

# Minority Students: Study Abroad and Academic Success

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An [Associated Press article](#) earlier this week surveyed how a number of institutions -- among them Temple University and North Carolina A&T State University -- are investing in efforts to encourage more students from ethnic minorities to participate in study abroad programs. Numerous studies have demonstrated the impact that study abroad and other forms of experiential learning (internships, service learning, etc.) have on the persistence and academic performance of undergraduates in general and of minority students in particular; yet increasing the participation of minority students in these programs often remains an overlooked pathway to retention and academic success.

Last year, findings were released from [GLOSSARI](#), the Georgia Learning Outcomes of Students Studying Abroad Research Initiative, based on a decade of data. Among the findings:

- Students completing study abroad programs show improved academic performance in subsequent terms
- Study abroad students have higher graduation rates
- Study abroad improves academic performance for at-risk students

However, as few as 1.5 percent of American college students study overseas each year, and participation from under-represented ethnic minorities is especially low. According to the [2010 Open Doors report](#) from the Institute for International Education (IIE), although ethnic minorities account for 37 percent of enrollment in higher education in the US, they account for only 18.6 percent of students studying abroad.

This week, we turned to Jennifer Campbell, assistant director for the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship at IIE (61 percent of Gilman Scholarship recipients in fiscal year 2010 were under-represented ethnic minority students), and asked for her observations about what steps college and university officials can take to encourage greater minority participation in study abroad programs.

## Investigate the Barriers at Your Institution

**First, look at the actual landscape at your campus. Identify those minority students who are under-represented in study abroad programs at your own institution. Some minorities may not be under-represented, while others are. Which students are experiencing or seem to be experiencing barriers to study abroad at *your* institution? This first step is critical.**

Jennifer Campbell, IIE

Campbell warns against two pitfalls that can lead to taking unproductive or counterproductive approaches: relying on the national data without checking it against your own institutional data, and grouping all ethnic minorities together in an effort to take a holistic approach to encouraging higher participation in study abroad. "It is a *big* mistake to try to address all of these groups with one approach," she warns. "These are diverse students who face diverse barriers. Engage and dialogue with each group. The answers you receive from each group may be markedly different." For each cohort, you need to be able to ask:

- Is there a gap in study abroad participation?
- Why is the gap there?
- What measures can we take to get them access?

Here are examples.

### **SCENARIO A**

A study abroad program director decides to interview the head of the campus's diversity office, academic advisors, and survey minority students to learn more about the barriers they perceive to study abroad. When surveying Hispanic students, the director learns that many of them have actually been abroad before, visiting countries of heritage. A majority of the Hispanic students at this institution do not have psychological or cultural barriers to international study; for them, the primary issue is financial. To help mitigate this barrier, the program director invests time in locating scholarships the students will be eligible for.

### **SCENARIO B**

Concurrently, the study abroad director surveys the African-American students on campus. At this institution, a majority of these students indicate that their families have a lack of experience with international travel, and the students have doubts about whether they can be successful at study abroad. In addition, many of the parents have concerns about the safety of international travel. In this case, the director responds with an awareness and educational campaign, and with efforts to identify and give visibility to role models, including faculty and African-American students who have taken study abroad.

In the first case, the barrier is financial; in the second, the barrier has more to do with student expectations and the availability of a support system. First-generation minority students, especially, may perceive multiple barriers to study abroad. "It is a big decision to attend college," Campbell remarks. "Now consider going overseas. A student may say, I've spent my life in an ethnic minority in the US. What will this mean for me, this identity, if I go to England, or to Ghana, or to Japan? Fear of the unknown can be a significant factor."

**I had a faculty member tell me once, "Jennifer, we just succeeded in getting our first-generation students here. Let's focus on getting them through their classes before we try to get them overseas." But this is shortsighted, because the gap will continue to be there. It's important for first-generation students not just to attend college, but to have a holistic**

**college experience -- study abroad, internships -- so that they are competitive when they graduate.**

Jennifer Campbell, IIE

The two scenarios above illustrate that different student cohorts will have different needs, and will have to be approached with different solutions. The needs will also vary from campus to campus. At an HBCU with study abroad programs, for instance, the challenges cited in Scenario B may be less pronounced, and there may already be many study abroad role models within the campus community. Or perhaps at your college, the primary issue is neither financial nor a lack of prior experience with international travel; maybe it is simply that you not are offering as many study abroad programs in majors that have high minority student enrollment. The point is to know your own students and their challenges.

### **Adopt a Multi-Layered Approach**

Once you know what barriers (real or perceived) must be overcome, here are some of the actions you can take:

- If you have students who believe study abroad is not really available to them, start featuring ethnically diverse students' study abroad stories in your campus newsletters, through your institution's social media channels, on the website, and in other campus publications
- If you have a study abroad alumni program, select students who are ethnically diverse to visit classes and speak with first-year students about the possibilities of study abroad
- Encourage student leaders to pursue study abroad; your strongest advocates and your best voices for getting the message out are past study abroad students, and student leaders are in a strong position to promote study abroad on your campus
- Ensure that the possibility of study abroad is addressed during first and second-year advising; some students, especially in STEM disciplines, may be concerned about their ability to complete the requirements of their major if they take study abroad during their junior or senior year, and they need to be aware of the opportunities to take study abroad earlier
- Identify dynamic faculty from ethnic minorities and invite them to participate on the study abroad program committee, or in taking students overseas; "these faculty," Campbell notes, "can serve as advisers to student organizations, and they can serve as inspiring role models"
- If your students face cost barriers, then rather than having the student do all the work of finding ways to mitigate the cost of a study abroad program, devote time and staff to looking up scholarship funding that may be available for minority students, and educate your students about the options

**It is worth the time investment to remove barriers to study abroad for minority students. The data shows the impact on their academic performance and student development. For all students, including students of color, study abroad can be a transformative experience. In 2008, I accompanied a group of students on a site visit to the Elmina Castle right outside**

**of Accra, Ghana. One student in particular, a young African-American woman who could trace her ancestry to slaves in the US, had a life-changing experience. After seeing that landmark, one of the starting points of the transatlantic slave trade, she said that it had struck her that she was the descendant not of slaves, but rather the descendant of generations of survivors. It was a remarkable moment for her and for all of us who had the honor to share it with her.**

Jennifer Campbell, IIE