



Top Tips: Inclusive Student Advising for Ethnically Diverse Students

Cultural sensitivity is as important domestically as it is internationally when reaching out to ethnically diverse students to talk about study abroad. Therefore being conscious as study abroad advisors about our own assumptions about students from diverse ethnic backgrounds may enhance our efforts to be more inclusive when recruiting these students to study abroad. While ethnically diverse students as a group tend to be underrepresented among study abroad participants nationwide, their experiences with international travel, their particular interests and motivation, as well as their perceived barriers to studying abroad may vary from one ethnic group to another. Recognizing that African American, Hispanic-American, Asian American, and other ethnic groups may voice distinct concerns during conversations about studying abroad will enable advisors to help students identify a program and study destination that best suits them.

1

Use **self-affirming marketing materials**. Being able to see others that look like you engaged in doing something that you want to do, or visiting a place where you would like to visit can be affirming. The message is “if they can do that, so can I.” For that reason, study abroad materials, office newsletters and publications, and event flyers and announcements should include images of ethnically diverse students. MSI students who have previously studied abroad tend to be quite willing to share photos that can be added to flyers promoting information sessions, faculty-led program brochures, or related materials. Encouraging students to wear college/university swag (t-shirts, caps, backpacks, etc.) when taking photos abroad particularly helps reinforce the message that studying abroad is something that MSI students routinely do. In this way, studying abroad is conveyed as a norm for your institution’s students, not an anomaly, and as a goal well within the reach of any student.

2

Draw upon faculty and other minority students who have studied abroad. Students venturing abroad for the first time tend to be more inclined to consider a short-term study abroad program led by a university faculty member. Because traveling with the faculty member helps allay both the students’ and their families’ anxieties, these faculty are invaluable to study abroad advisors. In addition, international faculty from destination countries where students contemplate traveling can be helpful in cultivating students’ interest and enthusiasm in studying abroad. International faculty at MSIs are a readily accessible resource usually quite eager to share information with students about their country and culture. Finally, past study abroad students can help.

Such students can meet with small groups of students in the study abroad office and simply share their experiences. At the study abroad fair and during class and residence hall programs, these students wear university study abroad alumni T-shirts and share multimedia presentations about their experiences. Another strategy is a pre-departure informal focus group involving students who have studied abroad for a semester or summer in a particular country and the group of students preparing to study abroad in that country. These kinds of interactions help ethnically diverse students feel more comfortable about their decision to study abroad and connect them to a supportive campus community.

3

Consider perceptions of minority students abroad. It is best not to ignore the elephant in the room! Being able to have candid conversations with students about how ethnic groups are perceived abroad and treated in certain countries is only fair to the students. Students should know if they will be curiously stared at or if they might experience racial discrimination. Students should be encouraged to investigate their potential reception as a non-white American abroad. For example, personal accounts, online videos, and other information about African Americans' encounters in China are plentiful on the Internet. Such accounts offer a range of strategies for dealing with these encounters. Often, study abroad program providers address these issues in their onsite orientations at the start of a program. The MSI study abroad advisor should not hesitate to contact study abroad program coordinators to inquire about the numbers and experiences of ethnically diverse students in programs in which students have expressed interest.

Students should also be invited to ask questions. Sometimes program providers may connect the students with other ethnically diverse students who completed the program. Further, this topic is one that can be explored during the focus group mentioned in Tip 2 and in other conversations with past study abroad students.

4

Destinations Matter. While some ethnically diverse students express few preferences for study abroad destinations, others seek destinations that provide a heritage connection. For Hispanic students, the destination might be Spain; for African American students, the destination might be an African country; for a Chinese American student, the destination might be China. While traveling to such locations may hold special cultural meaning for these students, students should understand that they may simply be regarded as an American—a wealthy American! However, for some students the experience of being in a country where people who look like them are in the majority, rather than the minority, may be culturally affirming and facilitate additional reflection about their identity.

Study abroad advisors can also identify those academic majors at their institution that have attracted ethnically diverse students and work closely with study abroad providers and partner institutions to map ideal program destinations for those majors. Small group advising of students in the same major can be quite successful as students find comfort in knowing that other classmates are considering the same destination and may be looking for a study abroad program offering similar major courses. (This may also be a good time to dispel the myth that studying abroad will cause students to get behind in their academic program and delay their graduation).

5

Guide students from Plan to Plane. In between “I want to study abroad” and “Have a nice trip!” there are many steps, forms, and challenges vying for the student’s attention. Dealing with multiple university offices, handling requests for information related to program and scholarship applications, taking care of pre-departure health needs, and other tasks can be daunting for students with little to no familiarity with studying abroad. Understandably, students may find all of this overwhelming and slowly drift away. It is so easy to lose students at this point. Instead, once students have decided on a program and destination, the study abroad advisor can help the student manage these tasks by following a study abroad checklist. After an initial study abroad advising sessions, the advisor and the student can agree that the student will check in at ten to twelve day intervals for an update. Rather than hand-holding, this process helps the student develop valuable transferrable skills—requesting documents, soliciting recommendations, meeting deadlines, completing applications, scheduling appointments—all personal management skills that can serve the student well beyond study abroad. Students have returned from abroad to tell others, “It was a lot of work, but it was worth it!”