Research Article

Peer Mentoring and the Importance of Identity Work: A Case Study on Increasing Study Abroad Participation Among African American Students

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Abstract

This article presents a longitudinal case study of efforts to increase participation of African American students who study abroad within an undergraduate business program. Based on an initial assessment, programmatic efforts were put into place and the impact measured across a five-year period. Results show that specific program changes that leverage peer mentoring and identity work substantially increased study abroad participation among African American business students. Key aspects of effective and inclusive program design along with the importance of peer-to-peer mentoring and identity work are discussed In terms of their role in reducing racial disparities in study abroad participation.

Keywords:

Diversity, equity and inclusion, African Americans; mentoring, disparities, business education

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Introduction

The past decades have seen a growth in advocacy and program support for the expansion of study abroad experiences to become more diverse by including greater representation of African American students and other under-represented student populations. Yet the enrollment statistics of African Americans students studying abroad continue to remain low (Allen et al., 2018). Researchers argue that we have barely moved the needle in enhancing equity in global exposure in higher education, especially for African American students (DiMaggio, 2019). This is especially relevant for African American students who were disproportionately impacted by the disruptions in their educational experiences due to the COVID-19 global pandemic (Pedersen et al., 2021). However, there appears to be a gap between study abroad research versus effective educational practice pointing to the need to develop and implement evidence-based programs aimed at enhancing study abroad participation and access for diverse students (Whatley & Stich, 2021). One contributing factor to the gap between program outcomes and increasing diversity lies in the limited research available on the nature and impact of best practice design on actual participation rates of the African American students (Ecker-Lyster & Kardash, 2022). This case study is one attempt to fill this gap by describing an evidence-based approach for the use of peer mentoring and identity work as key to increasing African American study abroad participation within an undergraduate business program.

Existing research has primarily focused on a "cost-benefit" analysis examining influence factors such as program cost, financial aid, the need to maintain employment, socio-economic background influences, lack of awareness, and concerns about increased time to gradation as key barriers to African American study abroad participation (Contreras et al., 2019). Many higher education institutions have sought to increase African American study abroad enrollment by implementing singular efforts such as offering study abroad scholarships/financial aid, creating programs specific to African American students, or targeting locations relevant to African American students such as heritage-seeking study abroad programs. However, other researchers have called for a broader approach that addresses not only a cost-benefit analysis to address persistent racial disparities, but also includes social influence factors that also impact study abroad participation for underrepresented groups (Hudson & Morgan, 2019).

To address this gap, we need to expand our understanding of the nature and outcomes of programmatic interventions that seek to increase African American student enrollment in study abroad in order to reduce persistent racial disparities (Mustaffa, 2017). This is especially critical given that study abroad is a defined high impact educational practice that is known to have a beneficial impact on key educational outcomes for student populations (Hughes & Popoola, 2022). Thus, creating programs that produce documented evidence (or "evidence-based") of reductions in racial disparities in study abroad participation would make a valuable contribution to both research and practice (Jackson, 2006; Vande Berg et al., 2012).

A great deal of previous work primarily focuses on the reasons African Americans do not study abroad (Harris-Weedman, 2022). For example, Salisbury, Paulsen and Pascarella (2010) identified a range of different factors such as student's attitudes, background, socioeconomic factors, parents, siblings, professors, and program features. Whatley (2018) argued that previous work ignores the substantial roles that key sources of influence play in students' decisions to study abroad especially for diverse student populations. This includes the substantial impact of peer groups on awareness of study abroad opportunities (Zhai and Scheer, 2002), decisions about studying abroad (Kasravi, 2009) and engagement in study abroad programs (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015). The influence of peers is supported by research showing that students who are actively engaged in campus life, co-curricular activities and student-run organizations are also more likely to study abroad than students who are less engagement in these peer-orientation activities (Salisbury, et al., 2010). The use of peer advisors has been shown to have a positive impact on study abroad decisions but, to date the impact for different populations of students is somewhat mixed (Petrie-Wyman et al., 2020). While peers have been shown to be influential, longitudinal data that looks at program-based solutions in order to measure their long-term impact are limited.

Clearly, study abroad decisions are impacted by a complex array of influencers and factors that impact participation. Some previous research shows a positive impact of peers on student participation in study abroad (Lane & Murphrey, 2020), with some work showing this peer effect for underrepresented minority groups (Kasravi, 2009). However, little research identifies the process of peer influence or explains peers' role as influencers on African American students' decision to study abroad. Thus, in addition to traditional influencers, it is important that the current case study provides new

insights into the impact of social influences that include peers on study abroad participation for African American students.

A focus on peer influence has been examined extensively within research and practice on mentoring (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Mentoring has traditionally been defined as a series of relationships that are dynamic, reciprocal and having a dual impact on both the mentor and the mentee (Kram, 1985). Mentoring serves two essential functions - career and psychosocial (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Career functions are those aspects of mentoring that enhance learning the ropes and preparing the individual for advancement within an organization. Career functions include activities such as sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions are those aspects of the relationship that enhance a sense of competence, clarity of identity, and effectiveness in a professional role. Psychosocial functions include activities such as role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. The connection between mentoring and positive outcomes has been previously discussed across both career and psychosocial functions (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Mentoring has also been shown to be a powerful tool to enable the careers of those advancing through the ranks in organizations especially in the context for diversity and inclusion (Murrell et al., 1999; Murrell et al., 2021).

Despite the well-documented advantages of mentoring relationships, mentoring across diversity poses unique and significant challenges when mentors and mentees differ in terms of gender, race, and/or other demographic factors (Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). The issue of how diverse mentoring relationships can be supported through the various phases of formation and cultivation to produce high-quality developmental relationships is a necessary yet complex issue (Murrell et al., 2019). This is especially true in the context of developing and advancing students of color (Sellers et al., 1998; Spalter-Roth et al., 2013). While enrollment numbers among students of color are increasing, disparities in graduation rates and overall experiences remain persistent (Trent et al., 2021). This means that additional attention should be paid to unlocking the power of mentoring relationships to support key success factors that are essential for reducing racial disparities in study abroad participation and other important educational outcomes. However, the limited availability of faculty or staff of color can create barriers for traditional hierarchical mentoring as a practical solution. The current case study focuses on the impact of peer mentoring as an effective and available source of support

and influence on African American students' interest and participation in study abroad education programs.

The Importance of Peer Mentoring

Some argue that peer or lateral mentoring is more readily available within the environment than traditional one-to-one hierarchical mentoring and provides critical career and social support (Eby, 1997; Ensher et al., 2001; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Higgins & Thomas, 2001). Peer mentoring relationships provide both important job-related and technical knowledge (Eby, 1997) and have been shown to be a valuable resource for knowledge transfer and learning (Bryant & Terborg, 2008; Young & Perrewe, 2000, 2004). Thus, peer mentoring can be a powerful conduit for the transfer of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994) given that much of the knowledge shared between peers is learned from personal experience and not typically part of the formal knowledge exchange that takes place in classrooms and other organizational settings (Swap et al., 2001). In fact, some argue that peers can actually compensate for an absence of traditional mentors because peer mentoring is less dependent on status, power, and access to closed networks, social support, and traditional knowledge resources (Allen et al., 2017; Ensher et al., 2001).

Since this early descriptive and conceptual work, a focus on peer mentoring or what has been labeled "lateral mentoring" has received an increase in attention (McDougall & Beattie, 1997; McManus & Russell, 2007; Murrell et al., 2021). Peer mentors can provide the same core functions (career and psychosocial) that have been identified in previous mentoring research (Kram, 2021). As a result, peer relationships may be an untapped source of both career and psychosocial functions of mentoring involving individuals who may differ in position or function within the organization but are similar or equivalent in other important relational attributes (Pullins & Fine, 2002). While the strength of peer mentoring relationships may vary across time and among different individuals, peers can help with program socialization, learning, moral support, and the need to have safe conversations about the complex dynamics that impact student outcomes and experiences (DeCastro et al., 2013).

Peer relationships defined by friendship ties can also involve expressions of personal affect, social support, and a sense of identity and personal belongingness (Coleman, 1988; 1990). Individuals depend on peers for counseling and companionship, especially for sensitive issues (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Individuals tend to make career decisions that are similar to

those of their peers (Gonzalez, 2006). This tendency to engage in social comparisons has led some to structure peer mentoring groups as a tool for facilitating collaboration within educational settings as providing peer support is found to be critical during early career stages (Brunsma et al., 2017). Clearly research shows that individuals make social comparisons with their peers, identify with individuals they consider models or exemplars of what they would like to become themselves, and exchange knowledge and information with peers they see as knowledgeable (Zagenczyk et al., 2009).

Thus, it is important to note that peer mentors can be an important source of social influence who shape individuals' experiences and perceptions of the organization and opportunities across the educational environment. The information, knowledge and opinions shared through peers, coupled with the self-disclosure and affect associated with strong and reciprocal ties, are an important combination available within and unique to peer-to-peer mentoring. It may also be the case that knowledge exchange, social support and identification are critical features that can be provided through formal peer mentoring relationships obtained within the organization through a well-designed portfolio of mentoring programs (Bommer et al., 2003; Liang et al., 1995; Murrell & Blake-Beard, 2017).

Peer relationships can be a valuable tool for social influence and change especially when those peer relationships share a common social identity (e.g., gender, race, culture, academic major, etc.) because these lateral relationships can provide a safe space for the important work of identity to take place. Thus, gaining a better understanding of the key role that identity and identity work play is an important contribution to existing research and practice. In order to better understand the impact of peer mentoring on study abroad participation, an evidence-based program model was developed to address the unique needs of African American college students. The focus of the current case study is to outline programmatic efforts with undergraduate business students that seek to increase interest for and participation in study abroad programs and measure the impact over a five-year period.

Making the case that peer mentors are sources of social influence who shape students' experiences and perceptions of the study abroad experience is important for future program design and effectiveness. The information, knowledge, and opinions shared through peers, coupled with the self-disclosure and affect associated with strong and reciprocal ties, can serve as an influencer

within peer mentoring. Clearly, the exchange of knowledge and information together with self-disclosure and emotional support provides a unique impact of peer mentoring relationships that are especially important for diversity efforts (Murrell et al., 2021). It may also be the case that knowledge exchange, social support and identification are critical features that can be provided through formal peer mentoring relationships provided by the organization through a well-designed portfolio of mentoring programs (Murrell et al., 2008; Allen et al., 2006). This is consistent with other research on peer mentoring relationships (Allen et al., 2004) as well as work on similarity in pro-social organizational behavior among peers (Bommer et al., 2003) and knowledge sharing among peer group members (Liang et al.,1995).

Traditionally, McDougall and Beattie (1997) offer a category of peer mentoring that they labelled as a "holistic peer mentor" that involves high levels of both work and personal aspects of learning. These holistic peers have complementary knowledge, skills and ability yet also share core values as each can address the other's unique developmental needs. There is a significant focus on the exchange and co-creation of knowledge among this type of peer mentoring. While Kram's original work (Kram, 1985) focuses on the notion of empathy within peer relationships, other work focuses on collaborative knowledge sharing and learning (Swap et al., 2001). Perhaps the notion of a holistic peer mentor reflects a combination of all types of peer mentoring relationships previously identified in Kram's original work. Thus, holistic peers can provide emotional support (collegial peers), professional identification (special peers), together with the reciprocal exchange of knowledge and advice (information peers). Clearly peer relationships can be a valuable tool for social influence and change especially when those peer relationships share a common social identity such that these lateral relationships provide a safe space for the important work of identity to take place (Ashfroth & Schinoff, 2016; Chavous, 2000; Curtin et al., 2013; Burke, 1981).

The Importance of Identity Work

In most of the literature, identity is discussed around these three major themes, personal identity, social identity, and role identity. Identity is defined as how individuals attach meaning to themselves through social interactions (Brown, 2015; Kreiner et al., 2006; Snow & Anderson; 1987; Weinreich, 2003). Burke and Reitzes (1981) defined identity as the roles that an individual occupies and how they interact with the expectations of and interactions with others in

the social environment. Other scholars argue that it is challenging to define identity using a single description because individuals operate within multiple identities (Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012; Kreiner et al., 2006). They believe that to achieve a sense of self, people need to situate their identity both in the personal and social contexts in which they operate. Hence, social identity theorists focus on understanding identity more as a process where individuals categorize and classify themselves in relationship to others in the larger community (Illeris, 2014; Lewis et al., 2004; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Others such as Pratt (2012) define social identity as how people perceive themselves as belonging to a social category/group. Essentially, identity is not merely constructed by the individual but involves influences from other people, communities, organizations, work, and social groups. Also, individuals continuously struggle with the tension of understanding, navigating, and defining their identities in different social contexts. Several scholars defined this process of constructing and reconstructing identity as "identity work" (Murrell & Onosu, 2021; Pratt, 2012; Snow & Anderson,1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

There are several definitions of identity work in the literature. Most of these definitions of identity work used words like constructing, creating, presenting, sustaining, forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising to explain this concept (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Others specifically focus identity work on how people construct identity (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Pratt, 2012). For example, Vough, Caza and Puranik (2020) noted that identity work allows individuals to construct their identities within specific social contexts. Vignoles and colleagues (Vignoles et al., 2006) described identity work as the social effort deployed to craft specific self-narratives in defining one's identity. Similarly, Chavous (2000) described identity work as the ongoing mental process and activities individuals engage in to positively construct and understand themselves. Each of these perspectives focus on the notion of identity work as a social or relational process that involves the individual engaging with others within a broader social context. Perhaps what is key in terms of participation in study abroad programs for diverse students is the need to support the construction of identity as a global citizen that is inclusive in terms of race, gender, and other dimensions of social identity.

Clearly, the social, educational and organizational environments have a tremendous influence on how identity work occurs. Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) call this sensemaking as the process that enables people to manage conditions of ambiguity caused by sense-breaking processes and events leading to identity ambiguity, conflict, crisis or change. In other words, how people make sense of their environment and experiences is a critical part of identity work and professional identity crafting especially for individuals who are not members of the dominate social group within the environment or institution. Seeing oneself in new and different global contexts may require models that can connect the students to these new perspectives and experiences. Support for identity work is also important in order to navigate through different experiences with identity conflict, ambiguity and development that make occur during the study abroad experience.

Prior research makes a clear case that peer mentoring can provide a safe environment for diverse individuals to engage in sensemaking that facilitates the development or refinement of both personal and social identity (Murrell et al., 2021). This type of identity-based peer mentoring is similar to what other scholars refer to as the "dramaturgical approach" that involves using actions and interactions in a social setting to engage in identity work (Caza et al., 2018). This sensemaking aspect of identity work also involves the use of personal storytelling as part of the ongoing relational aspects of knowledge sharing and understanding. It would make sense that storytelling as part of the sensemaking process would mean that having a sense of psychological safety, trust, and an inclusive environment are important aspects of the professional development experience especially for African American students.

A Case Study of Peer Mentoring and Identity Work

The current case study focuses specifically on the unique needs of African American undergraduate college students within a four-year business degree program. Programmatic measures were necessary to increase participation and yield positive outcomes for these students when disparities in study abroad participation were identified. These program efforts and case study are described by two distinct but interconnected efforts.

First, a series of focus groups of African American undergraduate business students was conducted and included questions relating to the motivation to study abroad (or not to study abroad) and any barriers to access. These questions were based on prior research examining the factors that

influence students' intent to study abroad (Whatley & Stich, 2021). These questions focused the factors that were important in making the decision to study abroad (or not to study abroad) with specific questions related to the advice they most valued (e.g., friends, family, advisors, alumni, business experts, etc.) The Coordinator of Minority Student Programs conducted all focus groups to examine barriers and opportunities for program improvement. A total of 15 African American students participated and their data was reviewed using thematic content analysis to identify relevant issues (e.g., financial needs, social concerns, professional development, academic requirements, etc.).

Based on the results of these focus groups, the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs worked together with International Programs, Academic Advising and Career Development staff to develop and implement specific program changes. Programmatic changes were based upon feedback and data collected during the focus groups. These efforts also included changes in funding opportunities in order to provide more resources to reduce financial burdens that were frequently cited by students as barriers for participating in study abroad. Trends in participation rate and participant feedback were measured across a five-year period to see if significant changes occurred.

An initial baseline study examining the lack of African American participation in study abroad programming was obtained prior to any interventions taking place. Initial focus group data identified three key influences on African American student participation: (1) financial barriers, (2) family/peer influences, and (3) career/practical work concerns. Students also indicated that more scholarships should be made available to underrepresented students in order to reduce their financial burden. Additionally, students indicated a need for improvement in advising for African American students from "just getting the word out" about study abroad opportunities to informing students about which programs that may better fit their needs, such as the option to take a two-week study abroad experience as a less expensive option versus an entire semester. Several students also indicated as another barrier to greater awareness and participation that there was no study abroad advertising being done for targeting the unique needs for African American students.

Focus groups also identified the importance of both family and peer influences that impacted their intent to study (or not to study) abroad. African American students reported lack of family support such that their family members did not recognize the potential value obtained in study abroad versus other opportunities that had higher perceived value (e.g., internships). A number of students referenced that neither they nor their peers were able to see the connection and the relevance of study abroad to their overall academic

and career plans. In fact, study abroad was seen as a potential obstacle for on-time graduation which would result in additional financial burdens for students and their families. A number of students indicated that study abroad needed to be explained upfront in recruitment during their first semester on campus; students would then start conversation and planning early with people who understood their unique perspectives and inform parents of the benefits for post-graduate opportunities.

Another key insight from focus group data was that African American students felt that they lacked peer support to study abroad. The students could not identify African American peers that had studied abroad, which influenced their desire to participate and limited their ability to understand the value of the experience to their education and future career plans. Participants suggested creating informal peer meetings with current minority students who have already traveled abroad for two aims. One is to discuss the benefits of study abroad. The second is to discuss difficult topics such as racism and various microaggressions (Nair et al., 2019) with which they may be confronted while studying abroad—and what it means to be both Black and American when they travel internationally.

Finally, the focus group responses indicated that the students felt they were not being adequately advised about the "return on investment" of study abroad for their career development. Participants did not see the importance of study abroad in developing the skills necessary for internships and post-graduation employment. Students suggested creating informational marketing and advising materials that specifically target the needs of minority students to address their unique concerns. They also recommended having minority faculty and staff share insights of the personal benefits that can arise from study abroad for African American students.

Following the analysis of initial focus group data, the leadership team began to implement study abroad program changes focused on the need to improve the enrollment and study abroad experiences especially for African American students. This effort began by addressing the needs identified in the initial focus group data. A commitment to scholarship funding for all business students was made, which helped to address the financial barriers identified by African American students. In addition, program location, content, and coursework were customized for business students across all majors in terms of their study abroad experience in order to enhance academic and career relevance. Information on study abroad opportunities was provided during staff training for all academic, career, and global program advisors to ensure that information was accurate, consistent, and readily available to students.

Information materials and sessions were added for parents and family members during the initial stage of recruitment and orientation in order to help shape a more positive view of the academic, career and personal benefits of study abroad experiences. One example took place during freshman orientation when parents were invited to a "parents-only information session" that provided an overview of study abroad and an opportunity to discuss concerns, doubts and rumors about the challenges and risks of studying abroad especially for African American students. While these sessions were structured to address some of the family concerns African American students presented during the focus groups, they were beneficial for all parents in terms of raising awareness and enhancing their support for study abroad opportunities.

To increase the perceived relevance of study abroad for business students, a competency-based educational model emphasizing "transferable skills" that were valued by corporate recruiters was used throughout the program and recruitment processes. This competency model included both classroom and outside-of-the-classroom activities and experiences in areas such as communication, leadership, social responsibility, application of knowledge, and career integration. Business students were coached on how to discuss and present their study abroad experiences to recruiters and explain the relevance for internship and employment opportunities using these competencies. This not only helped to enhance their ability to communicate the value of study abroad experiences, but also reinforced for them the wide range of positive outcomes associated with participation in study abroad programs. Competencies such as diversity awareness and global citizenship were also included and received positive feedback from students and recruiters.

Lastly, peer advisors were employed among current students who had study abroad experience, represented a range of academic business majors and intentionally included African American and other diverse students. This involved a reorientation of study abroad advising from a top-down approach to a peer-to-peer approach as essential to meeting the diverse needs especially for African American students. Rather than using only staff professionals as advisors for students wanting to study abroad, the program intervention targeted peer to peer advising. The program created the position of International Programs Ambassador. These International Ambassadors were trained student workers that had studied abroad on programs and were tasked with the responsibility to share their experiences and contributions of study abroad to their academic and professional development with other students. African American peer advisors were accessible and visible to all students interested in study abroad. However, when unique concerns were raised by African American students, special appointments would be scheduled for

individual peer coaching and discussion. This maintained access and visibility of a diverse group of peer advisors for all students and provided the opportunity for identity-related advising when needed for African American students. All student ambassadors work directly with students to help them achieve their study abroad goals by sharing personal experiences (storytelling), explaining different program options, aiding them throughout the application process, and explaining the benefits of study abroad to different student populations including African American students. Outreach to the various diversity-oriented student clubs and organizations was also conducted by these ambassadors.

A key element of the training was based on a competency-based approach that was present within the undergraduate business program. This competency framework provided a common language for students to understand and communicate the relevance of co-curricular activities and included "global and cultural engagement". This was part of a university-wide effort known as the "Outside of the Classroom Curriculum" and business program-specific activities and experiences were included that met the unique needs of undergraduate business students (see Pitt Business, n.d.). Peer mentors were very familiar with this framework as a key tool for understanding the relevance of global experiences for developing a range of important competencies. Peer mentors were encouraged to share their own personal experiences and unique insights as part of their discussion with students which helped to facilitate important identity-relevant conversations and sharing.

One of the key outcomes that was evaluated after these changes was overall participation in study abroad programs as the second phase of this project. An analysis of the longitudinal study abroad enrollment data revealed the percentage of African American students enrolled in study abroad at increased from 2.67% in 2014 to 20.29% by 2019 (see Figure 1). While African American undergraduate student enrollment remained relatively stable within the undergraduate business program, study abroad program changes were successfully able to increase the amount African American students that did study abroad within this 5-year period. This provides some evidence that changes were effective at increasing participation of African American students in study abroad programs. Feedback from students revealed significant benefits of connecting with peer mentors who "understood" their specific concerns. A frequent comment included that peer mentors help them to "see themselves" as part of the study abroad experience and its relevance to their future career aspirations. Issues of "feeling comfortable" talking with similar peers on how to address potential "challenges" and the idea of the "best fit" for them in terms of the opportunities to study abroad were frequently mentioned. This was evidence that identity work was part of the interactions between students and

peer advisors. Some conversations with peer mentoring also focused on the potential "challenges" or "threats" that are specific to race that may (or may not) be encountered when studying abroad were cited as beneficial to their decision-making process.
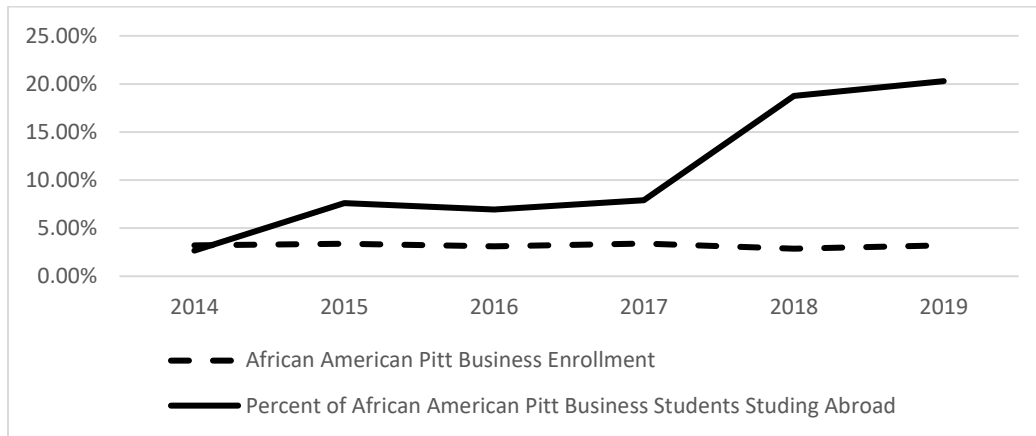

FIGURE (1): AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT STUDY ABROAD PARTICIPATION: 2014-2019

Discussion

Results clearly show that programmatic efforts to address barriers identified during the initial research provided a significant improvement of African American study abroad participation. The results indicate evidence-based programming that leveraged peer mentoring as social influence and a safe context for identity work can have a strong impact on increasing the representation of African American students in high impact educational experiences such as study abroad. This evidence compliments previous research noting that financial barriers, lack of awareness and family members play a significant role as influencing factors, especially for African American students (Salisbury et al., 2011). However, the addition of focused identity-related peer mentoring was a significant factor in producing positive results for increasing levels of participation.

The outcomes documented in this case study align with prior research on social relationships as a significant influencer for decisions to study abroad. The addition of peer ambassadors provided a positive impact for all students but especially African American students. This outcome is supported by prior research that individuals make social comparisons with their peers, identify with individuals they consider models or exemplars of what they would like to become themselves and exchange knowledge and information with peers they see as knowledgeable (Zagenczyk et al., 2008). Peer influencers are known to be

a vital tool in shaping expectations and decisions to engage in study abroad programs among underrepresented students (Whatley, 2018). However, the current case study adds the importance of identity work as a key factor for the programmatic changes needed to increase African American students' participation in study abroad. One might suspect that over time, peer influences may increase while others traditional sources (e.g., parents, family, faculty) decrease as individuals form and strengthen their personal and professional networks (Ong et al., 2011).

The lessons learned from this case study can provide best practice guidelines for program coordinators and faculty members looking to improve study abroad program enrollment and program design for African American students. Based on our review of programmatic changes and the findings, there are three key notions for others looking at evidence-based changes for enhancing African American students' participation in study abroad.

1. Create a data collection, management, and analysis plan for study abroad programs that includes a deliberate focus on diverse student populations. Prior to undertaking any programmatic changes, it was necessary for us to employ an evidence-driven approach. This means first understanding the unique needs of diverse students within the institution along with their unique set of influencing factors. In addition, making sure to take into account the specific context that may shape the experiences of African American students based on department, college or campus culture that is data-driven and informed. This is consistent with standards of good practice for education abroad outlined by The Forum on Education Abroad (2008, Clause 4.4.).

2. Leverage knowledge of peer mentors/advisors from diverse backgrounds to assist in the recruitment and preparation of African American students to study abroad. Create peer advising/mentoring inclusive of the needs of African Americans. Developing alumni and recruiter involvement as central to program efforts in order to explain the value of study abroad to African American students can also contribute to students' academic and career development plans to include study abroad.

3. Continue to provide financial support for African American students and communicate the available resources clearly. Ensuring that economic

barriers do not limit access to study abroad opportunities is a critical program element in order to meet the needs of African American and other underrepresented groups. These financial resources should be broadly communicated to reduce any stigma associated with students having to make a specific request due to their financial needs. Emphasizing the "return on investment" for career and post-graduation goals is also important.

The unique combination of peer mentoring and identity work appears to produce what other research calls "holding environments" or safe spaces for personal and knowledge sharing. As Kahn (2001) states, "holding environments at work emerge when opportunity, desire and competence coincide" (p. 266). The connection of peer mentoring and identity work as captured by the concept of holding environments provides a unique lens to understand the needs of African American students especially by focusing on three key dimensions: empathic acknowledgement, enabling perspective and containment (Ghosh et al., 2013; Higgins & Thomas; 2001; Kahn, 2001). While not specifically measured or included as part of the approach outlined in the current case study, these dimensions can help provide insight into the current findings and shape future efforts to increase study abroad participation for African American students.

Empathetic acknowledgement involves individuals such as mentors, colleagues and peers who recognize, confirm, and validate the lived experiences, conflicts and challenges encountered by an individual. Within the context of identity work, empathetic acknowledgement often involves the confirmation of issues such as unconscious bias, sexism, racism, and various forms of microaggressions that are validated as legitimate experiences from a point of mutual understanding and empathy. Enabling perspective is where others help the individual to make sense out of conflicting or contradictory information by engaging in self-reflection and insights shared by peers, mentors, and other personal relationships. Containment involves the accessibility of others and often involves showing compassion, warmth and accepting others' feelings without judgement or condemnation. The holding behavior of containment is focused on creating a safe environment for others to express emotion and serve as a non-judgmental sounding board that involves high levels of interpersonal trust. In contrast, enabling perspective focuses on mutual sensemaking where the end results are what is often referred to as negotiated interpretation of shared identity-related experiences or challenges. Empathic acknowledgement can also involve creating safe spaces for shared experiences. This dimension

places a strong emphasis on validation and identification that helps to show regard and respect given challenging situations and experiences (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Thus, it would make sense to expect peer mentoring to provide these types of holding environments especially when peers share the same social identity group as illustrated by the current case study. Peer mentors can be uniquely available and over time become trusted to provide containment, empathetic acknowledgement and enabling perspective within these lateral relationships. Facilitating formalized peer mentoring opportunities may also be useful in providing necessary identity-relevant support as holding environments especially for diverse students. Over time, having formalized peer mentoring may provide the opportunity for high-quality relationships to emerge and provide levels of psychological safety that are necessary for openness, sharing of experiences, and relational trust that are critical for identity-based development (Murrell et al., 2008; Murrell et al., 2021). Peer mentoring and identity work could be argued as providing the necessary "holding environments" to help African American students connect with the benefits and importance of global experiences for their personal, academic and professional development.

Future Directions

While this case study is limited to the efforts of a single undergraduate program, the issues of replication to different academic, geographic and cultural contexts must be addressed in future research. This case study focused on the experience of full-time undergraduate college students at a four-year public institution within an urban academic institution. The relevance for private institutions, community colleges, or minority-serving institutions must be interpreted with some caution. Clearly more research on other demographic groups and within different college settings is also needed.

However, the results from this case study are compelling. The need to address persistent disparities in study abroad participation is essential if we want to move toward greater equity and inclusion. Our interconnected world demands globally competent citizens. Careers in public, private and non-profit sectors will increasingly require cross-cultural skills, international travel and the ability to perform ethically with diverse and global partners. Central to meeting this demand is the need to provide research that demonstrates the transformative impact of global education inclusive of all students (Bain & Yakin,

2019; Schenker, 2019). The hope is that this case study encourages the growth of more robust research studies on African Americans and other diverse student populations in order to reduce disparities in studying abroad participation. Understanding the outcomes of study abroad among African American students will contribute to a more relevant and inclusive perspective necessary to prepare all students for an increasingly global workforce and society.

Acknowledgements

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