

**Students of Color and Study Abroad
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Introduction

While most agree that studying abroad can be a life changing experience for undergraduate students, this has not translated into the numbers of students of color who study abroad.

Nationally, less than 10% of the students who study abroad are students of color. At the University of Minnesota, 11% of the students who studied abroad between 2001-2004 have been students of color. The overall student of color enrolled at the University of Minnesota, including all four campuses, is close to 15%.

When the University of Minnesota constructed its grant proposal to the Bush Foundation, the goal was included of increasing enrollments of students of color in study abroad. No concrete plan, however, was outlined in the grant as to how the University would work to reach this goal.

The individuals presenting this paper are several of the committed University of Minnesota community members who have taken it upon themselves to create the means for reaching this goal.

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Framing the Context: Formation of the Multicultural Study Abroad Group

At the September 2001 retreat for the Freshman/Sophomore Advising group, a component of the University's Bush Foundation grant to internationalizing the undergraduate curricula, interest emerged regarding the participation of students of color in study abroad programs. In particular, advisers noted that students of color face particular barriers to study abroad and the University should seek to explore those barriers and address them.

From that retreat, the Multicultural Study Abroad Group (MSAG), with representatives from all four campuses, was formed to explore this aspect of study abroad. The group has defined itself as follows:

The Multicultural Study Abroad Group (MSAG) is made up of University of Minnesota professionals who actively support the University's goal of increasing the numbers of students of color who study abroad by: working to overcome barriers, promoting the benefits of study abroad, and providing resources that address the needs of students of color.

Initial members included representatives from numerous University units:

Crookston campus– Learning Abroad Office, Multicultural Programs
Duluth campus – African American Center, Office of International Education
Morris campus – Minority Student Programs
Twin Cities campus – African American Learning Resource Center, American Indian Learning Resource Center, General College, Learning Abroad Center, Martin Luther King advising community, Multicultural Center for Academic Excellence, Office for Multicultural and Academic Affairs

During the group's first year (2001-2002), members worked to identify the barriers that students of color face with study abroad. The group anecdotally identified the following barriers, financial concerns, family considerations, fear, cultural barriers and concerns, academic concerns, and lack of marketing and recruitment directly to students of color. In order to move from the anecdotal to the actual identification of barriers, the group advocated for qualitative and quantitative assessment. Several concrete methodologies were undertaken during 2001-2002, some as part of the evaluation process of the internationalizing initiative: surveys of sophomores and seniors regarding study abroad

curriculum integration were over sampled by including all sophomores of color and seniors of color in the surveys, focus groups were conducted, and a literature review happened. In the following section, barriers determined from these methodologies will be explained.

The group established four working groups that aimed to focus in the following areas: web and written materials, data collection, programs and outreach, and scholarships and financing of study abroad. The outcomes within the first two years of group's inception were significant and included:

- Information gathering from surveys and focus groups
- Web site devoted to the group's activities and outcomes
- Brochure: Multicultural Students and Study Abroad
- Advising material: Learning Abroad for Student Parents
- Advising material: Study Abroad Programs with Multicultural Focus
- Outreach to freshmen of color
- Development of Diversity Scholarships for study abroad
- Sharing of resources and expertise between study abroad advisers and staff in multicultural units

Barriers for students of color to study abroad

Barriers to study abroad for students of color are both real and perceived. Barriers can be financial in origin or a lack of awareness that may cause a student to overlook an education abroad opportunity. Or they may be mental barriers (Hurd, 2002) where an education abroad opportunity is perceived as "too expensive, too difficult to coordinate and too foreign" (p. 6). In some cases as with those of immigrant families, cultural attitudes may prevent a son or daughter from leaving the family unit to study independently in another country.

Uncovering the Barriers

There are a variety of ways to uncover the hidden barriers to studying abroad. Academic research, such as Thuy Doan's study on Asian Americans and Study Abroad, note that cultural and immigration background impact participation (Doan, 2002). These cultural barriers include the cultural tolerance of debt (incurred by many who study abroad); the importance of family support for students' study abroad endeavors; and the cultural inappropriateness of studying abroad due to family obligations and gender expectations. Multicultural students are also affected by their family's and their own cultural biases. For example, many students' families only approve of study abroad to a heritage site because of the drive to preserve the culture and because there will be family members on site who can offer support and ensure the student is behaving properly while away from parents. Some sites of political significance, such as Hanoi, Vietnam, need to be considered when promoting study abroad to various student populations. Vietnamese refugees and their parents attach strong emotions to this site, and therefore require additional care when encouraging participation in this site. Sites such as Hanoi do not

necessarily need to be eliminated, but advisers need to find a way to discuss the benefits of studying at such an emotionally charged site.

Focus groups conducted by the Learning Abroad Center (Twin Cities campus) have also reinforced the notion that family is at the center of many multicultural students' educational choices, although students often did not overtly state that their parents have this much influence. Students mentioned that it would help if there were more prestige attached to an education abroad opportunity. The Learning Abroad Center also found that students had many misperceptions of study abroad, and assumed it was too much work to apply the courses toward degree requirements.

Another manner in which the education abroad office can address concerns and expectations of multicultural students in relation to an education abroad opportunity is to develop a survey of returning multicultural students which inquires about the experience abroad. By doing so, education abroad advisors and students can come to understand how host nationals perceive and interact with multicultural students in a variety of settings. Such information can also assist multicultural students in being realistic about the treatment they may receive in the host country as well as ways to react to such comments and behaviors. For example, an African-American student at the University of Minnesota described on her Diversity Issues in Study Abroad Survey how in her homestay family's neighborhood in Milan, some of the locals thought she was a prostitute as African women are perceived to be prostitutes in Milan. She also described how she handled this situation. She decided to talk to shop owners and other neighbors and let them know that she was a U.S. American student studying in Milan. In this way, prospective learning abroad multicultural students can understand not only the way they may be treated but also how they can respond to any blatant racism or negative response. Finally, such information may be posted on a web site or shared with other pertinent offices on campus to share this valuable information.

Finally, outreach activities help build relationships with advisers in other offices that serve multicultural students. It also puts education abroad advisers in an environment where students feel more comfortable revealing personal concerns. For example, students are more willing to talk about their cultural concerns, such as parental disapproval, when study abroad advisers are providing services at a multicultural student advising office that offers a warm, welcoming and student-centered environment. Occasionally, a student will also mention barriers on their own, such as in application essays, so it is important to pay attention to what students are communicating in a variety of forms.

Challenges to determining and addressing barriers

Focus groups of multicultural students and outreach to multicultural centers are ways in which to inform education abroad professionals of barriers to study abroad. Challenges remain though. Multicultural students may be apathetic and not even consider inquiring about education abroad as they see it as not pertinent to them. They may be apprehensive about the subject matter as they do not know if someone in the education abroad office

will be able to address their needs or concerns. Students may not be aware of or consider how their ethnic identity may affect their experience abroad and therefore not address the issue with their advisers or professors. Professors, academic advisers and deans must encourage all students to consider education abroad and be educated about the barriers to multicultural students.

Understanding the demographics of the study abroad population is very important in finding out which exact ethnic populations are being served. In many cases, ethnic categories on study abroad applications do not properly represent the diversity of ethnicity of our student population. Many students also do not reveal their ethnicity. By not knowing the population we are serving and their needs, education abroad advisers cannot learn more about the barriers and how to address them. At the University of Minnesota, on all four campuses, we have seen increases in the past ten years in the Hmong student population, as the state of Minnesota now has the second highest Hmong population per capita in the United States. Minnesota has also seen significant African immigration from Somali and Nigeria. All of these student populations face different barriers than other minority populations that have been in Minnesota for several generations.

The culture of the education abroad office must also be addressed if barriers are to decrease. How open are education abroad offices to learning about multicultural students concerns and barriers? Are there any multicultural staff members in education abroad offices? Are we open to working with multicultural student centers on campus? How do we maintain the momentum and relationship with those offices? What information can or should we share with those offices?

Finally, public policy can limit our attempts to address barriers to multicultural students. For example, scholarships for multicultural students may not be possible at public institutions due to strong reactions against affirmative action programs. Are there other ways to address public policy issues such as creating an “under-represented student scholarship” that includes engineering students and male students? Challenges must be first identified and then addressed.

Principles to consider when addressing barriers to an education abroad experience with multicultural students

Understanding barriers is only part of the puzzle when addressing barriers with students of color. When advising multicultural students, it is important to apply this knowledge of barriers in a culturally sensitive way. Perhaps the most important principle to keep in mind is that general categories such as African American, Asian American, and Latino do not accurately represent specific ethnic groups within these categories. Instead, take time to inquire about the student’s specific situation or background, because the student may not identify at all with a particular group. Advisers must also be willing to make mistakes and learn from them. In general, an adviser who makes a sincere effort and expresses genuine concern will likely gain respect and appreciation by most students, because it shows the student that the adviser has the sensitivity to ask those difficult

questions that no one else will ask. Doing research on your target population is beneficial, which allows the adviser to approach situations from alternative perspectives and to be more aware that there could be other meanings to what students are sharing through their conversations with you. Students are often not aware of how their ethnic identity and background influences their thoughts, actions, and decisions. This is especially important to understand while discussing study abroad with students because advisers may be able to see connections between barriers and other issues when the student may not find the relationship apparent. Advisers can use what they know about possible barriers to engage students in the program selection and advising process. For example, knowing that parents of many cultures are highly involved in the lives of their children, an adviser may open up an opportunity for dialog during a conversation by asking, "How do your parents feel about you studying abroad?" When not asked, students will usually not volunteer this information, but are often relieved that someone in the study abroad office "understands" enough to ask. Advisers may also share written materials such as the survey mentioned above or articles written by students of color who have studied abroad to encourage dialog. These principles help the adviser build rapport with the student and help them see their study abroad adviser as someone who has the capability of and interest in understanding their situation.

Impact of this work on the University of Minnesota

The Multicultural Study Abroad Group stated from the beginning of its inception that its goal was not to make change overnight, or over the course of a year or two even. It sought to establish a long-term commitment to the University and in turn did not expect to see change in the short-term. Little increase in the numbers of students of color who studied abroad was seen in the first couple of years of MSAG's work. However, in 2003-2004, there was a significant increase in study abroad enrollments by students of color. The largest increase was seen on the Twin Cities campus, where numbers rose from 120 to 212 students.

The impact of the group's work has spread to affect the operations of several units that work with the largest student of color populations, the General College and the Office for Multicultural and Academic Affairs.

Within the General College, several advisers serve on MSAG and many other advisers and numerous faculty members have been involved since 2001 in the University's overall initiative to internationalize the undergraduate curricula. By General College advisers and faculty members' attendance at workshops and participation in site visits abroad both designed to increase their understanding of study abroad, General College has become the role model for other units at the University on how to integrate study abroad into the undergraduate experience.

General College is a freshmen-admitting college, and serves as a point of access to the University for students who not admissible to other freshmen admitting colleges. There is significant enrollment by students of color in General College. Advisers and professors have learned how to speak with confidence to their students about study

abroad, and developed a standing committee within the college called Learning Abroad Initiatives. The dean has earmarked \$16,000 for education abroad scholarships. The college also hosts weekly advising sessions by study abroad advisers from the Learning Abroad Center.

Another unit which has seen a culture shift in how it approaches study abroad for students of color is the University-wide Office for Multicultural and Academic Affairs (OMAA). A significant outreach effort has occurred in OMAA's freshmen seminar program, SEAM – Student Excellence in Academics and Multiculturalism. SEAM offers learning-friendly communities for first year students where students enroll in a common set of University classes. Once a week during the first semester of their freshman year, SEAM students meet with the faculty mentor of their cohort to discuss topics such as learning skills, career decision making, and learning goals. In the roughly dozen of SEAM cohorts offered annually, Learning Abroad Center advisers have, since 2001, engaged freshmen of color in a 50-minute module designed to provide critical thinking about study abroad. The module has allowed freshmen to consider the barriers to study abroad and envision the benefits of study abroad. Given that each SEAM cohort is comprised of approximately 20 freshmen, nearly 800 freshmen of color have been exposed to study abroad within their first semester on campus due to this innovation.

Conclusion

The University of Minnesota's work has been about building resources and tools to help increase the numbers of students of color in study abroad.

From our student surveys that we are conducting with the Bush Foundation grant efforts, we have started to see some noticeable changes in how the students are responding to our efforts. Students of color are less frequently giving "delay in graduation" as a barrier to study abroad. We are seeing change happening within ethnic groups also, as we see here in the Chicano/Latino student population.

We have limited the scope of our effort so that we can be focused and our stakeholders remain committed. We have used the "Teacher - Learner model" that allows colleagues inside the study abroad offices and in offices around campus to shape the effort.

By remaining focused on the student of color population, we have been able to begin to assess the breadth and common characteristics of our students, while remaining cognizant and aware of the diversity within the student of color population.

As our work moves forward, we will continue to set some attainable goals for our group to keep momentum going, and we realize that our goal is not based on numbers alone, but that may lead to positive outcomes and good study abroad matches for students.

Awareness is growing that study abroad is a functional mechanism for providing an international component to undergraduate education. Access to study abroad for all students at the University of Minnesota is a part of the design of our work, and the

Multicultural Study Abroad Group has provided a solid foundation for the work to continue.

Our hope is that our model can be transferable to other student populations and other campuses.

Please feel free to contact any of us with your questions or ideas.

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