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International Feature

“We Just Don’t Have the Possibility Yet”: U.S. Latina/o Narratives on Study Abroad

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Whether indirectly from governmental and non-governmental organizations or directly from higher education institutions, students receive messages that they should study abroad. Studying in a foreign country is considered essential if students are to be marketable to future employers and prepared to lead the U.S. into a new era. Despite the presence of such messages, the understanding of what it means to be absent from the undergraduate student population willing and able to study in a foreign country is severely limited. Importantly, what are the perceptions and experiences of students who repeatedly hear the value of study abroad and who, at the same time, are not willing and/or able to participate? The purpose of this critical

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qualitative study was to seek answers to this question by exploring the perceptions and experiences of a population that continues to experience low rates of study abroad participation: Latina/o undergraduate students.

In November of 2005, the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship (hereafter the Lincoln Commission) proposed a “bold new vision” (p. v) for the U.S.: to send 1 million undergraduate students abroad by the 2016–2017 academic year. The reasoning behind this five-fold increase in the number of undergraduates undertaking work or study outside of the U.S. is simple according to the Lincoln Commission: “what nations do not know exacts a heavy toll” (2005, p. 3). There is certainly truth in this statement. In recent years, international education has acquired ever-increasing economic and national security importance. Recognizing the dawn of a new economic world order, U.S. employers look favorably upon graduates who have demonstrable global skills and knowledge (Relyea, Cocchiara, & Studdard, 2008; Trooboff, Vande Berge, & Rayman, 2007). In addition to economic implications, the important role of international education in national security became patently clear in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, when the U.S. government hurried to find graduates whose global expertise could “alert us to emerging problems before they become serious threats” (The Lincoln Commission, 2005, p. 8).

Taking cues from the Lincoln Commission, as well as policy documents from organizations like the American Council on Education (2002, 2003) and NAFSA – Association of International Educators (2006), legislators demonstrated their support for incorporating an international context into education at every level. In March of 2007, Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), working closely with Senator Norm Coleman (R-MN), introduced the Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act (S. 991). This act, drafted from the Lincoln Commission recommendations, set study abroad as a primary goal and the cornerstone of undergraduate education. Whether indirectly from governmental or non-governmental organizations or directly from higher education institutions, students receive messages that they should engage in study abroad experiences if they are to be marketable to future employers and prepared to lead the U.S. into a new era.

Despite this strong policy push, the understanding of what it means *not* to be among those undergraduate students who are willing and able to complete a segment of their college education in a foreign country is severely limited. Importantly, what are the perceptions and experiences of students who often hear and believe in the advantages of study abroad and who, at the same time, decide not to participate? The purpose of this narrative study was to seek answers to this question by exploring the perceptions and experiences of Latina/o undergraduate students, a population that continues to record low rates of study abroad participation, despite their rapidly increasing numbers in higher education (Institute of International Education, 2008).

Literature Review

Literature on study abroad has dramatically increased over the last decade. For the purposes of this study, we focused our literature review on those topical areas that provide a context within which our findings can be best interpreted. In the review that follows, we define study abroad and position it as a central component in a phenomenon referred to as the internationalization of higher education. Given the strong push for students to study in a foreign country, we examined research on the outcomes of study abroad and underscored the few scholarly inquiries into study abroad opportunities for students of color, especially those studies proposing explanations for lower rates of participation among students of color.

Study Abroad and the Internationalization of Higher Education

Study abroad has become such a diversely packaged commodity that it can refer not only to a traditional semester or year abroad, but also to a variety of experiences, from a faculty-led week-long cultural tour of France to a year-long independent research immersion experience in Botswana. For the purposes of this study, we relied on the Lincoln Commission's (2005) academically grounded view of study abroad as "An educational program for undergraduate study, work, or research (or a credit-bearing internship) that is conducted outside the United States and that awards academic credit towards a degree" (p. 14). Study abroad is perhaps the oldest and most frequently mentioned example of internationalization in higher education, a process Knight (2004) defined as "integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p. 2). In fact, many institutions point to study abroad as their blue ribbon mark of internationalization success. Almost every publication intended to influence international education mentions facilitating study abroad as a fundamental aspect of internationalization (American Council on Education [ACE], 2002, 2003; Association of International Educators [NAFSA], 2006; Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2006).

Study Abroad Outcomes

Most research related to study abroad has focused on academic and developmental outcomes of students undertaking a portion of their education in a foreign country. In a quantitative, longitudinal project on study abroad outcomes, the Study Abroad Evaluation Project (SAEP) (Carson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990), students studying abroad from the United States, Sweden, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in more than 100 programs for a period of 10 to 12 months were surveyed. Their responses indicated that study abroad affected their academic achievement, cultural competence, and career aspirations. Academically, respondents reported increased language competence and enhanced ability to view problems through a comparative lens. Respondents also felt they better understood their host country's politics, history, and culture. The long-term effect of studying abroad was increased employment marketability, as respondents who studied abroad were better equipped for international positions requiring multi-lingual proficiency.

In 2002 the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) surveyed 14,800 alumni (3,723 of whom responded, or a 25% response rate) who studied abroad through IES programs between 1950 and 1991 to determine the longitudinal outcomes of study abroad. The study found that the benefits of this educational experience are multiple and include increased self-awareness, intercultural competence, and a more developed sense of career goals. Additionally, the study concluded that these benefits persist, sometimes lasting over 50 years (Dwyer, 2004). In general, research on outcomes has suggested that study abroad improves

- students' knowledge of and interest in learning about other cultures (Carson et al., 1990; Forgues, 2005; Hadis, 2005; Hutchins, 1996; Williams, 2005),
- empathy for non-native English speakers (Grey, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002) and ability to socialize with people from other countries (Drews & Meyer, 1996),
- cross-cultural skills and intercultural sensitivity (Forgues, 2005; Grey, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002), and
- language proficiency and intercultural communication skills (Bates, 1997; Hutchins, 1996; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Williams, 2005).

Study abroad also has a substantial impact on students' career plans and development (Oranhood, Kruse, & Pearson, 2004; Wallace, 1999). Despite these studies on the positive aspects of study abroad, rare is the study that delves into outcomes for students of color. An exception is Guerrero's (2006) qualitative study on the impact of study abroad for Latina/o students taking part in UCLA's education abroad programs. Guerrero interviewed 15 students and found that they returned with improved language skills (reading, writing, and speaking). Several of the students in Guerrero's study were identified as "heritage seekers" because they chose to study abroad in locations of familial significance. Mirroring the slow development of literature on study abroad outcomes for students of color, there have been few scholarly studies on study abroad opinions, decisions, and experiences among students of color.

Students of Color and Study Abroad: The Absent Demographic

According to the Institute of International Education's (IIE) 2008 *Open Doors* report, 241,791 U.S. students studied abroad for credit between 2006 and 2007, an 8.2% increase over the previous year. Roughly 87% (209,391 students) of these were undergraduates. Despite this increase, the population of students going abroad remains remarkably homogenous: approximately 2.7% of students studying abroad were enrolled at a two-year institution and 83.3% were attending a four-year institution of higher education. In the 2006–2007 academic year, 81.9% of students studying abroad identified as White, but only 6% identified as Hispanic American. As indicated by the 2008 Digest of Education Statistics, 66.1% of all undergraduate students enrolled in higher education in the United States identified as White and 11.3% identified as Hispanic. The number of Latina and Latino students studying abroad (6%) is half of what would be expected based on their overall numbers in higher education.

There is no lack of available anecdotal information on students of color and study abroad (see Akomolafe, 2003; Brown, 2002; Dessoff, 2006; Perdreau, 2000), yet few rigorous studies have been conducted on the subject, and there are even fewer studies that directly address Latino undergraduate study abroad participation. In 2008, Comp created an extensive annotated bibliography on underrepresentation in education abroad. Comp found that the majority of research on students of color and study abroad was not published in peer-reviewed journals. Instead, most of this literature is comprised of magazine and newspaper articles and conference presentations. The studies that do exist focus on students of color in general or African American students exclusively. In one prominent study on study abroad and students of color, Mattai and Ohiwerei (1989) investigated the experiences of southern Black students and listed the high cost of study abroad, minority group marginalization, lack of communication outlets abroad, and passivity with respect to travel as barriers to study abroad for students of color. Hembroff and Rusz (1993) posited that because students of color have a higher propensity to leave college after their first year, they are less likely to participate in study abroad programs, which often occur during late sophomore and junior years (IIE, 2008). The authors also found that students of color more often expressed concerns about finances, fear of going to unfamiliar places, fear of discrimination, and language barriers. Washington (1998) found that for African American students who *do* study abroad, awareness of available programs was the most significant factor influencing their decision to take part in an academic experience in a foreign country.

Although most of the research on students of color and study abroad focuses on African American students, a more recent study examined the factors that influence Asian American students' decisions regarding study abroad. Van Der Meid (2004) found that for Asian Americans, course of study was a more significant factor in decision-making than fear of discrimination, family location, and family duration in the U.S.

Latina/o, Asian American, and African American students certainly differ significantly in their study abroad decision-making processes. Salisbury, Umbach, Paulson, and Pascarella (2009) found that, whereas Asian American students were less likely than their White counterparts to *intend* to study abroad, the study abroad intentions of Latina and Latino students were no different than those of White students. Interestingly, a closer examination of these data by Salisbury, Paulson, and Pascarella (2009) found that Latina women students were significantly more likely than their White peers to intend to study abroad. These studies call into question the applicability of studies on other students of color to the study abroad decisions of Latina/o students.

With research on study abroad outcomes emphasizing its benefits over its costs, this study sought to reveal the perceptions and experiences of students who often hear and believe in the value of study abroad and who, at the same time, choose not to participate while in college. Accordingly, this study asked Latina/o students to reflect upon their study abroad decision-making as a means of gaining insight into their low rates of study abroad participation.

Methodology

This study used narrative inquiry, a qualitative design exploring the ways in which individuals narrate the events and experiences shaping particular aspects of their lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Riessman, 1993). This method was particularly useful for the goals of the present study. It provided tools to examine the various ways interview participants narrated the backgrounds, goals, and experiences that directed their paths in college. These paths included the ones directing them away from study in a foreign country. Most importantly, the use of narrative inquiry allowed us to gain an insider's perspective into the lives of Latina/o college students and the factors pertinent to their decision-making processes. During the research interviews, we encouraged participants to describe the events and experiences they felt were important factors in their study abroad decision-making process. We also paid special attention to the multilayered individual and societal contexts that shaped the students' decisions, including socioeconomic status and family background.

Sampling and Participants

We conducted semi-structured interviews with five Latina women and four Latino men attending a large public research university in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. Latina/o students comprise 6% of undergraduate enrollment at this university. To maintain a strong emphasis on meaningful information gathered from individual narratives, the sample size was purposely kept small (Creswell, 2002; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). In fact, scholars of narrative inquiry have recommended that even one participant constitutes an acceptable sample (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

A variety of techniques were used to recruit study participants. The most important feature of our sampling method emphasized a set of criteria, including Latina/o ethnicity, no prior participation in study abroad programs, and no intention to study abroad while in college. It is important to note that during the interviews, participants expressed aspirations to engage in opportunities abroad in the future. However, because none of the participants had concrete plans to study abroad, nor an interest in actively pursuing such opportunities, they satisfied our criterion of "having no intention to study abroad" while completing their undergraduate degrees. Within these criteria, we wanted the sample to represent maximum variation in terms of gender, major, transfer or non-transfer student status, cultural heritage, citizenship status, and students' paths leading to the decision not to study abroad (Mertens, 2005). Participants were recruited via list-serv and newsletter announcements and in-person solicitations in Latino Studies classes. Snowball sampling (Krathwohl, 2004) completed our recruitment efforts.

The nine participants represented a variety of majors, including government and politics, family science, art, engineering, and journalism. Three of the nine students began their postsecondary education at a local community college. Two students were in their second year of college,

four students in their third year, and three in their fourth year. The average age of the nine students was 21 years. The participants or family members were from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Colombia.

Data Analysis

Because narrative inquiry does not require a prescribed method of data analysis and because of our primary, although not exclusive, interest in the content of the interviews (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), we used open and axial coding to analyze data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In open coding, we read and carefully analyzed each line of the transcribed interviews, identifying words and expressions related to students' perceptions of study abroad, as well as the events and experiences that prevented them from participating in study abroad. Open coding was followed by axial coding, where we examined connections among words and categories, with the goal of developing an understanding of the abstract phenomena underlying students' stories. The primary goal in presenting our findings was to honor each student's story. The second presentation goal blends these stories in a unified format, emphasizing commonalities and differences in students' views and experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the entire research team participated in coding. We engaged in lengthy discussions of the findings, identifying the various themes as a group. To ensure accurate representation of their stories, we also utilized member checking by asking the research participants to comment on a draft of this article and make changes to the text accordingly.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered while interpreting the findings of this study. First, the students held some interest in study abroad, which is often why they volunteered to be interviewed. This may have resulted in perceptions of study abroad that are more positive than would be expected of Latina/o undergraduate students in general. Secondly, some study participants were recruited from Latino Studies courses, and thus may be more interested in their cultural heritage and Latin America as a geographic destination than other Latina/o undergraduate students.

Findings

Participant Narratives

Below we present three vignettes exemplifying some participants' views and experiences regarding study abroad. In depicting these stories, we highlighted major turning points and thought processes that played a role in the students' decisions to forego concrete plans for studying abroad during college. These three narratives were selected with the goals of maximizing diversity of experience and variation of gender and national origin.

Lidia¹. A student advocate for the creation of a Latino Studies minor, Lidia was deeply engaged in Latino community issues, both on and off campus. Reflecting on her college experience as a senior journalism major, Lidia expressed that she always wanted to study abroad. As she explained, “In the Spanish Department they have different excursions that they go on, and I always pick one up [a brochure] with the illusion that I was going to go, but I never get to go.” Even while feeling regretful, she was optimistic about a study abroad opportunity for journalism majors. Lidia had inquired about a study abroad program to Iceland, but she had not started to plan for this experience in her upcoming semesters.

Lidia was an ardent proponent of study abroad for its more immediate, as well as future, rewards. Study abroad, she believed, aids in developing a critical perspective of the individualism and capitalism she ascribed to U.S. culture. Lidia also noted that study abroad “looks really good on your resume” because,

If you’re interested in wanting to be a foreign correspondent one day . . . having that international experience is automatically going to get you in the door because you know the culture. . . . I think I’ve done pretty well, but that international experience would have been the jewel on my crown.

Lidia believed these rewards frequently went to a certain type of college student: “I almost always hear of a White person, usually a White female, who studied in Spain. I have family in Spain and still have been unable to visit. I’m kind of jealous.”

Both logistical and personal reasons made it difficult for Lidia to study abroad. When describing her decision-making process, the price of the trip was the first issue she considered. The timing of the trip was likewise a significant consideration, as trips during the summer could prevent her from obtaining one of the scarce journalism internships that improve job prospects. Semester-long study abroad experiences could result in a costly extension of her time at the university. The way study abroad can, ironically, boost a resume, yet make it difficult to secure an internship did not escape Lidia; she referred to her decision being tainted by “competing interests.”

Familial obligations and relationships permeated Lidia’s narrative. As she described, planning for a study abroad trip far in advance was not possible in her life:

I can’t say for sure six months from now, “Yes, I’m going to be able to go on this trip,” because with me there’s always something that happens: my grandmother dies, or my cousins are building a house and they need me . . . to help them build their house with the money they got from the government . . . or I need to stay home and I need to contribute by going to work.

¹Participant names are pseudonyms.

Lidia also stated with patent undertones of frustration that her mother was overprotective, explaining “I’m the eldest girl, and for double standards or not, I’m going to be put through that [test], being Latino.”

Personal interest and values also influenced Lidia’s decision. She wanted an experience that would enable her to improve her Spanish and interact with peoples of her cultural background:

I always try to look for study abroad, and maybe this is really closed-minded of me, where I can speak Spanish because I really want to improve my Spanish. It’s just I really love interacting with people of Latin American descent and my mission is to sort of help them.

For this reason, trips to Spain and El Salvador were particularly enticing. Nevertheless, the offerings of both destinations did not sway Lidia. She was of the opinion that going abroad was, at times, self-indulgent: “Sometimes I think . . . it’s just to sow your wild oats or something. I just don’t think that all causes are noble. I’m very much drawn to the more grass-roots type study abroad programs.” Lidia was not interested in an experience that, though labeled “study abroad,” would in all actuality put her in the position of being a “tourist.”

Roberto. Roberto expressed a longing to study abroad, but for several reasons he had not seriously pursued an opportunity. This longing stemmed from the fact that Roberto felt like he was missing out on an important part of what he termed the “four-year institution college student experience.” Being a transfer student who did not often interact with other students, Roberto had come to “envy the people that join the [study abroad] programs.”

While discussing his desire to study abroad, Roberto shared that a professor, in addition to sharing stories from her own time abroad, asked students who had studied abroad to relate their experiences to topics discussed in class. Roberto felt he “had nothing to say” because the questions were “asked in a way that only the people that have studied abroad can answer.” On another occasion, while picking up his father from the airport, Roberto talked to a group of students coming back from what he described as a “school project” abroad, and though learning a minimal amount about their trip, remembered that “they really had a blast.” Personal and familial finances, family unity, commuter and transfer student challenges, and lack of specific knowledge impeded Roberto from having a study abroad experience. Roberto’s main concern about studying abroad was that, “it must be expensive.” This was particularly relevant for him, as he would finance a study abroad experience on his own.

Family was a recurring theme for Roberto. He emphasized that Latinos are connected by their strong familial ties. When asked to elaborate why he thought Latinas/os had not taken advantage of certain university offerings, he suggested, “We don’t like leaving family behind.” As a result of family unity, Roberto speculated that many Latina/o students, regardless of institution type, live off campus. Roberto viewed commuting as a burden, saying that he felt like he was missing out on college because he believed he was busier at home than on-campus students.

Roberto's knowledge of study abroad programs at his four-year institution was limited to what he had digested from e-mail messages. These missives focused on destinations, but not the program specifics. He articulated that the study abroad programs centered on a theme and went to countries like Spain, Argentina, France, Brazil, and Ecuador, but admitted: "I just have that general view of information that I received through the emails, nothing more specific." Roberto likened study abroad to "a tour where a tour guide takes you to certain places and explains to you certain things."

Elisa. Study abroad opportunities and constraints were dictated by Elisa's financial situation, familial expectations, major, and citizenship status, many of which were interrelated. Money worries, which were greatly influenced by her lack of citizenship or permanent residence status, were the primary reason Elisa decided against study abroad:

Before a month ago, I didn't have a green card. I was dependent on my dad, so my Dad was the only person in the family who could work. Since I wasn't a permanent resident . . . I didn't have access to financial aid. I couldn't get loans. I mean, basically just coming to college has been a huge strain on family finances.

Elisa described her financial situation as the "reality" of deciding to forgo study abroad. This reality existed even with the enthusiasm of her mother, who Elisa believed would "be delighted" for her daughter to go abroad. By contrast, Elisa thought her father was more concerned about her studies in civil engineering:

He's very, "Engineering, engineering, engineering." I don't think he understands completely the importance of being culturally aware. I mean he would be if we had the money. He would be willing . . . to send me abroad. It would just be because it's a good experience and looks good in your resume.

Elisa was presented with study abroad options, but they were difficult to pursue with her goal to graduate in four years: "The [engineering] curriculum doesn't really . . . give you much free time." She was interested in pursuing the international engineering minor, which required spending time abroad for credit. Due to her finances and desire to avoid falling behind in her engineering coursework, she and her advisor devised a special arrangement where she could complete a domestic intercultural experience. Elisa knew one student who was able to study abroad in Spain, which she credited to early planning. Elisa detailed her image of U.S. students studying abroad as "White, probably, someone who has the money to do it."

Her Columbian heritage and childhood experiences in that country were a source of pride and frustration for Elisa:

Because being a Colombian, I mean, it's kind of a pain in the ass. I love it, I'm proud to be. Now that I'm a resident, I think it will be a lot easier. But before, since I was waiting for my green card, I wasn't really sure if I was able to leave the country. You can't make decisions on stuff that you don't know.

Despite these obstacles, Elisa remained optimistic about future study abroad, possibly as a part of Engineers Without Borders. She thought that study abroad was “amazing” because it helps you “get a better understanding of cultures—you become more accepting of people that are different from you.”

Narrative Themes

Five themes emerged from these and the other six participants’ study abroad narratives:

- (1) the connection with and importance of family,
- (2) family finances while considering study abroad opportunities,
- (3) an overarching positive regard for study abroad programs and optimism with respect to future study, work, or vacation opportunities abroad,
- (4) an emphasis on study abroad destinations, particularly those in Spanish-speaking countries, when contemplating the relevance and advantages associated with study abroad experiences, and
- (5) a pressure to fulfill requirements to graduate by individually established deadlines.

The connection with and importance of family. Family was central in the study abroad decision-making process in all nine participant narratives. Physical proximity to family was a major consideration for many participants when they made college choice decisions. This was also evident in that four of the nine participants lived at home and commuted to school. The importance of proximity to family and the possibility of separation played a large role in participants’ reactions to study abroad. Several participants noted that making the transition to college itself was a difficult adjustment for their families. The prospect of moving to another country for a semester abroad was intimidating. This emotional attachment was not portrayed just as a personal phenomenon, but an integral aspect of Latino culture.

Family finances and study abroad. Complicating participants’ decision-making process in the context of family relationships were study abroad expenses. Participants spoke of the costs associated with studying abroad in direct relation to their families’ finances. In fact, the intersection of family and finances was present in all nine interviews. They saw study abroad as an unjustifiable financial burden. Although some participants indicated that their parents would most likely support—both emotionally and financially—their decision to study abroad, worries about their families’ financial standing proved to be more influential. This reality kept them from making plans for studying abroad. The prospect of having to pay for study abroad without support from family was a concern for several participants.

Positive regard for study abroad and optimism about future travel. Despite the participants’ concerns about familial and financial costs of study abroad, they uniformly expressed a positive view of traveling abroad for school or work. Most saw study abroad as a rare chance to learn about their heritage. The idea of learning about self and others while being exposed

to new perspectives was enticing. Aside from being exposed to new perspectives, the participants noted the value of study abroad as an enriching opportunity beyond traditional classroom or textbook methods of learning.

For three participants who envisioned the typical U.S. college student going abroad as White, a racial identity category within which they did not position themselves, study abroad did not reinforce social hierarchies. The experience remained relatively untarnished in their minds. This positive regard may be a reason why many of the participants adhered so ardently to the idea of spending time abroad in the future. One student contemplated going abroad when she was gainfully employed and could afford the trip on her own. Another was planning to vacation abroad during the summer months. For both students, earning credit through study abroad was a less enticing motivator than gaining the experience of traveling abroad.

Emphasis on destinations. While considering studying abroad, eight participants mentioned Spanish-speaking countries as their top choice destinations. Whether for cultural exploration, Spanish language improvement, or other reasons entirely, the Latina/o students interviewed had a particular interest in study abroad programs in Latin America and Spain. It is important to recognize, however, that studying abroad was not merely about connecting with the peoples and places the participants associated with their culture. Study abroad was also seen as a resume builder, even the key to a career. Established study abroad program locations, which they saw as overwhelmingly European, did not meet several participants' needs and interests. Such a Euro-centric approach to study abroad discouraged them from embarking on this experience.

Graduating from college by individually established deadlines. Earning a degree was frequently cited as a crucial element of the participants' undergraduate experience. This goal made many hesitant to undertake a study abroad program that could jeopardize degree completion within their timetable. Two participants were quick to point out that additional time required extra financial resources, further increasing the total costs of study abroad. Consequently, as one participant reasoned, perhaps waiting until she was financially independent, or earning an income, would be a better time to gain international experience.

Foregoing study abroad was most emotionally detrimental for those students who had not already experienced meaningful travel abroad. Six participants reported that they had, in fact, spent time in a foreign country because of vacations, family visits, or non-credit bearing service projects. For these students, study abroad programs added a formal academic dimension to time already spent learning about foreign places and peoples—time that was not easy to document on transcripts or resumes.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that, in spite of the Lincoln Commission's vision, increasing the number of U.S. students who study abroad is far from simplistic. Narrating their views

and stories, the Latina/o participants presented several compelling reasons why study abroad was not an option or of interest to them. These reasons, though common in research designed to explain Latina/o college choice (Fry, 2002; Kurlaender, 2006), have not yet entered discourses on increasing the number of U.S. undergraduate students studying abroad. One reason participants repeatedly mentioned was that the idea of leaving family—the anchor that provides security and pathways to cultural heritage—even for the sake of briefly tasting independence, can be emotionally and logistically difficult. Although there may be immeasurable rewards to exploring the world outside the security of family and for learning about one's cultural heritage at its origin, a hyper-emphasis on study abroad may elicit feelings of personal and professional deficit.

For some Latina/o students, finances are an additional concern that permeates many educational decisions (Fry, 2002; Santiago, 2007; Zarate & Fabienke, 2007). Many institutions are striving to make study abroad more affordable by allowing students to utilize financial aid to offset program costs. These options include partial scholarships and fellowships and payment plans. However, financial aid often does not apply to short-term programs, which are growing in popularity (Dessoff, 2006). Financial aid is of little help if Latina families are unsure about how to access it or, due to citizenship status, are ineligible to receive assistance from the federal government.

Statistics about the availability of financial aid for studying abroad justify the participants' concerns. For example, ACE (2003) found that out of 752 U.S. colleges and universities participating in their national survey, 42% of institutions that offered scholarships for students to study abroad awarded on average less than \$1,000; 41% awarded between \$1,000 and \$2,500, and only 18% awarded more than \$2,500. The Lincoln Commission (2005) recommended a scholarship and fellowship program based on financial need wherein Lincoln Fellows, who must earn at least 12 credits while abroad and preferably study a foreign language, receive a maximum of \$5,000. However, in the same report the Lincoln Commission suggested that the average award be closer to \$1,750. Given the rising costs of study abroad programs, expensive airfare, and the unpredictable value of the U.S. dollar, scholarships and fellowships only stretch so far before students are forced to pay out of pocket.

In addition to the barriers to study abroad discussed above, transfer from community college may also be a factor. Three participants spent their first two years at a community college before starting their junior year at the university, an experience that held significant implications for their decisions to not study abroad. These participants first learned of study abroad at the institution to which they transferred. The information was therefore received late in their academic planning process, especially if the students were to apply for grants and scholarships. Many transfer students would have to prepare for their time abroad through careful course selection, advisor meetings, family discussions, and saving money almost immediately upon starting at the university. This preparation could add substantial considerations to the transition process. Transition assumes additional challenges when you anticipate leaving the place to which you are getting acclimated.

An additional finding relates to the importance of specific study abroad destinations for the Latina/o undergraduates participating in our study. Their interest in Latin America runs contrary to overall study abroad statistics, which indicate that nearly two-thirds of all undergraduate students studying abroad select Europe as their region of choice. One-fifth of study abroad programs occur in the United Kingdom alone. Latin America is the second most popular destination, but most study abroad sites are concentrated in just three countries: Mexico, Costa Rica, and Chile (The Lincoln Commission, 2005). Africa and the Middle East are even less popular, with fewer programs established in these regions. This circumstance may exist because certain countries in these regions are on the State Department's Travel Warning List (e.g., Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria), are rife with social unrest (e.g., Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan), are facing climate-induced economic instability (e.g., Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya), or a combination of all three. Given this geographical imbalance, it would be beneficial to consider how destinations affect the type of student who chooses to study abroad. Noticing the way that White undergraduate students predominantly study in White-majority, European countries, increased study abroad participation may be found among students of color if more programs were developed in destinations predominantly populated by people of color.

The suggestion to increase the number of programs in countries connected to students' ethnic origin stems from the desire among the participants to gain more personal development from their experience abroad. For many participants, academics during study abroad would be second to viewing the world through a different lens, learning language as a means of gaining new insight into identity, touring environments rich in personal relevance, and learning about their cultural heritage. Coursework, research opportunities, and internships—the pillars of study abroad—may be less appealing than first-hand travel through landscapes of origin.

Responding to labor market demands for a workforce that is effortlessly able to hopscotch borders, the number of undergraduate students studying abroad is steadily rising (IIE, 2008). Similar to the class needed for graduate school acceptance, the review course leading to higher standardized test scores, or the internship that paves the way to a corporate job, study abroad has become the ticket to skills and knowledge employers increasingly seek. This explains, at least in part, the yearning to study abroad of several participants. Participants may have felt disappointed for having missed out on what they were told, and truly believed, was an incredible chance to gain valuable intercultural skills.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

Research

If study abroad demographics are to reflect the undergraduate population in the U.S., more research is needed on the participation of students of color in study abroad programs. In particular, future research should provide in-depth examinations of the ways in which students of color from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds make study abroad decisions. Among Latina/o college

students, research exploring the experiences of students from ethnic groups not represented in our study (e.g., Mexican Americans) would be especially welcome. An additional avenue of research illuminated by this study is the role of destination options for study abroad. It would be beneficial to learn if, as this study suggests, creating study abroad programs in destinations that cater to underrepresented identities or traditions yields a more diverse study abroad cohort.

Practice

There are institutional and individual implications that can be derived from this study for student affairs practitioners interested in reversing the prevailing study abroad demographic trends. At the institutional level, administrators are engaged in drafting and editing strategic plans, missions, and visions for their institutions. Words like “global” and “international” have an unprecedented presence in these documents as preparations are made for an educational era shaped by globalization. This study proposes, first, that concrete, assessable provisions for diversifying study abroad programs be included in the statements guiding internationalization efforts. Secondly, colleges and universities must find ways to enable transfer students to study abroad, perhaps through partnerships with local community colleges.

The students’ narratives presented in this study also bring to the forefront several considerations for international education and/or student affairs practitioners. In what ways, for example, could the messages of study abroad marketing be reworked to address the concerns of students of color? Information on study abroad, including its benefits and the availability of financial assistance, could be produced in languages other than English to help multi-lingual families make sense of what can seem a daunting endeavor. Given the importance family plays in Latina/o students’ educational decision-making, it may be valuable for study abroad offices to host family information sessions about the outcomes of study abroad programs. Because some Latina/o students are coming from families that have recently immigrated to the U.S., it may also be important for practitioners to revisit the role of study abroad for today’s college student. Students from immigrant households, for instance, may find studying in the U.S. itself to be rich with cross-cultural challenges, thereby making calls to study in a “foreign” country less relevant.

Furthermore, practitioners should consider the complexities of paying for a study abroad experience. The student narratives in this study suggest that short-term programs may be more appropriate for Latina/o students whose families cannot afford for their sons and daughters to leave for extended periods of time. Concomitantly, financial aid at every institution of higher learning should be extended to defray the costs of short-term study abroad programs. A number of participants pointed to the perceived difficulty of applying for study abroad in general and financial aid for study abroad specifically. Simplifying study abroad and financial aid application procedures, or even advertising the ease of existing procedures, may encourage more students to study abroad.

Lastly, the positive regard for study abroad, particularly among Latina/o students who did not have concrete plans to take part in such an opportunity, may mean that practitioners need to be more innovative in their approach to internationalization. As we continue to build our understanding of how the outcomes associated with study abroad can be attained domestically, student affairs practitioners can develop international and intercultural awareness programs that allow students to feel engaged with global issues and cultures in the places on campus they frequent most. Living-learning programs targeting students of diverse backgrounds that combine coursework on understanding pertinent issues and cultural differences with field trips to museums, businesses, and think tanks represent one programmatic path to explore.

Policy

Currently, the Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act is the sole piece of legislation on study abroad under consideration by the federal government. The Simon Act, which was included as part of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 2010 and 2011 that passed the House of Representatives in June of 2009, sought to ensure that there is greater diversity in the 1 million students that venture abroad. To help achieve this goal, the Simon Act attached to the initial \$40,000,000 appropriated to increase study abroad numbers the requirement that institutions address on-campus factors inhibiting student involvement in study abroad programs. The findings of this study support the necessity of this requirement and encourage future policy intended to bolster study abroad rates of participation among students of color. Hence, the Simon Act is a welcomed first step toward a federal international education policy that is inclusive and moves beyond the rhetoric of national security and economic competitiveness.

Our focus in study abroad should not be one dimensional: We should not merely ask how many, but who is electing to take part in academic experiences outside of the U.S. The sad truth is that study abroad numbers may indeed reach 1 million, but the majority of the undergraduate students who comprise that figure will be those who can afford the expenses, with a cultural heritage not so firmly entrenched in proximity to family, and who live on campus. In other words, it will continue to be a predominantly White 1 million students traveling to White-populated destinations.

Conclusion

The voices showcased in this study remind us that our understanding of the study abroad decision-making process of Latina/o students is still in its infancy. Although pressure mounts to send college students abroad, the inadequate understanding of the study abroad decision-making process of Latina/o undergraduate students may lead to continued frustration over stagnant study abroad figures. Perhaps worse yet, international educators and student affairs practitioners may be unprepared for responses to this pressure from students who cannot or choose not to

study abroad: feelings of inadequacy, disappointment, or sadness for having missed out on what others cite as an incomparable college experience. Diversifying the cohort of undergraduate students venturing abroad and, more specifically, increasing Latina/o participation in study abroad may require more than sums of money allocated to scholarships and fellowships. It will require international educators providing outlets for students to voice their opinions, researchers to analyze their perspectives, and policy makers to listen to the voices that count most.

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