

Changing the Face of Study Abroad

Colleges reach out to minority students in effort to reduce racial disparities

When Jaime Alvarez looks at his life, he sees two narratives: what might have been and what is. In the first, he gets married shortly after high school, buys a house with money from a construction job, has several kids, and comes home every night to nurse a sore back with a six-pack of beer.

In the second, he transfers from a community college to San Francisco State University, working construction to support himself. He spends his senior year in Sweden — his first time outside the country except for trips to Mexico — and the experience changes his life. After graduating, he teaches English in Austria.

Mr. Alvarez, who is entering graduate school at California State University at Long Beach this fall, considers himself lucky.

In 2005 minority students made up 32 percent of all undergraduates, says the U.S. Education Department. But they accounted for only 17 percent of undergraduates who studied abroad in 2005-6, an increase of barely 1.5 percent over a decade ago, according to the Institute of International Education. That gap troubles study-abroad professionals, who worry that too many needy minority students slip through the cracks.

In 2005 a total of 223,534 students from American institutions studied abroad, up from 89,242 in 1995. As colleges work to expand study abroad in general, they are seeking new ways to include underrepresented students, by providing scholarships, meeting with campus minority groups, and developing information materials that deal with the tricky issue of race in study abroad.

Mr. Alvarez comes from a tightly knit Mexican-American family that was more likely to ask about his job than about schoolwork. At his home, in El Monte, Calif., a rough city east of Los Angeles, the first conversation of the day was usually about who had been robbed the night before. Even when he made it to community college but hadn't yet transferred to San Francisco State, he never thought study abroad was for students like him — poor youths from tradition-minded Hispanic families.

Such perceptions can be difficult to change. Few minority students come from well-traveled families, and many arrive at college with the mind-set that they are there to move quickly to the job market, says Andrew Gordon, founder of the Web site Diversity Abroad, on which minority students share their stories and gain access to scholarship information.

The perception of study abroad as reserved for rich white students is difficult to challenge, he says. Google "study abroad" and one of the top hits is from a blog called Stuff White People Like.

Mr. Gordon, whose Web site features images of minority students in locations as varied as London and Egypt, says colleges must challenge the notion that study abroad simply isn't for

minority students: "You need to really appeal, to reach the students' heart, so that they say, 'This is for me.'"

Mr. Alvarez credits the study-abroad office at San Francisco State with making him feel welcome from the moment he walked in the door, just to see what it offered. Until that moment, he had doubted he could do it. Now he is among several minority students featured on a DVD, *Breaking Barriers*, put out by the office.

Cost is another barrier for many minority students. Scholarships can help reduce racial disparities in that regard, says David Comp, a study-abroad adviser at the University of Chicago who has done research on minority participation in such programs.

He points to the national Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program, which gives 1,200 study-abroad awards a year to Pell Grant recipients. It has made an effort to reach out to minority students, especially at colleges with large minority enrollments. In 2005 more than 42 percent of the recipients were from minority groups. The average scholarship is \$4,000, evidence that even a relatively small award can make a big difference, Mr. Comp says.

Many study-abroad professionals, however, say colleges must also confront the psychological factors that discourage minority students from studying abroad. "It's not just that there isn't the interest or the money," says Peggy Blumenthal, executive vice president at the Institute of International Education, which administers the Gilman program. "They aren't even hearing it's a possibility."

Some minority students shy away from studying abroad because they fear they will face prejudice. Monty McGee, a lanky African-American student who graduated from historically black Norfolk State University a year ago, studied in China during his junior year. At times he felt uncomfortable because of his race, he says. He first lived in Beijing, where some women use parasols and creams to bleach their skin. He felt more at home during his second semester, in southern China, where there are more ethnic groups and people with darker skin. But he enjoyed the experience over all, he says, even when Chinese people would ask to take pictures of him. Ignorance and curiosity are different from racism, he says.

Joy G. Carew, an associate professor of pan-African studies and associate director of international programs at the University of Louisville, says campus advisers need to frankly discuss how students' ethnicity may influence their experiences abroad.

But she also says studying in another country can be freeing for minority students, enabling them to enter into new dialogues about race and reconsider their own backgrounds. Those who go to Europe may find they no longer have to contend with American stereotypes, while black students studying in Africa or places with large African-diaspora populations may be better able to visualize their own place in world history.

Still, some students seeking to connect with their heritage may be disappointed. Christa Sanders, associate director of New York University's Ghana program, says some heritage-seeking black

students are disappointed during their first weeks in that country, when they find that West Africans perceive them as Americans rather than as long-lost brothers and sisters.

Similarly, Asian-Americans who go to Asia expecting to blend in are often surprised when their behavior gives them away, says Emily Le, a study-abroad adviser at the University of California at Los Angeles. Advisers, she says, are often unsure how to treat different subgroups of Asian-American students, failing to take note of those from strict immigrant families, who view work, not travel, as the goal of education, or those who may fear leaving the country because of their immigrant backgrounds — the children of Vietnamese refugees, for example.

For college administrators, reaching out to minority students involves being honest with them but avoiding ethnic stereotypes.

Carol Larson, assistant director of study abroad at the University of Pittsburgh, says advisers must not shy away from charged questions of race and ethnicity. When she arrived at Pitt 10 years ago, the study-abroad staff was heavily white, as were most of the students who walked through the door. Now one-third of the staff is black, and the number of black students who go abroad each year has risen by at least 15 percent.

To encourage even more minority students to participate, the office hands out a student-written booklet called "The World Is in Your Hands," which describes the experiences of black students abroad. When she recently presented it at an international conference of educators, some advisers approached her to ask how to talk with black students. She was shocked.

"It takes the sincerity of the office," she says. "Honesty is so apparent to the student."

There are some signs that colleges' efforts are paying off, but the progress is not rapid.

Margery Ganz, who for 27 years has directed study-abroad programs at Spelman College, a historically black women's college in Atlanta, recalls having to explain to students what study abroad was when she first arrived. Now students come to her. But when she looks at the statistics showing such slow growth in minority participation in study abroad, she feels like throwing up her hands.

One possibility is short-term programs. Ruth J. Rubio, a professor of social work at the University of Texas at Austin, leads a monthlong program to London each year, teaching a course on social and economic justice. About a third of her students are from minority groups. Many tell her they wouldn't have been able to participate if the program — held between the end of spring term and the start of summer jobs — had been any lengthier.

Ms. Rubio, who attended college in the 1970s, says she remembers watching white students travel in Europe during their junior years and wondering, "How do you make that happen?" Now the professor, who did not start traveling internationally until her mid-40s, takes satisfaction in providing minority students with the opportunities she lacked. The biggest difference between her generation of working-class minority students and today's, she believes, is that now students have campus-support networks.

Jaime Alvarez has witnessed firsthand the power of study abroad to change his family's life. He credits his senior-year experience in Sweden with helping him break the cycle of poverty that has trapped his family since they moved to the United States from Mexico in the early 1980s. Mr. Alvarez now plans to get a Ph.D. in political science and become a professor.

When he visits his nieces and nephews, he gives them nesting dolls from Russia and talks about travel. Last year, when he was in Austria, his sister, who had never been to Europe before, decided to visit him.

He sometimes winces at the thought that, at 30, he doesn't yet own a home. But when he looks back, he sees that year abroad as an opportunity that has opened the door to others. His time abroad wasn't frivolous.

It was, he says, "an investment for my family."

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