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# Integrating Study Abroad Research and Practice: First-Generation Students in Focus

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## Research Summary

Research focused on first-generation students' experiences studying abroad is nascent, with all five extant studies published since 2019 (Brunsting, Chiles, et al., 2023). There is strong overlap between first-generation, students of color, and community college students for study abroad participation, as participants in studies were first-generation students of color (Blake et al., 2020; Pai & Wilson, 2019; Wick et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2019) or first-generation community college students (Whatley & Canché, 2022). Taken as a whole, the findings are positive: first-generation students experience similar positive benefits of study abroad as other students, including in their academic performance (Whatley & Canché, 2022), intercultural competence (Pai & Wilson, 2019; Willis et al., 2019), and identity development (Blake et al., 2020; Wick et al., 2019). However, access to longer duration programs still appears to be a challenge for first-generation students (Brunsting, Dietrich, et al., 2023); all five studies focused on short-term (Blake et al., 2020; Pai & Wilson, 2019), summer programs (Wick et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2019), or both (Whatley & Canché, 2022).

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## Key Findings of Research

The reviewed studies yielded four key findings with respect to access, program types, and activities to enhance first-generation students' identity development while abroad. **First**, researchers demonstrated multiple ways to increase these students' access to study abroad, including through creating faculty-embedded short-term programs in multiple continents (Pai & Wilson, 2019), creating summer internship and community engagement programs (Wick et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2019), and providing funding through the Frederick Douglass Global Fellowship (Blake et al., 2020). First-generation Black students reported that they were attracted to the Fellowship because it honored their heritage and signaled that Black students and other students of color were the focal program participants. **Second**, First-generation students traveling to countries where they shared cultural heritage, e.g., Latinx/Hispanic students in Costa Rica, were able to leverage linguistic and cultural knowledge to quickly connect with locals on a summer internship program (Wick et al., 2019). This connection, in turn, led the students to deepen their understanding of their cultural identity and values (Wick et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2019). **Third**, students traveling to countries where they did not share cultural heritage ascribed their ability to engage deeply in part due to their cohort being mostly students of color (Blake et al., 2020). Further, visiting local sites focused on students' heritages enhanced their sense of connection and identity (Blake et al., 2020). Thus, for both those students studying abroad in heritage countries and those who visited sites linked to their background in non-heritage countries, this connection with their ethnoracial background fostered belonging, engagement, cultural self-awareness, and identity development. In these instances, first-generation students could see themselves reflected in the host country culture (Blake et al., 2020; Wick et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2019). **Fourth**, scenario-based prompts at the end of short-term study abroad elicited from participants deep thinking and rich reflections demonstrating their global competency (Pai & Wilson, 2019).

## Practitioner's Interpretation

First-generation college students face more hurdles than many of their peers when it comes to participating in study abroad programs. At the same time, first-generation students often have more to gain from a study abroad experience, as they are less likely to have traveled abroad previously. With targeted efforts, higher education can make studying abroad a reality for an increasing number of first-generation students. Expanding accessibility to study

abroad has been a major goal at Wake Forest University since their 2006 Quality Enhancement Plan, which focused on preparing students to become global citizens. Based on the reviewed research and the success of this plan, we highlight strategies that found to work for Wake Forest's student body that may be adapted to increase study abroad accessibility at a variety of institutions.

### Short-Term Programming Increases Accessibility for First-Generation Students

Our university has observed a large growth in the popularity of short-term study abroad programming over the past few years. Many faculty members find that they can much more easily fit into their schedules a two-week short-term program than they can a full semester or summer program, particularly if they have family commitments. This increase in offerings has been met by an increase in student demand for this type of programming. These programs draw a disproportionate number of first-generation students.

As evidenced in reviewed literature, first-generation students, including at our university, note that these short-term programs are appealing for a number of reasons. First, many first-generation students may have never traveled out of the country before. They often feel much more comfortable traveling abroad with a trusted faculty member for two weeks rather than for an entire semester. Second, a number of students may have family obligations during semesters and the summer. This creates real challenges, e.g., financial restraints, as well as emotional and interpersonal challenges that frequently arise when considering leaving their families for a longer time frame. Finally, traveling in a group led by a faculty member that they know and trust can take away some of the trepidation associated with their first international travel experience.

While research and experience indicate that short-term abroad programs may well enable higher rates of first-generation students to study abroad, these programs are frequently financially inaccessible. It can be much more difficult to get federal financial aid to apply to these sorts of programs, and available scholarships are typically limited as well. Universities should take a holistic view of how to both provide more funding for students attending these programs and make them more affordable to begin with. Limiting the number of faculty leaders and locating programs in nearby and affordable locations such as Central America or the Caribbean are good starting points.

## Help Remove Barriers, Especially Early on in the Study Abroad Process

Because first-generation students may have never travelled, it is worth highlighting that many may not possess passports. Implementing a passport scholarship for students receiving financial aid can go a long way in helping them overcome this hurdle. . This scholarship should not only cover the costs associated with applying for a passport but also involve staff support throughout the application process including travel to the passport application office. It is often reflected that the first step of any journey is the hardest. For students without a passport, acquiring one is often the first step in their journey, making it one of the most daunting steps as well.

The cost and logistics of applying for a passport can be a real challenge for many students with financial need and little experience navigating bureaucratic processes. Conveniently, running a passport scholarship is a relatively affordable program for universities to offer. An investment of less than \$5,000 would allow more than 30 students to acquire an adult passport, which will enable them to travel abroad for ten years. To many first-generation students, a passport is more than just a requirement to travel abroad; it is a concrete item that they can hold in their hands and one which symbolizes access to new opportunities and experiences. If your institution is partnering with a study abroad provider to create a custom or faculty-led program, consider asking if they would provide a matching grant for applicants without a passport.

## Consider Creating Programming Specifically Targeted Towards First-Generation Students

As highlighted in reviewed research, there are a number of factors that contribute to first-generation students' successful participation and engagement in study abroad. These include: faculty-embedded and short-term programming; diverse cohort composition, including of students of heritage connection to the travel destination; considering students' first-generation identity in program design; and integrating reflection before, during, and after travel. All four of these factors were essential to the success of a Community Based Global Learning program at Wake Forest University where 14 first-generation students studied abroad in Ecuador during spring break of 2020, just before all university travel was halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Applying such success factors in study abroad programs where first-

generation students can take part requires a lot of preparation and work. As our experience suggests, it also requires significant subsidization, plausibly through numerous departments across an institution to make the programs accessible for the target demographic. These factors may make such programs unrealistic for many universities and study abroad offices. If this is the case, offices should consider what other options might be available. Could they partner with another institution to increase enrollment and reduce costs? Are there affiliate program options that they could market specifically to their first-generation students to remove administrative barriers? Are there departments on campus tasked directly with supporting first-generation students? If so, how could these departments aid in funding, administering, and marketing such a program?

### Future Research Questions Useful to Practitioners

Based on the preceding findings and interpretations, we contend that developing answers to the following questions will be useful to practitioners working with first-generation students who (wish to) participate in study abroad: Does participation in short-term study abroad programs lead to increased participation in semester programs? Does traveling abroad in a highly structured cohort-based program lead to similar levels of intercultural competency development as participating in a more independent program? What role do first-generation students' peer groups play in encouraging (or discouraging) them to study abroad?

### Conclusion

The early stages of research into first-generation students' study abroad access, experiences, and outcomes is a great starting point to guiding practitioners in the field as we strive to improve accessibility and the abroad experiences for this underrepresented group. Intentionality in program design and implementation can go a long way in assisting students as they navigate the study abroad process. Particular attention should be given to roadblocks early in the process to preempt frustration before students have invested time and energy to push through these challenges. Study abroad offices should seek out collaborations with scholars' offices, intercultural centers, and other departments familiar with and dedicated to the success of first-generation student experience. These offices can provide invaluable knowledge and ideas, and they can potentially provide financial and administrative support as well. Of course, it is of the utmost importance to listen closely to our students about

their challenges and successes as we continue to learn how to best support them.

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## Author Biography

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