knowledge base surrounding barriers and obstacles for African American students to studying abroad. This qualitative study is based on grounded theory and used semi-structured interviews with 10-14 African American students who participated in a first-time abroad experience at a private liberal arts college in the South. In addition to the interviews, students kept journals while abroad and completed a re-entry questionnaire. It was proposed that numerous barriers exist in African American students that differ from those of Caucasian students. These included but were not limited to, barriers related to family fears, disinterest in learning about other cultures or having been misinformed about the benefits of experiencing a diverse culture, fear of racism while abroad, and financial constraints. It was proposed that African American students would have experienced a lack of active family support in their decisions to go abroad. The findings support the notion that further research in this area needs attention so as to combat the continual underrepresentation of African American students who participate in study abroad programs.

Method:
Participants: Participants were full-time undergraduate students a small, private, liberal arts college in the South. Ten students participated in this study. These students ranged in ages from 18-22 and are enrolled in varying courses. All participants were of African American decent and all but one have been abroad or studied abroad. Students were participants of a new off-campus travel program where they had the opportunity to travel to Belize with a college staff member to experience cultural emersion along with service work while abroad. This program was titled A Multicultural Excursion: Belize in December/January 2011/12.

Procedure: Students first learned about the opportunity to travel abroad via an information session given by staff from the Study Abroad Office at the college. Many students in attendance at this session were members of organizations such as The Black Student Organization (BSO), Serving Our Students (SOS), All Students Interested in Asia (A.S.I.A.), Hispanic Organization for Language and Activities (HOLA), and other various student organizations on campus. As there are a small number of self-identified students of color at the college, many students from differing ethnicities join numerous multicultural groups on campus for support.

Measures: Investigator used qualitative research methods to explore the hypotheses. Prior to departure, the primary researcher conducted non-leading and semi-structured interviews with participants, which lasted approximately 30 – 60 minutes. Questions provided a guide for conducting the interview. These questions encouraged participants to discuss the barriers regarding their views of going abroad as well as international education. Additionally, questions further served as a guide to encourage discussion surrounding familial beliefs regarding study abroad issues. Sub-questions were asked to the participants to describe how the upcoming involvement in a study abroad program impacted them personally, in their family relationships, and in their relationships with people outside of the family.

During the time students spent abroad, they engaged in a reflective process through journaling. Within these journals the students were given prompts supplied pre-departure by the researchers. These prompts served to help the researchers to understand a bit more about the experiences of the students while abroad. The responses to prompts in student’s journals will be analyzed for similar themes. Upon re-entry, students were provided with open-ended questions pertaining to their experiences abroad.

Semi-Structured Interview:
Main Question: This study will focus upon the barriers experienced by students of color that hinder their involvement and interest in study abroad programs. I am interested in anything you have to share that relates to your experience with this.

Personal Experience:
How did you choose this trip, specifically?
What is it like to be a student of color at your college?
Have you ever considered studying abroad before?
What factors have kept you from going abroad or thinking about going abroad in the past?
What are the main barriers that have kept you from studying abroad in the past?
How do you believe studying abroad affect the way you view your education?
What do you hope to gain by going abroad?

**Family Relationships/Support Systems:**
- Have any family members been abroad?
- What conversations have you and your family had about studying abroad?
- How do you believe the prospect of studying abroad impacted your family members (or do you imagine it has)?
- What types of support (if any) have you experienced in your decision to go abroad?
- In your decision to go abroad, what have your family/support persons, good or bad, talked with you about?

**External Relationships:**
- How do you feel studying abroad will impact your future career/education?
- How do you feel studying abroad will impact the rest of your time in college?

**Discussion:** It is believed that the study abroad experience is an integral part of multicultural competence. Students have described increased knowledge of other cultures, of themselves, and of fellow classmates resulting from significant exposure to unfamiliar cultures. Having multicultural competence has been described as being able to understand and communicate across multiple cultures (O’Hara-Devereau & Johansen, 1994), communicating clearly, solving cultural problems synergistically, and negotiating across cultures (Adler, 2002). It has also been described as having the ability to be comfortable with other cultures, positively evaluate other cultures, understand cultural differences, have empathy for people in other cultures, value cultural differences, and show open-mindedness (London & Sessa, 1999). The students had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with a culture that differed from their own. Having the opportunity to participate in interviews, students were able to further introspect and gain new insight, per pre- and post-trip discussions with the researchers. Throughout this study, the researchers focused on discovering what barriers African American college students face which hinder their involvement in study abroad programs as well as what influence family members have on the students’ decision to go abroad.

Throughout the course of this study, researchers have found that African American students face barriers that hinder their involvement in studying abroad above and beyond those of other students. Even removing financial barriers, the researchers have preliminarily found themes related to a lack of encouragement and support in decisions to go abroad; fears of racism or criticism of race while abroad; lack of interest; lack of support from family; and little knowledge of what academic, personal, and future career gains can be attained by going abroad. As a result of this study and the trip to Belize, students reported benefiting greatly. These benefits students cited included: gaining a greater insight and understanding of other cultures outside the United States, gaining a greater understanding of self through personal growth, and becoming an advocate for students of color studying abroad as well as an increased open line of communication between the student and the individuals in their support system(s) with whom had apprehensions to studying abroad.

Limitations of this study include potential lack of generalizability of findings to the larger population of African American students. This is due to the characteristics of the students and the university they are attending (the college is a private liberal arts college that is quite selective and relatively prominent). Students in the study have particular characteristics that make this college more appealing to them as opposed to a public state school. Including only undergraduates who are enrolled in this university may render findings inappropriate to students in public universities. In addition, these students have self-selected themselves to go abroad on the trip and agreed to participate in this study, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, this study did not interview students who are not participating in the abroad trip. Thus, barriers may be vastly different between the group who went to Belize and students who did not complete such a program.

This study presents pressing issues for some important broader implications and serves as a good starting point for further investigation of this phenomenon. The findings may lead educators, study abroad advisors, students, and families of college students to see the need for future programs in addressing this continued lack of African American student involvement in study abroad programs. This study may be able to spark further programming and outreach at the high school level for African American students, as well as those from the other racial minorities, in order to increase the resources to assist this population getting abroad.

Contact: hillise@rhodes.edu or eovrebo@memphis.edu
Resources for Education Abroad Professionals supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Allies (LGBTQA) students.

Together we are mighty. Below are a few favorite resources in supporting LGBTQ students in studying abroad.

- **Questions for LGBTQ Students:**
  - Laws around sexual and gender identity in my host country?
  - Can I be out while abroad?
  - What does out look like in my host country?
  - What are the cultural norms for dating and friendship?
  - **Diversity Abroad:**
  - **Ithaca College** brochure for LGBTQ students:
    - [www.ithaca.edu/oip/docs/diversity/lgbt_students_and_sa.pdf](http://www.ithaca.edu/oip/docs/diversity/lgbt_students_and_sa.pdf)

- **Interactive world map to see laws and policies for countries for LGBTQI persons:**
  - [www.ilga.org/country/](http://www.ilga.org/country/)
    - **ILGA** – the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, is the world federation of national and local organizations dedicated to achieving equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) people.

- **Rights for air travel and transgender people:**
  - **National Center for Transgender Equality** is the nation's leading social justice advocacy organization winning life-saving change for transgender people.
    - [http://transequality.org/issues/travel](http://transequality.org/issues/travel)
  - **TSA Transgender Traveler Overview:**

- **Rainbow Scholarship:** This scholarship will be awarded to a deserving LGBTQI student who aims to participate in a high-quality, rigorous education abroad program. Applicants must meet general FEA scholarship eligibility requirements & preferences. Students interested in being considered for this annual scholarship should indicate this through their application forms.
  - **Scholarship link:** [http://www.rainbowsig.org/rainbow-scholarship-2/](http://www.rainbowsig.org/rainbow-scholarship-2/)

- **IES** has a list of additional general resources: [http://www.iesabroad.org/study-abroad/about/diversity-lgbt](http://www.iesabroad.org/study-abroad/about/diversity-lgbt)

Questions big or small: tfrey@pace.edu  P: 212-346-1980
Theresa Frey, Associate Director, International Programs, Pace University, New York, NY
April 10, 2015

Dear Parents,

Have you heard about St. John’s study abroad programs and want an opportunity to learn more? If so, we welcome you to join us for further information. During these informal presentations, we’ll address families’ “FAQs” about study abroad, including:

1. **Costs.** Did you know that our students “travel” with all their current financial aid? In addition, we award over $325,000 in additional grants to help make our programs more affordable.

2. **Coursework.** Our programs are custom-made for St. John’s students, and offer classes that fit nearly all students’ schedules—particularly if they plan ahead.

3. **Why go?** Study abroad can be a formative academic and personal experience, but equally important, it can provide a competitive advantage on the job market. Nationally, only about 10% of college graduates study abroad!

**Information Sessions for Parents of Interested Students**

Light refreshments, such as coffee and cookies, will be served.

**Queens Campus**

Thurs., February 5: 6:00-7:00 PM, University Center, Suite D

Thurs., February 19: 6:00-7:00PM, University Center, Suite D

**Staten Island Campus**

Thurs., February 5: 6:00-7:00PM, Kelleher, Room L-20

**Pre-Departure Sessions for Parents of Summer/Fall Study Abroad Students**

If your student will be studying abroad this summer or fall, welcome! During this session, you’ll learn everything you (and they) need to know before they go. Pizza and soft drinks will be served

**Queens Campus**

Thurs., April 16: 6:00-8:00PM, D’Angelo Center, Room 416C

Sat., May 2: 11:00AM-12:00 PM, Bent 277A

**Staten Island Campus**

Thurs., April 23: 6:00-8:00PM, Kelleher, Room L-20

**Online Pre-Departure Session:** Tues., April 28 (12:00-2:00pm)

Can’t attend in person? Feel free to sign up for our online parent pre-departure orientation. You’ll receive an email 24 hours prior with instructions on how to access the session.

**Confirmation is required** for all events, so please RSVP by phone (718-990-6105) or email (globalstudies@stjohns.edu).

We look forward to meeting you!

Sincerely,

Matthew Pucciarelli
Associate Vice President, Global Studies
Dear «FIRST_NAME»,

At St. John’s, we believe that a study abroad experience should be within the financial and academic reach of all our students. That’s why we offer core classes that fit nearly every major at our world-class facilities in Rome, Paris, and Seville, as well as the financial resources to make a semester overseas possible.

Since financial aid is key to many students’ decisions regarding study abroad, I wanted to inform you of a few essential “financial aid facts” as you consider an SJU semester program.

- You are eligible to receive St. John’s University, New York State, and federal financial aid to assist you in attending one of St. John’s study abroad programs. So, if you currently receive any financial aid, you may continue to receive this assistance while attending one of our semester abroad programs in Rome, Paris, or Seville (or all three, through SJU’s Discover the World: Europe program).

- We offer work opportunities to qualified students while studying abroad. These positions allow you to keep earning money while you are away. (For more information, go to: www.stjohns.edu/globalstudies)

- Many students receive additional aid toward study abroad from external scholarships, including those awarded by the Gilman Foundation and the Italian Culture Center; they can provide up to $5,000 toward a semester abroad. (For more information, go to: http://www.stjohns.edu/OGSscholarships)

Best of all, based on your current financial aid application, you have been awarded a St. John’s University Study Abroad Grant in the amount of GRANT AMOUNT HERE to assist you in attending one of our fall 2015 study abroad programs. You may use this grant, in addition to any other financial aid for which you may qualify, to spend a semester in Rome, Paris, Seville or on our unique, DTW: Europe program.

We encourage you to review the enclosed information, which details your estimated expenses and financial aid eligibility. If you are interested in learning more about how you can be part of this unique experience, we invite you to reach out to the Office of Global Studies and speak with our colleagues. Their contact information follows:

Staten Island Campus (Campus Center, Room B18—Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays)
Queens Campus (Sun Yat Sen Hall)
718-990-6105
globalstudies@stjohns.edu or www.stjohns.edu/globalstudies

We look forward to welcoming you to an amazing academic semester in Europe!

Jorge Rodriguez
Associate Vice President
Student Financial Services
Name: «FIRST_NAME» «LAST_NAME»  
ID: «ID»

We're pleased to provide you with a personalized breakdown that compares your estimated expenses for attending classes in New York with enrolling in one of our semester programs in Europe. This breakdown applies to the fall 2015 term.

### Fall 2015 in New York

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<tr>
<th>Estimated Educational Expenses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuition and Fees</td>
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<td>Room and Board</td>
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<td>Total Expenses</td>
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<td>Financial Aid</td>
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</table>

Total Cost to Student

### Fall 2015 in ROME, PARIS, SEVILLE, or on the DTW Europe Program

<table>
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<td>Program Fee</td>
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<td>Discounted Flight</td>
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<td>Total Expenses</td>
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<td>Financial Aid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study Abroad Grant</td>
<td>$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Aid</td>
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Total Cost to Student

**NAFSA Note:**
Students’ personalized numbers—based on FAFSA data—are pulled in via mail merge by our Office of Student Financial Services.

### The difference between a term in NYC and a **GLOBAL** experience is

Note: Your estimated fall 2015 financial aid eligibility is based on meeting all financial, judicial, and academic eligibility requirements. Your total financial aid package includes any student loans you have been offered, even if you decide not to apply for them. Please also note that external scholarships and numerous work opportunities may also help defray costs: please stop by the Office of Global Studies for information, or visit their website, [www.stjohns.edu/globalstudies](http://www.stjohns.edu/globalstudies)
Georgia Regents University’s 7-10 day faculty-led business study abroad trips saw a 200% increase in participation after implementing new marketing techniques during the 2013-2014 academic year. These increased numbers were largely due to a 750% increase in minority participation. This change brought the diversity of business study abroad trips in line with institutional averages.

A Study Abroad Liaison role was implemented in 2013 giving a business advisor the responsibility of marketing study abroad. The Study Abroad Liaison was the first resource for business majors with questions about academic credit, trip details, business scholarships, and other details. She created and dispersed study abroad promotional materials to students, advisors and faculty; over 700 students were reached in five minute class presentations. Students were engaged personally about studying abroad in advising/career appointments. Each student expressing interest was personally e-mailed at deadlines.

Research conducted with students studying abroad suggests that direct reach methods were especially influential in minority undergraduates’ decisions to study abroad. Direct reach includes one-on-one outreach by an advisor/professor or a classroom presentation by a known advisor. Minority students were most impacted. The first year of direct outreach 83% of minority students identified these factors as their primary motivation to study abroad as did 43% of white students. 100% of the students studying on the business trips in 2014 and 2015 participated in the survey.

The Hull College of Business offered a $500-$1000 study abroad scholarship to all students who applied and the Study Abroad Office offered a $200-$600 to all undergraduates who applied. These scholarships were well known and heavily promoted. While almost 50% of white students identified the availability of scholarships as a factor contributing to their choice to study abroad – only 15% of minority students identified this as a factor even after receiving over $1500 in scholarships. Some students, although aware, elected not to apply for these scholarships.

**Key Insights**

- Direct outreach as a marketing technique will recruit minorities and can cause study abroad diversity numbers to align with institutional averages.
- Advisor/professor outreach coupled with classroom presentations by known staff are key to reaching all students – availability of study abroad office is a secondary factor.
- 70% of minority students were persuaded to study abroad by an advisor/professor – a 750% increase.
- 50% of white students were motivated by an advisor/professor – a 90% increase.
- Location of trips, ability to earn credit, convenience, and resume are key minority motivations.
- Availability of scholarships is a low motivating factor for minority students - a sale on a product you aren't considering isn't incentive.