

Abstract

International education professionals have been persistent about the need to diversify and create equitable and inclusive US study abroad programs. However, issues of race and racism continue to permeate the experiences of students of color who study abroad. We argue that as a field, it may be time for study abroad to move beyond the broad rhetoric of diversity and inclusion and begin to embody and lead an antiracist agenda in international education.

What Is the Role of Study Abroad in Advancing Antiracism in International Education?

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Study abroad researchers and practitioners should be among the leading voices in conversations about institutional racism in higher education, particularly in the area of student development. Study abroad has long championed itself as a source for intercultural competency, staffed and researched by experts in this area, promising to make students more tolerant, understanding, and aware by exposing them to the world and its people. These outcomes should theoretically lead to students committed to anti-racism, justice, and respect for all regardless of color, creed, or nationality. However, the very experiences of US students of color who study abroad, and the fact that discussion

on the need for antiracism in the field is only now emerging, suggest that, in fact, the domain itself has ways to go when it comes to race.

Race and Equity in Study Abroad

From the academic discourses that have dominated the field for decades, to how students of color access and experience programs, study abroad has a race issue it needs to continue to contend with at a deeper level. The underrepresentation of students of color in study abroad is an ever-present topic of discussion. Yet, despite public commitments to increasing racial diversity in study abroad participation, particularly at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), scholars and practitioners engaged in these efforts have traditionally done so in ways that overemphasize what students of color lack in terms of navigating access to study abroad rather than holding accountable the systems that create and maintain these barriers. It is no surprise then that efforts to diversify US study abroad programs have been slow moving.

In the US context, study abroad across institution-led programs and private providers is very much an extension of the higher education system as a whole, in which the unwillingness to acknowledge and address long-standing and deep-seated issues of race have amounted to the willful neglect of people of color within institutions. Indeed, the experiences of students of color who do study abroad challenge the very claim that students become more understanding, empathetic, and less inclined to racial stereotyping through study abroad. When Black students study abroad, they report that a significant amount of racism that they experience when away is perpetuated by their white peers, who represent 70 percent of all US study abroad participants. How do we reconcile this with the notion that students return from their experiences more willing and comfortable to engage with difference?

The Language of Diversity

In their book, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Sara Ahmed describes the varied discourse around the term “diversity,” including the multitude of ways in which diversity is operationalized—from its presence in equity and inclusion statements and marketing materials to how it is used to signal an organization’s values and priorities. This discourse extends beyond institution-wide declarations of diversity, equity, and inclusion—permeating academic and cocurricular programs. Study abroad is indeed an area where posturing has been employed as a substitute for the real work of advancing racial, economic, and social justice. Beyond the symbolic language of “diversity,” “awareness,” and “understanding” embedded in study abroad discourse (and marketing), little within the enterprise has explicitly sought to combat racism, xenophobia, and other social issues.

Alternatively, antiracism takes aim at how the systems and structures in place act to uphold or oppose racism in the institution. It is a change-oriented philosophy that first demands continuous, ongoing, critical reflexivity, and then an active commitment to choices that promote justice and equity. In order to shift into authentic antiracism work, study abroad must begin by interrogating the discourse around its policies and practices.

Addressing Racial Inequity

The language of institutional diversity is, by design, destined to fail to deliver what it promises. It is time to move beyond this disarming rhetoric toward an unequivocally antiracist, social justice ethic. In practice, the field can address how the status quo works to uphold inequity by:

- Continuing to diversify the field of study abroad and its leadership.
- Rejecting deficit narratives that blame students of color for their underrepresentation in study abroad (e.g., due to their lack of financial, social, or cultural capital) and assessing how institutional policies, such as GPA minimums, can be exclusionary;
- Devoting resources to help students of color study abroad. Underrepresented students of color need more outreach, culturally responsive advising, and financial support;
- Breaking the study abroad bubble that places outgoing students with US peers in US-styled classrooms and extracurricular activities, a model that does little to challenge

Most importantly, addressing racial inequity means embedding an antiracist curriculum into every study abroad program for all students.

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students' perspectives and views or truly raise their awareness of differences among peoples and cultures.

Most importantly, addressing racial inequity means *embedding an antiracist curriculum into every study abroad program for all students*. The curriculum should, among other things, help students reflect on their privileges and social position in the world; engage students with social justice issues in the host country; prepare students with tools to engage in the host country environment, academic culture, and with the people; and have students reflect on how they might use their experiences in service of others, particularly as leaders of antiracism work on their home campuses.

The need for more defined learning outcomes in study abroad is more crucial than ever. Any effort to transform students will need to be explicit, intentional, and coordinated. While not comprehensive, the steps we have listed above to address entrenched racism and exclusion in the realm of study abroad are meant to begin a dialogue.

Conclusion

According to the Association of International Educators, approximately 341,000 students went abroad in the 2018–2019 academic year, of which 30 percent were students of color. Study abroad is uniquely positioned to lead antiracist education with students of all disciplinary backgrounds. It can give students a “third space” in which, removed from the context of US society, they have the room, both physically and mentally, to observe, experience, and appreciate new and different ways of being and doing. Herein lies the real opportunity for transformation. ▲