Chapter 12

An Empowering Experience: Black Males Developing Competencies Abroad

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the experiences of 12 Black males who studied abroad as undergraduate students. This study was concerned with understanding the potential impact of study abroad on their personal, academic, and professional decisions. Findings are organized in three main sections: preparing to study abroad, life abroad, and returning home. This study revealed that Black males in the study had strong predispositions to study abroad and secured encouragement and support from a number of individuals and groups to study abroad. While abroad, students enhanced their sense of independence, were challenged to be critical and creative, and had opportunities to reflect upon several aspects of their own identity. Once students returned home, study abroad continued to have an influence on their lifestyle, career decisions, and commitment to actively participate in their community.

INTRODUCTION

Study abroad continues to grow as the most widely replicated initiative across the country helping students acquire international and intercultural competence (American Council on Education (ACE), 2008). As Tillmann (2010) summarized, study abroad has opened an, “unprecedented range of opportunities available to broaden their [college students] world view and deepen their understanding of global
issues” (Tillmann, 2010, p. 7). This interest in increasing the number of students who participate in study abroad has been supported not only across colleges and universities, but has also been set as an important priority through federal plans and commissions establishing goals such as reaching one million American students studying abroad annually by 2017 (Lincoln Fellowship Advisory Council, 2005). In 2016, a total of 325,339 American students studied abroad, representing a four percent increase from the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2017).

Despite these efforts to promote study abroad as an experience for all students, it is clear that major gaps still exist when considering access to study abroad by race and gender. As it pertains to race, in 2016, White students made up nearly four-fifths of study abroad participants from the United States. By comparison, Hispanics/Latino students made up 9.7% of students of color who studied abroad, followed by Asian/Pacific Islanders (8.4%), African Americans (5.9%), and multiracial students (3.9%), and American Indian/Alaska Native (0.5%) (Institute of International Education, 2017). With regards to gender, 33.5% of all study abroad participants are male. This disparity holds constant even in academic majors that are dominated by males (e.g., Engineering, Math) (Dessoff, 2006; Institute of International Education, 2017; Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2011).

Considering that study abroad is regarded as one of the most influential practices for the development of students; this qualitative study explored the experiences of 12 Black males who studied abroad as undergraduate students. The goal of this study was to enhance our understanding of the experiences of Black males abroad, contributing to the literature by examining if and how study abroad impacts the personal, academic, and professional decisions of students.

BACKGROUND

The majority of research about students of color and study abroad has focused on identifying barriers associated with the lack of participation for this population in study abroad. Findings suggest barriers for participation range from financial concerns, fear of racism abroad, lack of family support, language competency, and information about study abroad opportunities (Consuelo-Clemens, 2002; Doan, 2002; Van Der Meid, 2003).

Unfortunately, very few inquiries (i.e., Burkart, Hexter, & Thompson, 2001; Guerrero, 2006; Metzger, 2006; Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2011) have examined the experiences of students of color as participants in study abroad programs. As a result, colleges and universities have little knowledge about the impact of study abroad for this population, and continue to face many unknowns when attempting to promote internationalizing initiatives that truly engage all students (Salisbury,
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