Institutional Barriers to Study Abroad Participation:
The Perceptions of Undergraduate African American Students

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Abstract

The study abroad experience at the university level is an increasingly important developmental opportunity. Unfortunately, while campuses within the United States collectively enroll a growing number of international students, the number of American students studying abroad during an undergraduate degree program remains consistently low. This is especially true among African American students. This case study examines the perceptions of undergraduate African American students regarding institutional barriers to study abroad. Supporting extant literature, perceived cost and restrictions on financial aid for studying abroad topped the reasons for not pursuing study abroad. In addition, the largest influences on the decision by African American students to participate in study abroad are family and friends. However, minimal institutional awareness of these influencers was present. To increase African American participation in study abroad, the findings highlight the need for focused institutional actions that include involving African American campus resources, carefully considering study abroad destinations, and strategic communication.

Keywords: African American; higher education; study abroad; undergraduate

The development of intercultural competencies among undergraduate students is critically important within an increasingly interconnected world (Petzold & Peter, 2015). To foster intercultural competency, universities across the globe have implemented a wide variety of strategies in recent decades, with study abroad becoming the key strategy. The result has been a growing number of international students attending American universities for short term study. At the same time, however, the percent of American students studying abroad during an undergraduate degree program has remained consistently low. This is particularly true among African American students.

This study was conducted at a research university in the central United States. The authors collaborated with the university's Division of Institutional Diversity, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and the Study Abroad Office. The intent was to assess the perceptions of undergraduate African American students regarding potential institutional barriers that impede participation in university sponsored study abroad. The study was thus designed as an intrinsic case study to inform senior policy makers at the host site.

Review of the Literature

The following review of the literature briefly examines three aspects of the study abroad experience, namely, its beneficence, factors that influence students' decisions to participate, and contextualized participation rates at the research university associated with this study.

The Benefits of Study Abroad

Numerous studies note the value of study abroad experiences. Savage and Wehman (2014) found that 76 percent of students who studied abroad thought that the experience increased their critical thinking skills, while 72 percent of students thought the experience improved their academic performance. Twombly et al (2014) pointed to multiple benefits derived from study abroad participation, including: increased intercultural competence; enhanced development of participant identities as students, individuals, American citizens, and global citizens; strengthened intellectual/cognitive development; and better academic outcomes such as graduation rates, time to degree, retention, and GPA.

Interestingly, Martin et al (2015) found that students who were the least open to study abroad might be those who benefit the most from it. They found in their research that, in contrast to previous studies, students who indicated the lowest openness to studying abroad subsequently displayed the greatest developmental benefits. They noted that this could be the result of cultural novelty; although students who had not traveled abroad were less open to doing so, their lack of experience lent itself to the travel experience making a greater impression.

The benefits of study abroad, however, do not immunize universities from criticism related to the opportunity. For example, Marinoni and De Wit (2019) noted that only 2 percent of the world's student population has the economic resources and the social mobility required to participate in study abroad and benefit from the experience. What, therefore, are the institutional responsibilities to address such disparities? Is it possible that the internationalization of higher education may contribute to inequities among marginalized and underprivileged students, including those in the United States? Such were the foundational questions that led to this research study.

Factors Impacting Study Abroad Participation

Research demonstrates that a variety of factors impact the student decision to participate in study abroad. According to Simon & Ainsworth (2012), these include finances, habitus, social networks, cultural capital, and institutional considerations, with race and academic year yielding the greatest impact. Petzold & Moog (2017) note that language challenges and concerns about the supportiveness of host universities also impact the study abroad decision-making process. The latter is particularly relevant for this study.

Among minority and low income students, decision-making factors often include barriers to participation. For example, Simon & Ainsworth (2012) note that socioeconomic status plays a significant role, with the advantages and resources associated with middle and upper income levels making it easier for students to participate. In addition, students from these income levels are more likely to have previously benefitted from prior international travel opportunities and to

know friends who go abroad. According to Booker, Zhang, & Caplow (2001), study abroad participants often do not rely on financial aid and/or employment to attend college. More than a dozen studies point to finances as a barrier for minority and low income students, including Burkart et al (2001), Brux & Ngoboka (2002), and Lörz et al (2016).

Beyond these studies, Brux and Fry (2010) indicate that low income and minority students are often embedded in social networks that are less conducive to study abroad participation. They add that access to print and visual media, as well as to information about study abroad, impact the decision, noting that the lack of requisite information may inhibit participation among minority students. They further suggest that institutional factors [such as academic scheduling, encouragement, study abroad destinations, and financial issues], family obligations, family concerns related to study abroad participation, and racism impact the decision to participate. The latter barrier is echoed in Dessoff (2006), who found that African American students, despite a strong interest in study abroad, often perceive the process as cold, distant, and lacking responsiveness to their concerns about potential racism. Jackson (2005) argues that the effects of historical exclusion—e.g., minimal history of sending youth abroad among minority families—impede participation. Finally, Simon & Ainsworth (2012) suggest that low participation of minority faculty and staff may discourage participation among minority students. These findings are buttressed by extensive research over multiple decades and across institutional type (Amani & Kim, 2017; Boggs & Irwin, 2007; Chama, Ramirez, & Mutepa, 2018; Chieffo, 2000; Doyl, Gendall, Meyer, Hoek, Tait, McKenzie, & Loorparg, 2010; Green, 2007; Peterson, 2003; Stroud, 2010; Vernon, Moos, & Loncarich, 2017; and Yuksel & Nascimento, 2018). Collectively, these studies reveal not only that multiple factors influence the decision to participate in study abroad but also that minority and low income students encounter barriers—many of which are institutional in nature—that majority and middle/upper income students do not.

Contextualized Participation Rates

Although the percentage of U.S. undergraduate students who studied abroad was low compared to the percentages in most other countries, the number of U.S. students participating in study abroad actually grew in recent decades. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), during the 2004-2005 academic year 205,983 U.S. students studied abroad. After 10 years of steady growth, the number reached 313,415, a 52.2 percent change. This trend did not occur, however, in the home state of the research site. Whereas the Association of International Educators (2016) indicated that the percentage of American students studying abroad was 1.55 percent during the 2014-2015 academic year, the percentage in the subject state was 1.23 percent. According to the Institute of International Education (2017), no college in the state was in the top 10 nationally. Focusing specifically on the research site associated with this study, participation rates also lagged in comparison to all other universities in the same athletic conference. During the year of comparison, only 1,195 students from the research site participated in a study abroad program (Study Abroad Annual Report, 2017), whereas other universities in the athletic conference enrolled over 3,000 students in study abroad programs.

Notably, only 28 African American undergraduate students participated in study abroad at the research site, representing the lowest percentage of any group within the university (Study Abroad Annual Report, 2017). This contrasted with the trend involving African American students participating in study abroad programs at other universities within the conference. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), for example, showed that the number of African American study abroad participants at the national level grew from 3.4 percent to 6.1 percent over the past 20 years, a significantly higher rate than the typical 2-3 percent participation rate at the research site. These numbers highlighted the need for the collaborative institutional research conducted in this study.

Methods

This research study was an intrinsic case study designed to examine student perceptions of institutional support for study abroad participation. The researchers worked with three key institutional partners to promote and distribute an electronic survey soliciting input from all African American undergraduate students on campus.

The survey instrument replicated the instrument used by Wanger et al (2012) to assess Native American student perspectives regarding study abroad. The 29-question instrument included both closed-ended and open-ended items. Because the term "Native American" was changed to "African American," the reliability and validity of the instrument were retested and confirmed. The instrument was subsequently distributed using the Dillman Method of Survey Research, with three sequential and timed email distributions. Respondents completed the instrument via the Qualtrics survey platform. A total of 63 students participated, which was more than double the number of African American students noted above (28) who had actually gone on a university sponsored study abroad trip. This fell within the recommended response rates for research involving college students, according to Fosnacht, Sarraf, Howe, & Peck (2017), who argue that the minimum rate for unbiased results should fall between 5 percent and 75 percent. As subsequently discussed, the study thus produced data from both study abroad and non-study abroad participants. The study was guided by the research question, "How do undergraduate African American students perceive institutional support for participation in university sponsored study abroad?"

Data analysis included two separate processes. First, closed-ended questions were quantified and cross tabulated using the Qualtrics platform to produce descriptive statistics. Second, open-ended questions were coded using open and axial coding to reveal emergent themes. Inter-rater coding exceeded 90 percent.

Theoretical Framework

Social capital theory guided the study. The theory claims that the social contexts of students inform their educational choices. These contexts include the beliefs, attitudes, aspirations, perceptions, and values of the home and school environments of the students (Bourdieu, 1986). These are typically formed prior to matriculation in college and are continually

shaped while in college by family, peers, and others. Consequently, a student's decision about educational choices is informed by multiple non-controlled variables that influence how they perceive and respond to opportunities while in college. Related to this research study, therefore, students' perceptions of opportunities such as study abroad are influenced by their pre-existing and evolving social contexts.

Findings

Demographics

The following paragraphs briefly describe the demographics of the participants. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Of the participants, 74 percent were female and 26 percent were male. Regarding age, 91 percent were within the 18-25 age range and 9 percent were 26 years of age or older. The breakdown for socioeconomic status of the household in which the participants grew up were as follows: Upper class/rich, 0 percent; Upper middle class, 11 percent; Middle middle class, 44 percent; Lower middle class, 30 percent; and Lower class/poor, 15 percent. The communities in which they grew up were divided this way: Urban, 33 percent; Suburban, 50 percent; and Rural, 17 percent. Tables 1 and 2 highlight participants' academic year and college enrollment, respectively.

Table 1
Academic Year of Participants

Year	Percent
Freshman	26
Sophomore	22
Junior	19
Senior	33

Table 2
College Enrollment of Participants

College	Percent
Agriculture	9
Arts & Sciences	35
Business	22
Education	4
Engineering	20
Human Sciences	11

Participants who had previously traveled to a foreign country (57 percent) outnumbered those who had not (43 percent). Of those who said they had traveled abroad before, only 12 percent indicated that they had gone on a study abroad program at the subject university. A strong majority of the participants (61 percent), however, indicated that they knew a family member or friend who had studied abroad.

Perceptions

Regarding the perceived benefits of study abroad, 19 percent said the chance to "learn about another culture" was the main advantage of study abroad. Two additional benefits, at 13 percent each, were the second highest. These were "Increase my independence" and "Help me professionally in a globalized world."

Interestingly, the study found that more than three-quarters of the participants (77 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that information about study abroad programs at the university was readily available, and 67 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the variety of study abroad programs was good.

Participants were asked to select the factors that might prevent them from participating in study abroad. They were given 11 options from which to choose and asked to check all options that applied to their situation. An "other" option also was included, with a dialogue box for input. Table 3 notes the most frequently reported responses; it is noteworthy that cost issues and the availability of financial aid, when combined, constituted nearly one-third of all responses.

Table 3

Top 6 responses to: "The following factors might prevent me from participating in study abroad (check all that apply)"

Option	Percent
Program cost	20
Family obligations	12
Restrictions on financial aid for study abroad	11
Lack of foreign language knowledge	9
Fear for my safety in other countries	8
Fear of racism in other countries	7

The responses to this question should be considered in conjunction with a related question about funding availability (below). In response to that question [see Table 4], fewer than one-third of the participants held a positive perspective of the institutional financial resources that were available for study abroad.

Table 4

Likert responses to: "[Subject university] offers good sources of funding for students who want to study abroad."

Option	Percent
Neutral/no opinion	53
Strongly agree or agree	30
Strongly disagree or disagree	16

Another question queried students regarding their perception of the institution's support for African American participation in study abroad. As Table 5 indicates, 51 percent opted for the "neutral/no opinion" option, nearly a third (32 percent) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, and only 16 percent either agreed or strongly agreed. Thus, fewer than one in six African American students perceived institutional support for their participation in study abroad as strong.

Table 5
Likert responses to: "[Subject university] encourages international experiences for African American students."

Option	Percent
Neutral/no opinion	51
Strongly agree or agree	16
Strongly disagree or disagree	32

Finally, participants were asked to indicate with whom they were comfortable talking about student abroad opportunities (Table 6). They demonstrated strong comfort talking to administrators (academic advisors and study abroad advisors). However, comfort levels were noticeably higher with regard to speaking with family members and other African American students, at 84 percent and 76 percent, respectively. Participants were least comfortable talking with faculty (39 percent) about study abroad.

Table 6

Participants that agreed or strongly agreed with the Likert statement: "I feel comfortable talking to _____ about study abroad opportunities."

Option	Percent
Family	84
Other African American students	76
Academic advisors	67
Study abroad advisors	63
Professors	39

Open-Ended Responses

The responses to open-ended questions overwhelmingly indicated that study abroad was perceived as a great benefit. The four primary benefits stated were: (1) Learning about another culture, (2) Increasing experience, (3) Enhancing professional growth, and (4) Broadening one's horizon. These benefits emerged in response to the question, "What do you believe is the value of study abroad for African American students?" One student wrote that the best benefit was "Experiencing different cultures and meeting different people of different backgrounds." Highlighting the second benefit, a student stated, "Learning about different cultures around the world and experiences that are once in a lifetime." This was echoed in the comments of a student who wrote, "See new things and experience different things you could not in the U.S." One response in particular to this question stood out. The student replied, "It allows us to go to another country where we can learn about other cultures and also see the lenses of someone else being the minority."

Although the students recognized the benefits of study abroad, their responses addressed the institutional barriers that negatively impact the decision to participate. One student stated, "Honestly, finances could possibly be one of the main obstacles." Financial considerations, in fact, were the most frequently mentioned barrier. Another student voiced the same concern, writing, "I think that [the institution] should find programs that are affordable." A student offered, "Help us to find ways to fund it because a lot of times we cannot afford it." Not surprisingly, the availability of financial support was noted by numerous participants. Another student said, "Make sure they [students] are aware of the resources available to help them afford the study abroad trip." A participant effectively conveyed the perception of financial support by stating, "I think for many it seems unattainable because of the cost associated with it. There are scholarships available, but it still feels like a lot of money out of pocket. Finding a way to make them realize that it is financially feasible for them is important."

Finances, however, were not the only barrier. Notably, a perceived lack of targeted communication and promotion of study abroad was cited. One student noted a need for, "More direct outreach to African American students," while another said, "You need to tell more African

American students about the study abroad programs, [sic] I did not even know about it." Some students also highlighted the importance of who conveys promotional messages and where they are given. A student suggested, "Have speakers attend African American organizations to reach out to the students and tell them about the study abroad opportunities." Another agreed, saying, "…more study abroad information should be presented at minority events." And a student wrote, "Get a teacher/advisor that is African American to attend." The participants also suggested that more African American students should be involved in promotional efforts. Said one, "More African American students going [to promotions/outreach] could increase numbers of other African American students [who] participate."

Discussion

The following paragraphs explore the meanings of the preceding findings. Because this study was conducted as collaborative institutional research, we focus in this section on the meanings of the findings for the subject university. This supports the role of institutional research as "a proactive management guide" (Peterson, 1999) and institutional researchers as "change agents" (Delaney, 1999). Due to the critical framing and analysis that social capital theory provided, we begin with a discussion of the findings through that lens.

As previously stated, social capital theory holds that students' educational perceptions and choices are influenced by their social contexts, which are both pre-existing and evolving. This suggests that the findings are more than just facts, statistics, or research data—they represent meanings that inform what was found. Consequently, it is impossible fully to explicate here all implications and relevance. We proffer, however, that certain implications are critical.

For example, the participants included students with diverse experiences: those who had participated in a subject university sponsored study abroad, those who had not, those who had not studied abroad but knew a friend or family member who did, and those who had and had not previously traveled abroad. This strong mix of experiences suggests that regardless of their previous experiences, participants self-selected based on their perceptions—whether positive or negative—of the beneficence of study abroad. We suspect, in fact, that despite divergent social contexts related to study abroad or international travel, participants likely viewed study abroad as beneficial. Such a case would further heighten the meanings of the previously reported findings. For example, it is likely that students who had (a) previously traveled to a foreign country, (b) gone on a study abroad program at the subject university, or (c) knew a family member or friend who had studied abroad, perceived study abroad positively and chose to thus respond to the survey. Conversely, many of the students for whom none of these held chose to not complete the survey. Although a variety of reasons exists for this decision, among the most likely is the perception that study abroad was an unrealistic option for them. Regardless, these diverse prior experiences coalescing around a unified theme underscore the importance of student perceptions, particularly as minority students in a predominantly white institution.

That the findings reveal positive perceptions regarding the value of study abroad is thus not surprising. The participants of this study concur with participants (both majority and

minority) in previous studies that examined study abroad; they recognize the multiple values of study abroad. In this study, they even perceive the subject university as readily providing information about study abroad and offering a variety of study abroad opportunities.

However, social capital theory suggests that their social contexts contribute to their perceptions of barriers to participation in study abroad. Understanding these barriers, therefore, becomes important not only for equity but also for enhancing African American student participation. In subsequent paragraphs we focus on the perceived barriers.

The greatest perceived barrier to participation in study abroad is cost. The findings clearly echo prior research (Lörz et al, 2016; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Brux & Ngoboka, 2002; Booker, Zhang, & Caplow, 2001; and Burkart et al, 2001). The distinction, however, is not just that the costs associated with study abroad potentially impede participation, but that the awareness of financial aid and the perceptions of costs further impact the decision. Although this is particularly true for African American students, as attested here, it also applies to the findings of Wanger et al (2012) and likely holds true as well for students from other minority groups and low income families. The implication of this point is that the subject university needs to do more to advertise the availability of financial aid for study abroad. This includes addressing the perceptions that students bring with them that study abroad may be too expensive, potentially resulting in a premature decision against participation. Such institutional actions depend on developing greater awareness across the university of the social capital that students bring with them.

The participants of this study also indicate that family obligations influence their decisions. This again mirrors the findings of Brux and Fry (2012), Dessoff (2006), and Wanger et al (2012). The latter found that family responsibilities significantly impact whether or not Native American students pursue study abroad opportunities. When combined with the fear of encountering racism in another country, these factors account for nearly 20 percent of the decision-making influence noted by the students in this study. Because this is significant for African American and other minority students, further institutional research is warranted. Although full exegesis is beyond the scope of this research study, we address this consideration in the recommendations that follow.

Similarly, the special role that family and friends play for African American students, with regard to study abroad, is critical for understanding the perceptions that inform decisions. Far greater than faculty influence, the thoughts, values, and input of family and friends sway the decisions made by African American students in this study. This again underscores the need for greater awareness and incorporation of social capital theory as it relates to study abroad. If the university desires to increase study abroad participation rates among African American students, it must better understand the values, beliefs, aspirations and attitudes of African American students and their families (Bourdieu, 1986).

Along these lines, the participants strongly recommend targeted promotion of study abroad to African American undergraduates. Such promotion necessitates understanding the recipients. Burt (2000) notes that in complex and intensive social networks [such as research

universities] there often is a relative lack of connections between people and the institution. He describes these deficiencies as "structural holes" and indicates—per social capital theory—that people of the same perceived group are more inclined to be in close contact with individuals within that group. Burt's comments are relevant here; enhancing participation rates requires strengthening—and in some cases, building—social connections. The participants of this study recognize this. They recommend targeted promotion, encouraging the facilitation of greater numbers of African American faculty and staff in study abroad, and incorporating African American students in the marketing of study abroad. In essence, the participants recommend that the university bridge the structural holes that currently exist.

Bridging these holes also includes addressing the perception of institutional support. It is striking that 83 percent of the participants were either neutral/had no opinion or strongly disagreed/disagreed with the statement that "[Subject university] encourages international experiences for African American students." Although further research is needed among all students at the subject university, this may suggest that inequality in study abroad opportunities exists, a reality that certainly transverses American higher education. As Petzold & Peter (2015) note, and as this chapter began, the development of intercultural competencies among *all* undergraduate students is critically important within an increasingly interconnected world. To limit opportunities for some is to limit the future for all. Ensuring equal opportunity for all students thus becomes the domain of researchers, administrators, and policy analysts at both the institutional and national levels. Accordingly, we think that this study holds meaning for policy, practice, and research.

Recommendations

As previously stated, the purpose of this research study was to assess the perceptions of undergraduate African American students regarding potential institutional barriers that impede participation in university sponsored study abroad, with the goal of making specific recommendations for reducing the influence of these barriers at the subject university. The five subsequent recommendations thus address student perceptions and requisite institutional responses. The first four recommendations are based directly on the findings of this research study, while the last recommendation is closely related.

First, we recommend that the university president create an ad hoc committee to explore undergraduate African American student participation in study abroad in depth. The committee should be composed of members of the African American Student Association, the Study Abroad Office, the Division of Institutional Diversity, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and the Office of the Provost. The latter should include one or more African American faculty member who is active in study abroad. The committee should be charged with: (1) addressing issues associated with perceived costs, the role of family and friends in the student decision to participate, student perceptions of encountering and navigating racism while abroad, and other issues that may emerge, and (2) offering specific recommendations to the president within 12 months.

Second, we recommend that the Study Abroad Office investigate strategies and related institutional processes to increase the leadership of study abroad opportunities offered by African American faculty and staff. For faculty, the investigation should include collaboration with the Office of the Provost and the university Faculty Council to incentivize study abroad leadership within institutional policies for Appointment, Reappointment, Promotion and Tenure (ARPT). For staff, the investigation should include collaboration with the Staff Advisory Council (SAC).

Third, we recommend that the Study Abroad Office, the Division of Institutional Diversity, and the Office of Multicultural Affairs collaboratively explore mechanisms and channels to deliver targeted, strategic communications related to study abroad to African American students. This exploration should be guided by the principles of social capital theory.

Fourth, we recommend that the president and the provost collectively charter an ad hoc committee that is charged with finding ways to promote greater understanding, across the university, of the roles that social contexts play in educational decisions. The committee should address the relevant stakeholders and/or interest groups on campus, outline specific implementation strategies, and report their findings within 12 months.

Fifth, we recommend that the Study Abroad Office assess the relevance of current international destinations for African American students and explore new destinations that will facilitate greater participation. Similar to the third recommendation, this assessment should be guided by the principles of social capital theory, particularly as they relate to social contexts.

Conclusions

 This study represents a snapshot in time of undergraduate African American students' perceptions of study abroad. Conducted during two semesters at a research university, it was exploratory in nature and designed as an intrinsic case study. Consequently, these site-specific findings are not generalizable to other universities. However, we suspect that the patterns these findings reveal likely hold significant meaning for more than the subject university. Our hope is that other researchers—including institutional researchers and policy analysts—will expand related research by further exploring, in additional contexts, the perceptions and barriers that impact the decision of undergraduate African American students to participate in or reject consideration of study abroad.

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