African Studies Abroad: Meaning and Impact of America's Burgeoning Export Industry

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American education operates as an export industry, as indicated by the proliferation of American study abroad programs in Africa and the influx of Africans seeking degrees from American universities. In this article, we have used statistics (from the Institute for International Education (IIE)'s *Open Doors* and NAFSA/SECUSSA) compiled to track this educational exchange and estimate economic investments made by students and their host institutions into the socio-geographical areas in which the programs take place. These statistics, coupled with the authors' experiences in directing study abroad programs, suggest the urgency of adopting more equitable models of reciprocity. Commensurate with our desire to see more American students engaged in African studies at home and abroad, we further emphasize the need for a re-invigoration and deployment of the concept of "capacity building" to achieve such ideals. This entails examining the economics of exchanges, but also reconsidering the social and intellectual impacts of the ways in which study abroad programs are conceived and implemented.

According to IIE statistics for the year 2000-2001, foreign students were responsible for a net contribution to the United States' national economy of $11.04 billion, derived from tuition and fees, room and board, entertainment, and other purchases.[1] That figure is in itself quite important, as 67 percent of all foreign students, and over 80 percent of all international undergraduates, finance their education in the United States from personal and family sources (see *Open Doors*).We have inferred from these figures that the 34,217 African students, accounting for 6.25

percent of the total number of foreign students in the United States that year, contributed, conservatively, $690 million. Overall, 73 percent of international students at all levels of higher education receive most of their funding for their sojourn in the United States from sources outside of the United States. However, the amount contributed by foreign students to the US economy takes on increasing salience when compared to the number of U.S. students studying abroad in Africa during the calendar year, and the sorts of contributions they make to the areas where they study.

Based on the most recent statistics available at the time of writing, *Open Doors* counted 3,969 U.S. students abroad for some length of time in Africa during the 1999-2000 academic year.[2] To our knowledge, there does not yet exist a database that has compiled the costs of study abroad programs along with the net contributions of American students to their African destinations, but we estimate that the net contributions of these students to their African host countries for that year would be between US $15-18 million, or 2.1-2.5% of what African students contributed to the U.S. economy during that same period. This estimate is based on average costs for study abroad programs of variable durations (ranging from about three weeks to the entire academic year), as well as estimates of average student spending on entertainment and elements of material culture outside of program costs.

A number of the study abroad programs catering to U.S. students are based within U.S. institutions, which means that a portion of the costs of these study abroad programs in Africa remains with or is repatriated to the sponsoring U.S. institutions in the form of tuition, fees, U.S. faculty and staff salaries, and administrative overhead. Given this return of revenue to the U.S., certain U.S.-sponsored study abroad programs in Africa can be seen to fit into the model of higher education as export industry.

Proposed as an alternative to this unequal exchange, some current programs foster direct student exchanges between specific African and American universities. This arrangement allows African students studying in the U.S. to pay the tuition of their home institution in Africa. This is, in almost all cases, a far lower amount than U.S.-based institutions charge for tuition. Thus, it can be said that African exchange students save money on tuition expenses at U.S. institutions, given that they would not have to pay the usually substantially higher tuition rates of the U.S. colleges where they study during the exchange. On the other side of such an exchange, American students studying in Africa also pay their home institution tuition rates directly to their home institutions. Although these rates are usually far higher (especially for private colleges and universities) than tuition rates at African institutions, the tuition costs do not usually serve as an encumbrance for the American students who have been paying them (either with or without financial assistance) throughout their college careers. As such, this system is "clean" in the sense that the students involved do not have financial responsibilities outside the parameters of their home institutions.

One effect of direct student exchanges, however, is that such exchanges yield no financial benefit to the African institutions. A participating African institution receives the American students, who join the other students at the institution in standard courses of study. If an American student requires services beyond the services usually offered at the African institution (for example, psychological counseling), the direct enrollment of the American student becomes a potential additional cost for the African institution. In short, what is seen to be beneficial to the individual African student (relatively low cost of home-based tuition payments, as opposed to U.S. institution tuition rates) becomes a potential burden for the African student's home institution. The participating U.S. institution, by comparison, does not experience the same magnitude of economic burden in this exchange. Unless additional funding is provided to the African institution to support the American students during their exchange program, the exchange runs the risk of reducing funds available to African students studying at their own institution, by assuming additional costs of services for American students. This is not to slight the idea of such exchanges, but merely to note that, currently, the impact of these exchanges is felt in ways not often fully realized.

It appears to be beyond question, then, that higher education as an export industry is "good business" for the U.S. This sentiment has been echoed by numerous representatives of international education consortia. For example, Thomas Harvey, IIE's Senior Counsel for Government Affairs, stated a few years ago:

> Nearly 500,000 foreign students study in the United States each year. The department of Commerce considers this an

> export of services valued at $7.5 billion dollars annually. Other countries have for years been seeking to encroach on the United States' market share for foreign study. For purely economic reasons, the U.S. should protect this market share.[3]

Today, with over 547,000 foreign students and more than $11 billion per annum at issue, American education as export industry has become our *chasse gardée*. Aside from the fiscal contributions that African students make to the United States while earning their degrees, Robert Scott emphasizes that once they return home, they may become corporate leaders who make ideal contacts for U.S. exporters or U.S. businesses looking to locate abroad: "An international student who leaves [the United States] with a good feeling is a life-long advertisement for the [U.S. business] community".[4]

Mulling over a great deal of the literature on the motivations for welcoming foreign students into the United States, as well as promoting study abroad among U.S. students, we have been overwhelmed by the ubiquity of bald economic claims of profitability and boiled down economic metaphors to talk about what *should* also be seen as the possibility for intellectual exchange on a less overtly materialist front. In other words, what we are suggesting is that there is something deeper at stake, if you will, than the exchange of currency and the expansion of profit margins.

In this spirit, we want to focus here specifically on U.S. study abroad programs to Africa, and we are calling for a re-invigoration of the phrase "capacity building". The term "capacity building" has become common parlance throughout Africa, and yet due to overuse in various development schemes, it has become a somewhat blunted concept. In its most general sense, "capacity building" refers to a process by which members of a community become enabled to oversee necessary functions of management or governance, as well as provide particular services in a sustainable or long-term manner. More specifically, as we are using the term, "capacity building" must also promote equitable access to key resources relevant to participants in a given program or project, as well as address the power relationships between and among the people and institutions involved. Our attempt here is to apply the concept of "capacity building", especially given the latter criteria, to illustrate what can be described as ethical components of our current trans-Atlantic dialogue; we want to once again raise the issue of reciprocity in this ongoing conversation on international educational exchange, and suggest ways in which our vision of capacity building goes hand in hand with certain ideals of reciprocity. In this effort, we are not restricting ourselves to reciprocity between educational institutions, nor, necessarily, to capacity building of only generally state-run educational institutions. Opportunities, responsibilities, and capacities exist across the range of institutions, organizations, agencies, and communities that contribute to successful cross-cultural learning environments.

From the U.S. end, as educators preparing to send American students, faculty, and staff to study abroad in Africa, we must seriously engage them and ourselves in notions of responsibility – certainly during the period of the study abroad program, but also for the long-term. As has been discussed at length in a variety of forums, study abroad programs should not be facilitators of cultural voyeurism; they should be sincere efforts to learn – and, where necessary, to learn *how to* learn – by acquiring the sorts of skills that enable one to be sensitive, responsive, connective, and reflective. That is a crucial part of capacity building for all participants in study abroad programs. To employ a cliché, students must be prepared to "give back," but so also should their U.S.-based program administrators and faculty members.

Now more than ever before, the first place North America-based universities can look in trying to assist in capacity building for Africa-based study programs is the university to which students are headed. A growing number of universities in Africa are placing increased emphasis on international program offices as a source of potential programming and revenue. By acknowledging the programmatic and student service support provided by international programs offices, and by themselves supporting such offices, North America-based universities and colleges have the opportunity to directly build capacity, both programmatically and financially, at these host institutions. As international programs offices are more fundamentally integrated into program planning, administrators from these offices begin to develop a broader network of US-based university contacts. One nascent example of this networking is the NAFSA group AfriSIG (Africa Special Interest Group), at whose annual conference sessions one can find increasing representation from African institutions.

In addition to international programs offices located within and managed by African universities, there exist a number of organizations and agencies that possess the kinds of capacity needed to successfully operate educational exchange programs, either on their own, or in conjunction with universities. These groups address ideals of reciprocity and, in some instances, offer model programs that demonstrate ways in which reciprocity can work. In Senegal, both the Baobab Training and Resource Center and the West African Research Centre have long worked with the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (in Dakar) and other universities while maintaining their own freestanding programs. In Ghana, SYTO (formerly Students and Youth Travel Organization) works with Ghana's public universities (Legon, Cape Coast, Kumasi, and Tamale), designs and operates its own freestanding exchange and student work programs, and assists in organizing programs for non-Ghanaian colleges and universities. East Africa-based examples include a number of organizations carrying out a range of educational exchange and development work. Tawasal Institute in Lamu and Mombasa, and the United African American Community Center (UAACC) near Arusha, offer their own programs, as well as assistance in operating US-designed study programs.

Sometimes, in working with groups such as those mentioned above, a U.S.-based institution or faculty member may be required or, alternatively, find it beneficial to cede some control and allow local organizations within the African country of focus to assume responsibility for planning and running all or some portion of the program. This statement seems quite simple and obvious on the surface, but indeed gets at issues of power and authority. Specific examples of such issues may include: who sets the parameters of program and course content? Should this power be kept in the hands of U.S.-based educators, who are, after all, beholden to their institutions' accreditation demands? Should content oversight for academic courses and programs ever be turned over to non-academics, or organizations that concentrate less than fully on "academic matters"? Who, if anyone, holds the keys to the education the students receive? If "receive" is too passive a word for the educational process, what more active role do or should students play in their education? And, if students are to be viewed as active learners in their experiences, which other participants in the development and delivery of a program merit being viewed as active?

If program coordination and on-site duties are meted out to "professional" organizations/agencies, there are potential hazards to the "professionalization" of study abroad programs. For instance, a monopoly over study abroad in a particular country or region could have deleterious effects on the quality and creativity of study abroad experiences, as an industrialized or output-based study abroad program in which individual students become units of consumption and payment would deny the sort of "capacity building" ideals we mentioned earlier.

Further fragmentation or proliferation of independent programs without some sort of coordination does, however, run the risk of needlessly reinventing the wheel (or, worse yet, failing to even be able to do so), and/or conflicting with other programs running in the same region. An example: when we led a study abroad program to Kenya in 1995, our 18 students unintentionally met up with another group of American students on a similar program in a rural area near Lake Victoria. Many of our students recoiled in horror, having felt that their "authentic" experience had somehow been soiled by running into another (and, many of our students assumed, less savvy) group of Americans. Their reactions beg the question of what we promise – or at least what we neglect to address – as we recruit our American students to sign up for study abroad programs. Here again, we see an opportunity for our "capacity building" principles to enable us *as the educators* to provide a more realistic impression of the socio-economic realities of the regions we visit, and increase our students, as well as our own, sensitivities to the reliance of these regions on our foreign revenue.

In connection with the above example, and at both of the aforementioned extremes – that of monopoly over and increasing fragmentation of study abroad programs – there is a risk of relying too heavily on what we can call "default locales" and thus a potential burgeoning of its corollary: host community fatigue. The simple comparison of the number of U.S.-based colleges and universities to the number of colleges and universities in any African country, even when discounting for the relatively low number of U.S.-based institutions which send students to Africa, leaves a significant burden for the receiving African institution and/or favored regions and communities. This imbalance is exacerbated even further when looking at "default locales," such as South Africa (37 universities and *technikons*), Kenya (one primary university study abroad site at the University of Nairobi), Ghana (three primary university study abroad sites – at Legon, Cape Coast and Kumasi), and Senegal (two primary university study abroad sites – at universities in Dakar and St. Louis). It seems self-evident that some manner of additional assistance, as provided by the kind of organizations mentioned above, is needed for already under-funded and over-burdened universities. Given this need, those proposing study abroad programs from the U.S. to Africa should review any assumptions they have in program design and delivery, and expand their notion of what study abroad is and can be.

Figuring out how to sustain "good" study abroad programs and ensure "profitability" for African host communities and institutions address the ideals of capacity building and reciprocity discussed above. The National Consortium for Study in Africa (NCSA) has set forth guidelines for high quality study abroad programs in Africa. Among their recommendations is "a strong commitment in the development and administration of all programs – short and long-term – to mutually-beneficial collaborative relationships with African universities, other tertiary institutions, and any relevant local NGOs".[5] Their more specific recommendations of what they call "genuine reciprocity" include the following, all of which speak to means of capacity building:

- one-to-one exchange of undergraduate students;
- graduate education for staff development;
- opportunities for short-term faculty study-leaves;
- other academic resources (computers, laboratory equipment, books, journals, etc.);
- depositing fees charged to participants in foreign currency accounts in the United States for host institutions to use for their foreign currency needs.[6]

We applaud and echo these recommendations, and then request a focus on another integral part of many, if not most, study abroad experiences: African host families. We must strive to ensure that the host families also experience some semblance of "profitability" – to greatly understate, they must not by any means suffer an economic loss by accepting foreign students into their homes, and, further, they should ideally gain something from the social interactions and experiences of welcoming into their homes engaged learners from another country. Accomplishing these social and economic ideals of profitability is what we mean by "capacity building" – preparing both students and host families with some ideas of what they can expect while also encouraging a long-term commitment to understanding and appreciating these sorts of exchanges beyond their economic components. As we are able to accomplish this at the level of the individual student and homestay family, perhaps we better enable ourselves to achieve similarly at organizational and institutional levels.

Notes

[1]These figures are available at www.nafsa.org/content/Public Policy/DataonInternationalEducation/factsfigues.htm, www.opendoorsweb.org.

[2]These figures are available at http://www.opendoorsweb.org/2001%20Files/23TABLE_edited.htm

[3]From "International Education Policy – A Statement from Thomas Harvey, Senior Counsel for Governmental Affairs, IIE", available at http://www.iie.org/iie/tharvey.htm

[4]Robert L. Scott, "International Students: Are Communities Paying Attention?" in *Open Doors 1994/95: Report on International Educational Exchange*, ed. Todd. M. Davis (New York: Institute of International Education, 1995). See also Jennifer Coffman "Study Abroad in Africa Considered within the New World Economy" in *African Issues* XXVIII/1&2 (2002).

[5]Available at http://www.isp.msu.edu/ncsa/guidelines.htm

[6]Ibid.