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Integrating Study Abroad Research and Practice: African American and Black Students in Focus

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Introduction

For Black students in U.S. higher education institutions, study abroad has historically been, and continues to be, an experience that is pointedly racialized. These institutions are increasingly focusing on diversifying their student profile, seeking to more equitably provide international experiences to students that have consistently represented one of the smallest demographics of outbound study abroad participants. Although Black students made up 15.7% of all enrollments in higher education in the fall of 2021 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), they constituted only 4.1% of all Americans studying abroad in the 2020-2021 academic year (International Institute of Education, 2022). Contemporary research has examined the motivations for participation and the reasons why it is not higher. However, more recent research has begun to turn toward a more

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qualitative investigation of the study abroad experiences of Black students in particular and how these experiences compare to those of their peers (Brunsting, Chiles, et al., 2023). Once an institution has sent Black students abroad, what do the learning outcomes of their experiences look like regarding academic achievement, language learning, intercultural competence, identity development, wellbeing, and career progress? How can educators and study abroad practitioners use these insights to better understand and serve their campus?

This brief integrates insights from research and practice to shine light on these questions, which are on the forefront of the minds of many study abroad practitioners across the country.¹ Our point of departure is that although Black student participation in study abroad is increasingly less than that of their peers (Lu et al., 2015), their study abroad experiences and learning outcomes are receiving increased research attention. In the case of this brief, the reviewed research shows that Black students' study abroad experiences and learning outcomes seem to be largely positive. Broadly, the Black students whose experiences are documented in reviewed studies made gains in their academic achievement, language learning, intercultural competence, identity development, wellbeing, and career outcomes (Bell et al., 2021; Blake et al., 2020; Bush et al., 2022; Byker & Xu, 2019; Dietz et al., 2011; Edwards, 2020; Lu et al., 2015; Quan, 2018; Smith-Augustine, 2014; White et al., 2011; Willis, 2015).

Summary of Research Findings

This section offers a background against which practitioner interpretation and recommendations are next presented. We share a concise research summary of main findings about Black students' experiences and learning outcomes of study abroad. This summary is of key and/or frequent findings² as gleaned from reviewed studies (for background on the selection of these studies, see Brunsting, Dietrich et al., 2023, in this issue). In order, the summary covers findings about Black students' destination interests, their learning activities and experiences while abroad, their learning outcomes, and elements of study abroad program design positive to them.

¹ We acknowledge that consensus on racial and ethnic nomenclature has not been reached; for brevity, we refer to African American and Black students throughout this brief as Black students.

² These findings are intended to inform the practitioner commentary and are not intended to generalize about Black students' study abroad experiences and learning outcomes.

Black students were not only attracted to heritage destinations and locations (Blake et al., 2020; Bush et al., 2022) but also to other destinations, e.g., Central America (Dietz et al., 2011; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014), South and North Europe (Willis, 2015), Africa (Byker & Xu, 2019; Willis, 2015), and East Asia (Byker & Xu, 2019; Lu et al., 2015). Across these destinations, the students engaged in their study abroad experiences through various activities, including site visits, local encounters, community service, storytelling, group discussions and, most importantly, regular journaling and written (self-)reflection (Blake et al., 2020; Edwards, 2020; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014). Through these activities, the students exercised personal liberation, interacting freely and engaging openly and deeply with both their host society and with themselves (Blake et al., 2020; Bush et al., 2022). They also exercised critical and creative agency. They withdrew from negative social interactions while persisting towards self-set goals (Quan, 2018), held to account their own biases and preconceptions (Dietz et al., 2011), and generalized skills to new situations (Lu et al., 2015).

In terms of study abroad outcomes, Black students made gains in their personal, psychological, and ethnoracial identity development. Reported gains include an increase in their self-knowledge, -confidence, and -advocacy; in their sense of motivation, resilience, and ambition; in their attitudes of empathy and self-accountability (Dietz et al., 2011; Edwards, 2020; Lu et al., 2015); and in their ability to embrace vulnerability and release from “generational racialized trauma” (Blake et al., 2020; Bush et al., 2022, p. 274). They expanded their knowledge and appreciation of their Black identity, its complexity, and its global intersections (Bush et al., 2022; Edwards, 2020), an outcome associated with an increase in students’ commitment to serving their communities (Blake et al., 2020), including by promoting study abroad therein (Lu et al., 2015). Furthermore, Black students demonstrated an increase in their interest and ability to overcome preconceptions, as well as in their cross-cultural empathy that, for some, would potentially enhance their professional practice (Dietz et al., 2011; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014). Also, Black students demonstrated increased appreciation of cultural diversity in global business operations (White et al., 2011), improved awareness of the need for foreign language skills (White et al., 2011), and deepened interest in foreign language learning (Dietz et al., 2011; Lu et al., 2015). Those on language learning programs improved their foreign language skills, though not their confidence of using the foreign language (Quan, 2018).

Overall, the impact of the abovementioned activities on Black students' study abroad experiences seemed particularly significant when program design and pedagogical practice followed Black participants' unique interests and validated their (gendered) experiences (Blake et al., 2020; Bush et al., 2022; Edwards, 2020). Crucially, group composition seemed to influence this impact of study abroad activities on Black students' experiences. Those in mostly-Black student cohorts reported additional avenues of support, motivation, and shared reflection (Blake et al., 2020; Willis, 2015). In contrast, those lacking such companionship reported feelings of discomfort, isolation, and marginalization (Willis, 2015).

Practitioner's Interpretation

Shift Away from a Deficiency Approach

As a starting point, much of the literature on students of color has focused on the student from an asset/deficit perspective. There exists a plethora of studies that examine why Black students do not study abroad at the same rates as their peers, as well as the challenges they face when they participate, but not as much that focuses on the successes of those that do (e.g., see Lee & Green, 2016). Bush et al. (2022) approach the Black male students that went abroad in their study from a nondeficit perspective. They view acts demonstrated by this group in society and schools—such as “sagging”³ and the use of AAVE and slang—as “strengths and a form of resiliency, rather than expressions of opposition to oppression, and serve as an attempt to reconnect with one's African self” (Bush et al., 2022, p. 262). Similarly, Lu et al. (2015) use Yosso's (2005) asset-based Community Cultural Wealth framework to examine the reasons why Black students choose to study abroad rather than why they do not.

Although research has shown one of these barriers to be resistance from family, practitioners can flip the script by acknowledging the value Black students place on their family relationships via engaging with families during program outreach. Peers also serve as a valuable resource; for example, those who return from a study abroad experience are often interested in promoting study abroad to their friends, family, and acquaintances back home (Byker et al., 2019; White et al., 2011). Focusing on what Black students uniquely have to

³ “Sagging” refers to the controversial style of wearing pants anywhere between just below to waist to mid-thigh, so that underwear is visible.

gain can also help to center the Black student in discussions about the value of study abroad, which may look different than the benefits for the traditional White student. Study abroad can provide unique opportunities for students of color to enhance their knowledge of and connection to their ancestral background and to gain a better understanding of their own identity and culture, while at the same time also diversifying the image and perspective of “the American” for residents of the host country (Murray Brux & Fry, 2010). Utilizing identity-based and strengths-based pedagogies can open the door to significant cultural, political, racial, and gender identity development. Black program alumni report increased self-actualization (Willis, 2015) and connection to their heritage (Bush et al., 2022) which may not otherwise be tapped into at home.

Be Proactive about Preparing Students for Potential Discrimination Abroad

Black students consistently report their own or their families’ fear of discrimination as a major barrier to deciding to study abroad (Murray Brux & Fry, 2010). While this is an experience that many Black students do report upon their return, other Black students on the other hand report experiencing less discrimination than they typically face in the U.S., sometimes even instead being treated more positively abroad (Lu et al., 2015). Study abroad administrators should be proactive about preparing these students for the different realities they may face as persons of color in their host country. Employing the experiences and feedback of alumni is key to staying up to date on what these students can expect and what has proven most helpful or comforting for more current participants.

Those who reported having done their homework on their host country’s culture, values, demographics, and racial/ethnic history, among other issues, experienced less shock upon interacting with locals in ways that might have otherwise been an unpleasant surprise (Dietz et al., 2011; Willis, 2015). Thus, it stands that race and ethnicity should be explicitly addressed in advising, in materials for prospective applicants, and in orientation programming before departure and in-country. Quan (2018) suggests that staff/faculty should identify challenges faced by previous students of color in order to directly address them for future students.

Preparation need not be limited to what study abroad offices can provide. These offices should develop partnerships with other parts of campus such as cultural centers, counseling centers, and diversity, equity, and inclusion offices. Both students and staff can also be directed to the plethora of existing resources made available by organizations whose purpose is to support students of color abroad, such as Diversity Abroad, Diversity Network, and Black & Abroad, as well as study abroad providers which house resources aimed at Black students considering or preparing for a study abroad program. Such resources can familiarize students with how to manage their hair while away from home and how to talk about their program with their parents, but also prime students for the possibility of being stared at or asked questions about American race relations and politics. They can also provide advice on how to combat discrimination and stereotyping.

Administrators should be aware that discrimination can extend to other intersectional dimensions as well. It is important not to focus solely on potential issues associated with being a Black student abroad. Negative and sometimes dangerous attention or interactions can potentially happen when students have additional identities, e.g., identifying as LGBTQ+, non-binary, or genderfluid, being a person with disability, or simply being American. Yet, this multidimensionality of identity can also potentially serve as a positive component of finding belonging with shared identity groups in the host country.

Invest in Affordable Faculty-led Short-Term Programming

It is worth noting that nearly all the research on Black students studying abroad features students on short-term programs, taking place during the summer or through several weeks, but shorter than one semester. Additional barriers to study abroad participation are high program costs and a concern about staying on track to graduate on time—despite data showing students who study abroad have improved retention and graduation rates (Blake et al., 2020). White et al. (2011) note that the duration of the programs an institution offers may impact Black students' participation in study abroad as they are likely to join shorter- rather than longer-term programs. Semester and year-long programs, while still valuable, are less likely to attract students in general due to the cost (particularly for those with high financial need) and due to scheduling requirements (particularly for those with more rigid curricular requirements or concerns about graduating on time). Study abroad offices should ensure diversity in program length and cost. However, it is

acknowledged that with rising costs in the larger economy, this can be a challenge for institutions with limited funding. In this case, they could consider various funding methods like fee waiver exchanges or cost-sharing agreements.

Faculty remain one of the best resources in introducing new programming. Lu et al. (2015) suggest that practitioners should encourage faculty who are popular with Black students to lead study abroad programs. Many students see the faculty leader as more influential in their decision-making than the program destination. Such faculty members can also play a substantial role in program recruitment. Compared to longer programs, short-term faculty-led programs can be more affordable and more accessible, particularly when the program is focused on a subject that is relevant to prospective students' degree requirements and aims to make students more marketable in the long term.

Consider Programs that Engage Black Students in a “Critical Mass”

Partnerships with study abroad providers and collaboration with cultural or academic units or other institutions can be a synergistic method to draw on external expertise and cut down costs. Morehouse College, for example, has offered an international spring tour program since 1985, financed through corporate fundraising efforts and sponsored by the Division of Business Administration and Economics. The program, run at an all-male school, offers an impactful study abroad experience for groups consisting of mostly Black men. Outside of a strictly higher education context, initiatives such as the Frederick Douglass Global Fellowship partnership with CIEE, as well as the A2MEND partnership with Diasporic Soul are two collaborations that have been marketed specifically to students of color at American colleges and universities, with whose partnerships these organizations offer meaningful race-based study abroad programs at little or no cost. Institutions developing new programs may consider similar programs with course content catered and marketed to Black students. Other examples of best practices in this area include UMD-Summer: Ghana: Education Equity in Crisis: Global Corporate Social Responsibility; and the Luard Morse Scholarship, which provides up to \$25,000 towards a semester of study at a British university to deserving sophomores, in all disciplines, who are attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities; and programs or scholarships targeted at Federal TRIO students such as McNair Scholars (at UMD or Indiana University).

Such programs reduce the frequency in which students from underrepresented backgrounds “experience prejudice within their programs and enrich the learning experience of all participants by including more diverse voices as these groups navigate and analyze their host countries” (Blake et al., 2020, p. 165). Having groups of multiple students of color also offers these students the opportunity to support each other as they navigate incidents of discrimination or microaggressions, especially where White peers may be sources of discomfort and isolation (Willis, 2015). If institutions do not offer similar programs locally, promoting such programs alongside existing offerings can be a way to ensure their students of color have access to experiences they may otherwise not be able to afford. Cross-institutional collaborations can also enable schools to combine resources to send students abroad at lower cost to the institution, with the added benefit of allowing their students to expand their network of peers.

Train On-site Staff to Provide Culturally Sensitive Reflection and Debrief Opportunities

Given the racialized experiences that Black students have while abroad, it is pertinent that on-site support is present and that such support staff are trained 1) to recognize and reflect on their own responses to racial issues as they arise; 2) to facilitate reflection for program participants; 3) to recognize microaggressions and take them as well as more serious offenses seriously when they are observed or reported; and 4) to create a safe space for all students while on program. Edwards (2020) finds that support staff with experience supporting marginalized students drastically shifted the capacity of the program in her study in ways that would not have been possible had the program not been a collective endeavor. The program designers of this course, both Black, reported correctly anticipating and proactively building pedagogically productive counseling support into the program in ways that are not typically found in traditional study abroad programs. Such support staff may not be available for the average practitioner; however, this does highlight the benefit of intentional training and program design. These should be priorities regardless of whether an individual is an instructor or a designated support staff member on-site.

In addition to facilitator-guided reflection, self-guided reflection through methods such as journaling is proven to be highly beneficial to students’ self-revelation and personal growth (Smith-Augustine et al., 2014). Another option

might be culture classes where learner experiences are reflected upon and contextualized (Quan, 2018).

Minimize the Impact of Discrimination on Language Learning Abroad

One of the motivators of study abroad is the opportunity for students to immerse themselves in their target language. When Black students experience discrimination or overtly racist encounters with locals, their opportunities for practice with native language speakers rather than other second or tertiary language learners can all but disappear. If language learners are less inclined to interact with native speakers who they feel might be discriminating against them, or even just disengaged with interacting with them, they lose out on valuable practice. This is not to discount formal instruction, which can still result in learning gains. However, students report that a lack of interaction with locals results in less speaking practice and lowered confidence in their oral abilities in the target language (Quan, 2018). This will undoubtedly have noteworthy effects on these students' academic success, a large part of which may be dependent on social integration.

Such research suggests a greater need for study abroad programs to provide the above-mentioned chances for reflection on incidents and feelings that may result in missed language learning opportunities. For programs with a language learning component in particular, students should in advance be made aware of the importance of overcoming shyness (Quan, 2018), but these programs must also intentionally incorporate opportunities to connect participants with target language speakers. This can be done through organized language partner programs, structured host family events, or volunteer and internship opportunities. To address the issue of confidence, more transparent tracking of students' language progress may be helpful. As a significant portion of speaking and listening practice comes from interactions with a student's host family, program staff should also be mindful of how perceptions of race and other social identities may affect host families' willingness to engage and level of engagement with assigned students of color. Organized language partner programs should keep this in mind as well, particularly when it comes to group makeup and incentives to practice the target language with native speakers.

Recommendations for Further Scholarship

One of the most commonly cited limitations of research on Black students in study abroad is the modest sample sizes, which stem from the comparatively small number of Black students in higher education as a whole and, by extension, in study abroad. This often results in a less than ideal tendency to make generalizations based on limited, sometimes overly localized information. Further research would be served by larger-scale data collection of the experiences and impact of study abroad for Black students, which necessitates greater participation rates and intentional initiatives to send large-scale cohorts of Black students abroad. Already a current goal for most institutions, this serves as further impetus to make these initiatives happen.

Lastly, researchers should identify further pedagogical exercises that educators and students can use as a template to cultivate culturally validating classroom environments while abroad, as suggested by Blake et al. (2020). Such exercises can be included in training for faculty and staff responsible for developing study abroad course curriculum and facilitating student support on-site.

Conclusion

Study abroad practitioners should not presume that the experiences and outcomes of Black students are automatically the same as those of their peers. Research shows that their motivations for participating differ from those of the traditional White student. Still, Black students do have some identical and some unique outcomes that demonstrate that studying abroad is not only an opportunity that should be offered at the same level, but also one that offers measurable benefits that they may not otherwise be able to reap. If institutions genuinely wish to increase diversity of their programming and better support their students of color, they must be intentional about ensuring that these students are set up for success once they arrive in-country. Black students are strikingly resilient, and their nearly unanimous reported satisfaction with their programs proves that study abroad remains an incredibly valuable experience despite the challenges.

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