



IIE Center for Academic Mobility
Research and Impact



Underrepresented Students in US Study Abroad: Investigating Impacts

Laura C. Engel, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of International Education and International Affairs
The George Washington University

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Underrepresented Students in US Study Abroad: Investigating Impacts

Introduction

More US students are participating in study abroad than ever before. With steady increases since 1989-1990, there were 313,415 students who studied abroad for credit in 2014-2015, a 3 percent increase from the prior year (Institute of International Education, 2016). Evidence has suggested a range of benefits to study abroad, including positive learning outcomes, increased retention, and higher degree attainment. Notwithstanding these positive impacts, fewer than 10 percent of US undergraduates participate in a study abroad program and only 25 percent of those are racial/ethnic minority students. This striking imbalance results in the exclusion of a significant proportion of the higher education population from accessing the benefits of study abroad.

Enhancing pathways of access to study abroad for all students remains an essential objective for higher education institutions, researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers. Yet, not enough is definitively known about the impacts of study abroad on different groups of students, particularly racial/ethnic minority students and, one step further, what program approaches and strategies are most effective in bringing about these positive impacts. This brief aims to fill a notable gap by providing a synthesis of existing research on the association of study abroad with positive academic outcomes, degree retention, and completion rates for racial/ethnic minority and other underrepresented students.

Access and Attainment of Underrepresented Students in Post-Secondary Education

In 2015, there were 17 million US undergraduate students, of which 12.3 million were enrolled full-time at degree-granting institutions; and 4.7 million racial/ethnic minority students attended full-time (US Department of Education, Institute of Education Statistics, 2016). For example, college enrollment patterns from 1996 to 2012 for two- and four-year degrees show dramatic increases of 240 percent for Hispanic students and 72 percent for African American students, according to data from the Pew Research Center in 2014. In terms of attainment, however, the data suggest a less positive outlook. The Lumina Foundation's 2017 *A Stronger Nation* report indicates that despite the increasing enrollment rates for minority students, there remain vast inequalities in attainment across race and ethnicity. In particular, Hispanic and African American student populations continue to lag in attainment of four-year degrees. For instance, while the attainment rate in 2015 for White students was 45.7 percent, only 29.3

percent of African Americans earned degrees or certificates and 21.3 percent of Hispanics attained education beyond high school (Lumina Foundation, 2017).

Similar student attainment data are reported by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Examining data from students, both part and full time in two- and four-year degree programs, the report found graduation rates of 45.8 percent for Hispanic students and 38 percent for African American students, compared with 62 percent of White students and 63.2 percent of Asian students (Shapiro, Dundar, Huie, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Hwang, 2017). Taken together, these data suggest that while progress has been made on encouraging growth in racial/ethnic minority student enrollment in post-secondary education, overall attainment rates remain frustratingly stagnant.

Impacts of Study Abroad on Achievement, Retention, and Completion

Research on study abroad suggests that it may be an important intervention in post-secondary achievement, retention, and completion. Often the research on study abroad impacts has focused on single institutions, such as University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, University of California-San Diego, and University of Texas-Austin; however, other studies have looked at state systems, including Georgia and Florida. Collectively, this research has shown that among study abroad participants, there are higher retention and graduation rates, compared with students who do not study abroad. For example, research on study abroad participants within the Florida State System examined time-to-degree and degree completion among participating study abroad students in associate, bachelor, and graduate degree programs (Posey, 2003). Posey found that overall 93 percent of students who participated in study abroad attained their degree, compared to 64 percent of non-participants. The effect was particularly noted in four-year bachelor's degrees, where 81 percent of study abroad participants completed their degree compared with 57 percent of non-participants.

Research in study abroad suggests that among study abroad's different benefits, participants have higher post-secondary retention and completion rates than non-participants.

Using student data from 2002 at University of Texas-Austin, Barclay-Hamir's (2011) research demonstrated that students who studied abroad had a 60 percent chance of graduating in four years compared to 45 percent of non-participants. Data reported by the University of California at San Diego (2010) similarly showed that five year graduation rates for non-study abroad participants were 82.3 percent, in contrast with 94.7 percent for study abroad participants. Most impressively, according to the University of Georgia's Georgia Learning Outcomes of Students Studying Abroad Research Initiative (GLOSSARI), the largest survey of study abroad outcomes to date, a full-time student who does not participate in a study abroad program has a

less than 50 percent chance to graduate in less than six years. Those students who did participate in a study abroad program attain a graduation rate of 88.7 percent.

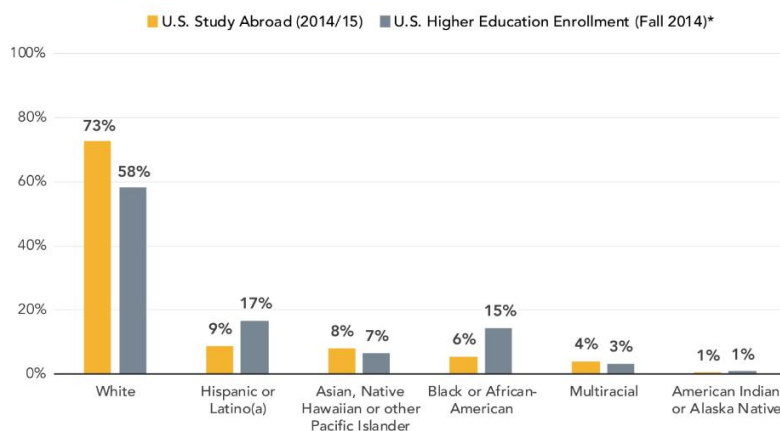
In addition to graduation rates, Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2015) found a positive association between study abroad participation and higher academic performance, satisfaction, and communication skills. Other research has found impacts of study abroad on personal growth (Dolby, 2007), independence (Hadis, 2005), and self-efficacy (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013), all important factors in achievement, retention, and completion.

Notwithstanding these promising effects of study abroad, there is considerable variance in who participates, resulting in the exclusions of particular segments of the student population that would reap the most benefits from the study abroad experience.

Who Studies Abroad?

Researchers and organizations have long lamented the considerable gaps in who studies abroad (ASHE, 2013; Lincoln Commission, 2005; NAFSA, 2003). Well-noted in research, the demographics of post-secondary study abroad point to participants as largely White and female. According to 2016 Open Doors data, 72.9 percent of study abroad students were White, 5.6 percent were African-American, 8.1 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 8.8 percent Hispanic, 4.1 percent multi-racial and .5 percent American Indian. Against total college enrollment, the proportion of study abroad students from underrepresented backgrounds continues to lag. In fact, the only demographic to be overrepresented in study abroad statistics in comparison to their college enrollment are White students (Sweeney, 2013).

Race/Ethnicity Representation of U.S. Students in Study Abroad and Total College Enrollment



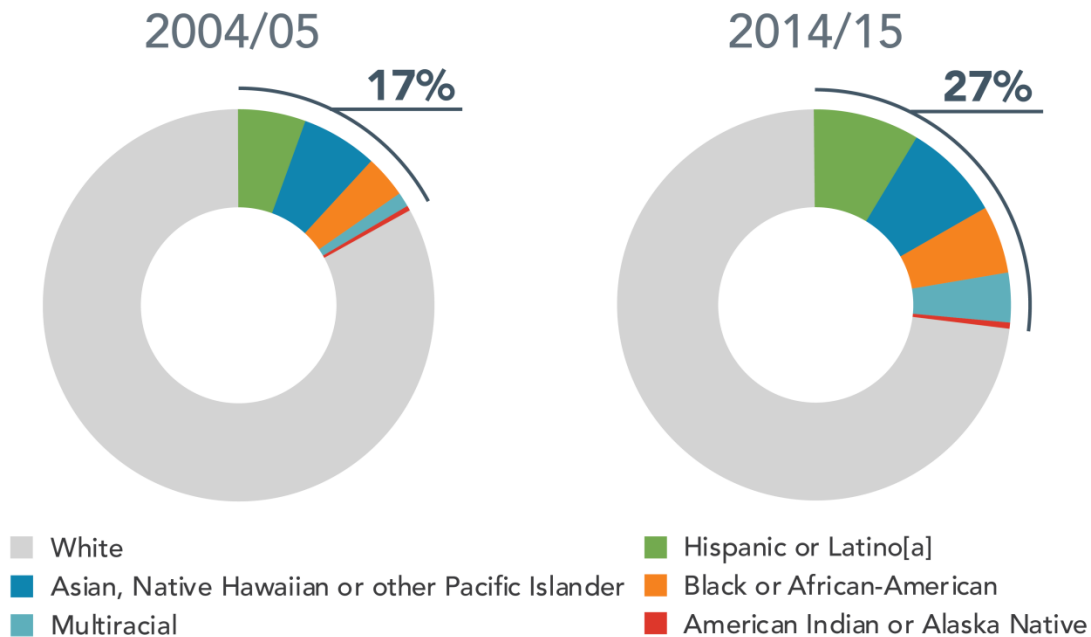
*Data from national Center for Education Statistics, reflecting total number of U.S. students receiving undergraduate degrees in 2014/15

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Although only a quarter of the study abroad population is non-White, Open Doors 2016 data show a modest increase of racial/ethnic minority students studying abroad, from 17 percent in 2004-05 to 27 percent in 2014-15.

Proportion of U.S. Minority Students Studying Abroad Has Increased Modestly Over the Past Ten Years

Race/Ethnicity of U.S. students abroad



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Other identified underrepresented groups are also participating in study abroad at disproportionate rates. For instance, there are a growing number of students with disabilities going abroad, from 1 percent in 1998 to 3 percent in 2008; however, they remain considerably underrepresented in study abroad programs (Scheib & Mitchell, 2008).

Much of the existing research has examined motivations and barriers to study abroad, particularly for racial/ethnic minority students and other underrepresented student groups. Literature consistently points to cost, financial aid restrictions, family and community influences, lack of awareness, and concerns about on-time graduation among the barriers to study abroad access (Briers, Shinn, & Nguyen, 2010; Brux & Fry, 2010; Kasravi, 2009; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009; Scheib & Mitchell, 2008). As higher education institutions have sought to address these barriers, they have focused mainly on enhancing the pathways of access to study abroad for all students, including targeted study abroad scholarship programs to students receiving Pell Grants; the application of federal loans toward study abroad; marketing strategies; and special faculty-led programs aimed at low-income and first generation students of color.

In 2016, the University of Pennsylvania Center for Minority Serving Institutions and the Council on International Educational Exchange launched a multi-year partnership targeting greater access of undergraduate students in minority-serving universities to study abroad opportunities. The partnership offers leadership workshops to other institutions, trainings for faculty and program development, and annual scholarships for ten students to undertake a short-term study abroad experience. In a different partnership, the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) Abroad worked with 11 Historically Black Colleges and Universities to offer opportunities for expansion in the number of African American students in study abroad. Likewise, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities has also offered scholarships to students, as well as the use of federal financial aid toward study abroad.

Other higher education institutions, such as California State University-Fresno, Emory University, Temple University, North Carolina A&T State University, San Francisco State University, SUNY Oswego, and Florida A&M University, among others, have also taken targeted approaches to grow the number of students from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds involved in study abroad. One recognized pathway of enhancing access is through providing scholarships to study abroad, including financial support for obtaining a passport. Additionally, the US Department of State Benjamin A. Gilman International scholarship program, which offers grants to students of limited financial means in two-year and four-year college/university to participate in study and intern abroad programs, has increased access of underrepresented students to study abroad. Gilman scholarships have been awarded to a growing number of ethnic minority students, from 36 percent in its inaugural year to 64 percent in 2014-2015 (US Department of State, 2016). These opportunities have resulted in more racial/ethnic minority students participating in study abroad, thus diversifying study abroad and resulting in a range of positive impacts on Gilman Scholars, including increased foreign language skills, enhanced global perspectives, and adopting new areas of interest and career objectives (US Department of State, 2016). Gilman Scholars noted that the scholarship was impactful in their decisions to pursue graduate student and other prestigious international fellowships; 14 percent went abroad again through the Fulbright program (US Department of State, 2016). While increasing access is a critical first step, further research is needed on the impacts of the above interventions on post-secondary attainment, retention, and completion rates.

Utilizing longitudinal data from the Wabash National Study on Liberal Arts Education, Salisbury et al. (2009) investigated the interaction of different forms of accumulated capital with student decisions to participate in study abroad. Among their findings, there is a clear effect of socio-economic status (SES) on choice to study abroad, whereby students of lower SES backgrounds, including those offered financial assistance (e.g., scholarships), are less likely to study abroad than students of higher SES. Interestingly, regardless of SES, the accumulation of social and cultural forms of capital has a mitigating effect on student decisions to study abroad. These findings suggest that scholarships alone are not sufficient to alleviate barriers to study abroad.

Impact of Study Abroad on Racial/Ethnic Minority Students

A growing body of both small and large-scale research has focused on study abroad's specific impacts on racial/ethnic minority students. For example, examining race and ethnic representation among study abroad participants, Sutton and Rubin (2007) found that minority students who studied abroad had higher four-year graduation rates. Similarly, in research at University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, 64 percent of study abroad participants graduated in four years, whereas 41 percent of non-study abroad students did not. Similarly, 90 percent of study abroad participants graduated in five years, compared with 58.6 percent of non-study abroad participants. The correlation between study abroad and graduation rate was significantly strong for minority students, as well as first-generation college students.

The GLOSSARI study found near parity among graduation rates of White students and African-American students, who were 13 to 31 percent more likely to graduate than their peers who did not participate in study abroad. For other non-White students, graduation rates rose by 7 to

Students who studied abroad had a four-year graduation rate 17.8% higher than non-participants. African-American students who studied abroad had a 31.2% higher graduation rate (Sutton & Rubin, 2010).

18 percent. For example, for Hispanic students studying abroad in community colleges, the two-year retention rate was 10.3 percent higher than non-participants; they completed on average 12.5 more transferable credits; and were 5.4 percent more likely to enroll at university (Raby, Rhodes, & Biscarra, 2014).

In contrast to these more positive outcomes, a study from Indiana University at Bloomington found when controlling for academic achievement, area of study, and background variables, there was a smaller effect for minority students (Redden, 2012). This study also found a lower increase of attainment for all students participating in study abroad in

comparison to GLOSSARI and other findings.

In examining learning outcomes, other studies have focused on dimensions of student engagement, independence, perseverance, and confidence, all of which have been found to positively inform learning outcomes (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). For example, one study analyzed essays of 18 participating African American students in a study abroad program in Ghana and found that the overseas experience positively affected student motivation in learning and overall achievement (Day-Vines, Barker, & Exum, 1998). For first time travelers, short term study abroad program participants noted gains in confidence (Slotkin, Vamosi, Perez, Durie, & Eisenberg, 2016). Hadis (2005) found increased decision-making independence and academic focus among study abroad participants. Other studies of the career benefits of study abroad have demonstrated that the increase in positivity about career outcomes would likely be magnified for underrepresented students (Kronholz & Osborn, 2016).

Building the Pipeline: Impacts of Early Exposure to Study Abroad

Early exposure to international experiences affords students opportunities to develop important 21st century skills from an early age. Yet, few secondary education students will have an education abroad experience. In fact, fewer than 2,000 US students (.002 percent of the US secondary student population) studied abroad in semester or year-long exchanges (Council for Standards on International Student Travel, 2016). It is noteworthy, however, that many K-12 study abroad opportunities tend to be short-term and a comprehensive data source on how extensive these programs are in US schools and districts does not yet exist. What we do know is that most K-12 study abroad offerings tend to be school-based and accessible only to a small student population with adequate financial resources, thereby excluding many students from travel overseas.

Aimed to make “study abroad the expectation, not the exception” for all students, the DC Public Schools (DCPS) Study Abroad program has launched a new district-wide, fully funded study abroad program. The DCPS is presumed to be the first public school district in the US to provide free study abroad opportunities (Engel, Fundalinski, & Gibson, 2017; Engel, Fundalinski, Gatalica, Gibson, & Ireland, in press). As of 2017, more than 800 8th and 11th grade students and 100 educators have traveled to 17 countries and more than 500 passports have been provided to students. The population of student participants is considerably diverse, representing a range of racial/ethnic and SES backgrounds, contrasting the typical portrait of US study abroad participation.

In research examining the early impacts of these overseas experiences on participating students, Engel, Fundalinski and Gibson (2017) found positive impacts on students’ engagement in learning, confidence, motivation to continue studying at the college level, and future aspirations for study abroad in post-secondary education.

In addition, there are early indications of impacts on college access. Although GPA is not a factor in student selection for DCPS Study Abroad, participants are more likely to apply to college, are 15 percent more likely than non-participants to be accepted to college/university, and 24 percent more likely to have applied for financial aid. Moreover, DCPS data show that 98 percent of the 2016 cohort of 11th graders studying abroad took the SAT, compared with 89 percent of students overall. Given that the majority of DCPS Study Abroad program participants are students of color from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, these early indications of the relationship between study abroad and college access are notable.

New research suggests positive impacts of K-12 study abroad on students’ engagement in learning, confidence, and motivations for future college study.

Future Pathways in Research

Much of the attention on study abroad participation gaps has focused on access of racial/ethnic minority students to study abroad. This research has examined barriers to study abroad, the mitigating factors in decisions to study abroad and, to a lesser extent, the experiences of students in study abroad. Overall, much attention has been placed on the growing access of racial/ethnic minority students to study abroad through scholarship programs. Undoubtedly strides are being made in increasing the numbers of racial/ethnic minority student participants in study abroad and the number of targeted initiatives across higher education institutions. Yet, much work remains. While training faculty and leaders, designing inclusive programs, and providing scholarships are all laudable efforts, making the case that study abroad is for all students mandates more than increasing access. Understanding the impacts, and in particular the impacts on learning outcomes for underrepresented student groups, remains essential.

As such, there are three main recommendations for future research related to impacts of study abroad on minority students:

- **Continue to evaluate the impact of study abroad participation on retention and degree attainment for racial/ethnic minority students by conducting additional research and designing a data repository and dashboard for use by practitioners and academics.** While post-secondary enrollments of minority groups have continued to rise over the past two decades, attainment has not risen in any corresponding fashion. And yet, multiple studies of single institutions have suggested that study abroad has had a positive effect on minority retention and attainment rates. Why is this the case? Further research is required into these dynamics of study abroad's impacts on minority student attainment. Investigative research on student engagement and inclusive excellence, both at the secondary and post-secondary level, may help not only to fill the considerable gaps in study abroad research, but also may help bolster understanding of the minority student experience in post-secondary education (Sweeney, 2013). It is also clear that additional research examining community college study abroad is a necessity. Minorities tend to make up larger percentages of two year programs. And yet, research has shown that students enrolled in community college study abroad at disproportionate rates as students enrolled in liberal arts colleges (Salisbury et al., 2009). Given the positive impacts on community college students of minority backgrounds who study abroad, community colleges are a significant context for further impact studies (Raby, Rhodes, & Biscarra, 2014).
- **Expand the current scope of study abroad research to address issues related to all underrepresented student groups, such as undocumented students, refugees, students with disabilities, LGBT students, among others.** While the synthesis of research in this brief is centered primarily on race and ethnicity, additional research is

needed on citizenship status and education abroad, including impacts on undocumented students, refugees, and students in the permanent residency process. Moreover, few studies have examined LGBT students' experiences in study abroad and the impacts (Bryant & Soria, 2015). Lastly, further research on impacts of study abroad on participants with registered disabilities is also an area of growth in terms of impact studies (Scheib & Mitchell, 2008). If there is more known about the experiences and effects of study abroad on these different student populations, higher education professionals and policy-makers may be guided in better interventions in enhancing access and ensuring positive study abroad experiences.

- **Build a K-12 pipeline to higher education through expansion of programs targeting early exposure to international experiences and investment in research which examines college and career outcomes.** With increased initiatives to enhance study abroad among secondary education students, there are unprecedented opportunities to examine the short-term impacts of early exposure on high school retention and college access, as well as medium and long-term impacts of early exposure to study abroad on post-secondary area of study, career choice, study abroad rates, retention, and graduation rates.

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