



AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT SUPPORTING ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' EDUCATION ABROAD



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ABOUT THE GUIDE AND AUTHORS

This guide was produced by a sub-group of the 2019-2020 Race and Ethnicity Task Force Members. The task force is a collection of global education and diversity professionals who provide critical guidance and support to Diversity Abroad initiatives.

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AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT SUPPORTING ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' EDUCATION ABROAD

Introduction

In 2018-2019, the Diversity Abroad Race and Ethnicity Task Force conducted a literature review¹ on Asian American students in global education and a follow-up qualitative study entitled *Asian American Students in Study Abroad: Resources, Representation, and Awareness*². The takeaways from both the literature review and the study complement what is reflected in research: Students are often put under assumptions based on their outer identities, when the resources that are needed to be successful while studying abroad is more complex than this. Even when discussing the race or ethnicity of study abroad participants, Asian Americans are often underrepresented. There are similar reasons for this as with other non-white students, such as a lack of historical participation, which perpetuates an ongoing gap or a lack of representation in university staff, faculty, and especially leadership. This lack of representation has led to a lack of resources and awareness in supporting Asian American students in study abroad.

1 Rafal, G., Cancio, K., Lu, C., Rose, K., & Snowden, C. (2019). Asian American Students in Global Education. Diversity Abroad Race & Ethnicity Task Force. Retrieved from <https://www.diversitynetwork.org/DIVaPublic/Education-Abroad/Support-and-Advising/Resources/Asian-American-Students-in-Global-Education.aspx?WebsiteKey=a7e4b1c3-2a0d-4e85-98f4-d8fa8ef24785>

2 Lu, C., Rafal, G., & Rose, K. (2019). Asian Americans in study abroad: Resources, representation, and awareness. Diversity Abroad. Retrieved from <https://www.diversitynetwork.org/DIVaPublic/Articles/Article-Items/Asian-American-Students-in-Study-Abroad-Resources-Representation-and-Awareness.aspx>

There are also other issues to contend with such as the concept of the “model minority,”³ in which Asian Americans may not find proactive support from university offices because they are assumed not to need any compared to other students of color. In addition, the perception of “Asianness” tends to bring up a very narrow perception of cultural influence when in reality the term is used to describe a multitude of cultures and backgrounds.

From the previous literature review and article, it was apparent that more student voices needed to be heard from across institutions to benchmark what resources were or were not providing opportunities for Asian American students to seek support and have conversations about their intersecting identities. To learn more, the 2019-2020 Race and Ethnicity Task Force conducted an anonymous survey in early 2020. This survey went out to the Diversity Abroad community and received 25 results from program alumni whose profound responses highlight several areas:

First, students need the opportunity to have conversations about their identity as an Asian American *and* how it relates to their other intersecting identities. More students than ever before are thinking about diversity, equity, and inclusion topics in and out of the classroom and are likely to discuss this with staff or faculty. Staff and faculty, therefore, need to be prepared to guide students to resources for their experience when they are asked. It should not be assumed that students will find all of the answers on their own, especially for those that have never been exposed to their destination’s cultural environment in this academic context.

Second, while there is also a need for more Asian American representation in marketing and recruitment, representation also needs to be active in the pre-departure and in-country stages as well. Not receiving enough support after enrolling risks greater issues like attrition or struggling with mental health.

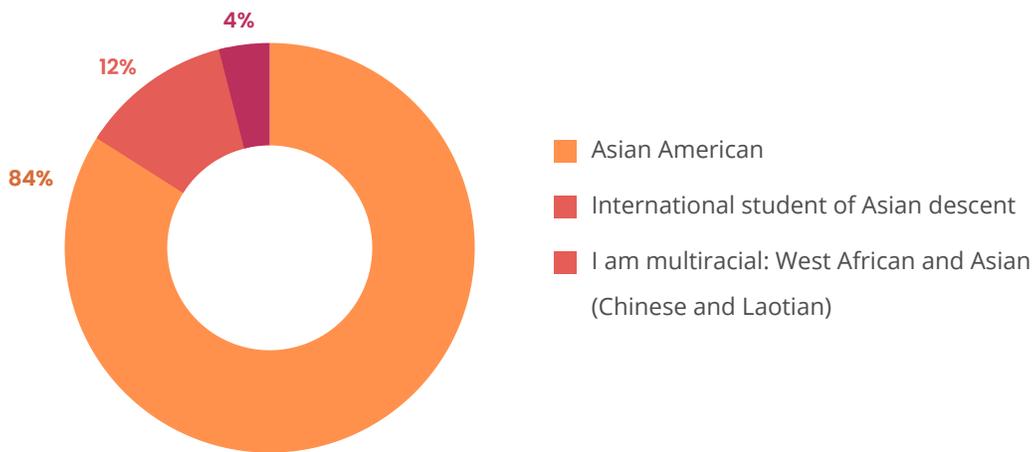
Third, we can never know the full story of a student’s journey but should listen actively and encourage frequent reflection on their experiences and guide them as much as we can with active knowledge of resources. To dive deeper into the 25 surveyed students’ experiences, basic demographics were collected, then information about their level of support was divided into the pre-departure and in-country stages.

³ Term coined in a 1966 New York Times article by William Petersen, propagating an inaccurate myth that certain minorities could overcome discrimination and achieve socioeconomic success in the US by family values and hard work, thus undermining other communities seen as a “problem,” such as African Americans (Kasinitz et al., 2008)

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

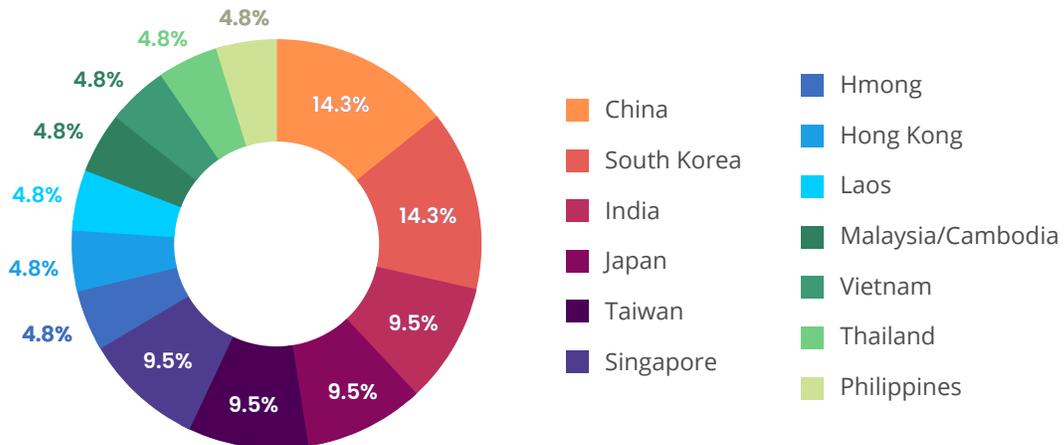
All students answered questions about their identity, home university, and program type. A majority of students were Asian American, with a few students identifying as international students from an Asian country or of multiracial descent. In addition, following traditional study abroad participation statistics, 72% of students were female.

Do you identify as Asian-American or an international student of Asian descent studying in the US?



Students’ fill-in responses to country of heritage or origin were quite varied, which reiterates the importance of having a thorough knowledge of the diversity within the simplistic “Asian” category.

Country of Heritage or Origin

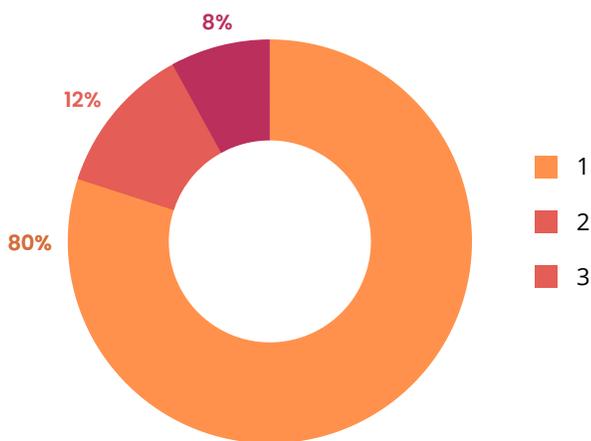


In terms of academics, 64% of students were in their final year or at the graduate level at their institution. Majors were highly varied and across all disciplines, and most respondents were enrolled in large, public universities in the Western U.S. (Southwest and Coastal Region).

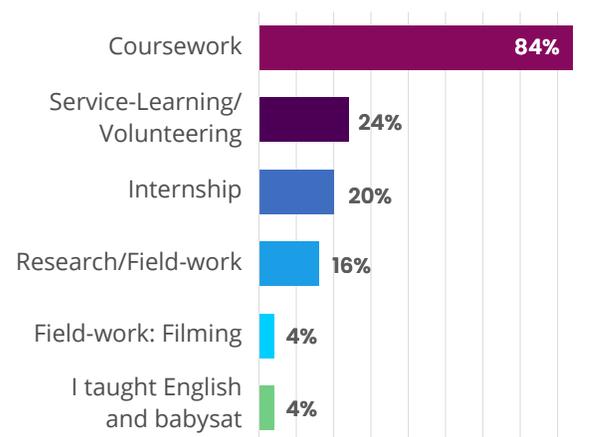
While students' study abroad programs yielded interesting findings on just how varied types of programming are today, a majority of students participated in one program, for a full term (two to four months), with academic coursework. Interestingly, most programs were led by faculty from their home institution, which likely means most students were also with a group of peers from their home institution. Regions also varied significantly, although most were in Northern/Western Europe and South/East Asia.

Students' motivations to study abroad were very multifaceted, but the top three were the desire to travel, the desire to learn about another culture, and to receive academic credit while doing so.

How many programs did you participate in?



What did your study abroad program(s) entail?



What was your primary motivation to study abroad? (Select top three)

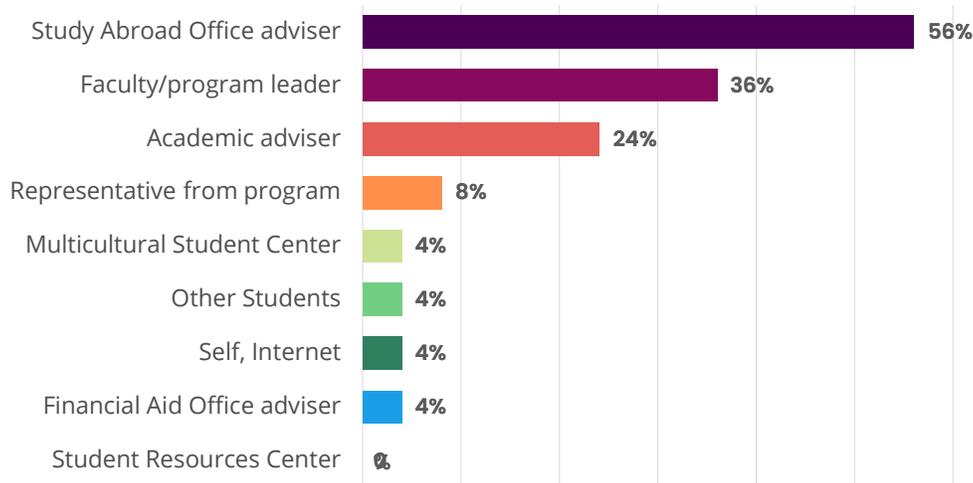


PRE-DEPARTURE SUPPORT

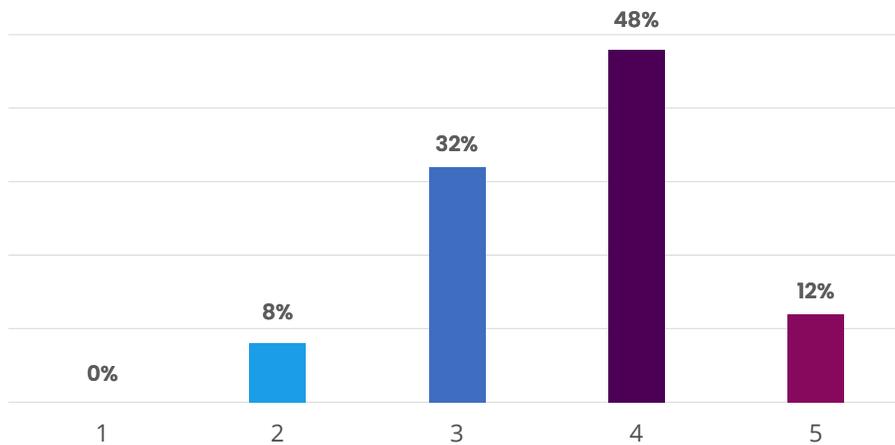
Support Received

It is impossible to know all the forms of support students used throughout their study abroad process, but the respondents did make contact with a study abroad advisor, a faculty member, and perhaps an academic advisor at some point. The perceived support from their primary point of contact was fairly well regarded, with few extremes. Rating of support was mostly positive, on the basis of No support (1) to Excellent support (5) on a 1-5 scale.

What was your *primary* form of support for navigating the application/pre-departure process?

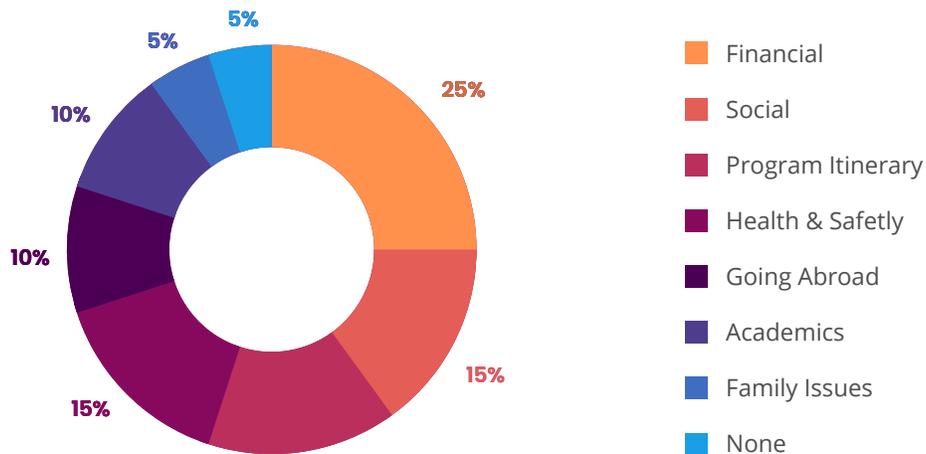


Overall, how supportive did you find your university resources?



After gauging the more basic information about how supported students felt and where they went for support, they were asked to write in responses regarding the support they received in the pre-departure stage. These have been categorized into the area most related to their anecdotal reflection.

Pre-departure Concerns



Some particularly salient responses were:

“*Being away from my family for that long, especially with bad communication within my family... further[ed] my distance with my father because they were Humanities based programs.*”



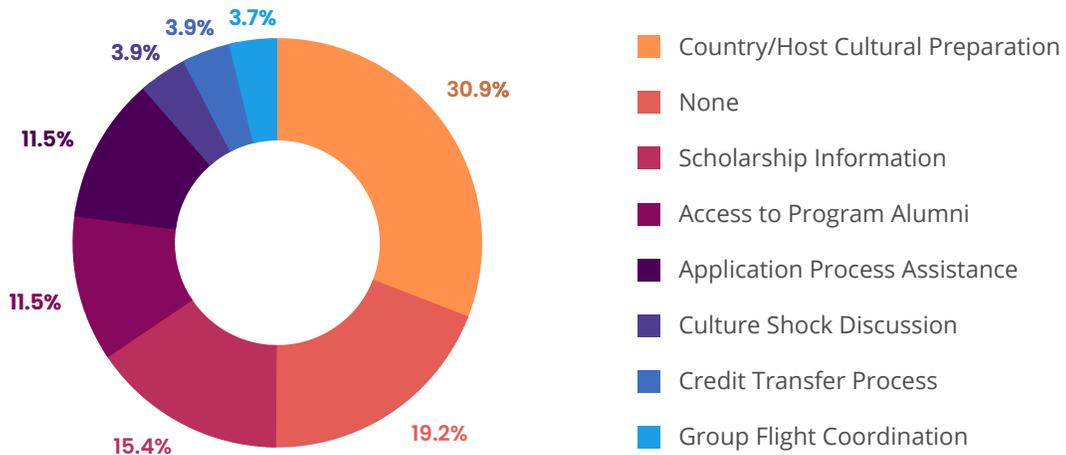
“*I was very concerned about paying for the program, but I was also anxious about being the only Asian American participating in the program.*”



While concerns prior to the surveyed students’ experiences abroad were all across the board, most mentioned more than one kind of concern. There were proportionally more financial concerns, as well as worries about making friends or maintaining relationships from abroad, and the logistics of the program itself. While none of this is very surprising, there were no students whose only concern was related to their identity. When concerns were stated, it was along with other aspects, as in the two quotations above.

Additional Support Needed

When asked about what other resources participants wished were available or had knowledge of prior to departure, like students' initial concerns and anxieties, anecdotes were categorized to more broad subjects such as host culture preparation, scholarship information, and access to program alumni and application support. Approximately 19.2% of students stated that they didn't need any additional information.



Of these responses, it is important to highlight some suggestions on identity-related support that students mentioned:

“An in-person discussion about culture shock and what to maybe expect, Asian American representation in these programs.”



“I wished that I could have spoken to other people who did the same program as me, but also that I could've spoken to a person of color about their experience going to a foreign country.”



“I don't remember that there were lots of resources focused on identity and diversity. I didn't think I needed it, but then I experienced a lot of overt racism in Europe as an Asian American. The provider program I went on also wasn't particularly attuned to diversity issues either, and I think I was one of four Asians/Asian Americans out of 50 participants in the same program.”

It is easy to understand the importance of having past participants to communicate their experiences to prospective students. There is an even larger challenge if the program is new or has not historically recruited many students of color. When program alumni are available and willing to speak to their experiences, perhaps the most valuable aspect of this is that students see themselves reflected in the program, and that the program management has cared to include reflection on topics of diversity and inclusion, while understanding that everyone's experiences will be different, even if there are similarities in alumni identities within them.

When asked "What could have been done to further support you?" It was encouraging to see that students did not provide extensive feedback on this question. However, it did indicate that even though many students can access information about programs and finances online, it is still vital to provide as many in-person opportunities as possible and allow the time to explore these questions in an individualized way. Asian American students, being underrepresented in study abroad, may also have questions they feel more comfortable bringing up in a one-on-one format, with an advisor who conducts themselves in an open and supportive way and can normalize students' concerns and direct them to helpful resources. Here are some responses:

Since it was a country of my own heritage, I had a lot of support from home as well. It may have been easier to have a clearer understanding of the places we would be staying in and the conditions of the region, so I could have packed/prepared myself better."



Since the school is still new, I think I received the most support I could've been given. I just hope the [study] abroad office hears what the students are saying and takes our feedback into consideration. Our voices are the most important right now because we are experiencing it firsthand."



An advisor who sat down with me and listened to my wants, to help pinpoint a program that would be best."



The section exploring the question "What is something you think your Study Abroad Office should know to help support Asian American or Asian students who study abroad?" yielded the most extensively profound post-reflection. All responses in general fall under the following three categories: marketing or recruitment, preparedness for cultural differences at the host site, and advising practices. Selected quotes with particularly insightful reflections are below.

Study Abroad Marketing or Recruitment:



I've never really 'seen myself' on social media or their brochures, in terms of media representation. My intentions to travel weren't necessarily dissuaded, but it would have been encouraging."



I think connecting us with other Asian American students who have studied abroad in the past would be helpful. I have travelled outside of the US before, but I've always been with my family and we're usually travelling to an Asian country."



One thing that study abroad offices can do is to make sure they do not further exoticize or orientalize abroad programs in Asia. This only feeds into negative stereotypes that often indirectly affect Asian American students. It may paint the wrong idea for non-Asian students to think that Asian culture is something to be consumed for one's individual needs and desires, rather than something to humbly delve deeper into with help of local community members. Keep in mind that a lot of Asian American students go to Asian countries to further understand their heritage, so the program's representation may not speak to a perspective that Asian American students grew up knowing. Encouraging Asian American students coming back from an Asian program to share their unique insights especially as a heritage seeking student adds more nuanced perspectives of Asia as a whole."



Students not seeing authentic representations of themselves in marketing materials or in participants and staff may subliminally or overtly dissuade them from studying abroad. Anyone working in study abroad should keep in mind that many types of modern marketing may look visually appealing but can still carry portrayals of destinations through a post-colonial lens. This is also important to consider when including people from the host culture in any photos or videos of the program.

Preparedness for Host Culture:



Heritage students studying in China is probably harder in some ways than non-heritage students due to the expectations placed on them by Chinese people (assumptions that you know what they are saying, etc)”



I had taken the initiative to ask the exchange university’s representative about perceptions of my ethnicity before I left, but I don’t think this would have been addressed if I hadn’t asked. Maybe the Study Abroad Office could preemptively ask the student if there’s any aspects of their identity they are worried about in a foreign country, and they could help the student do research on this?”



I think study abroad offices need to be attuned to and treat with seriousness various microaggressions faced by Asians in almost any country outside of Asia, particularly stereotypes that categorize Asians. Study abroad offices should help Asian American students have the tools to face and process encounters that may be difficult or hard to swallow.”



Whether or not students participate in their program in part as a way to explore their heritage, perceptions from the host culture will influence how Asian American students are treated differently. This may be due to the history of people from Asian countries migrating to or interacting with the host culture, or stereotypes that may or may not be similar to what Asian Americans experience in the United States. In addition, if students are heritage seeking, the heritage culture they grew up with may differ in many ways once actually in that destination. This can range from perceptions of them as an “Asian” versus an “American,” cultural roles they do or do not follow, and expectations of knowledge that they may or may not have, like the local language. It is vital to prompt exploration of the possibilities these students may encounter prior to departure, as far in advance as possible, and not just at their orientation.

Student Advising:

Everyone is coming from different backgrounds and levels of knowledge, and everyone has different uncertainties whenever it comes to travelling abroad. For some, money may be a source of worry, for others, it may just be the prospect of being away for so long (no matter how exciting the program seems). I think students need to be met at where they are and resources need to be individualized for each student.”

Don't try to relate to us just because your wife/cousin/aunt is Asian. I'm Chinese, yes, but that doesn't mean I want to go to China, speak Chinese, or relate to your distant relative in wanting to “reconnect with my culture.” Please treat me like the American student I am. I was born and raised in Los Angeles. My grandparents didn't go through discrimination for me to be treated like this all over again.”

I was adopted and didn't grow up with very many Asians or Asian Americans in my community. I feel like part of the reason I wanted to participate in this program was to experience more of Korea. It was an amazing experience, but I had to go pretty far out of my way to meet people outside of my group.”

Understanding that there are different Asian Americans who don't fit under the model minority and supporting those who come from more marginalized backgrounds.”

Listen to what they want to do. Don't just think because they are an Asian American they automatically should go to an Asian country. That's not always the case. Listen first.”

Ultimately, when advising students, you will not be able to understand their full background or experience, even when identities are shared. Instead of making assumptions or seeking to relate as early as possible, the most supportive way to advise any student with diverse identities is to listen to what they communicate about themselves and ask open-ended questions that prompt them to reflect on possible challenges or opportunities they may face before, during, and after their experience abroad.

Now more than ever, students require an individualized approach to determining what support and resources they need. For example, many resources need to speak to identity intersections. While students may have experiences that deal with their ethnic/racial identity, they will also likely have encounters (sometimes the same encounter) that involve other identities they align with. Every Asian American student will have a truly unique experience, but there is not an overwhelming amount of resources to research how this could play out on their program. The advisor's job will be to help them navigate that in a supportive and empathetic way.

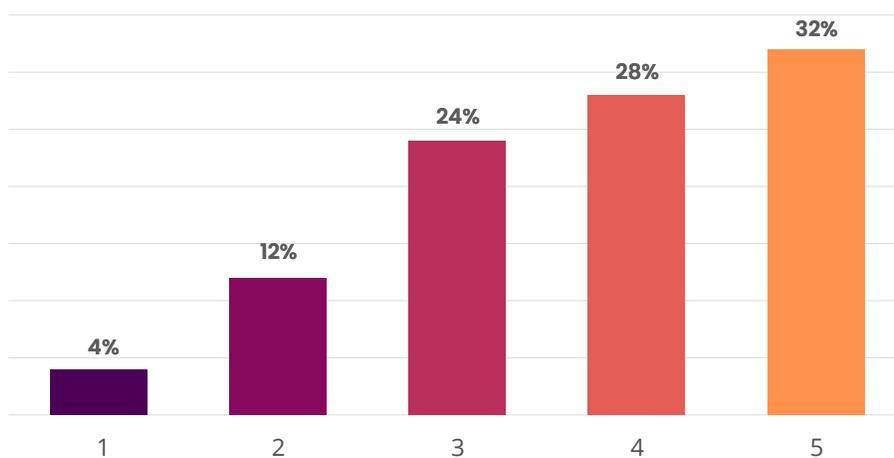
IN-COUNTRY SUPPORT

In the next section, the surveyed students reflected on their time once on their program, and how their study abroad office supported them from afar, or whether their host on-site was prepared to help them navigate their complex identity as an Asian American. Like in the pre-departure stage, responses show a variety of approaches towards navigating challenges that students encountered, and resiliency where they encountered a lack of resources or support, microaggressions, and negative racialized experiences.

Support on the Ground:

While abroad, most students gathered support from either their host institution, advisors, or local faculty and felt generally supported by the resources that were provided, with 60% indicating a 4 or a 5 with 5 being excellent on a 1–5-point scale. Many also relied on the friends they made while on the program. When asked about what other resources would have been helpful, many students mentioned more cultural preparation or orientation to the local culture and community, as well as access to fellow peers prior to the program and on the ground.

Overall, how supportive did you find your program resources?



While discussing the types of anxieties or concerns students had abroad, most mentioned the expected anxieties of a foreign language or culture and the adjustment period associated with these spaces. However, a few did mention how their identity influenced their program:



I was worried about how I would be treated and seen as an Asian American”



My anxiety revolved around my identity and how a predominantly westernized European culture of Buenos Aires would view me in my standpoint as a female who looks very apparent as African but also Asian.”

Some also mentioned their experience of comments made by their white peers in regard to the local culture:

Living with mostly middle class white students. Witnessing the discourses and racism up close and personal. Lots of “gross” or “that’s disgusting” in regards to Peruvian people, culture, and food. Not having money for extended weekend trips. Realizing that it was a “china” by locals even though I was born in the States and said I was American.”



When directly asked how their identity as an Asian American participant impacted their experience, the response was highly contingent on the country in which students were studying and how their identity was perceived by the locals. For example, students who went to Asian countries where they “passed” as a part of the local community had a much different experience than those who did not.

I was Korean-passing and therefore a lot of people thought I could speak Korean. This didn’t bother me much. I would just say I couldn’t speak or reply in English. I rarely had a language issue and didn’t get stared at too much. I’d imagine a study abroad experience might be more negative if I went to a European country, however.”

It helped me regain touch with my cultural roots, and the entirety of the program felt a little more relevant & personal to me. I felt like I had a stake in the program and a personal reason to want to reconnect with a marginalized community that I identify with.”



Even in these scenarios, students sometimes felt they had to hide a part of who they are for the sake of acceptance from their white peers:

I grew up eating offal⁴ meat. White students were so judgmental, especially street food like grilled beef hearts. I had to hide this fact and just carry along because I didn’t want to be viewed as different. I did appreciate locals not asking me for money as much as the white students”.

⁴ Internal organs and entrails

The students who were in non-Asian countries had a mix of experiences. Some felt that the complexities of their identities were better understood:



I went to Norway and unlike other European countries in general, when people hear my accent, they will think that I'm from the States (despite the fact that I'm Asian). Honestly I feel that in Norway nobody will make an assumption that I'm from an Asian country just because of my skin color and honestly this shows how educated Norwegians are."



While others had their race and ethnicity brought up throughout their experience in various forms of conversation:



In many conversations or interactions, my race and ethnicity were brought up, whether directly or implicitly. Some exchanges with my host family were derogatory towards me and foreigners in general. However, I think the culture I was in, at least in my experiences, recognized the vastness of Asia and Asian identities, and I was never immediately assumed to speak Mandarin."



While the experience may have varied from student to student and from country to country, it is clear that students have to face questions, comments, or general interactions that are tied to their visible identity as an Asian American, not to mention other less apparent pieces of their identity such as sexuality, learning disabilities, etc. which they may have had to navigate in some form or another. It is important to note that these experiences are not only in the context of the local culture but also students' own classmates and the culture or dynamic that is present within the group of students that are abroad together, as well as the faculty member or host organization. There are many dynamics in play that need to be considered when thinking about how best to serve and support our Asian American students.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the survey indicates that students of Asian American descent studying abroad have varying experiences based on the country they travel to, just as any other student of any other background would. What is important to note in these cases is that the way a student looks and speaks influences the way in which they are perceived or treated and how this may in fact be different from the way in which they identify. In addition to transitioning to the local culture and finding their way, many students also noted having to navigate the culture within their own peer groups and the language used specifically by their white peers that may have caused them anxiety or to feel like they had to hide an aspect of who they are.

Though students indicated that they felt generally supported throughout the study abroad experience, there is a trend of needing more support to prepare for how their identities will be viewed, discussed, or even challenged while traveling abroad not only by locals but also by their peers. These are discussions that aren't happening in study abroad offices and need to be. When thinking of best practices, are staff both abroad and at students' home institutions trained to support students when they are facing these issues? Has it been made clear to students that they can and should reach out? Did local staff provide a cultural context for the way in which a student may be perceived or describe the history that a country may have with a certain group of people that may impact a student? How do you differentiate that which is due to local culture vs. the history of racism that may actually be coming with the group of students themselves rather than the host country? These are all questions that need to be considered when creating and executing study abroad programming for not only Asian American students but all students. With Asian American students and other students of color, however, there is an added layer of identity considerations that needs to be addressed.

It is important to acknowledge that this survey was sent out to a specific population of students enrolled in institutions that are members of Diversity Abroad, and only 25 students responded. Despite this, the responses given are powerful indicators of the additional support that our Asian American students need.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Keeping in mind what has just been summarized above, what can you do to support Asian American students? Here are a few recommendations:

- ♦ Learn what the term *Asian American* means and how vast the number of identities with differing histories make up this group. This doesn't mean you need to understand everything about this group—that would be near impossible. But it is possible to have a general understanding and to be open to learning more when the opportunity presents itself.
- ♦ Understand the history of the country that you are advising on as it relates to migration from Asia and Asian ethnicities in the host country's culture, and actively have conversations with students around this at all stages of the study abroad process.
- ♦ Explore your explicit and implicit biases. What biases do you have that may impact your ability to support Asian American students? If a faculty member leading a group of students unknowingly believes the model minority myth, will they be able to see a struggling Asian American student?
- ♦ Actively advocate for training for yourself, your team, program instructors, etc. on how to handle difficult questions around identity in-country as well as at the home institution. Consider what you would do if a student came to you indicating that another student or a local was bullying them based on their identity. Do you feel equipped to handle this? Is your team? Do you have resources to support your students?
- ♦ Look at the language you or your institution are using when advising or in marketing materials. Is it inclusive? Are you stereotyping or making assumptions?
- ♦ When creating programs, incorporate an inclusive curriculum into all aspects of the process (i.e., pre-departure, in-country, and re-entry).
- ♦ Remember, the onus is on you to educate yourself, not on Asian American staff or students. Take this education a step further and spread awareness to others who may not know.

These are just a few things you can actively do to support your Asian American students. There are many other spaces that need to be explored and advising resources that need to be created to help support study abroad professionals. If you would like to know more on this subject, please see the resources below on Asian Americans in Study Abroad, Higher Education, and the US in general.

Hopefully this article has provided some useful insight and initial tools study abroad professionals can add to their repertoire. However, change needs to be made on a larger systemic level across the industry if future students are going to feel fully supported.

RESOURCES

Asian American Students in Study Abroad:

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