

Study Abroad Programming: A 21st Century Retention Strategy?

Christy A. Metzger*

Preparing the workforce for an increasingly global economy is among the leading concerns in higher education, and retention of students is vital to successfully managing this economic shift. Study abroad programming consistently yields positive outcomes that span these three levels and may very well be a retention strategy that has been previously been overlooked. This article examines and compares retention and study abroad literature to highlight strong similarities in the factors that affect retention compared to the variables that are positively influenced by international study. The subsequent analysis explores how institutions can thoughtfully integrate study abroad programming as an effective retention strategy.

Bateson (1990), in her book *Composing a Life*, argued that the primary function of education today “is not to confirm what is but to equip young men and women to meet, change and imagine what could be, recognizing the value in what they encounter and steadily working it into their lives and visions” (p. 74). In today’s progressively more global society, few would argue that graduates must be engaged, informed, and effective world citizens who can adapt quickly to their ever-changing environments.

Steve Hipple of the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics predicts that by the year 2012 the number of jobs that require advanced skills will grow at twice the rate of those positions that require only basic skills (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). Also, the value of education is increasing dramatically. For instance, in 1999 the median college graduate earned 76% more than the median high school graduate, up from only a 38% differential 20 years prior (Stiglitz, Tyson, Orszag, & Orszag, 2000). It is now increasingly important for members of the workforce to hold a bachelor’s degree. Norfles (2003) stated, “Today few would question that to be competitive at the postsecondary level and in the workplace, international awareness, exposure and language training are truly advantageous” (p. 9).

The need for an educated citizenry is rapidly increasing, but degree attainment for minority students still shows cause for concern (Carey, 2004; Lotkowski et al., 2004). [Note: In this literature review, unless otherwise specified the terms “minority,” and “underrepresented” will be used interchangeably to describe the population of students who are underrepresented in both university and study abroad enrollment. As per the TRIO Program guidelines, underrepresented students are comprised of African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, and American

* Christy A. Metzger works with First-Year Experience Programs at University of Louisville. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to christy.metzger@louisville.edu.

Indians/Alaskan Natives, as well as students who meet the qualifications for low income and first-generation status, regardless of ethnicity (Humphrey, Carey, & Mansfield, 2002).] While one study revealed that African American and Hispanic students both are reaching degree status an average of 10% less frequently than their Caucasian counterparts (Carey, 2004), Lotkowski et al. (2004) reported even larger disparities. They reported an approximate 18% gap between the completion rates for both African Americans and Hispanics versus Caucasians. Carey (2004) warned that the lack of degree attainment can be considered a “national dilemma,” especially considering ACT’s statistic that within 30 years African American and Hispanic citizens will constitute roughly 30% of the U.S. population. Sharing Carey’s concern, Lotkowski et al. (2004) stated that “low retention rates waste human talent and resources, jeopardize our nation’s economic future, and threaten the economic viability of our postsecondary institutions and our country’s democratic future” (p. 2).

If the United States hopes to hold its position as a leader in the world economy, it is essential for institutions of higher learning to produce graduates who are prepared to compete in this international market. At the same time universities must address the problem of fewer minority students entering and successfully completing degree programs. Although resolution of this problem is not reached through a single policy or initiative program, study abroad programs may serve as one strategy for improving degree attainment for minority students.

Retention Research

General Research Related to Retention

Tinto (1993) developed the student departure theory in an endeavor to explain why some students leave college before degree attainment. In Tinto’s (1993) perspective, retention is an interaction of personal (student) characteristics with community (institutional) factors that lead to students’ perceptions of a rewarding or unrewarding experience at the institution and their subsequent decision to stay or go. In short, Tinto proposed that colleges are comprised of clusters of social and intellectual communities to which faculty, staff, and students belong. He defined persistence as “a process of social and intellectual integration leading to the establishment of competent membership in those communities” (p. 121). Conversely, departure from college is reflective of “the unwillingness and/or inability of the individual to become integrated and therefore establish membership in the communities of the college” (p. 121).

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) arrived at similar conclusions to Tinto’s (1993), and added that all members of the campus community can help improve student retention by supporting the university’s mission. Braxton et al. believed that institutional integrity (demonstrated when the actions of university administration, faculty, and staff are in alignment with the institution’s mission and goals) is an important retention factor. They highlighted the importance of the implicit messages that colleges and universities are imparting to their constituents

by stating, "Because the actions of administrators, faculty, and staff shape both the integrity of the institution and the institution's commitment to the welfare of its students, we view these influences as reflective of an organizational perspective on student departure" (p. 28).

While retention theory describes the overarching social and academic factors that affect student departure, the individual variables that most influence integration and subsequently retention must be examined. The Office of Policy Research at ACT completed a meta-analysis for the purpose of better understanding these factors (Lotkowski et al., 2004). Authors of the ACT report reviewed 109 retention studies of full-time students at four-year institutions (with data spanning 20 years) to determine how pre-college and post-enrollment factors influence a student's decision to remain in school. All variables were given a numeric value to demonstrate the strength of that individual component's relationship to retention (Lotkowski et al., 2004). Researchers found that while pre-college factors of high school GPA (.246), ACT Assessment scores (.124) and socioeconomic status (.228) had positive correlations to retention, the correlation was most powerful when post-enrollment factors of academic goals (.340), academic self-confidence (.359), institutional commitment (.262), social support (.257), and social involvement (.216) were also considered with the pre-college factors. This combination represented a full 17% of the variability of retention across students. Like Tinto (1993) and Braxton et al. (2004), Lotkowski et al. (2004) recommended that universities "take an integrated approach to retention efforts that incorporates both academic and non-academic factors into the design and development of programs" to create an "inclusive and supportive academic environment that addresses the social, emotional and academic needs of the students" (p. viii).

Minority Student Retention

Although this research by Tinto and ACT offers a snapshot of why students do or do not remain in college, it does not specifically address why minority students are dropping out at higher rates than students whose parent or parents attended college. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini (2004) reported academic outcomes are weaker for first generation students because they do not enter college with the same levels of cultural and social capital that other students do. Pascarella et. al defined cultural capital as "the degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the dominant culture of society" (p. 252) and social capital as a kind of understanding and knowledge that is transferred through interactions with other, more knowing individuals, and which serves to formally and informally impart important values and skills to the recipient.

Pascarella et. al (2004) found that due to a shortage of cultural capital, first generation students are more likely to be "handicapped in accessing and understanding information and attitudes" (p. 252) surrounding choice of college, importance of degree attainment, and the best way to participate in the academic and social environments of the institution. A lack of cultural and social capital

leads to a less influential college experience and, therefore, inhibits cognitive and psychosocial outcomes for first generation students.

The research by Tinto (1993) and Lotkowski et al., (2004) emphasized the importance of institutions' assisting the first generation students in making the most beneficial social and academic choices. The recommendation by Pascarella et al. mirrors that of Tinto (1993) and Lotkowski et al. (2004), but they are presented from the perspective of retention of minority students. Pascarella et al. (2004) stated that: "the social capital gained through extracurricular and peer involvement during college may be a particularly useful way for first-generation students to acquire the additional cultural capital that helps them succeed academically and benefit cognitively" (p. 278). If institutions of higher education do not consider these dynamics in minority students, they risk not preparing the kind of capable, educated employees that our changing economy needs.

Study Abroad Research

Tinto (1993), Lotkowski et al. (2004) and Pascarella et al. (2004) recommended that institutions develop programs that more positively and significantly affect social and intellectual opportunities for all (and especially minority) students. Research on international education has consistently found that students who participate in study abroad programs experience lasting effects across a wide variety of academic and personal/social growth categories (Astin, 1993b; Byrnes, Mrozinske, & Rojo, 2004; Dwyer, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Opper, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990; Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2002; Thot, 1998; Younes & Asay, 2003). The vast majority of students who go abroad characterize their experiences as positive overall, and many consider it life-changing. Further, some colleges and universities are recognizing the positive cognitive and psychosocial benefits of study abroad for their students and are increasingly promoting international study as a strategy for preparing students for success in the global marketplace (Dwyer, 2004; Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002; G. Woodruff, personal communication, June 21, 2005).

While there is little research to document the study abroad outcomes for Caucasian versus minority students, research does suggest that minority students are less internationally oriented and less confident in their ability to adapt to foreign cultures (Hembroff & Rusz, 1993). Hembroff and Rusz surveyed roughly 1,200 college students at one institution and discovered that African American students are significantly less likely to have visited countries outside of the U.S., to have traveled within the U.S., or to have known friends that have done so. The data also revealed that the underrepresented students are more fearful of travel outside of the United States, are more concerned about potential language barriers than their Caucasian counterparts, and are less likely to be informed about study abroad opportunities. Further, the research indicated that the less students have traveled outside of the U.S., the less interest, understanding or positive attitudes they have regarding international relations (Hembroff & Rusz, 1993).

Opper et al. (1990) revealed that students with lower levels of preparedness and interest might receive the largest positive net gain from study abroad. They reported that students who are less globally oriented and less self-confident are prone to experiencing more dramatic change along the lines of international orientation and self-efficacy.

Unfortunately, minorities are grossly underrepresented in the study abroad population. African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans comprised roughly 3%, 5%, and 0.5%, respectively, of the total study abroad participation in 2002-03 (*Profile of US Study Abroad Students*, 2004). These figures have remained relatively unchanged for the past 10 years.

Although the numbers may look bleak, some institutions and organizations are actively working to close the gap in participation by addressing the complex set of barriers for minority participants that have been identified, including insufficient financial resources; fear; and lack of information, family support, and/or institutional support (G. Woodruff, personal communication, June 21, 2005; Norfles, 2003). Two excellent examples being implemented to address barriers are a program by the Council for Opportunity in Education (Norfles, 2003) and one program at the University of Minnesota.

Based on the assumption that minority and low-income students should have access to the same international experiences as other students, in 2000 the Council for Opportunity in Education launched a TRIO programs initiative to increase opportunity for study abroad to underrepresented students (Norfles, 2003). In part based on this, professionals at the University of Minnesota started a grassroots effort to improve participation of students of color in study abroad by creating the Multicultural Study Abroad Group (MSAG) in 2001. Members of MSAG commented on their strategy: "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" (Woodruff, Doan, Hoff, Hall, Troupe & Hernandez, 2004, p. 7). Their efforts have been successful. In 2003-2004 on the Twin Cities campus, the number of minority students studying abroad increased from 120 to 212. MSAG has amassed significant anecdotal evidence that the minority students who study abroad are staying on campus, becoming more involved in campus activities, becoming peer mentors/tutors, and graduating in numbers that may be higher than their counterparts who do not go abroad (G. Woodruff, personal communication, June 21, 2005). This recent insight has prompted speculation that study abroad opportunities are positively influencing the retention rates of minority students at the University of Minnesota.

Retention and Study Abroad: Comparing Outcomes

Astin (1993a) reported the results of a four-year longitudinal study involving over 25,000 students from approximately 200 U.S. colleges and universities. Astin measured the effects that cultural awareness workshops had on participants and discovered a positive correlation between workshop participation and undergraduate retention (as defined by completion of a bachelor's degree) and student satisfaction with the undergraduate experience and the six measures of academic development of (a) critical thinking, (b) general knowledge, (c) public speaking ability, (d) listening ability, (e) writing ability, and (f) preparation for graduate school (1993a). Although results did not indicate a direct link between retention and study abroad, others have reported that cultural awareness workshops and study abroad result in improved social awareness (Cash, 1993; Day-Vines, Barker, & Exum, 1998; Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002; Opper, Teichler, & Carson, 1990; Paige, et al., 2002; Thot, 1998).

Academic Goals and Academic Self-Confidence

Pascarella et al. (2004) reported that being a first generation student has consistently negative effects on degree plans at the end of the second and third years of school, but students who participate in study abroad programs often experience a clarification or validation of career goals (Dwyer, 2004; Opper et al., 1990; Younes & Asay, 2003). Many students have reported that their academic performance in a study abroad program was better than it would have been at home (Opper et al., 1990) or that they learned and will retain the material to a greater degree than if they had been taught in a U.S. classroom (Younes & Asay, 2003).

Younes and Asay (2003) found that the structure of study abroad programs appeals to different learning styles and noted that the students' learning "seemed to take place at many different levels, challenging them personally and academically" (p. 146). Opper et al., (1990) reported that stronger critical thinking skills and a higher valuation of different schools of thought result from study abroad. Further, Day-Vines et al. (1998) reported increased academic achievement and motivation in African American students returning from study abroad programs as demonstrated through greater involvement in intellectual activities and improved post-study grade point averages.

Improved self-confidence and self-efficacy are regularly listed as positive outcomes of study abroad (Byrnes et al., 2004; Opper et al., 1990; Younes & Asay, 2003). In first generation and minority students, this outcome has a more measurable impact on retention than among majority students (Pascarella et al., 2004). Individuals who work directly with minority students have noted the shock that students traveling abroad for the first time experience when they are treated as Americans first and "as intelligent students who have earned the right to be studying in the host country" (Starlett, 1998, p. 89). Another advisor reports a similar sentiment in her minority students who feel as if they have spent their lives having their

intelligence and abilities questioned, have been seen as inferior, and have come to accept this role. For these students, study abroad challenged this belief, and the students returned to the U.S. with an improved and more accurate self-image and a new perspective on academic and professional opportunities (Carew, 1993). All of the research reported here points to the important role study abroad program can have for minority students.

Social Involvement

Peer groups and social adjustment play an extremely important role in retention (Astin, 1993b; Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993). As a minority at a predominantly White campus, it may be difficult for a student to feel integrated into the social fabric of the university. Study abroad experiences can help students see commonalities and, as a result, focus less on race. Carew (1993) stated about her Caucasian and minority participants that “all the students... for the first time in their lives were able to step outside the confines of racial barriers long enough to see themselves – and those they meet – from a perspective other than race” (p. B3).

Additionally, study abroad participants exhibit an improved ability to interact with others (Cash, 1993), develop stronger communication skills through better understanding of other cultures (Snider, Malone & Bachner, 2001), and may show an increased tolerance for uncertainty (Dwyer, 2004). These positive changes increase the likelihood that students will feel successful charting new and unfamiliar territory, especially minority students who are beginning to accumulate the social and cultural capital they might have been lacking at the start of their college careers.

Returning study abroad participants also placed increased importance on developing relationships with faculty outside of class (Opper et al., 1990), and research indicated that faculty-student interaction is critical to the retention of students (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993). When students can carry these liberating and empowering experiences back to campus, they may feel more confidence establishing new and strengthened social networks with faculty members and students.

Social Support

Little to no research directly measures study abroad participants' subsequent perception of the level of social support that the institution provides. Braxton et al. (2004) indicated,

An institution committed to the welfare of its students also clearly communicates the high value it places on students in groups as well as individuals. The equal treatment of students and respect for them as individuals constitute additional aspects of this construct. (p. 22)

One can hypothesize from the retention data presented previously that if a staff or faculty member is integral in supporting students and/or participates in the experience of the study abroad program, students may connect the positive outcomes of study abroad with institutional support. If an institution values multiculturalism and encourages divergent world views, this philosophy should be reflected by the university's support of study abroad programs and could help minority students feel valued. Specific programs designed to encourage and support underrepresented students in study abroad could additionally enhance the minority students' perception that the administration makes student welfare a priority.

Institutional Commitment

Study abroad researchers also have spent little time measuring returnees' subsequent confidence in and satisfaction with institutional choice. Nevertheless, Astin (1993a) reported that emphasizing diversity positively affects overall student satisfaction with the college experience, satisfaction with student life, opportunities to take interdisciplinary courses, and the quality of instruction. Students who recognize in themselves academic and personal growth as a result of the university's multicultural emphasis and study abroad programming may be more likely to be satisfied with their institutional choice.

Tinto (1993) argued that student perceptions are of paramount importance in retention. Universities that make considerable effort to educate students regarding study abroad opportunities, assist students in acquiring financial aid to fund the program, and place high value on multicultural and holistic education are more likely to retain minority students than are universities that do not make these efforts. As McNairy (1996) noted, "The challenge in retaining students of color is to refrain from 'fixing the student' and to focus on institutional change reflecting a commitment to examine and, when appropriate, revise policies, power relationships, curriculum, support services, campus climate, and environment" (Author abstract, 1).

Study Abroad as a Retention Strategy

The strong similarities in the student characteristics that affect retention compared to the variables that are positively influenced by study abroad programs indicate that study abroad program participation for minority students could positively affect retention. As such, institutions should explore how to integrate study abroad programming as an effective retention strategy. The MSAG program at Minnesota is one such example that achieves this integration.

Gayle Woodruff, curriculum integration director at the University of Minnesota and a founding member of the Multicultural Study Abroad Group, indicated that an integrated approach has been critical to their success. Woodruff shared, "If there is anything to be gained from the Minnesota model, it is the partnership that is taking place [between faculty, advisors and student affairs staff]. We are all

teachers and learners on campus” (personal communication, June 21, 2005). Although MSAG did not intentionally replicate retention strategies when they developed a plan of action, their program’s successful tactics for increasing study abroad opportunities for minority students are remarkably similar to Braxton et al.’s (2004) seven guidelines for an integrated design approach to retention (2004, p. 67-69). Below are highlights of the MSAG program and how the program illustrated Braxton et al.’s guidelines for developing an integrated approach to retention.

“Guideline One: Many small policy levers rather than one single policy lever should be developed” (Braxton et al., p. 67). This includes treating students equally, making sure that university practices are aligned with its mission, and insuring that students receive the appropriate level of financial aid. Minnesota’s “policy levers” include prioritizing equal access to international study for underrepresented students; undertaking extensive campus-wide efforts at internationalization and including study abroad, a natural but sometimes overlooked component, in this endeavor; and earmarking money for study abroad programming and scholarships.

“Guideline Two: The policies and practices developed should embrace one or more of Tinto’s three principles of effective retention” (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 68). University of Minnesota administration demonstrates a commitment to the equal education of all students by devoting extensive resources to the Multicultural Study Abroad Group. Additionally, the MSAG staff members share their knowledge and information openly with other professionals in an attempt to improve not only their institution but also learning communities across the nation.

“Guidelines Three and Four: Wholehearted support from the president, chief academic officer, and chief student affairs officer is necessary and all members of the administration and staff need to have a stake in the success of the retention efforts” (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 68). Woodruff (personal communication, June 21, 2005) attributed MSAG’s successes to the merging of a “powerful vision” coming from the top leadership [president and provost] with “an enthusiastic grassroots effort” that includes other dedicated University of Minnesota professionals from all four campuses.

“Guideline Five: Policies and practices empower students to take responsibility for their own college success” (Braxton et al., p. 68). This includes students taking the initiative to help their peers and themselves meet educational goals. Many students who go abroad indicate that faculty members and study abroad alumni were most influential in helping make the decision (Slind, 2004). Minnesota students interested in studying abroad now have easier access to knowledgeable faculty, academic advisors, and returned students with whom they can discuss this important decision. These networks of peer and mentor guidance can work to relieve student fears and misinformation about international study, to improve recruitment, and to increase social support before departure and upon return.

“Guideline Six: Some student departures may be in the best interest of the student or the institution” (Braxton et al., 2004 p. 68). There is no one perfect program for all

students, and international study is not the correct choice for every person. MSAG offers a wealth of resources to help educate interested students about available options and to select a program that best fits their goals. With advisors and faculty across campus trained to discuss study abroad options, dialogue occurs, and students begin making informed decisions about what is right for them.

"Guideline Seven: Enacted policies and practices should be assessed for their effectiveness" (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 68). Woodruff (personal communication, September 14, 2006) shared that "initially anecdotal evidence indicating possible trends was considered and used for focusing subsequent quantitative data collection." In the past two years, MSAG has received enough responses from students of color to be able to report those results independent of the aggregate data. Factors which Woodruff and her staff assess include students' overall attitudes toward and understanding of study abroad, their decision-making behaviors regarding choice to study abroad, and time to graduation for students who studied abroad as compared to those who did not.

Conclusion

With the reality that degree attainment and sufficient preparedness are impacting employability, minorities are at serious risk of being left behind economically and socially, and our nation is at risk of falling behind in a rapidly progressive global marketplace (Carey, 2004). Federally funded postsecondary institutions are legally required to insure equal access of all students, but this may not be a reality on many campuses. To facilitate change in retention rates, colleges and universities must examine how the college experience, at all levels, is not meeting the needs of its minority students. In *The Quest for Equity in Higher Education*, Spanier and Crowe (2001) stated that

universities must take a comprehensive approach to the pursuit of equity..., and the wide range of educational and climate issues that pertain to equity in experience within our learning communities also must be addressed through policy and related program initiatives. (p. 225)

The problem of retention is ill-structured with no one solution. It is a complex mix of personal and environmental factors. Certainly the disparity in numbers of Caucasian and minority students who study abroad brings to the table an issue of equity that must be considered. The research and arguments presented in this literature review yield considerable evidence that study abroad may be another way for institutions to positively impact retention rates. Often such a suggestion is met with resistance and a litany of "insurmountable barriers," not the least of which is a paucity of funding. However Slind (2004) urged, "Even in an institution where resources are limited, if the study abroad advising office and the institution provide support and inspiration, relevant information, and an internal and external network of assistance, our diversification efforts will be successful" (p.3).

Because the relationship between study abroad programs and retention has not been explored, extensive research possibilities exist. As this relationship is explored, the information obtained can and should affect policymaking and institutional commitment to international learning. Institutions express strong commitments to equal educational opportunity, valuing diversity, and creating thriving multicultural communities, but with such disparities between Caucasian and minority students in the retention and study abroad participation rates, colleges and universities have much work to do before they achieve these commitments.

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