

By Janet Hulstrand

Increasing Diversity in Education Abroad

INCREASING ACCESS to study abroad opportunities to all student populations on campus has been a goal for many education abroad offices nationwide. Efforts are paying off—in the last decade, the number of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds has risen steadily.

Oftentimes, on campuses where there has been a concerted and sustained effort to increase the numbers of students from traditionally underrepresented groups, there has been a more dramatic rise in the numbers of students who choose to study abroad.

Longtime Efforts Improve Access to Study Abroad

At San Francisco State University (SF State), comprehensive efforts to increase diversity over a number of years have led to impressive results: underrepresented students make up 64 percent of the study abroad population, well above the national average of approximately 25 percent. And a preliminary study in 2015 by Noah Kuchins, assistant director for study abroad, found that 44 percent of their study abroad population self-identifies as first-generation college students.

According to Marilyn Jackson, assistant director of the SF State Office of International Programs, “Our study abroad staff and student peer mentors give hundreds of presentations each year to thousands of students, on and off campus, all with the message that study abroad is affordable and accessible.” On SF State programs students pay regular SF State tuition, receive

resident credit, and can access all financial aid. In addition, advisers integrate advice on financial planning throughout the application process and actively promote scholarship opportunities. They also approach their bilateral partnership searches with the goal of creating low-cost programs. “Through these efforts study abroad is often less expensive than studying in San Francisco,” Jackson says. “This makes it as accessible as possible to lower-income students.”

Funding study abroad is certainly one important concern for students from underrepresented groups.

Fortunately, in recent years new sources of funding have become available. One such source is the Fund for Education Abroad (FEA), launched in 2010, which provides scholarships of up to \$10,000 for students from traditionally underrepresented groups. “FEA gives big scholarships to students representing the tiniest study abroad demographics in order to increase and diversify the population of Americans earning college credit abroad,” says Jennifer Calvert, executive director, and adds, “The majority of FEA scholars are some combination of first-generation, minority, community-college, LGBTQ, or returning adult students, and all of them demonstrate financial need.”

But finances are not the only challenge. Jackson stresses that Kuchins’ study showed that while it is important to assuage fears about the *cost* of study abroad, it is also important to talk to students about the *value* of study abroad, and make sure that programs are academically aligned so that they can continue to make progress toward their degrees and complete their studies in a timely manner. “We also believe that seeing oneself as a study abroad student is important, and that media can play a role,” she adds.

In 2007, with funding from a NAFSA cooperative grant, SF State produced a documentary film, *Breaking Barriers*, which features before and after interviews with nontraditional students (people of color, ethnic minorities, older students, and students with dependents). The film has received national attention: most importantly, it has helped SF State advisers partner with their minority-serving programs to reach underserved students. The film is shown at every education abroad information meeting, to all parents at new student orientations, and in all major presentations. And while all these things help, Jackson says, “There is not one method, one magic bullet, one ‘build it and they will come’ solution. It takes hard work, combined with strong partnerships and countless day-to-day interactions, to help increase diversity in education abroad.”



SUNY Oswego students
Amy Zakett and
Sholand Collins



Students Tiana Morris, Ashley Domenech, and Sholand Collins (right to left) pose for a presentation of the SUNY Oswego's "I, Too, Am Study Abroad" campaign.

"I, Too, Am Study Abroad" Campaign a Success

At the State University of New York at Oswego (SUNY Oswego), comprehensive and well-coordinated efforts over the past few years to improve outreach, support, and mentoring of such students has also had impressive results. In 2010–11, underrepresented groups comprised just 13 percent of students going abroad: by 2014–15, that figure had nearly doubled, to 25 percent. According to Joshua McKeown, director of the Office of International Education and Programs, the increase has come about as part of an institution-wide effort to encourage retention and degree completion. As part of its strategic plan, SUNY Oswego has pursued an aggressive expansion of its study abroad portfolio and targeted institutional student grants, with a special emphasis on diverse locations and new academic disciplines.

SUNY Oswego created its first education abroad offering in Africa, new grant-funded STEM research programs in Brazil, and new programs to destinations such as China, Cuba, India, and Turkey to attract and accommodate a broader array of their student population. "We knew that our campus demographics had



SUNY Oswego students Imani Gary, Meghan Everett, and Devin Storment (right to left)

changed, that the 'traditional' study abroad student is less and less visible on our campus, quite frankly," McKeown says. "So we knew that in order to grow our study abroad programs overall we needed a different approach." They mounted a dedicated effort to bring in students from traditionally underrepresented groups, and called it the "I, Too, Am Study Abroad" campaign. "This was a dedicated, coordinated effort," McKeown says. "If you take just one of the individual components, it wouldn't be unlike what a lot of institutions are probably doing. But taken as a whole, as the driving force behind study abroad promotion and recruitment on our campus, it was comprehensive and it was compelling."

The centerpiece of the "I, Too, Am Study Abroad" campaign is a discussion series that features returning students speaking candidly about their experiences abroad, addressing issues such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background. In addition, the Study Abroad Mentors (SAMs) program involves returning students both as employees in the international office (who are hired in a competitive process), and volunteers.

RACE/ETHNICITY OF U.S. STUDENTS ABROAD	2003/04	2008/09	2013/14
White	83.7	80.5	74.3
Hispanic or Latino(a)	5.0	6.0	8.3
Asian or Pacific Islander	6.1	7.3	7.7
Black or African-American	3.4	4.2	5.6
Multiracial	1.3	1.6	3.6
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.5	0.5	0.5
TOTAL U.S. STUDENTS ABROAD	191,231	260,327	304,467

Source: IIE's Open Doors Fast Facts 2015, supported by a grant from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State

Each fall at their opening reception, all the “SAMs” receive a specially branded T-shirt. “On the front it says ‘I studied abroad. Ask me where,’ and on the back it says ‘I, Too, Am Study Abroad.’ This creates a team spirit from the minute they’re hired,” McKeown says. “That’s just one example of looking at one aspect of promotion/recruitment and asking ourselves, ‘How can each step be examined to be sure that it’s meeting the needs of today’s students?’”

Another key factor in increasing their numbers has been finding ways to encourage the creation of programs that actively encourage faculty-to-student mentoring, research projects, and other experiential activities abroad, along with other ways of bringing the interest students have in international travel together with the academic goals of the institution. “This takes work and dedicated time,” McKeown says, “But it is crucial, because it helps students see themselves going abroad in ways that they may not otherwise. It also ensures that faculty are part of the process, both academically and by encouraging students to participate in such programs.”

Since 2008 Marcia Burrell, professor and chair of SUNY Oswego’s Curriculum and Instruction Department, has taught “Schooling, Pedagogy, and Social Justice,” a course that includes an experiential component in Benin in January. The course offers students the opportunity to witness how one of the poorest countries in Africa is able to organize schools, establish governments, produce food, and maintain a sustainable economic structure with limited resources. “Students respond to faculty who encourage

them to engage in programs that interest them,” Burrell says. One of the leaders of the class is the adviser for a large group of students in SUNY Oswego’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). “She talked to her advisees about her personal experiences as a student on the trip in 2009, and the students listened,” Burrell says. She adds, “Some of the EOP students are of color, and while they are interested in cultural travel in general, without the endorsement of someone they trust, it is very difficult to recruit a diverse pool of students.”

Increasing the numbers of students from underrepresented groups benefits more than just those students. In the past, Burrell’s class attracted mostly Caucasian students, but in 2016, half of the group was African American or Hispanic, and there was economic diversity as well. “In the U.S. we live in very segregated communities,” Burrell says. “When students come to school, they are often placed in residence halls with someone of a different race, class, culture, or religion, but by the time they make the decision to travel abroad, they have often gravitated towards peers who are more similar.” The Benin course has 20 people (students and faculty) living and working in close proximity, in the hotel, on the vans, on school visits, and at the study site for 16 days, 10–12 hours a day. “This gives them a chance to really feel how segregated life in the U.S. is,” Burrell says. “Also, when we are in Benin, all foreigners are ‘YOVO’ (‘foreigners,’ or ‘whites’). This helps students realize that the categories of race are socially constructed, and that in Benin we are all seen as Americans.”

Third-Party Providers Assist Institutions With Diversity Resources

IES Study Abroad, a program provider that works with more than 240 consortium members, promotes its diversity resources through school visits, print materials distributed to consortium members, e-mails to prospective students, and social media postings. “Since 2011 we have seen a 63.3 percent increase in diversity across all of our programs, and a year-over-year enrollment growth in ethnically diverse students of 16 percent from 2014–15 to 2015–16,” says Gretchen Cook-Anderson, director of diversity recruiting and advising.

“We also advise students, on an as-needed basis, to provide optimum tailored support to them before and during the application process,” Cook-Anderson adds, explaining, “Students occasionally have concerns about how they’ll be perceived or treated in the host country; or they may wonder how they’ll fit in within their own American student cohort due to differences of socioeconomic class, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or culturally based attire. Some students feel they won’t be viewed as ‘American enough’ by some in the host country community if they don’t fit neatly into the ‘traditional American’ stereotype. Some students may feel the strain of being from lower-income backgrounds and worry about not having enough money to be able to enjoy some of the extracurricular travel and other things that other students in the program are able to enjoy. We help students talk through how they’re feeling about these issues, and offer

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support. Sometimes we put them in touch with peers of a similar background who have been through the experience, that they can connect with.”

Andrew Gordon, president of Diversity Abroad, an organization that helps schools assess and benchmark their practices, trains staff and faculty in more inclusive strate-

gies, and provides tools and resources to help schools expand participation in study abroad among traditionally underrepresented groups, strongly agrees that providing adequate support tailored to the needs of these students is of prime importance. “For a long time, the conversation around diversity in study abroad has had a deficit focus,”

he says. “We’re talking about the students’ finances, their families, their fears. And we haven’t looked hard enough internally, structurally to ask, what are we doing, or not doing, that could help? One of the problems is, we haven’t had any guidelines as to what are the ways we can tweak or enhance each of the tasks, throughout the process, to make study abroad possible for more students.” To address this challenge, Diversity Abroad created the Aid Roadmap. “It’s a very helpful tool, because it breaks down the process into 11 discrete areas,” Gordon says. “And then, instead of having a separate diversity initiative, which is what we have done in the past, the AID Roadmap incorporates diversity and inclusive practices into *everything* we’re doing. So when we’re talking about programming, we’re looking at inclusive practices, and when we’re talking about funding, we’re talking about inclusive practices, and when we’re talking about health and safety, or advising, we’re talking about inclusive practices. When we do this, we’re not only going to get more students, we’re also going to be properly supporting the students we have. We want to get more students abroad, obviously that is the heart of what we do as an organization. But we want to make sure that we’re doing it in such a way that the students we send are able to really benefit from everything that can be explored through education abroad. I think that’s one of the areas where there’s just tremendous opportunity for growth.”

And why does any of this matter? SF State’s Jackson sums up at least part of the case succinctly: “The oft-stated goals of study abroad and international education—cultural understanding, world peace—will never be achieved without a commitment to diversity.” **IE**

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