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## **If Not Us Then Who? Exploring the Role of HBCUs in Increasing Black Student Engagement in Study Abroad**

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*Black students are alarmingly underrepresented in participation in study abroad experiences. The reasons for this vary, but are most often consists of barriers, such as financial constraints, lack of support from family, and fear of racial discrimination. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are regarded as sanctuaries for Black students with emphasis on their commitment to providing low-income Black students with positive and nurturing educational experiences. As such, HBCUs are believed to be positioned to assist in overcoming the barriers to participation in study abroad for Black students. However, because they receive significantly less resources, they are limited in their ability to provide adequate programming and initiatives. In this conceptual paper, student engagement and marginality and mattering theories are used to explore strategies and recommendations for ways that HBCUs can both enhance their programs and increase overall engagement of Black students in study abroad.*

*Keywords: Black students, diversity, HBCUs, student engagement*

Study abroad is a high impact practice through which students experience personal and intercultural development and have a higher rate of career attainment (Kauffmann & Kuh, 1985; Dwyer & Peters, 2004). However, it is less common that the impact of study abroad be examined from a lens that specifically considers the racial identity of the students engaging in the trip. While there are few existing studies that investigate the experiences of students of color abroad, even fewer studies reference the experiences of students of color by context, specifically Black students attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs; Brux & Fry, 2009; Penn & Tanner, 2009).

Study abroad is important to the education of all students and at all institution types. When it comes to students of color, HBCUs are especially important for increasing efforts to provide study abroad opportunities and increasing opportunities for Black students to attain global perspectives (Craig, n.d.). In this conceptual paper, I explore the current body of research focusing on the impact of study abroad, Black students studying abroad, and the current state of study abroad programs at HBCUs. Following this, the conceptual frameworks, informed by Astin's (1984) Student Engagement and Schlossberg's (1989) Marginality and Mattering theories, are highlighted. I conclude the paper with a discussion consisting of recommendations and strategies that may inform future institutional practices at HBCUs to support their student body, achieve the goal of

providing study abroad opportunities that are equitable, and increase Black study abroad participants.

## **Review of the Literature**

### *The Impact of Study Abroad*

Recently, Kuh's (2005, 2008, 2013) work focusing on student engagement has framed the most effective ways of supporting university students. This research has led to the identification of ten HIPs, which are teaching and learning practices that foster student involvement and engagement. Kuh (2005) suggests that student success is gained most through the activities in which students engage during their time at the university and it is the responsibility of the university to provide these activities. As such, the use of HIPs are suggested, including: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/ global learning, service learning and community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects (Kuh, 2013). Many of the HIPs have been identified as a means for transformative experiences and have been empirically shown to foster high-levels of engagement (Kuh, 2008). Study abroad is an example of one of these HIPs that has led to positive outcomes for students (Jones, 2015; Williams, 2005).

Research shows that study abroad decreases racial and ethnic prejudice when accurately processed by the student (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). Dwyer and Peters (2004) indicate that study abroad experiences transforms students in the areas of personal growth, intercultural development, education and career attainment. Moreover, the results from a survey of alumni conducted by International Education of Students demonstrates that studying abroad is commonly a defining moment in a young person's life and has continuous impact even years after the experience (Dwyer & Peters, 2004.).

Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, and Jon (2009) investigated the long-term impact of study abroad on the five forms of global engagement (civic engagement, knowledge production, philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, and voluntary simplicity), as well as the future career and educational choices utilizing a sequential mixed methods design. The study results revealed that of the 6,391 students who participated, about 83.5% of students indicated that study abroad had a strong impact on their college experience. In addition, 60.5% of the study's participants decided to pursue their graduate degree and 35% of them discussed an internationally oriented graduate degree. In essence, study abroad, when looked at generally, has consistently been shown as having a strong impact on students in numerous aspects of their development. In the next section, literature referencing the experiences and impact of study abroad with regard to race, focusing on Black students is explored.

### *Black Students and Study Abroad*

When considering race within the impact of study abroad, research has revealed varying results, particularly with regard to Black students. As the number of American

students studying abroad continues to increase, researchers highlight the disparity in the numbers of students of color who participate (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011; Stallman, Woodruff, Kasavri, & Comp, 2010; Tensley, 2015). Nationally, less than 10% of students who study abroad are students of color (Woodruff, Dolan, Hoff, Hall, Troup, & Hernandez, 2005). Students of color in general are less informed about study abroad opportunities, less likely to understand the connection between study abroad benefits and career objectives, and less likely to have role models who support participating in study abroad experiences (Jarvis & Jenkins, 2000; McLellan, 2007; Norflores, 2003).

Only five percent of U.S. students who study abroad are Black students (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011). The reasons for these gaps consists of barriers, such as financial constraints, lack of support from family, lack of programs in sites of interest, and cognitive dissonance (Acquaye & Crewe, 2012; Brux & Frye, 2010; Willis, 2015). For the students who do study abroad, their experiences are often marked with debilitating challenges such as isolation, microaggressions, and racial ignorance from both U.S. peers and international hosts (Willis, 2012; Womack, 2016). Tensley (2015) indicates that the lack of representation of Black students receiving experiences abroad a) limits the number of Black people in international careers and leadership positions and b) robs of society of opportunities for Black people to fulfill their role in telling Black America's story. Overall, the representation of Black students in study abroad is important not only for student development, but for the nation as a whole. As such, there is an increased need for institutional and programmatic efforts that focus specifically on engaging Black students in participation in study abroad. As institutions that focus on the holistic development of Black students, HBCUs could play a strong role in encouraging Black students to study abroad and are the focus for the next section.

### *HBCUs and Study Abroad*

HBCUs are well-known for providing an educational experience that allows access to positive campus environments (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Fleming, 1984; Stewart, Wright, Perry, & Rankin, 2008), increased exposure to diversity on campus (Palmer, 2015), nurturing faculty (Gasman & Commodore, 2014; Shaw, Cole, Harris, & Nelson Laird, 2012), and inclusion in the curriculum (Gasman & Commodore, 2014; Gasman, Gerstl-Pepin, Anderson-Thompkins, & Hathaway, 2004; Ginwright, 2004) particularly for Black students. Evidence of engagement at HBCUs and other minority serving institutions indicate that students may be provided more support overall than their counterparts who attend predominantly White institutions (Bridges, Kinzie, Nelson Laird, & Kuh, 2008). Study abroad is an important topic for all higher education institutions. However, for many reasons, including lack of resources, personnel and funding, HBCUs continuously fall behind when it comes to providing students opportunities to study abroad (Oguntoyinbo, 2014). According to Gasman (2013), 58% of HBCUs offer study abroad programs, but the benefit of these programs are often overshadowed by barriers, such as finances, fear, friends and family and thus are rarely utilized by students.

Efforts to facilitate study abroad experiences currently exist at a small number of HBCUs, such as Morgan State University, a public research university in Baltimore, Maryland and Spelman College, a private liberal arts college for women located in

Atlanta, Georgia. Unfortunately, even when receiving institutional support and funding, HBCU study abroad programs remain rather underdeveloped (Mullen, 2014). Lomotey (1989) discusses a quality education for Black students as one that prepares them to transfer that which they learn to the Black community (their communities). Lomotey suggests that the ability for HBCU students to see themselves in curriculum positions them to best adjust their thinking to benefit their own communities, versus acquiring information that they cannot apply to their interests. When such opportunities are not available to this population of students, they are not able to fulfill this.

The Council on International Educational Exchange, a nonprofit organization, has partnered with the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Minority Serving Institutions (Penn CMSI) to help HBCU presidents expand their study abroad programs. This program, in its infancy, consists of three major components: a daylong training in Berlin for the university presidents covering topics of international education; faculty training and development programs on international education; and the providing of approximately \$20 million scholarships and passports for 10,000 students (Edwards, 2015; Penn CMSI, 2016). It is expected that this program will broaden the horizons for many of HBCU students who would not otherwise have even thought of studying abroad. However, this program is just the start in addressing the need for the over 100 HBCUs to begin providing cultural opportunities that permanently shift student perspectives, helping them to evolve into the best versions of themselves, and ensuring opportunities for Black students to be among the most competitive of career and educational opportunities. In seeking to increase the participation of Black students in study abroad, we must examine the role of student development theory in positioning HBCUs to develop programs to support the needs of these students. This can be done through a discussion of the applicability of the conceptual frameworks: Astin's (1984) student involvement and Schlossberg's (1989) marginality and mattering theories.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### *Student Engagement Theory*

Study abroad is important and useful because it can enrich the undergraduate experience, promotes student involvement, can empower students, and gives them a sense of control over their lives. Astin's (1984) landmark longitudinal study established a link between involvement and a range of developmental outcomes (as cited in Kuh, 2009). Today, student engagement refers to the amount of time and energy students are willing to invest in various activities to receive the outcomes of their undergraduate education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and what institutions are willing to do to create opportunities to engage for students (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009). According to Astin (1984), "the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (p. 136). Astin also suggests that student involvement is imperative to one's development, thus students involved in college are prone to be academically successful. Underpinning Astin's (1984) student involvement theory, Kuh (2009, 2013) suggests that educationally effective institutions consist of what students do or the time and energy devoted to educationally purposeful

activities; what institutions do or the use of effective educational practices to induce students to the right things; and the ways in which educationally effective institutions provide and direct students towards the right activities (Kuh, 2013). Kuh (2013) goes on to suggest that engagement in study abroad serves as a tool to actively engage and involve students within the university community upon return to their home campus.

A critique of the student engagement construct is that it may refer less to students from historically marginalized groups (Bensimon, 2007; Harper, 2009; Kuh, 2009; Quaye & Harper, 2014), thus it has been concluded that while all students benefit from being engaged, some students benefit more from certain activities than others (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In 2014, Quaye and Harper devoted their edited text to discussing ways of engaging different student groups who are commonly neglected from consideration in research, including international students, women students, veteran students, students of color, students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and many more. In Harper's (2009) article on race conscious student engagement practices, he discusses the need for educators to be intentional in getting students of color engaged and going out of their way to ensure equity in the treatment of students of color. This can be achieved through the use of frameworks that specifically consider the experiences of marginalized groups within the overall higher education context and the climate in the United States, including students of color, such as Schlossberg's (1989) marginality and mattering theory.

### *Marginality and Mattering Theory*

Schlossberg's (1989) marginality and mattering is a student development framework that has grown from an increase in the desire to get students involved in various activities on college campuses. This framework is attentive to the impact of classifications and issues that divide people, such as age, gender, race, social class, ethnicity, religion, and financial resources. The theory deals with whether students feel they belong and are engaged in things that interest them (Schlossberg, 1989). Schlossberg defines marginality as referring to a person who is living between two cultures where they are not quite accepted into at least one, often due to prejudice (Schlossberg, 1989). When a person never integrates into the culture, the individual concludes that he or she does not matter.

Mattering refers to the feelings that one is depended upon and cared for by others and are the object of someone's attention (Schlossberg, 1989). This consists of four dimensions: attention, importance, ego-extension and dependence. Attention refers to notice from another individual. Importance is the perception that one considers what the individual thinks or feels. Ego-extension deals with the feeling that others will celebrate our accomplishments and be saddened by our failures. Dependence deals with the belief that our behavior is governed by the belief that others are relying upon us. Schlossberg (1989) suggests that having knowledge of the need for marginalized students to matter helps us to be able to understand the experiences for those from diverse backgrounds at the university.

This theory is relevant to the topic of HBCUs and Black student participation in study abroad as Black participants have noted feelings of marginality in international

contexts and the need for belongingness (Willis, 2015). Penn and Tanner (2009) discuss the increased need for more education, mentoring and support for Black students to participate in study abroad. Moreover, this framework can be used by HBCU administration to provide an understanding of the role of HBCUs in continuing to serve as safe havens for Black students against the chilly and often dangerous racial climate in the United States and abroad. The aforementioned theoretical frameworks, taken together with the extant literature surrounding Black student participation in study abroad provide the background for the recommendations and strategies proposed in the next section.

## **Recommendations and Strategies**

HBCUs often consists of predominantly Black, first-generation, low income students who rarely have opportunities to travel and may need more convincing to overcome the barriers related to family, fear, finances, and friends (Mullen, 2014). As such, when developing programs and initiatives at HBCUs it then becomes more important for administrators to include components that specifically appeal to the population represented. Some of these components include: an emphasis on the ability to apply a global view to Black American issues including race and identity outcomes as learning objectives of study abroad trips; the inclusion of Black faculty and staff with abroad experiences; and advertising developing countries versus European countries. In this section, I offer a number of suggestions that can be used to strengthen the impact and effectiveness of study abroad programs at HBCUs.

### *Gearing Students for Success in a Globalized World*

According to Gasman (2013), “HBCUs play a crucial role in educating their students to succeed in an increasingly globalized world” (p. 8). This is arguably even more important due to the misconceptions regarding the negative views of Black people or the view of the United States as solely White (Ali, 2015). As more Black students, especially HBCU students engage in study abroad, systematically the global perspective towards the United States and Black Americans can be shifted while simultaneously shifting the perspectives of individual students.

As an aim of Black education was once to apply the knowledge being attained to the Black community for its improvement (Lomotey, 1989), HBCUs are key in assisting students in developing and executing this commitment. Experiences abroad are key to assisting students in understanding the world and society around them. Moreover, it is referenced as an integral component in assisting Black students in developing global competence as well as multicultural competence (Craig, n.d.). A benefit of applying what is learned from Black students about their study abroad experiences for programs at HBCUs is increasing opportunities for HBCU students to apply a global awareness and perspective to the work they do in their communities. Doing so will expand immeasurably the impact of HBCUs and HBCU students.

### *Including Race and Identity Outcomes as Learning Objectives of Study Abroad Trips*

While increased racial identity sometimes is an outcome of study abroad (Lee & Green, 2016), it is often not an intended objective of these trips. A distinguishing factor of HBCUs is that they have components that pertain specifically to the Black race in many areas of the curriculum (Banks, 1993; Ginwright, 2004; Gasman & Commodore, 2014). Often with current study abroad programs or initiatives, general learning outcomes such as: engaging in research projects, forming meaningful relationships with local people, and providing structures for exploring future professional direction (Sutton & Rubin, 2004, 2010) are included; however, none of these objectives refer directly to the impact identity has on study abroad decisions. This is despite the knowledge that many students harbor apprehensions about racism that they anticipate encountering travelling abroad (Fels, 1993; Mullens, 2014). Students are often also reluctant to venture into foreign variations of racism, given their experiences in the United States (Cole, 1991). Because racism and other forms of discrimination cannot be avoided and should not be ignored, it could be beneficial to embrace these as an opportunity for growth and development when implementing study abroad programs, particularly at HBCUs. Understanding racism and discrimination and its implications not only in the United States but also in international contexts can help students to gain a deeper understanding of their identity and develop interests in addressing these challenges. To do this, students must be equipped with the proper support.

### *Black Faculty and Study Abroad*

Lu, Reddick, Dean and Pecero (2015) found that Black students who studied abroad in China referenced the Black faculty member present as their primary and sometimes sole reason for studying abroad. Similarly, Bruce (2012) found that all of the Black participants in his study noted the positive benefits of having a cultural guide or mentor to assist them by providing culturally enriching direction during their study abroad. Taken together, these studies show that Black students are more likely to study abroad when they see faculty or administrators who look like them whom they feel will support and understand their experiences based on their diverse identities. Instead of forcing those students to ignore this and go with faculty whom may not understand the impact of race, there should be some intentionality added to the experiences of the faculty leading study abroad trips or encouraging Black students to engage (Ali, 2015).

Often, students are more likely to participate in an activity if a faculty member recommends they do so (Kuh, 2008). Based upon NCES data provided to *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* in 2013, at 99 HBCUs, more than half of full-time instructional staff were Black (Morris, 2015; Palmer, 2015). It can be inferred that this positions HBCUs to address this challenge present in other study abroad programs with the participation of their predominantly Black faculty body. Faculty of color with whom students are able to relate and feel comfortable, such as the professor described in Lu et al. (2015) should intentionally be recruited to lead or participate in study abroad trips. To ameliorate some of the apprehension held by Black students toward study abroad, recruitment of faculty



should focus on those who have had extensive previous experience travelling to the locations and have pre-established relationships with contact persons.

### *Advertising Developing Countries*

Research indicates that cost is a common cause for the limited participation in study abroad for Black students (Fels, 1993). According to a recent report from the Institute of International Education, European countries are most often traveled to among U.S. study abroad participants. The United Kingdom is the leading destination, followed by Italy, Spain, and France (Institute of International Education, 2016). The sole non-European country reported is China. The continent of Africa is among one of the least common destinations when it comes to study abroad.

In an opinion editorial article, Commodore and Gasman (2014) suggest that Black students may find non-Western locations as more desirable as many majority students are attracted to Europe due to their cultural connections with the location. To address location and cost concerns, study abroad programs should include a component that relates student culture to destinations outside of Europe and demonstrates the ways in which students can travel to developing countries where the US dollar can travel further. Among the cheapest countries to study abroad are: Mexico, India, Guatemala, Peru, Vietnam, Dominican Republic, Morocco, Brazil, Thailand, Ecuador, and South Africa (Scrapinato, n.d.). Unfortunately, because HBCU students commonly do not have reference points for these locations and do not know how to find them themselves, they continue to believe that the cost of study abroad is too far beyond their attainment. To change the outcomes related to HBCU student engagement in study abroad, practitioners must work actively to bridge the gap in knowledge regarding costs and benefits above and beyond that which has previously been done (Gasman, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

From student engagement and marginality and mattering frameworks, this paper proposes the development of study abroad programs at HBCUs based upon previous literature regarding Black student study abroad experiences. Because HBCUs receive far less resources than other institutions of higher education, their study abroad programs and initiatives lag far behind that of majority institutions (Gasman, 2013; Mullens, 2014). HBCUs can start by actively focusing deliberate attention towards recruiting students for participation in study abroad using the previously known criticisms and strengths of programs at other institutions (Gasman, 2013). HBCUs face unique challenges when it comes to convincing students to overcome their fear and cognitive dissonance towards study abroad long enough to reap the benefits (Acquaye & Crewe, 2012; Comp, 2008; Willis, 2015). By using what is known about Black student study abroad experiences and looking through a new theoretical lens, HBCUs can further develop their study abroad programs, maximizing opportunities for HBCU students and fulfilling the unique mission of their institutions.

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