

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
**Study Abroad Curriculum Integration**

*International Education for Undergraduates*

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**Students of Color Focus Group Data Summary**  
**Spring 2002**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

As a directive from the Multicultural Study Abroad Group (MSAG), Global Campus • Study Abroad gathered data from students of color on their perceptions of study abroad. The goal was to hear from the students about barriers to study abroad, their current knowledge of study abroad, and where they obtain study abroad information at the University of Minnesota. This directive will provide information to MSAG, and in turn MSAG will develop ideas to recruit, maintain, and offer support for students of color who want to study abroad.

The following major themes came out of the analyses of the data gathered.

1. Family has a large role in students' decision making.
2. Cost is often a hindrance to study abroad.
3. Influence by peers and advisers are very important.
4. The student's country of heritage plays a great role in where a student will study abroad, whether it will be in that country or not.
5. Students have a lack of knowledge of study abroad and its outcomes. This lack of knowledge leads to the general perception that study abroad is more fun than academic.
6. The idea of prestigious or official study abroad programs can play a big factor in the decision to study abroad.

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

The Multicultural Study Abroad Group (MSAG) emerged from interest expressed by participants of the September 2001 retreat for the Freshman/Sophomore Advising group. This Study Abroad Curriculum Integration retreat was one in a series of events for faculty and advisers on all four University of Minnesota campuses. MSAG will address the concerns and questions regarding the participation of students of color in study abroad.

In order to gather the data, the Global Campus implemented a series of three focus groups. The students in the focus groups had not studied abroad, although some had inquired about it at the Global Campus. The students were recruited with the help of MSAG members and contacts in the multicultural offices on the Twin Cities campus.

A total of eight students of color participated in the focus groups (FG).

- FG 1 consisted of one woman of South Asian descent, one of Pacific Islander descent, and one of Southeast Asian descent. All three of the students were enrolled in the College of

Liberal Arts. One student was a pre-med Biology major, one was a junior in Journalism, and one was double majoring in Political Science and Biology.

- FG 2 had a total of four participants. One woman was a sophomore in Geology or Biology and the other woman had not yet chosen a major. One man was a sophomore in Biosystems & Agricultural Engineering in the Institute of Technology and the other man was a freshman in Carlson School of Management (CSOM). Of this group, one student was of mixed ethnicity (East Asian and European American), one was of Southeast Asian origin, and the ethnic background of the other two was not identifiable.
- FG 3 consisted of one man of South Asian decent who was enrolled in CSOM.

No African American, Native American, or Chicano/Latino students participated in the focus groups.

The students were first asked to write down three things that came to mind when they thought of study abroad. These were written on a flip chart and discussed. The students were then asked a few open-ended questions to get at the goals of the focus group. Lastly, students were reminded of the flip chart and the group reflected on the original ideas. A copy of the Focus Group Question Guide can be found in Appendix A.

## **THEMES**

### **Family**

Students indicated that family was a key barrier to study abroad. Although students often did not overtly state this at the beginning of the focus group, as they talked through other concerns they realized that parent/family attitudes were the actual key influence. As one student stated, "Family is the main category. Like with the idea map, there is family in the center and all the others branch out from there."

Words like "guilt" and "burden" were used when they talked about asking parents to help pay for study abroad. One student expressed, "I feel awful when I have to burden them some more when they are already working so hard." This point was maintained by another student commenting, "Family actually is hiding there under cost/expenses." In addition, the parents have strong feelings about how to pay for school. As one student stated, "My parents said absolutely no loans." Another student followed with, "I don't want loans at all. I know I will need them eventually but study abroad is more of a want than a need, so it isn't worth it."

Another student valued the security and reliability of his family so much that he stated he would need a similar security system abroad but doubted he could find one. The example he mentioned was how he goes home to do his wash and wondered if he would be able to rely on someone like that while studying abroad.

An additional point that came out was what their parents would think they were doing abroad. Students would have to be doing something worthwhile and not just having fun away from their parents. As one student stated, "I have to show them that I deserve it. I need to show the grades and work for it."

A couple of students did not think family was a factor at all.

## **Cost**

This category can be summed up in one statement: the price of studying abroad is too high. Experience within the study abroad office can support the statement that one student made, "Cost is the most common concern about study abroad." In most student cases, this holds true.

It is obvious that this category is related to Family with all of the previous comments about burden and guilt. It is interesting to consider how money is spent and on what, by the households the students come from. For example, there are obvious and strong feelings about loans as seen from the earlier quotes. Considering that people spend money on products they place a high value upon, we can assume this category is also tied to the idea of an official or prestigious program. There may possibly be some programs that would be worth it.

## **Influence**

When asked about whose opinion on study abroad the students would trust, the overwhelming response was their peers. Students felt that, "Peers are your age and they know what you like and what you don't." Peers with experience or knowledge in study abroad were especially regarded as influential, "Peers in Global Campus have already studied abroad and so they can share their experiences." The general feeling was that close and well-known peers were influential, regardless of their experience, and unknown peers could be as well if they had experience.

Family came up at this time, too. Students made a greater distinction here between family who had studied abroad and those who had not. A student whose uncle studied in London and the one whose sister was in Australia both mentioned them as being influential but did not say that other family members who hadn't studied abroad were influential.

Advisers were also influential. Here, a distinction was made between professors and academic advisers. There was the feeling that some advisers were impersonal and had a prescribed agenda that required them to mention study abroad only because it was part of their script, as illustrated by the comment, "Advisers always say you should study abroad." However, most students had an adviser they felt they knew and whose opinion they valued about study abroad. One student responded that she values the advice of "My Global Studies adviser because she has connections and knows people. She works with students who have studied abroad or are going to study abroad and they come to her with letters of recommendations and that kind of thing." All the students in FG 1 mentioned they would listen to their Martin Luther King (MLK) Program advisers.

## **Heritage**

A handful of students were interested in studying abroad in their heritage country even if they had been there before. "I go to the Philippines all the time. My parents still want me to study abroad there." This student clearly stated that this would be the only place she would want to go as well, "I definitely want to study abroad in the Philippines and the program was canceled due to political unrest. That is basically the only place I want to go. So I guess I won't study abroad because the program I wanted is canceled."

Another student stated that he wanted to study where an uncle had studied abroad and had found many people of their ethnic group.

A couple of students said their parents would not let them study in the country of their ancestry. One student described what his parents would say, " We won't pay for you to study abroad in India. We can tell you what you need to know about that. Now if you want to go somewhere else..."

### **Perception and Knowledge**

The student's general perception of most study abroad programs can be summed up by two of the students' statements: " Fun & games" and "You're like a tourist while you're there."

Surprisingly, despite this general perception, the students still were aware of the concept of curriculum integration and academic fit. The students in the focus groups were very determined that if they were to study abroad it would have to fit into their existing curriculum and not waste money or time. Students were making comments as explicit as, "Matching the course requirements from here (is a concern)." And also, " I need to know the whole transferring of credit. Will I be in trouble when I come back or will I be able to graduate?"

Because of the perception of study abroad as fun, most students assumed it could not fit academically. Or they thought if it could, it would be too much work to make it happen. "When I was thinking about studying abroad I was thinking about all the work I'd have to do to make it quality. It'd be hard to tie in their classes with classes at the U of M." The idea of all this work is a widely held deterrent to study abroad as well. On the flip side, students thought that if study abroad fit academically, it would be more acceptable to consider doing.

The focus group participants had a general lack of knowledge about study abroad. Even students who had looked into it in the past demonstrated basic misconceptions. Knowledge of the basic services that the study abroad office and study abroad programs offer was absent. Students suggested advising or promotion techniques that are already in place. This lack of knowledge was reflected in questions that also displayed their fear of the unknown. Some examples were, "Does the insurance system here work over there?" or, "What happens if I get sick or something? What if I need prescriptions? They may not have the same kind that we do," and, "What would it be like to live there?"

In terms of outcomes, students were not able to articulate the connection between study abroad experiences and career advantages. This is also prevalent among African American students, "...the vast majority of African American students believe that study abroad does not have any relationship to their career."<sup>1</sup> Even one student who highly valued traveling did not think that a study abroad program would be advantageous in obtaining her goal to eventually work abroad. As reflected in this student's comment, there were no conceptions about the value of study abroad for any reason, "It really comes down to, 'do you need it? Is it really going to help out with your education and enhance your major or do you just want to go?'"

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<sup>1</sup> Starlett, Craig (1998). Global Leadership for African-American Collegians: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Imperative, study and travel abroad enhance leadership skills. The Black Collegian Vol 29, 78-83.

### **Official or Prestigious Programs**

The idea of prestige attached to study abroad was a concept that came up in relation to the academic quality of programs and also regarding parental buy-in. The parents were more supportive if the program was an honor or relayed a special status to a student for participating. These students felt like this type of study abroad program would be extremely worthwhile, "Where I go and what school I'm with over there...if it is accredited and how will it look on my resume. How it will impact me in the future. Is it a good school?"

Students stated that their parents would also see the value in an official program or one that their child would gain prestige from participation. The parents would be more likely to support such an endeavor. As one student stated, "When they choose stuff like this it has to be accredited. I am going to China because it is a national forum. When they see the paper and they see it all like authentic and official, so it is worthwhile. The 'Congratulations, your daughter...'"

### **CONCLUSION**

The results of these particular focus groups show that although on the surface the variables may appear the same for the students of color as for the general population, the students may experience challenges in a different way. Therefore, we as international educators and academic advisers must approach these variables with new perspectives. These will be important considerations as we all try to raise the general knowledge about study abroad and its outcomes.

We have learned a great deal from these focus groups. However, there are two areas in which we would like to improve the information. First, with the small number of participants it is difficult to generalize the results. For this reason we will be creating a survey designed around the major themes that came from these focus groups. The survey will be distributed to students of color to see if the concerns of the students of the focus groups are also concerns of the larger population of students of color. Secondly, we would like to conduct more focus groups with African American, Native American, and Chicano/Latino students.

Prepared by Amy E. Greeley and Thúy Doan  
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