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### **African American Students are underrepresented in Study Abroad**

In response to globalization, higher education programs, federal agencies and non-profit organizations have established study abroad programs to provide students with an opportunity to gain valuable experience abroad. According to Dr. Allan E. Goodman, President of the Institute of International Education, "international experience is one of the most important components of a 21st century education, and study abroad should be viewed as an essential element of a college degree and critical to preparing future leaders."<sup>1</sup> Study abroad opportunities allow students to learn about other societies by living and interacting with local communities-learning their customs and traditions. These experiences help students develop an appreciation for different cultures as well as adopt new perspectives on their own American culture.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Goodman and Stacie Nevadomski Berdan insist that "learning how to interact with people from other countries and cultures equips future leaders in all sectors to address urgent issues shared across borders."<sup>3</sup> Additionally, students who study abroad are also more likely to develop leadership skills, problem solving skills and an increased ability to cope with difficult and unfamiliar situations.<sup>4</sup> The aforementioned skills are critical for students to possess in this global economy.

While international experience is an important skill that all students should acquire, too few African American students are acquiring these skills due to low participation in study abroad programs, which may have an adverse effect on their educational outcomes. According to the U.S. Department of Education National Center on Educational Statistics, only 5% of students who studied in abroad were African American although African American students accounted to 15% of post-secondary education enrollments in the United States.<sup>5</sup> The low participation rates

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<sup>1</sup> "Africa: International Students in the United States and Study Abroad By American Students Are At an All-Time High." AllAfrica.com. N.p., 21 Nov. 2014. Web. 02 July 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Bandyopadhyay, Soumava, and Kakoli Bandyopadhyay. "Factors Influencing Student Participation In College Study Abroad Programs." *Journal of International Education Research* 11.2 (2015): 87.

<sup>3</sup> Goodman, Allen E., and Stacie Berdan. "Every Student Should Study Abroad." New York Times. N.p., 12 May 2014. Web. 2 July 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Bandyopadhyay, Soumava, and Kakoli Bandyopadhyay. "Factors Influencing Student Participation In College Study Abroad Programs." *Journal of International Education Research* 11.2 (2015): 87.

<sup>5</sup> "Trends in U.S. Study Abroad." NAFSA. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 July 2015.

of African Americans in study abroad programs can be attributed to several factors including lack of mentors and faculty support, lack of meaningful direct outreach and financial barriers.

One of the most significant obstacles that African American students face when considering studying abroad is the lack of mentors and faculty support. According to Dr. Eileen B. Wilson-Oyelaran, absence of mentoring as well ineffective outreach contributes to low participation of African Americans in study abroad programs.<sup>6</sup> Due to the low participation rate of African American students in study abroad programs, there are fewer African Americans who can serve as mentors for students who are interested in participating. Mentors can play an important role providing a crucial support system that African American students need in the pursuit of international experiences. When students know their peers have studied abroad, it can motivate them to seek study abroad opportunities<sup>7</sup>. Mentorship not only increases student confidence, but also, mentors can help students obtain the necessary information about study abroad before they apply to a program.

Images of students who participate in and thrive in study abroad program rarely reflect the diversity that can be found throughout our country. Too few African Americans see images of—people who look like them or who come from the communities from which they come, engaged in study abroad advertising materials. This may cause African American students to believe that studying abroad is not for them or to otherwise forgo possible international opportunities. It is important that professors and advisers directly engage African American students encouraging them to seek study abroad opportunities. A case study on study abroad marketing techniques at Georgia Regent University, Hull College of Business found that minority students were more likely to apply for study abroad programs if they were reached out to directly by their professors or advisors.<sup>8</sup> Direct encouragement by professors and advisers is important for historically underrepresented students, because students will feel encouraged when they receive information from their professors and advisers rather than receiving information through flyers or other forms of communications such as emails. College study abroad offices should collaborate with professors and advisers to make sure that information and recruitment for study abroad programs reach African American students.

While some students can cover the non-tuition costs of studying abroad out of pocket other costs including airfare, food and living abroad can be prohibitive for many African

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<sup>6</sup> Wilson-Oyelaran, Eileen B. "Diversity in education abroad: A plan for our campuses." *IENetworker*, spring, 30 33 (2011).

<sup>7</sup> "Mentor Program for African American Students." Global Education Office -. Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d. Web. 03 Aug. 2015.

<sup>8</sup> "Dismantling Non-Financial Barriers to Study Abroad Experienced by Underrepresented Students." NAFSA Annual Conference 2015 (n.d.): n. pag. Georgia Regents University. Web. 13 July 2015.

American students. Airline tickets to and from the country of study could be as much as \$2000<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, the cost of travel between the country of study and other ports of call which many students may need to travel can cost a lot of money. This is a burden to many African American students who may not be able to afford to cover these costs. As a result, they may forgo study abroad opportunities that could have allowed them to gain international experience and develop important skills.

Fear of racism abroad can also discourage African American students from pursuing study abroad experiences. In interviews I conducted for this article, African American students shared experiences of racism abroad. Ashley Patterson recalls being questioned about her “Americanness” or being asked if she can speak “*Black-Speak*.” Another student, Olivia Harrison, thinks that “*many people have the idea that an American is a white American*”. Experiences like this may cause African American students to become worried about studying abroad especially where there are few other African Americans. It is not uncommon for African American students who study abroad to experience a sense of isolation due to the fact that there are fewer African American students pursuing study abroad.

In addition to the above mentioned factors such as lack of mentors and lack of faculty support, financial burden causes many African American students to face obstacles in gaining study abroad experiences. As stated, it is critical for African American students to study abroad and learn additional languages to be competitive in a global labor market that is demanding more people with cultural and international experiences. A survey conducted by the Institute of International Education found that a large number of employers value a new recruit with international experiences.<sup>10</sup> Employers value employees with study abroad experiences because they possess the following skills: multicultural knowledge, foreign language skills, ability to communicate effectively in intercultural settings and adaptability to unfamiliar cultures which companies and organizations value. Additionally, studying abroad provides African American students an opportunity to experience different cultures and languages which may give them a sense of confidence in exploring international careers. Currently, African Americans are underrepresented in the top posts in the U.S Department of State and Diplomacy.<sup>11</sup> If more African American students studied abroad, it could increase the number of those working internationally. International experience not only is an essential skill that African American

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<sup>9</sup> Stansbury, Taryn. "Thinking of Studying Abroad? It's Not All About Cost." Fox Business, 14 June 2013. Web. 03 Aug. 2015.

<sup>10</sup> "The Value of International Education to U.S. Business and Industry Leaders:." The Value of International Education to U.S. Business. Institute of International Education, Oct. 2009. Web. 08 July 2015

<sup>11</sup> Richter, Paul, and Tom Hamburger. "Few Blacks Serve in Top U.S. Diplomatic Posts." Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, 16 Mar. 2010. Web. 09 July 2015

students should gain in order to be competitive in the labor market, but it is also important to educate people of other countries about the United States and its diverse population.

There are some programs that provide support to minority students like African American students. The U.S Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs offers the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program, which is offered for undergraduate students with limited financial resources or students who have long been underrepresented in study abroad through Institute of International Education.<sup>12</sup> The U.S Department of Education also provides grants and fellowship for international experiences in addition to the financial aid that many students receive to finance their higher education. Some of the programs that the US Department of Education offers includes: Fulbright-Hays fellowship which is awarded to graduate students conducting scholarly research abroad. Unfortunately, many African American students do not have access to these resources and information because of lack of good outreach. Access to resources is the most important step that can be taken to address the low representation of African American students in study abroad.

To address the low representation of African American students in study abroad, which is a critical opportunity, the following recommendations should be considered and pursued:

- 1- A program to increase African American mentors in colleges that provide study abroad programs should be created to be resource for African American students who are interested in study abroad.
- 2- Colleges should increase their outreach to African American students in order to share with them about study abroad opportunities. Direct outreach by professors and advisors have huge positive impact on student interest in study abroad therefore it should be main outreach methods that study abroad in colleges uses to attract underrepresented students like African Americans.
- 3- Study abroad advertising materials should reflect the diversity of the student body in American colleges
- 4- The U.S Department of Education should encourage colleges to establish funds to support students who are not able to cover the cost of study abroad trips (e.g: flight and accommodations).
- 5- The Department of Education should also allow students to use their financial aid for flights and accommodations. This would allow more minority students to take advantage of financing study abroad with their financial aid.
- 6- Additional scholarly studies on study abroad programs/global education and African Americans should be conducted. Currently, there are few studies that have been done on study abroad specifically related to African Americans. Studies would assist policy

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<sup>12</sup> "About the Program." Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program. The Institute of International Education, n.d. Web. 06 July 2015.

makers to establish policies and priorities that will address the underrepresentation of African American students in study abroad.