Diversifying Study Abroad

In 2007/08, minority students comprised over one-third (36 percent) of total U.S. higher education enrollment, but less than 18 percent of U.S. study abroad students (4 percent were African-American, 6 percent were Hispanic and 7 percent were Asian-American). While the number of minority students studying abroad has increased over the past decade along with the overall growth in study abroad, the proportion of minority students has grown only 3.5 percent.

A major challenge Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Predominantly Black Institutions (PBI’s), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HIS’s) and other U.S. colleges and universities are facing outreach and advising to minority students regarding study abroad. A smaller proportion of minority students seek out information on study abroad from study abroad advisers. One prominent reason is that many minority students perceive study abroad as a costly activity that they will not be able to afford. Critical information on scholarship opportunities and financial aid for studying abroad is often not reaching these students.

In addition, study abroad promotional materials often do not target minority students through the images and information presented, especially at non-HBCU’s where many minority students are enrolled.

Furthermore, many HBCU’s and HIS’s do not have a centralized study abroad office, or have small one-person offices where there is a high rate of staff turnover. Best practices and strategies for recruitment and outreach to minority students are often unknown or lost due to staff turnover.

However, it has been shown that targeted outreach, recruitment and funding opportunities can substantially increase minority participation in study abroad. A number of minority-serving organizations are currently working to increase minority participation in study abroad through these avenues. These organizations include the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), the National Association for Equal Opportunity (NAFED) and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU).

The United Negro College Fund Special Programs (UNCFSP) runs several international programs and fellowships designed specifically for minority students. Their Institute for International Public Policy (IIPP) fellowship program, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, encourages minority students to participate in international service projects and develop cultural competence.

Recently, NAFEO has joined with the American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) to increase the financial assistance given to underrepresented groups to study abroad. AIFS has earmarked nearly one-third of its available study abroad scholarship funds for the diversification of the study abroad population. The U.S. Department of State’s Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program provides substantial financial support to underrepresented groups to study abroad. The Gilman Program provides grants of up to $5000 to study abroad to American undergraduates currently receiving federal financial aid. The program reaches students through a variety of channels, including workshops, webinars, and social media sites such as Facebook. The Gilman Scholarship Program is currently the largest undergraduate study abroad scholarship in the U.S., awarding over 1,700 grants each year to U.S. students from all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. 55 percent of Gilman recipients are minority students.

Two new research studies regarding minority participation in study abroad will soon be released. The University Center for International Studies (UCIS) at the University of Pittsburgh and NAFEO will both be releasing their findings on surveys conducted over the last several years. The UCIS study, funded by the National Security Education Program (NSEP), studies the effects of institutional factors at public four-year colleges and universities on the participation of undergraduate racial and ethnic minorities in study abroad. NAFEO surveyed foreign language studies, international studies and study abroad initiatives at HBCUs and PBIs to determine the current state of these activities at their member institutions, as well as to develop strategies for improvement.