

Preparation and Experiences of African-American Foreign Language Students Abroad

by

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This article stresses the importance of study abroad experiences in the development of language and intercultural skills. Unfortunately in the case of U.S. universities, minority students have often been left behind when it comes to study abroad. The article presents some of the challenges minority students may face, strategies to promote study abroad for minorities, and gives the example of a successful study abroad program from an urban U.S. university.

The Standards of Foreign Language Learning as determined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) include "culture" as one of the most important aspects in foreign language education.

Beyond the acquisition of language, a sound knowledge and understanding of the target culture(s) as well as a student's ability to navigate within it and develop cross-cultural skills are of prime importance if we are to develop citizens who are ready to face and fully participate on the international scene. Despite the efforts of well intentioned foreign language teachers, cultural experiences remain limited and insufficient within the college classroom and field trips are a remote memory of high school days gone by.

Study abroad presents itself as a unique opportunity for language immersion and intensive practice, but also as the ultimate exercise in human relations and understanding: dealing with differences across cultures, gaining the ability to observe and analyze a new environment, and finally, returning with a fresh outlook on one's own culture and identity.

In the U.S, college study abroad programs are steadily growing as administrators and faculty become aware of the global challenges that lie ahead. But unfortunately, not all students participate equally. At the 54th annual meeting of NAFSA, the association of international educators, William Gray noted that of all the students who studied abroad in 1999, only 3.3% were African-American, 5.2% Latino, and 4.4% were Asian-American. Of a student population slightly above 7,000, Chicago State University has a predominantly African-American student body (83%), but Latinos also make up a noticeable portion (6.3%).

The college finds itself in a privileged position when it comes to promoting study abroad and other international experiences to minority students. Even though the university's programs abroad remain modest in comparison to other public universities in the area such as Northeastern Illinois University or University of Illinois at Chicago, faculty and administrators at Chicago State are particularly sensitive to the unique background and needs of minority students as they embark on an experience of a lifetime.

We focus on three important levels:

- 1- the promotion of study abroad and advising;
- 2- the development of a pre-departure program with a language, culture, and strategies component;
- 3- field facilitation;
- 4- finally, assessment of the abroad experience in terms of language, cultural and personal gains.

I will give the example of a study abroad program for our students in Nice - France to show how students from predominantly minority backgrounds can successfully gain language and cultural competence. These efforts are, for our American students, a first step into building bridges of understanding which will last them a lifetime.

The thought of study abroad may seem extremely remote for many minority students. Affordability and cultural displacement and discomfort are some of the main concerns in the minds of students. In addition to their "minority status," many students at Chicago State University are non-traditional students: older students, single mothers, or full-time employees. Participating in study abroad may involve temporary sacrifices on the home front, time off from a job, and all the financial and emotional repercussions that may follow.

From this particular perspective, the promotion of study abroad becomes one of the most important and crucial aspects of the program in order to gain new recruits. It involves public presentations about study abroad and the different sources for financing (during International Week in November for example), cultural events which focus on the importance of world languages and cross-cultural skills (during Foreign Language Week in March and other events organized by the department), but also more personalized initiatives such as faculty identification of motivated language learners and individualized advising.

At times, even reaching out to a student's family may be necessary through the sharing of videos for home viewing or communication with other family members about some of the long-term benefits of study abroad. For students who work, provisions have to be made for release time on their jobs and a sound financial plan for the time of their absence. Thus, advising for study abroad at Chicago State, particularly in the case of our non-traditional students, encompasses so much more than just choice of program. It often involves an entire plan which includes search for funding, a financial plan for study and living costs on the field, but also family and career arrangements while absent.

Selected students are required to enroll into pre-departure language and cultural sessions. In the case of French, we spend 10-12 weeks on functional use of language using scenarios such as simulations at the airport, ordering food at a restaurant, taking the train, asking for directions, just to name a few. Further vocabulary review and grammar practice are accomplished as independent study in the language laboratory using multimedia programs. The study of culture and society also constitute an essential part of pre-orientation. When students are familiar with their new environment in advance, more confidence can be expected when navigating unfamiliar grounds. Study of customs, social issues, politics, geography, and history is gathered through authentic reading materials, the Internet, films, and documentaries followed by discussions.

Beyond the basic language and culture components, pre-departure orientation also aims to prepare students to deal with "the language barrier" and "culture shock" in general. As noted by the authors of Maximizing Study Abroad, *"while we often talk about learning a language as if it were just one skill, it's really a number of skills. Thinking in terms of strategies for dealing with different elements of language helps to make language learning a more manageable process"* (164).

Students will be faced with a large amount of language learning in a relatively short period of time and it is helpful that students also know their own style of learning and how to surmount challenges of language learning: how to tackle efficiently their listening, reading, and oral communication skills in particular. In addition, intercultural communication and conflict resolution training is provided to prepare students for coping with such hurdles. Aspects of intercultural communication such as communication styles, verbal and non-verbal communication, sense of personal space and the different concepts of time are introduced and discussed through case studies and critical incident analysis.

When it comes to U.S. minority groups studying abroad, there are additional challenges they may face when they find themselves abroad: how they are viewed by their hosts, the preconceived images their hosts may have constructed of U.S. minority cultures.

One African-American student interviewed several French youths in Nice and even other foreign students, mostly from European countries, about their image of African-Americans. Most imagine African-Americans as fitting the image of rappers with heavy gold chains or dangerous criminals! African-American and Latino students abroad most often do not correspond to the stereotypical American our hosts have imagined. When Latinos and African-American students go abroad, they may be confronted with certain stereotypes their hosts have internalized about minorities in America through film and popular music.

Just as our students want to learn more about the peoples and cultures of the host country, so do our French counterparts want to know more about us. Reflections about our own identities, background and values are important before leaving as these reflections help our minority students become true ambassadors of culture, dispel many of the stereotypes of the African-American or the Latino abroad, and introduce our hosts to the rich cultural diversity of the U.S.

You cannot imagine the excitement and anticipation of students who, in many cases, are leaving for the first time their homeland on a voyage of discovery. Taking students to Nice during the summer every year has become for me one of the highlights of my school year because it contextualizes everything I have tried to teach them in the language classes. The students will be improving their language skills as they study at the Université Internationale d'Été de Nice for 3 weeks, but also embark on cultural and personal discoveries. The French professor only remains for the first 10 days of the program to facilitate installation in the residences, advise in the choice of classes, introduce students to the city of Nice, take them on important cultural field trips, and locate important resources for them. Because students reside at the university, more help and direction for practical matters (such as getting around town) is given. One of most exciting tasks is to take students on selected field trips in Nice and the surrounding areas.

The first few days focus on getting to know Nice and how to navigate the bus and tramway system to get to school. In the afternoon and evening, visits to "La Vieille Ville" and "Le Château" introduce students to the history and development of Nice through the centuries. Local museums such as "Le Musée Chagall," "Musée Matisse," "Le Musée des Beaux Arts", and "MAMAC" open students' eyes to the rich cultural scene of the city. Trips to Monaco and Cannes and other surrounding areas such as Eze, Grasse, Cagnes-sur-Mer, and Biot are organized with a focus on history, art, and traditional industries. An important trip with the instructor is one to the city of Fréjus to discover a little piece of African history at the site of the "Mosquée Missiri" built in the 1920s by a corps of tirailleurs sénégalais based in the quartier of Caïs. This is an opportunity to talk to students about the contributions of Africans to France and connect with their African heritage. The orange/red mosque is a miniature replica of the Djenné Mosque in Mali built as a reminder of the African soldiers' homeland, but also as a mark of their spirituality and allegiance to Islam.

During the remainder of their stay without the instructor, students continue in their language studies (30-40 hours per week) and cultural explorations with the program of the Université Internationale d'Été and on their own (special itineraries as instructed by their CSU French instructor). Even though students do not reside with French families, they are able to meet French counterparts through the UIEN's English language program as well as cultural and social activities in town.

When students return home, they reflect on the whole study abroad experience and assess their learning. In terms of language objectives: Has the experience increased their ability to communicate and understand the target language? In terms of cultural gains: What have they learned about the peoples and cultures experienced? How has the experience helped them view the world and the US differently? Finally, in terms of personal gains: What changes have occurred within themselves as a result of contact with other cultures and stepping outside their world? What additional skills and dispositions have students developed? Renewed outlooks on the world and their own cultures and identities are revealed in students' presentations and journal entries.

The following are some of the reactions and commentaries gathered from recent students:

"I realized how similar we are despite our different cultures and locations. Study abroad showed me that there are different types of people and the world does not revolve around the US."

"This experience showed me how to prepare, concentrate, and study for whatever I want to accomplish"

"I had to overcome the arrogance of being American. I had to overcome not knowing what is going on at times and not always being right."

"This experience changed my life forever and for the better"

CSU and other colleges in the U.S must redouble efforts to close the gap between opportunities offered to mainstream American students for study abroad and those offered to minority students. Universities nationwide are in the business of developing the new global citizen, one rooted in and knowledgeable about local realities while, at the same time, open to the world and its interconnectedness. In these exciting times, Latinos and African-American students will not be left behind with the efforts of urban universities with a large concentration of minority students.