

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad
© Nelson Brunsting, Amelia J. Dietrich, Anas N. Almassri, W. Patrick Bingham

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Integrating Research and Practice to Enhance Experiences and Outcomes of Study Abroad of Underrepresented Students: An Introduction to the Special Section

Nelson Brunsting¹, Amelia J. Dietrich², Anas N. Almassri³, W. Patrick Bingham¹

Abstract

A team of practitioners, researchers, and scholar-practitioners collaborated to spotlight successes and to enhance areas for improvement in study abroad practices through interaction with research. The joint effort focused on study abroad students from five identity groups for which the research base was large enough to permit generation of research-to-practice briefs. Researchers first reviewed studies from the Academic Research on Education Abroad (AREA) Database and summarized research on these students' study abroad experiences and outcomes. Practitioners—most of them with lived experience as a member of the identity group—drew on their expertise in interpreting the relevance to practice of summarized research findings and in recommending better study abroad practices. The resulting five research-to-practice briefs focus on the experiences and outcomes of five student identity groups: African American and Black students, Asian and Asian American students, first-

¹ WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY, WINSTON-SALEM, NC, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

² THE FORUM ON EDUCATION ABROAD, CARLISLE, PA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

³ DURHAM UNIVERSITY, DURHAM, UNITED KINGDOM

Corresponding author: Nelson Brunsting, brunstnc@wfu.edu

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generation students, Hispanic and Latinx students, and LGBTQ+ students. Altogether, these briefs signify working in teams of both researchers and practitioners, and they highlight some of the outstanding gaps in study abroad research and practice concerning the student groups in focus.

Abstract in Spanish

Un equipo de profesionales y académicos colaboró para destacar los éxitos e identificar las áreas de mejora en las prácticas de estudios en el extranjero a través de la interacción con la investigación. El esfuerzo colaborativo se centró en la investigación ya publicada sobre estudiantes de estudios en el extranjero que provienen de cinco grupos de identidad sobre los cuales hay una base de investigación suficientemente grande para facilitar la creación de resúmenes de cómo aplicar la investigación a la práctica. Primero, los investigadores revisaron estudios incluidos en la base de datos Academic Research on Education Abroad (AREA) y resumieron la investigación sobre las experiencias de estudios en el extranjero y los resultados de participación de estos estudiantes. Luego los practicantes profesionales del campo de educación internacional—la mayoría de ellos con experiencia vivida como parte del grupo de identidad sobre el cual estaban escribiendo—aprovecharon de su experiencia para interpretar la relevancia que los resultados de la investigación y recomendar mejores prácticas. Los cinco resúmenes de investigación aplicada a la práctica que resultan se enfocan en las experiencias y aprendizajes de cinco grupos de identidad: los estudiantes negros o afro-americanos, los estudiantes asiáticos o asiático-americanos, los estudiantes de primera generación, los estudiantes hispanos o latinxs, y los estudiantes LGBTQ+. Juntos, estos resúmenes representan el trabajo colaborativo entre investigadores y profesionales y destacan algunas de las brechas sobresalientes en la investigación y la práctica de estudios en el extranjero con respecto a los grupos de estudiantes en cuestión.

Keywords

Research-to-practice, researcher-practitioner collaboration, scholar-practitioner, underrepresented students, diversity

Rationale and Opportunity

One of the great aspects of study abroad is its intellectual accessibility and inherent interdisciplinarity: researchers, educators, and students from all academic areas can generate opportunities to enhance learning in their fields (Giedt et al., 2015). One drawback, however, is that the research literature on study abroad programming and student outcomes is disparate; faculty leading programs often stay within their discipline to publish research on study abroad.

Indeed, the research articles of U.S.-based study abroad included in a recent literature review were published in over 150 journals across every major discipline (Brunsting, Chiles, et al., 2023). Beyond intercultural competence development, language learning, and teacher education, there are few coordinated lines of inquiry to provide faculty and practitioners with evidence-based practices to support student outcomes, especially for underrepresented students, including students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and first-generation students.

Recently, there has been a noticeable increase in the publication of study abroad scholarship focusing on students of color, their voices, and the abroad curricula and destinations that have made notable impact on particularly Black and African American students (e.g., Edwards, 2020; Willis, 2015; White et al., 2011) and Hispanic/Latinx students (e.g., Kaneria et al., 2020; Teranishi, 2007; Wick et al., 2019). Indeed, much of the scholarship that touches on first-generation students arises from research centering students of color (e.g., Blake, 2020; Wick et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2019). Of particular note is Bell et al.'s (2021), which investigates the role education abroad plays in scholastic achievements and positive graduation outcomes for students of color who study abroad. Further, LGBTQ+ students have received some attention in education abroad scholarship (Bingham, Brunsting, et al., 2023), but this area is still burgeoning in empirical research (e.g., Brown, 2014; Michl et al., 2019; Mnouer, 2020).

While peer-reviewed research focusing on underrepresented students is nascent, leaders in the professional practice of education abroad have noted the need to reconsider old practices and to try new strategies to engage and better support the equitable learning outcomes of students from groups historically underrepresented and excluded from education abroad activities. To meet this need, individual practitioners, centers of excellence, and professional associations have generated a vast number of resources and shared knowledge via professional development opportunities albeit based on data collection efforts unfit for purpose (e.g., exit satisfaction surveys), precedents from other adjacent or intersecting fields (Bruckman et al., 2022; Contreras et al., 2022; Rizzotti & Cruz-Feliciano, 2023) and individual (Brandon & Thornton, 2023; Moore, 2023) or collective personal experience and expertise (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020).

Our purpose in these research-to-practice briefs is to extend this work. In our researcher-practitioner collaboration initiative, we aim to unite some of the many academic discourses and pedagogical approaches across the borders that often separate them, to encourage more dialogue and more cross-pollination, and to bring diverse perspectives, including of researchers and practitioners, to bear across this work. There are many ways of knowing and knowing-being (knowing through lived experience and constructing knowledge in relation to others) outside the Western canonical approaches to “objective” and measurable outcomes research. These ways should not be discounted, especially when considering the exclusionary and harmful history found in many lines of Western research throughout history (see D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020; Inoue, 2015; Yngve & Brewer, 2022). The lived experiences of colleagues and educators, especially those who share identities with the groups in focus in this work, are invaluable sources of data to inform advancement in our practice. Moreover, as Murrell (2022) reminds us, our ways of knowing are constantly being challenged by changes in our field, among our students, and in the world around us. Revisiting what we know and how we know it through a practice of dialogue and critical reflection is the only solution for staying up-to-date on our answers to those critical questions (Murrell, 2022). Additionally, many of the resources and services already available are only accessible for a fee (Diversity Abroad, n.d.). With this work, we hope to complement and build on these tools with guidance and knowledge that are readily accessible to all.

Collaboration to Meet Opportunity

The collaboration shown in this special section represents a strategic partnership and effort to fill in some of the identified gaps while also piloting a format to allow for more nimble response to other gaps and needs identified in the future. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* is a peer-reviewed, academically rigorous journal published entirely online. It is open-access for colleagues and other interested parties anywhere in the world where they can connect to the internet. Since 2015, *Frontiers* has been published through support from The Forum on Education Abroad, the premier professional association for international educators focused especially on education abroad and the recognized Standards Development Organization identifying and supporting the implementation of best practice in the professional field of education abroad. The relationship between *Frontiers* and its publisher is borne of the knowledge and commitment that research is an

integral component to the development and continuous improvement of good practice and that without practitioners to inform, research remains siloed and goes unapplied in real-world contexts. While *Frontiers* retains editorial independence, these shared values undergird the strong, mutually agreeable publisher-publication relationship. Since its inception in 1994, *Frontiers* has been led and supported by colleagues spanning the practitioner, scholar, and practitioner-scholar spectrum. *Frontiers'* double-blind peer review process regularly includes researchers and practitioners with experience in the area of the submitted article. Including both as peer reviewers of submitted manuscripts ensures that the methods and the implications are both valued in the assessment of worthiness for publication.

This profile of *Frontiers* made it ideal for collaboration with the Research on Abroad and International Student Engagement (RAISE) Center at Wake Forest University. The RAISE Center had conducted a systematic literature search collating empirical research emphasizing education abroad experiences for students attending U.S.-based academic institutions into the Academic Research on Education Abroad (AREA) Database (Brunsting et al., 2021). The AREA Database is updated three times per annum (January, May, and August). Studies included in it must have met specific criteria: being empirical studies; centering study abroad students originating from U.S. universities; having a clear methodological framework; and having been published after 2001 (see Brunsting et al., 2023). At the time of publication, the AREA Database includes 409 peer-reviewed journal articles. Each article is tabled and coded for key information (demographics, sending institution location, study abroad duration, study destination, academic content for the study abroad program, methodology, and focal outcomes), and users can apply multiple filter layers using these codes to narrow their search scope. The AREA Database also includes the citation and, where available, relevant DOI links. Although we noted that the field ranges widely with articles published in 180+ journals, 64 of the 409 studies (about 16%) in the November 2022 version of the Database are published in *Frontiers*, making it the single largest source of studies for the AREA Database (see Brunsting et al., 2021).

Seeking input on how to utilize the AREA Database to strengthen practice in study abroad, we crowdsourced ideas at the NAFSA 2022 Annual Conference from provider operators, study abroad advisors, on-site personnel, and faculty. Almost unanimously, our colleagues shared that the most useful distillation of

information would be through research-to-practice briefs. To paraphrase the responses: “Give me a handout briefly summarizing the research, identifying what practices already exist aligned with the findings, and discussing what practices should be changed or developed to better align with the research.” We agreed, and we publish this special section of research-to-practice briefs open-access and in the context of a fit-for-purpose publication with a long track record in this arena. We do so with the hope of exceeding the expectations of those who shared their insights with us and of providing our collective field research-based actionable insight to maximize the abroad experience.

Structure of the Special Section

To deliver on our purpose, we formed a collaborative special section author team of active practitioners, research/practitioners, and researchers to jointly determine the format of the research-to-practice briefs. Each brief was assigned an author team including both practitioners and researchers, ideally with lived experience as a member of the identity group, to draw on their combined expertise. Each brief begins with a summary of key findings from the research reviewed, cites existing practices as identified in the reviewed research, and discusses adapted or new practices based on the research findings. Each of the five research-to-practice briefs focuses on the experiences and outcomes of a specific student identity group: African American and Black students, Asian and Asian American students, first-generation students, Hispanic and Latinx students, and LGBTQ+ students. We chose these identity groups as we believe the study abroad experiences of their members are under-explored; we plan to include additional identity groups in future briefs.

Overview of Special Section

In what follows, we briefly present a synopsis of the recommendations set forth in the five research-to-practice briefs. It should be noted that the focus of this part is on what the practitioners co-authoring the briefs found would be helpful to improving study abroad practices as far as the student identity groups in focus are concerned. For findings of what reviewed research reveals about the study abroad experiences of each group, readers are kindly advised to refer to the first section of the respective brief, which offers a concise summary of such findings.

In the brief on Black¹ students (Almassri, Welch et al., 2023), Welch recommends specific actions to be implemented through various stages of study abroad programming. During the program design phase, she recommends choosing faculty members popular with Black students to lead study abroad programs, ensuring diversity of short- and longer-term program options, and considering cross-institutional collaborations as well as offering financial aid opportunities to lower participation costs. During the outreach and marketing phase, she recommends engaging with student families, engaging past study abroad participants, and highlighting potential study abroad benefits specific to Black students. Further, Welch recommends that groups be planned, during the recruitment phase, to include multiple students of color. During the advising phase, she advocates a proactive approach to mitigating the impact of any potential incidents of discrimination, including by explicitly addressing race and ethnicity in advising materials and in pre-departure orientation activities, as well as by directing students to self-study resources to reflect on and prepare for any incidents of microaggression or discrimination. Through the program, Welch proposes specific actions to enhance Black students' quality experience, e.g., training on-site staff to be competent at responding to incidents of discrimination and at supporting students, and using identity-based and strengths-based pedagogies as well as reflection exercises that have potential to enhance students' multidimensional development. When delivered together, these actions have high potential to fulfill the need for turning away from a deficit-based approach and more towards an asset-based one.

In the brief on Asian and Asian American students (Almassri, Kullar, et al., 2023), Kullar emphasizes that the starting point for discussion of these students' study abroad experiences should be deeper reflection on the diversity and the more particular contexts of groups to which the terms *Asian* and *Asian American* refer. Kullar recommends that, for each of these groups, this deeper reflection should cover two issues: identifying the specific barriers to participation a group faces and its potential, unique needs for effective engagement; and considering more carefully the immigration history and background of students from the given group. Kullar shares two further recommendations for ensuring Asian and Asian American students are prepared for any incidents of discrimination: engaging them in reflections on

¹ We acknowledge that consensus on racial and ethnic nomenclature has not been reached. As outlined in respective briefs, references to groups of students here are only followed for brevity.

how their identities may be perceived in their specific host countries (in the pre-departure phase) and ensuring staff and faculty serving in the pre-departure phase and on-site are sufficiently trained to deal well with situations of discrimination.

In the brief on first-generation students (Brunsting, McGlynn, et al., 2023), McGlynn recommends short-term, low-cost programs as particularly appealing and accessible for these students, not least because of their potential family obligations and commitments. He additionally recommends the following actions to enhance first-generation students' access to and quality of study abroad experiences: having popular faculty members lead programs; identifying and mitigating potential unique barriers to their participation, including through collaboration with offices familiar with these students' affairs; availing or exploring alternative arrangements to avail financial support for their study abroad participation; and creating conducive mechanisms, such as cross-institutional collaboration, that in course increase enrolment, reduce costs, remove administrative barriers, and improve marketing.

In the brief on Latinx students (Bingham, Smith et al., 2023), Smith recommends following an asset-based approach through all phases of a study abroad program. In this approach, she recommends that students be engaged in reflective journaling and individual and group conversations that encourage them to explore and potentially mobilize their community cultural wealth assets (Yosso, 2005), from the application stage to re-entry. Smith links this recommended action to a key objective of helping Latinx students—on their own or along with other minority students—to identify (globally connected) systems of power, privilege, and oppression as well as to acknowledge personal experiences of oppression at home. She makes further recommendations to prepare Latinx students for the range of experiences they may face abroad, including providing them with self-study resources on Latinx students' experiences abroad as well as engaging past Latinx study abroad participants in advising/mentorship activities. She also reiterates the essential need for offering programs, of short- and longer-term durations, in Latin America and in Spain with opportunities for advanced Spanish language and in-depth interactions with members of the local host community.

In the brief on LGBTQ+ students (Bingham, Mitchell, et al., 2023), Mitchell emphasizes the need during program design for ensuring LGBTQ+ students' safety and success. This need, she recommends, should be met through: providing resources on the culture of host countries and encouraging students to do their own research; training staff and faculty to be able to support LGBTQ+ students, including with regard to their intersectional identities; ensuring accommodation arrangements are made in a way that guarantees inclusively positive experiences; and integrating in pre-departure and re-entry activities opportunities for reflection, respectively to prepare for and to process the range of experiences related to their identity that they may and may, or may not, have faced abroad.

Beside these recommendations for practices, recommendations for bridging gaps of research on the experiences of the five groups were shared in each of the briefs. Often overlapping, topics recommended for further research included:

- What and how certain factors, whether structural or related to intersectional identities, influence the participation choices and study abroad experiences of students from the five groups,
- What marketing practices can be used to drive the participation interest of these students,
- How heritage students experience studying abroad in non-heritage locations,
- What are some of the effective practices for pre-departure preparation of students of specific backgrounds and orientations; and
- Whether participation in short-term study abroad leads to increased participation in longer-term programs.

As may be clear from this synopsis, there is significant overlap of practices and research topics recommended for enhancing study abroad experiences for students from the five identity groups. The most prevalent overlap focuses on the need to shift from a deficit- to an asset-based, cross-stage approach. This shift has potential to help make the strides needed to further improve the quality of the five groups' participation in study abroad. The program phases of design, marketing, outreach, application, and pre-departure advising can all be seized to help students (and their families) realize the linguistic, cultural, navigational, resistant, and aspirational assets with which they may go on to enjoy safer and more impactful study abroad experiences.

Another key overlap is that during the aforementioned phases and beyond, reflective journaling, directed self-guidance, access to mentors of similar backgrounds, and working with popular faculty members are presented as key to preparing students from the five groups for success during (and after) their study abroad. Also, offering affordable, short-term programs to travel with peers of similar backgrounds to study in (nearby) locations of heritage appears to consistently drive Black and Latinx students' interest in and quality of studying abroad, including when they are of first-generation status.

Concluding Thoughts

Altogether, the briefs presented in this special section underscore the importance of working in teams of both researchers and practitioners. The significance of this work is illustrated in our briefs in three major ways. Our collaborative teams produced research-driven, concrete, and viable proposals of action that may better enhance equitable access to and enjoyment of safe and impactful study abroad experiences. Also, we see these briefs as illustrative of the agenda-building potential of such teamwork, for researchers to pursue questions that fill existing knowledge gaps and for practitioners to create, adapt, and reflect on new practices that fill existing gaps in various groups' interest, access, experience, and/or learning outcomes of study abroad. In this agenda-building, such teams of researchers and practitioners are better able to determine more pressing issues for both research and practice. Consider, for example, the emphasis on identity-related experiences and learning outcomes of study abroad. This emphasis was consistently found in reviewed research and, as consistently, advanced in practitioner commentaries, including in the latter's recommendations for future research. We hope this special section will inspire more engagement of practitioners in research teams, perhaps as early as the design phase but ideally across the research project cycle.

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Author Biography

Nelson Brunsting, PhD, is a Research Associate Professor of Contemporary Global Studies and serves as the Executive Director of the Center for Research on Abroad and International Student Engagement (RAISE Center) at Wake Forest University. His research interests center on understanding and enhancing the wellbeing and social-emotional development of diverse populations in academic contexts.

Amelia J. Dietrich, PhD, is the Senior Director for Research and Publications at The Forum on Education Abroad and Managing Editor of *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*. Amelia’s work focuses on The Forum’s research and publishing efforts, including the recently-launched Standards in Action book series, and she presents widely on topics related to best practice in education abroad around the world. Amelia completed her Ph.D. in Spanish and Language Science at The Pennsylvania State University.

Anas Nazmi-Nihal Almassri is a doctoral candidate and teaching assistant at the School of Education of Durham University. Funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council, his doctoral project investigates the potential contributions of international graduate scholarships to peace in Palestine. Anas holds a BEd in English (IUGaza), MA in Arab studies (Georgetown), and MSc in peace studies and PGCert in research methods (Durham).

W. Patrick Bingham, PhD, is a Research Assistant Professor and the Research Coordinator for the Center for Research on Abroad and International Student Engagement (RAISE Center) at Wake Forest University. Patrick’s research focuses on the role non-normative identity plays in global mobility programming.