Common Issues Related to Learning Abroad for Low-Income First-Generation Students
Nathan Whittaker, M.Ed. and Kirsten Collins, M.Ed.
TRiO Student Support Services, College of Education and Human Development

Abstract
There has been increased discussion around the significance of providing meaningful learning abroad experiences to students of color; however, little is known about the complexities of learning abroad for low-income (LI) and first-generation (FG) college students. TRIO Student Support Services at the University of Minnesota (CEHD) works specifically with students from LI/FG backgrounds; the vast majority of TRIO students are people of color and includes several permanent resident green-card individuals and recent refugees. In our experience as TRIO professionals, barriers to learning abroad are strongly correlated to economic class and citizenship status where financial and academic capital is often limited. This analysis focuses on common issues encountered when assisting LI/FG students with learning abroad opportunities.

Significance
There are many significant challenges for LI/FG students, including: unwritten cultural norms, footloose of academic culture, complex lives outside college, and a need for community (Jehangir, 2010). Learning abroad is increasingly important for LI/FG students who often thrive in non-traditional academic settings with diverse pedagogies. TRIO staff has seen first-hand how students excel academically and retention improves following a learning abroad experience. Burkart, Hexter, and Thompson (2001) posited that, “Studies experiences outside of the United States can be more than enriching for low-income and minority students; they can also produce profound and lasting changes in self-confidence, their academic and professional goals, and their attitudes about their roles in society.”

TRIO students also enhance learning abroad experiences for more traditional students via their ability to navigate multiple cultures, multi-lingual skills, and lived experiences that often differ greatly from their more privileged peers. The existence of diversity in higher education has been linked to increased critical thinking and problem solving skills, creativity, academic success, retention, satisfaction and students involvement (Smith & Schonfield, 2000). Students also benefit by increased efforts to address issues relating to oppression and prejudice and “commitment to civic engagement, democratic outcomes, and community participation” (Smith & Schonfield, 2000).

Common Challenges
LI/FG students face multiple barriers to learning abroad including: “program cost: length of study; admission requirements; marketing; lack of faculty or departmental support; and, campus climate” (Carter, 1991). TRIO staff strongly encourages learning abroad; however, most of our students are unable to ignore home obligations, feel overwhelmed by the process and cost, or view learning abroad as an opportunity for other students. In a recent TRIO needs analysis, 95% of TRIO student leaders (some of our most engaged) felt that study abroad was not possible (n=21). Common reasons listed were consistent with our research and experience.

- Pell Grants and additional scholarships often fall short. As opposed to their middle and upper-class peers, LI/FG students are rarely have a “safety net” and risk dire consequences should they run out of funds. Most scholarships for short-term programs are disbursed after departure. Students cannot afford up-front program fees and in-country costs.
- Basic program costs are often unfeasible. Fees can be daunting to LI/FG students when added to estimated cost of attendance (EOC). The yearly family income for TRIO students is $22,000 (traditional TRIO) and $18,000 (TRIO College English Transitions).
- LI/FG students often have additional expenses related to travel documentation, including: passports ($150) and application/confirmation fees ($540), refuge status and green-card students must obtain the US-131 for re-entry ($136), biometric fees ($85), and host-country VISA fees depending on their home nation. The documentation process is time consuming and requires certain skills to navigate.
- There is a scarcity of need-based scholarships for learning abroad. Scholarships strictly based on essays, GPA, recommendation letters, or other student accomplishments negate inequities in education and put LI/FG students at a disadvantage.
- LI/FG students often focus on the day-to-day living that poverty requires (food, shelter, safety, etc.). It can be difficult for LI/FG students to find additional time to navigate an already unfamiliar process, such as study abroad.
- Folkways of academic culture and limited familiarity with college life frequently prevent LI/FG students from learning abroad. Families and community may not prioritize “external” academic experiences or prohibit their children from participating due to cultural norms.
- There is a gap in educational opportunity (including learning abroad) between America’s highest and lowest income students, despite their potential. Many institutions have not altered how they make decisions, teach courses, and make resources available to meet LI/FG students in the middle. For many LI/FG students it can be difficult to navigate policies, trust staff, and receive “warm referrals” to meaningful opportunities.

- “Even scholarships ask for writing essays and find a recommendation, which makes it difficult to apply. Also, low-income students don’t have experience going through the process of applying, expectations of what is needed to apply, and resources to help them. I know it’s important to study abroad but it’s costly and a difficult process for someone like me.” TRIO student

Solutions
- CEHD includes financial need in scholarship reviews - taking into account students from LI/FG backgrounds - supporting the idea that diverse learning environments are beneficial to all involved. Other colleges and programs could consider similar practices.
- The Learning Abroad Center now allows LI/FG students to defer short-term program confirmation fees to allow subsequent semester financial aid to cover this cost. This will save LI/FG students upwards of $450 out-of-pocket need.
- CEHD holds scholarship-writing workshops that have benefited LI/FG students. Other colleges should consider similar workshops.
- “Warm referrals” and developing trusting relationships are a must for LI/FG students regarding financial aid, applying for programs, and overall support.
- Increase number of low-cost and short-term programs.
- Scholarships and reserve funds for additional pre-departure and in-country costs are greatly needed.

Short Term Programs
Short-term learning abroad experiences tend to fit well for LI/FG students due to family and financial obligations. It also gives students a chance to “get their feet wet,” which often feels comfortable for students who have not been from home. Short-term programs provide structure, community, and safety that is important to both the students and their families.

“Coming from a disadvantaged family in terms of income is the main reason I struggle financially. My family isn’t able to contribute to my education; therefore, I’m unable to get involved with certain things, such as learning abroad. My savings are important to me because, I’m basically independent. I buy my own clothing, personal products, and books. I would have put all of my savings towards study abroad, then when I returned home, I would have been struggling to take care of myself. Although it would have been a wonderful experience, the truth was I couldn’t afford it.” TRIO student

References