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# Empowering Students of Color to Study Abroad: Effective Approaches for Predominantly White Institutions

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**Empowering Students of Color to Study Abroad:  
Effective Approaches for Predominantly White Institutions**

A'mari Bing-Way

Winston School of Education and Social Policy, Merrimack College

2024

MERRIMACK COLLEGE

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IN

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AUTHOR: A'mari Bing-Way

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As a committed DEI advocate, this study is the next step in championing future access to global educational programs for students of color.

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### **Abstract**

Traditionally studying abroad is an opportunity afforded to college students. For many, it is perceived as a desirable and essential component to the college experience. Initially developed by a white professor for white students at a predominantly white institution (PWI) to immerse themselves in European culture. The study abroad model in higher education was not designed with inclusivity in mind. However, research suggests that access to such opportunities depends on a student's network to include: social, cultural, and financial capital as well as the university's investment in empowering students to participate in study abroad programs. Historically, government funded initiatives have sought to increase the number of students studying abroad, and more recently enhancing the participation of students of color. Studies imply that accessibility and awareness for all college students is not equal. This study uses the community cultural wealth framework and transformative learning theory to explore how students of color attending a PWI perceive study abroad programs and how enhanced support, awareness, and targeted marketing can improve their participation in study abroad opportunities. Ultimately, inclusive marketing on PWI campuses will assist in dispelling the stereotypical images and thoughts associated with studying abroad.

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**Empowering Students of Color to Study Abroad:  
Effective Approaches for Predominantly White Institutions**

The stereotypical image of a study abroad student in higher education is a white, wealthy, female, American student who is studying at a university in a major Western European city (Boulden, 2022, p. 208). This description is a culmination of racial, ethnic, familial factors, socioeconomic status, gender, academic standing, and exposure. These factors can hold a significant influence on a college student's likelihood to study abroad, specifically for students of color attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) (Almassri et al., 2023a; Boulden, 2022; Gathago et al. 2018; Salisbury et al., 2010; Wanger, et al., 2020). There are disparities in both attraction and accessibility to study abroad programs. This leads to questioning how study abroad opportunities are being marketed so that students of color will feel empowered to participate in them.

The boilerplate marketing statement emphasizes that students will be “expanding global knowledge, gaining cross-cultural skills, increasing critical thinking and intellectual curiosity, and promoting self-efficacy, all while delivering important career and academic content” throughout their trip (Boulden, 2022, p. 207). The overwhelming aim is for the student to embrace the culture, language, people, and history of the host country within a few short months. Additionally, this international adventure hopes to enhance the academic experience for such degrees in humanities and the social sciences (Salisbury et al., 2009). Ultimately, when the student returns to the U.S. she will be viewed as a cultured student, a global citizen, and a competitive candidate in the job market (Harder et al., 2015). The benefits of studying abroad are vast yet ultimately depend on a student's network (social capital, cultural capital, and financial capital) and a university's investment in encouraging students to participate. It is often

presumed that students of color have major deficits within their networks due to financial barriers (Almassri et al, 2023a; Boulden, 2022; Salisbury et al., 2009; Wanger et al., 2020), low social and cultural capital (Salisbury et al., 2011, Wanger et al., 2020), lack of awareness and interest in study abroad opportunities (Gathago & Horton, 2018; Salisbury et al., 2009), fears of experiencing racism abroad (Salisbury et al., 2009, Salisbury et al., 2010), and familial obligations (Wanger et al., 2020) in comparison to their white counterparts.

In 2023, the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA) reported that only 1% of students studied abroad while enrolled at a higher education institution. This is equivalent to over 180,000 students nationwide; resulting in less than 10% participation of college students (National Association of Foreign Student Advisers, 2024a). Of this percentage, 31.5% were students of color with .4% Native American or American Indian; 8.6% Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; 5.3% Black or African American; 11.9% Hispanic or Latino(a); and 5.3% multiracial while 68.6% of white students studied abroad (Institute of International Education, 2023).

Study abroad programs are often presented as opportunities that welcome all students, however, “given the wide-ranging areas of study and diverse demands, a one-size-fits-all approach can no longer be justified” (Strange & Gibson, 2017, p. 85). Discussion and research concerning the gaps in study abroad participation for students of color attending higher education institutions, overwhelmingly reports that it is attributed to low capital (social/financial/cultural). Ironically, the majority of the research found captures the deficits or shortcomings of students of color; hence, neglecting research promoting an asset-based perspective. One of the barriers to the approach in engaging students of color is not exclusively exposing and/or targeting them within



their college matriculation. This contributes to the modest growth of study abroad participation for students of color.

While these hindrances are well documented for students of color, equal attention is not given to students of color who do participate in the study abroad program opportunities. Written and visual representations of the study abroad experience are presented in an idealized tone of inclusivity and desirability yet accessibility remains difficult to convey.

The purpose of this capstone is to address how the marketing strategies utilized at predominately white institutions can impact the likelihood of students of color to participate in study abroad opportunities. The goal is to explore how increased support and awareness can potentially benefit participation in more study abroad opportunities for students of color. Consequently, improving the quality of messaging at predominantly white institutions.

Exploration of this topic was conducted from an asset-based approach utilizing Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Christie et al., 2015; Fleming, 2018; Strange & Gibson, 2017) and community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). This paper will investigate the following: (1) how the promotion of study abroad opportunities are perceived and translated to the experiences of students of color at a PWI; and (2) effective promotional strategies that can be applied to the study abroad process to help increase accessibility and awareness of study abroad opportunities.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Origin of Study Abroad***

Studying abroad in higher education refers to the pursuit of academic studies and earning credit at a foreign university (Diversity Abroad Community, 2019); its purpose is to “promote global competence, cross cultural understanding, cultural immersion, and world-mindedness”

(Gan & Kang, 2022, p. 207). The concept of study abroad in the United States was a reaction to World War I. It was proposed by Raymond Kirkbride, a professor at the University of Delaware and former soldier, to the university's president, Walter Hüllihen. The first program was established in 1923 (Livingston, 2023; University of Delaware, n.d.a.) as the Delaware Foreign Study Plan now known as the Junior Year Abroad. Like many trips today, the university took students to European countries including France, Germany, and Switzerland (University of Delaware, n.d.b.).

Prior to Kirkbride's initiative, the idea to increase opportunities for Americans to experience a globalized education was gaining momentum. In 1919, the Institute for International Education (IIE) was established with the mission "to help people and organizations leverage the power of international education to thrive in today's interconnected world" (Institute of International Education, 2024, para. 3). Ties to the government and war continued as IIE was founded by Elihu Root, a former U.S. Secretary of War and Secretary of State, and Nicholas Murray Butler, a former president of Columbia University, both of whom later, respectively, were presidents of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Nobel Peace Prize recipients (The Nobel Prize, n.d.a.; The Nobel Prize, n.d.b.).

Decades later in 1946, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs launched the Fulbright Program after World War II with the intent "to increase mutual understanding and support friendly and peaceful relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries" (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, n.d., para. 6; Fulbright Program, n.d., para. 1). The ongoing effects of war, politics, and the perception of the American populace remained influential factors driving cross-cultural interactions, notably the establishment of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies

(Burn, 1980). The consensus among members derived from understanding that in the interest of all levels of American education, international exchange was a priority, and in the interest of the United States, the commission “must encourage informed and sympathetic views of America in other lands” (Burn, 1980, p. 130). This is especially important when attempting to establish shared international diplomacy.

On September 11, 2001 (9/11), a violent attack on American soil was executed at the World Trade Center killing many citizens. Civil international diplomacy was significantly needed during this time (Anderson et al., 2016). Consequently, the aftermath of 9/11 elevated the importance of educating students about international security, and international relations. Bolstering “future security, economic prosperity, and global leadership” were concerns of the government, businesses, and academic institutions (Anderson et al., 2016; Salisbury et al., 2009). The need for global exposure through international educational opportunities was further supported.

This support was demonstrated through the 2004, Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program. It was established by the late Senator Paul Simon. The fellowship was appointed by Congress with the goal of sending one million U.S. students abroad by 2020 (Anderson et al., 2016; Salisbury et al., 2009). The mission was to significantly increase and diversity participation in international education. It aims to achieve the following targets which were intended to benefit students of color. The following targets include: (1) “Create a more globally informed American citizenry;” (2) “Increase participation in quality study abroad programs;” (3) “Encourage diversity in student participation in study abroad;” (4) “Diversify locations of study abroad, particularly in developing countries;” (5) “Create an innovative partnership with higher education to open more doors for study abroad;” and (6)

“Internationalize U.S. higher education by making study abroad a cornerstone of undergraduate education” (NAFSA. n.d.b., para. 3). An additional initiative supported by the Commission was the Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act of 2006. This bill allocates \$80 million grant funds to increase the promotion of study abroad, with a particular focus on students of color (Boulden, 2022; Salisbury, 2009).

Today, Kirkbride’s vision of study abroad has expanded and Hullahen’s prediction of its effects - to “produce better-rounded students, train future foreign language teachers, and provide experience for students who wanted to go into careers with international aspects” - has been proven correct (University of Delaware, n.d.a., para. 3). Over time, government initiatives have aimed to increase student participation by providing financial assistance, yet access to this support remains unevenly distributed. Since its inception, studying abroad has transformed into a sought-after experience and selling point for many colleges and universities. Consequently, its origin and Eurocentrism has caused the experience to be perceived as a college norm (Petzold & Peter, 2015) or privilege reserved for the previously described stereotypical study abroad student.

### ***Study Abroad Model in Higher Education***

Initially developed by a white professor for white students at a predominantly white institution to immerse themselves in European culture, the study abroad model in higher education was not designed with inclusivity in mind. Disproportionate levels of access and awareness operate as hindrances for many students of color in the study abroad process. However, like the aforementioned government initiatives, new models have emerged to increase participation and accommodate time and academic constraints of students.

The U.S. student model involves a college or study abroad organization partnered with a college to lead a trip but a crucial factor influencing who is attracted to study abroad is the

duration (Mason & Garcia, 2022; Anderson et al., 2016). Durations are divided into three categories: (1) short-term programs which can range from one week (primarily for faculty-led trips) or six to seven weeks (2) semester program (16 weeks); and (3) an academic year program for 32 weeks (Isabelli, C. & Isabelli, C. L., 2020; Strange & Gibson, 2017). Strange and Gibson (2017) explain that the latter two options are typically considered more advantageous academically and for cultural immersion. Boulden (2022) argues that positive correlation between program duration and benefits primarily stems from students with high levels of financial and social capital having increased access to study abroad opportunities.

Many students of color identify time constraints based on family, work, and academic commitments as obstacles in their participation (Boulden, 2022; Gathogo & Horton, 2018; Mason & Garcia, 2022) making particular study abroad models less appealing. Nevertheless, dwelling on the barriers of study abroad programming acts as a barrier in itself. Short-term programs have been noted as a solution to accommodating time and financial constraints (Almassri et al. 2023a, p. 45). Mason and Garcia propose short-term faculty-led study abroad trips in particular have a significant impact on the interest of students of color as the duration is generally two weeks or less (2022). Contrary to the gradual immersion into a new culture during a semester or year abroad, Anderson et al. (2016) argue that when facilitated with intention and proper organization, short-term faculty-led trips help students feel engaged and empowered.

Therefore, faculty serve multiple roles during the study abroad process to the extent of which Almassri et al. state that “many students see the faculty leader as more influential in their decision making than the program destination” (2023a, p. 46). Anderson et al. (2016) expands upon this claim explaining that to effectively encourage participation in study abroad, faculty leaders should be seen as trusted sources for intercultural mentoring, providing an opportunity

for students of color to gain social capital. Thus, diversifying access points to social capital empowers students of color to place more value on the benefits of studying abroad.

### ***Benefits of Study Abroad***

The spectrum of benefits that students acquire during and after studying abroad is extensive and varied; even though Boulden (2022) suggests that certain benefits are frequently observed because students who possess higher levels of social, cultural, and financial capital tend to study abroad. Research has identified the listed benefits that impact students' academic and professional success: increased critical thinking skills, intercultural competence, improved academic performance, enhanced sense of identity, tolerance of ambiguity, confidence, and interpersonal skills (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017; Wanger et al., 2020). Although these benefits are often marketed to students and parents, the benefits are reciprocal for universities and employers.

Upon returning from study abroad, Boulden (2022) shares that there is “increased institutional engagement and student success, are more likely to work in global careers, are more likely to graduate in four years, involve themselves in reflective learning experiences upon their return, hold jobs within six months of graduating, have increased institutional loyalty, and earn more in starting salaries” (p. 208). The length of time a student is abroad significantly influences these benefits as well, with longer durations increasing the likelihood of job offers and the development of critical professional skills, while shorter durations effectively enhance teamwork skills (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017). In summary, accumulating these benefits leads to a broader perspective on academic and career opportunities, motivating students to explore more ways to increase their capital. All benefits listed are applicable to students of color but the benefits that are exclusive to students of color must be equally recognized and promoted.

Previous research investigating these unique study abroad benefits has predominantly focused on the experiences of Black students; however, some aspects may be relevant to students of color from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Almassri et al. (2023a) attribute study abroad to augmented senses of personal, psychological, and ethnoracial identity as well as improved “self-knowledge, confidence, advocacy; in their sense of motivation, resilience, and ambition; in their attitudes of empathy and self-accountability; and their ability to embrace vulnerability and release from “generational racialized trauma” for Black students (p. 42). Boulden (2022) reinforces these findings by explaining that Black students who study abroad also develop cultural capital, skills to navigate intersecting identities, and intercultural sensitivity.

Notably, research pertaining to the benefits that Asian and Asian American students gain from studying abroad reflect those that can be applied to any student, predominantly white students - graduating on time, higher GPAs, improved language skills, and identity development (Almassri et al., 2023b). This arguably resonates with the myth of “model minority” which is associated with Asian and Asian American students. Research on the benefits of studying abroad for Asian and Asian American students show outcomes similar to those experienced by all students, especially white students. The benefits include timely graduation, higher GPAs, improved language skills, and identity development. Drawing a comparison to white students in this context reinforces the stereotype of the “model minority” myth associated with this demographic (Almassri et al, 2023b). Ultimately, further investigation of the benefits that non-Black students of color gain through study abroad enhances the understanding of how students of color express interest in studying abroad and navigate their experience on campus.

*Participation Challenges for Students of Color on Campus*

Discourse surrounding students of color engaging in study abroad opportunities frequently adopts a deficit-based approach, reinforcing the notion that they are responsible for the absence of resources they possess. When entering higher education and considering study abroad, students within this demographic are often assumed to lack a social and familial network that exposes and encourages study abroad, financial flexibility, academic adaptability, awareness of study abroad opportunities, understanding that on-campus resources offer relevant support, and confidence in feeling prepared and welcomed when studying abroad (Gathogo & Horton, 2018; & Wanger et al., 2020). For example, a challenge that is disproportionately associated with students of color is the cost of studying abroad, despite critique from Wanger et al. who argue that “only 2 percent of the world’s student population has the economic resources and the social mobility required to participate in study abroad and benefit from the experience” (2020, p. 2). Recognizing this fact should prompt predominantly white institutions to apply an asset-based approach to the study abroad process, utilizing their resources to prioritize capacity building for students of color, starting on campus.

Barriers that are often overlooked stem from a college or university’s responsibility is how students of color navigate a predominantly white institution. Morrison identifies four ways in which lack of awareness on the part of the institution and white students appears: (1) The Kid-gloves treatment: “patronizing behavior from Whites on campus...coded in an insecure tone that is picked up by the student’s antennae, a tone that signals a condescending diminution of the black person”; (2) Stereotyping: “students are often treated as stereotypes rather than as individuals”; (3) Denial: white people denying the existence of racism due to lack of awareness; and (4) Ignorant comments and questions: “Dealing with comments and questions from Whites



who are unaccustomed to diversity” (2010, p. 1003-1004). The presence of these barriers reinforces the suggestion of Salisbury et al. (2010) that “maybe it isn’t fear of racism abroad that limits minority participation; maybe it’s an enduring effect of bias at home” (p. 145). Combined with “stereotype threat...the potential for an individual’s actions to be interpreted by others through the lens of an existing negative stereotype” (Salisbury et al. 2010, p. 141) the challenge of increasing the level of interest that students of color demonstrate towards study abroad can become more pronounced. According to Wanger et al., effectively incorporating the insight of students of color requires addressing “structural holes,” the absence of connections between students and the institution, to address the perception of institutional support (2020). A significant absence is targeted marketing for students of color.

### ***Perceptions of Study Abroad Based on Marketing***

The stereotypical image of a study abroad student and experience is also associated with stereotypical images. Miller-Idriss et al. categorize images into “jumping,” “horizon-gazing,” and “arms wide” (2019). Images of students jumping convey a sense of joy, youth, and being untethered, while those depicting students staring into the horizon suggest contemplation and transformation on their past and future. Lastly, images of students standing with arms wide imply a feeling of achievement and renewal (Miller-Idriss et al., 2019). Boulden suggests that visuals in these categories “are most effective only within the population that has been predisposed to study abroad” (2022, p. 210). Although such visuals may be appealing, many students of color may not be able to picture themselves in them because of representation and the lack of accentuation on education. Miller-Idriss et al. seek to address the overall observation that “American higher education has come to be marketed as a time of fun and little work or hassle, with images of leisure” (2019, p. 1093) an approach that has been integrated into study abroad marketing.

Consequently, a common observation made by researchers is the need for predominantly white institutions to implement targeted marketing strategies to garner and sustain interest from students of color (Boulden, 2022; Mason & Garcia, 2022; Wanger et al, 2020).

While study abroad programs have been shown to increase likelihood of timely graduation, improved GPA, and broaden job prospects, students of color and their families who perceive college solely as a means to obtain a degree may not find study abroad appealing (Mason & Garcia, 2022). Gathogo and Horton examine an explanation that could contribute to this perspective towards study abroad, proposing that the opportunity can be viewed as a form of recreation and tourism (2018). From a recreational standpoint, messaging for study abroad capitalizes on a students' idea of how leisure time abroad should be enjoyed, resulting in concern about academics being a priority during the program. Whereas the use of "leisure," "relax," and "fun" portray study abroad as a recreational activity, terms such as "explore," "tour," and "adventure" imply that students will view their host country as a tourist (Gathogo & Horton, 2020, p. 67). Interestingly, both perceptions diverge from the academic, professional, and personal benefits that study abroad programs widely market to students.

### ***Methods to Increase Participation***

Improving methods to increase international education participation for students of color is a must. Therefore, future research studies should refrain from deficit-based perspective and embrace an asset-based perspective especially for underrepresented students. For example, (Almassri et al., 2023a) states reframing the barrier of familial obligations and resistance to reflect the value that students of color place on their families. This can serve as an opportunity for institutions to foster connections with students and their families.

Regarding the importance that students of color place on family, marketing efforts showing respect towards the host culture conveyed that study abroad programs were racially conscious and safe environments for students of color. Receiving transparent and digestible information about cost, courses, and benefits of studying abroad highlighted the importance of authenticity and clarity for students of color. Next, diversity depicted in marketing photos accentuates the significance of representation. Representation then aligns with the importance of signaling which refers to using symbols that reflect student identities (e.g. Pride flag or images of international attractions that connote diversity) and promote inclusivity. Lastly, the broader campus culture plays a critical role in ensuring that Black students feel supported by their institution and dispelling feelings of being seen merely as “a number.” Collectively, these components offer solutions that counteract common barriers faced by students of color, creating new opportunities to increase equity and inclusion.

In addition to family, Wanger et al. (2020) found that friends serve an influential role in students of color participating in study abroad. Therefore, utilizing students of color who have study abroad or international travel experience as peer mentors can effectively counteract disparities in social and cultural capital. As previously mentioned, faculty members play a crucial role in the study abroad decision-making process for students of color. Kruse and Brubaker (2007) argue that preparing for study abroad should be initiated within the classroom further expanding access points for students of color to receive information. In conjunction with this approach, Salisbury et al. propose diversifying audiences as a method which simultaneously forces messaging to cater to the needs specific to a group while also engaging students of color on their own terms (Salisbury et al., 2010).

Boulden builds upon these methods by directly addressing what students of color, particularly Black students, prefer to see implemented in study abroad marketing and experiences (2022). Elaborating on research findings, Boulden discusses that Black students are drawn to marketing efforts that feature elements such as relationships, respect for hosts, authenticity and clarity, representation, signaling, and the broader campus culture are factors that are sought out in marketing (2022). Once more, connections with peers, faculty, and campus resources are emphasized as important sources of information.

### ***Transformative Learning Theory***

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory serves as a critical framework for this capstone as it addresses "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of our psychocultural assumptions has come to constrain the way in which we perceive our world, of reconstituting that structure in a way that allows to be more inclusive and discriminating in our integrating of experience and to act on these new understandings" (Fleming, 2018, p. 123). Christie et al. (2015) simplifies this to say that the hope of transformative learning is that "better individuals will build a better world" (p. 11). This theory provides a foundation, simultaneously, for exploring why students of color at a predominantly white institution uniquely interpret study abroad marketing and how faculty and staff members at predominantly white institutions engage students of color with regard to study abroad opportunities.

According to Mezirow, successful transformative learning requires discourse and reflection, of which occurs in ten stages: "(1) Experience a disorienting dilemma; (2) Self-examine and feel guilt or shame about your perspective; (3) Critically assess your assumptions; (4) Recognize that these changes occur in others; (5) Explore options for a new perspective; (6)

Plan new actions; (7) Acquire new skills; (8) Provisionally attempt a new frame of mind; (9) Build competence in new ideas; and (10) Fully reintegrate into life” (Strange & Gibson, 2017, p. 87). Mezirow then expands on the significance of communicative learning within transformative learning theory, referring to the “ability to understand oneself and others” (Fleming, 2018, p. 125), which necessitates verifying the speaker’s authenticity, credibility, and qualifications to speak on a topic. Applicable to dismantling various awareness-based barriers faced by students of color, these stages assist in analyzing strategies to increase a student of color’s exposure to study abroad information and a predominantly white institutions approach to integrate the needs of students of color regarding study abroad and campus culture (Boulden, 2022).

### ***Community Cultural Wealth Model***

Developed as a framework to challenge Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory, the community cultural wealth integrates critical racial theory to spotlight forms of capital possessed by people of color (Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu’s theory proposes that knowledge valued by hierarchical society comes from upper and middle class, thereby declaring it as capital (Yosso, 2005). When applied to discussions regarding students of color participating in study abroad, this theory emphasizes their deficits instead of recognizing alternative forms of capital they possess. Utilizing critical race theory to analyze how race is implicitly and explicitly integrated into social practice and discourse, Yosso (2005) argues that “community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77).

To convert these into forms of capital, Yosso (2005) identifies six ways marginalized communities contribute value to their communities. This includes the following: aspirational capital: “ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and

perceived barriers;” linguistic capital: “intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style”; familial capital: “cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition”; social capital: “networks of people and community resources”; navigational capital: “skills of maneuvering through social institutions,” and; resistant capital: “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77-80).

For the purpose of this research, the community cultural wealth model serves as a framework to explore how students of color and predominantly white institutions can leverage Yosso’s forms of capital to foster mutual benefits and promote equity and inclusion in the study abroad process.

### ***Capstone Focus***

This capstone focuses on creating a comprehensive promotion plan with the goal of increasing the participation of students of color in study abroad opportunities at Merrimack College. A private predominantly white institution located in North Andover, Massachusetts. The project pitch was created and presented to current stakeholders in study abroad and international service learning departments. This includes current faculty, staff, and student leaders.

The college offers different ways to participate in study abroad programs which consist of short-term and long-term opportunities, a semester at sea, and alternative break service trips. Merrimack markets studying abroad, short-term and long-term, as an opportunity for students “to get invaluable life experience and self-confidence,” “deepen [their] understanding of the world,” “develop appreciation of cultural diversity,” “gain global perspective on [their] field of study,”

and “enjoy networking and collaboration opportunities” (Merrimack College, n.d.a., paras. 4-8). Ultimately, implying that studying abroad will allow students to become global citizens.

The college has partnerships with universities in England, Ireland, Spain, and Italy; however, there are short-term programs in the Dominican Republic, Spain, Morocco, Italy, Iceland, and Ireland (Merrimack College, n.d.a.). The Semester at Sea program provides the opportunity to visit ten countries on three continents. Lastly, alternative spring break opportunities at Merrimack are led by the Campus Ministry department under the SEND Program (Merrimack College, n.d.c.). The SEND trips are “student-led opportunities where Merrimack students, faculty and staff volunteer during their winter, spring or summer break to serve and immerse themselves in communities in other states or countries” (Merrimack College, n.d.c., para. 3). International service trip destinations have included Greece, Honduras, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Peru, and Ecuador (Cronin, 2023a; Cronin, 2024b; O’Connell, 2022).

Rooted in Merrimack’s Augustinian heritage, the SEND program emphasizes their four pillars: service, solidarity, community-friendship, and reflection. Additionally, social justice is integrated into the program by encouraging students to practice self-reflection, learn about systemic realities, participate in physical and spiritual activities, and connect with communities affected by unjust systems and practices (Merrimack College, n.d.c.). The study abroad opportunities addressed in this capstone are long-term and short-term programs and international service trips in the SEND Program.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research methodology was conducted to gather data for this capstone project. Qualitative interviews and a focus group were conducted virtually and in-person at Merrimack College to support these findings. The interviewees included staff members engaged

in study abroad initiatives, a faculty member who participated in faculty-led study abroad trips, and students who lead on-campus organizations for students of color. During the interviews and focus group, participants were asked questions relevant to their roles within the study abroad process at Merrimack (see Appendix A), presented with the Comprehensive Promotion Plan for Students of Color (see Appendix B), and provided examples of potential marketing materials (see Appendix C) to review its content. This research approach aimed to gain insight into the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders regarding awareness and accessibility to study abroad opportunities at Merrimack College.

### **Community and Participants**

This capstone project is centered around the population of traditional (18- to 23-year-old) undergraduate students of color attending Merrimack College. The term “students of color” refers to students who are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, or two or more races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). At Merrimack College, undergraduate enrollment includes 17% students of color, comprising 9% Hispanic, 4% Black, 2% Asian, and 2% identifying as two or more races (U.S. News, n.d.).

At a PWI, the presence of students of color consistently raises questions about campus climate and the administration’s commitment and implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) values. Despite study abroad being marketed as an inclusive opportunity and perceived as an essential component of the college experience (Petzold & Peter, 2017), the disconnect in how students of color engage remains persistent. This prompted an examination of whether students of color at PWIs are encouraged to study abroad via on-campus marketing and resources. While programs and resources exist to support the financial, academic, and social



needs of these students, this study aimed to identify how connections between on-campus resources and the needs of students of color interested in study abroad could be enhanced.

Participants in this study serve as key stakeholders in the study abroad process; however, interviewees were not limited to students of color.

- Interviewee 1 has extensive experience in higher education while holding professorial and leadership positions oriented in advancing DEI discourse and initiatives. They serve in a senior leadership role for study abroad programs.
- Interviewee 2 holds an administrative position responsible for overseeing service-learning opportunities for students.
- Interviewee 3 is a faculty member with experience leading faculty-led study abroad trips.
- Interviewee 4 is a leader for a student organization dedicated to the Black student population.
- Interviewee 5 is the co-leader of a student organization dedicated to the Black student population.
- Interviewee 6 is a student leader within a student organization for the Latino student population on campus.

### **Project Theme and Materials**

The theme of this comprehensive community proposal project is enhancing access and awareness of strategies that encourage students of color at a PWI to pursue study abroad opportunities. A promotion plan targeted towards students of color was proposed with a three-pronged approach: (1) awareness campaign, (2) seminar and workshops, and (3) family support campaign. The awareness campaign would serve as a way to increase access to information and

support for students of color interested in and participating in study abroad at Merrimack College. The awareness campaign would involve implementing coordinated messaging with departments that are directly and indirectly involved in initiatives aimed at students of color and study abroad. A collaborative social media campaign would also be launched with the study abroad department, student organizations focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and departments focused on community and student engagement.

To increase access, information on study abroad would incorporate available scholarships, relevant campus resources, and images of students of color studying abroad. Outreach to DEI-based student organizations and courses would be leveraged to broaden the distribution of information. Next, the seminars and workshops would operate as mediums to create spaces where in-depth discussions about study abroad, DEI and professional development intersect. Student seminars would offer students of color the opportunity to explore their views on DEI within study abroad, as well as delve into the advantages of a globalized education. In addition, they would be provided with guidance in communicating study abroad details to their parents and receive recommendations for post-study abroad support.

Workshops for faculty and staff members in relevant departments would present information to emphasize their role in the study abroad process and equip them with effective methods to support students of color interested in studying abroad. Furthermore, a family support campaign would be implemented to alleviate parental concerns, encourage parental engagement, and accentuate the significance of their role in their student's study abroad experience. An inclusive measure to support this would be to translate study abroad information to other languages (e.g. Spanish, Haitian Creole). Print and electronic materials regarding parental engagement would be developed and shared. Lastly, study abroad information sessions for

parents would directly address their concerns regarding finances, academics, student identities (race/ethnicity, LGBTQ, gender, first generation, disability, religion, etc.), and aid them in supporting their students through the process.

### **Procedure**

Data gathered during the in-person qualitative interviews were captured using audio recordings and written notes. The focus group was held virtually on Zoom, and data was collected through audio and video recordings as well as note-taking. Interviewees were selected from three categories in the campus structure: administration, faculty, and student. Interviewees were shown presentation slides outline the three-part Comprehensive Promotion Plan and two sample marketing flyers promoting a study abroad session for students of color. Interview protocols were tailored to capture their role-specific perspectives, concentrating on key themes such as access to study abroad information, on-campus resource support, and perceptions of the study abroad experience.

### **Findings**

The responses gathered during the qualitative interviews and focus group revealed common themes amongst faculty, students, and administrators regarding how students of color perceive abroad. However, variations in viewpoints understandably diverged based on their role on campus. An overarching theme that emerged was awareness, which was interconnected with themes such as financial barriers, peer influence, familial support, and discrepancies in addressing DEI. Among the three approaches outlined in the Comprehensive Promotion Plan for Students of Color, participants shared that the student seminars and workshops, along with the family support campaign would have the most impact on students of color. Interviewees viewed the seminars and workshops as fulfilling the need for physical spaces that foster conversation

about study abroad while the family support campaign would build communication with parents. The findings are categorized based on the role of each interviewee's role within the Merrimack College community.

### ***Student Feedback***

Interviewees first addressed that the challenges of starting college during the COVID-19 pandemic greatly hindered their consideration of studying abroad. As study abroad programs began to reopen, the cost of participation became the most significant barrier. Additional obstacles varied depending on the interviewees' circumstances such as flexibility within their major, familial obligations based on their cultural background, being a residential versus commuter student, and uncertainty about being abroad. However, the interviewees mutually agreed that each proposed strategy would successfully encourage students of color to pursue study abroad opportunities, with the potential to positively influence retention rates. The students proceeded to share that they learned about study abroad and international service learning opportunities primarily through word-of-mouth from their white peers, as well as through flyers and received emails but only after their interest was communicated to administration.

Each interviewee emphasized that student seminars and workshops for faculty and staff members would be significantly impactful. They viewed the student seminar as providing a safe space for discussions that would foster open-mindedness and enable conversations with peers of color who have prior study abroad experience. One interviewee mentioned that a workshop setting would enhance their learning experience and as a result, boost their confidence when discussing the study abroad process with their parents. Likewise, another interviewee highlighted that offering family support workshops and translating study abroad information to other languages (e.g. Spanish, Haitian Creole) would demonstrate the college's commitment to

proactive communication with parents of color. The participants viewed these approaches, all in all, as methods to amplify the importance of addressing DEI on campus.

### ***Faculty Feedback***

Like the student interviewees, the faculty member concurred that the promotional plan would encourage students of color to study abroad, and notably would present it as a valuable opportunity and offer platforms for them to express their concerns. The interviewee believed that a family support campaign and an awareness campaign that focuses on scholarships would make the greatest difference. They continued to share that these approaches would address the barriers of cost (although the interviewee emphasized this is not exclusive to students of color), first-generation student status, and accumulating social capital (with examples of students of color studying abroad).

Noting previous experience in marketing short-term faculty-led trips, the interviewee mentioned that disseminated study abroad information in the course description, social media, flyers, word-of-mouth, and shared more details with students during the pre-approval interview process. The interviewee detailed that students were asked to explain their interest related to their major and international travel experience without family. Lastly, the faculty member recalled a moment where a non-American student of color had shown interest, however lack of information regarding visas was an obstacle in their participation. This led to their recommendations of distributing passport information and including non-American students of color into the promotion plan.

### ***Administration Feedback***

Both Interviewee 1 and 2 found that the awareness campaign could encourage students of color to participate, respectively, in study abroad and international service programs. It was also

noted that the perceptions of the respective programs restricted the diversity of participants, though this was not exclusive to students of color. Perceptions included students and, at times, parents viewing international travel and studying abroad as a privilege, the uncertainty about participation impacting a student's professional development, and assuming that interest in religion is necessary to participate in service learning trips.

Like the students, Interviewee 2 found that student seminars and workshops could encourage openness and dialogue. Regarding the family support campaign, Interviewee 1 shared that outreach to families in an existent measure in the study abroad program. Building on this insight, the family support campaign was seen as beneficial, to an extent as two potential outcomes were noted. This approach could enhance DEI efforts or present challenges in maintaining boundaries with parents.

### **Discussion**

Using the lens of Yosso's community cultural wealth framework (2005) and Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Fleming, 2018; Strange & Gibson, 2017), this capstone explores how PWIs promotion of study abroad empowers the participation of students of color. An observation noticed in prior research and the interview process was to initiate discussion with a deficit-based approach. Almassri et al. (2023a) highlighted this trend, explaining a surplus of studies focusing on the lack of Black students in study abroad in comparison to their white counterparts rather than the success of Black students who participate. The absence of asset-based discourse furthers misconceptions that study abroad is a privilege reserved for white students which was mentioned by an interviewee.

Furthermore, some studies reference government scholarship initiatives - Paul Simon National Study Abroad Bill, Fulbright Program, and Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship

Program (Anderson et al., 2016; Fulbright Program, n.d.; Salisbury et al., 2009) - designed to support study abroad programs, the focus remains on detailing the disparities between students of color and white students. For example, the Paul Simon National Study Abroad Bill was passed specifically to financially support students of color, but Boulden (2022) explains that Black student participation in particular was not affected. This leaves the question of whether participation increased for students identified in other racial and ethnic groups. Thus, PWIs should adopt marketing strategies that place scholarship information and on-campus resource support at the forefront of study abroad promotion.

In addition to financial, social, and cultural barriers, student interviewees attributed a lack of awareness about DEI to the interest expressed by students of color, consistent with Boulden's findings about the impact of campus culture (2022). An approach to rectify this barrier is targeted marketing and presenting study abroad information in spaces frequented by students of color. As mentioned by Interviewee 2 and supported by Boulden (2022), meeting students of color in their own spaces would promote opportunities to increase cross-cultural awareness and communication. Ultimately, this study suggests that to enhance the participation of students of color in study abroad programs, it is crucial for students of color to feel that their experiences at a PWI are valued by administration, faculty, and their peers.

### **Limitations of the Project**

Considering the numerous PWIs in the U.S. where this Comprehensive Promotion Plan could be proposed, data collection was conducted at only one higher education institution. The limited sample size of student participants was primarily due to inaccurate information about active student organizations supporting students of color. Access to faculty who have led short-

term study abroad trips and administration engaged in study abroad opportunities on campus was not a limitation.

The purpose of this study was to explore how marketing approaches can empower students of color to study abroad; however, a constraint was the small number of students identifying within the racial and ethnic categories encompassed by the term “student of color.” As a result, the lack of diversity among students restricted access to student leaders representing on-campus organizations for students of color. Although students of color possess intersecting identities such as socioeconomic status, religion, and being a first generation student, race and ethnic identity were the primary focus in addressing the impact of marketing strategies.

### **Implications for Future Projects**

Future projects investigating the connection between PWIs marketing strategies for study abroad opportunities for students of color should be inclusive of all students who identify under this umbrella. For example, the exploration of Asian and Asian American students' experiences studying abroad concluded that more research is necessary. It would facilitate a clearer understanding of their perspective (Almassri et al., 2023b). Additionally, research projects should be considerate of comparing the experiences of Black students to white students studying abroad as it overlooks the viewpoints of students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. This also reinforces the perception that study abroad is not accessible to Black students. Addressing the distinct cultural backgrounds among students of color and its influence on their perceptions of study abroad is essential to strengthening the visibility of DEI efforts at predominantly institutions.

In conclusion, the financial obligation to participate in international education programs was deemed a barrier, however not only exclusive to students of color; hence, research should



explore the impact of student orientations designed to include detailed and targeted information about study abroad opportunities. Ultimately, inclusive marketing on PWI campuses will assist in dispelling the stereotypical images and thoughts associated with studying abroad.

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## Appendix A

### Student Interview Questions

1. Have you ever been interested in the study abroad programs offered at Merrimack?
  - a. How did you learn about Merrimack's study abroad programs?
2. Do you feel that study abroad programs are marketed towards students of color?
  - a. What differences do you notice when students of color discuss study abroad compared to white students?
3. In what ways do you feel study abroad programs could better align with the experiences and backgrounds of students of color?
  - a. How could study abroad at Merrimack specifically change to better align with students of color?
4. Do you feel that these proposals would encourage students of color to study abroad?
  - a. Which do you feel would be most impactful and why?
5. What barriers do you feel that students of color face during the study abroad process?
  - a. Do you feel that Merrimack provides support for the needs of students of color regarding study abroad?
  - b. Do you feel that these proposals would change how students of color are supported at Merrimack?
6. Do you feel that Merrimack's study abroad location options are too narrow?
7. Do you think that these proposals would alter how study abroad is perceived at Merrimack?



**Faculty Interview Questions**

1. Do you feel these proposals would encourage students of color to study abroad?
2. Have students of color participated in the study abroad trip(s) that you led?
3. What differences do you notice when students of color ask about study abroad compared to white students?
  - a. Do you feel that there are differences in how students of color prepare for study abroad in comparison to white students?
4. How do you encourage or advise students of color when they ask about studying abroad?
  - a. How do you inform students about the study abroad trip you are leading?
  - b. What is the key information you share with students who participate in the study abroad trip you are leading? Do you feel that the information is inclusive to students of color?
5. In what ways do you feel study abroad programs could better align with the experiences and backgrounds of students of color?
  - a. How could study abroad at Merrimack specifically change to better align with students of color?
  - b. Do you feel that Merrimack's study abroad locations are too narrow?
6. What barriers do you feel that students of color face during the study abroad process?
7. Do you think that these proposals would alter how study abroad is perceived at Merrimack?
  - a. Which ones do you think would make the most difference?
  - b. Any ideas on what else could be done to encourage students of color to participate in Merrimack study abroad programs?

**Administrator Interview Questions**

1. Do you feel these proposals would encourage students of color to study abroad?
  - a. Do you feel these proposals would reduce dissonance in study abroad and encourage students of color to study abroad?
2. What barriers do you feel that students of color face during the study abroad process?
3. Certain study abroad trips are designed to be academically and culturally enriching while others are for service, do you think this impacts the interest of level for students of color?
  - a. Do you feel that Merrimack's study abroad location options are too narrow?
4. In what ways do you feel study abroad programs could better align with the experiences and backgrounds of students of color?
  - a. How could study abroad at Merrimack specifically change to better align with students of color?
5. Do these proposals encourage students of color to build connections to Merrimack's community and to the world?
6. Are there goals to encourage students of color to study abroad?
  - a. Do you feel that these proposals would support Merrimack's vision for DEI?
7. Do you think that these proposals would alter how study abroad is perceived at Merrimack?

## Appendix B



# Study Abroad Promotion Plan for Students of Color



Comprehensive Project Proposal  
A'mari Bing-Way



## Awareness Campaign

**Goal:** Increase access to information and support for students of color interested and participating in study abroad at Merrimack College

- Social media campaign
- Coordinate on campus resources
- Diversify study abroad info session information and audiences



## Seminar & Workshops

**Goal:** Create spaces where in-depth discussions about study abroad, DEI, and professional development intersect.

- Student seminars
- Workshops for faculty
- Workshops for Academic Advisors, Financial Advisors, and Career Advisors



## Family Support Campaign

**Goal:** Reduce parental concerns through increasing parental involvement and emphasizing the importance of the parent's role in their student's study abroad experience.

- Translate study abroad information to other languages (e.g. Spanish, Haitian Creole, etc.)
- Create digital and print study abroad information packet
- Parent study abroad info session

## Appendix C



# Study Abroad Workshop

## Unlocking Global Horizons: A Study Abroad Workshop for Students of Color

### Date | Time | Location

**We'll discuss the unique opportunities and challenges faced by students of color when considering studying abroad. We will guide you through:**

**Navigating Cultural Identity** Explore how your cultural background shapes your study abroad experience.

**Financial Resources & Scholarships** Discover available scholarships, grants, and financial aid designed to support students of color.

**Overcoming Barriers & Stereotypes** Address common misconceptions and concerns that may deter students of color, and develop strategies to overcome these barriers.

**Building Connection & Support Network** Connect with students of color who've studied abroad and listen to their experiences and build a supportive network.

**Cultural Competency & Global Citizenship** Discuss the importance of cultural competency and global citizenship, and explore how studying abroad can contribute to personal growth and global understanding.

Email us at [globalmerrimack@merrimack.edu](mailto:globalmerrimack@merrimack.edu)  
Follow us @[globalmerrimack](#)



# STUDY ABROAD WORKSHOP

UNLOCKING GLOBAL HORIZONS: A STUDY ABROAD  
WORKSHOP FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR



We'll discuss the unique opportunities and challenges faced by students of color when considering studying abroad. We will guide you through:

- **Navigating Cultural Identity**
- **Financial Resources & Scholarships**
- **Cultural Competency & Global Citizenship**
- **Building Connections & Support Network**
- **Overcoming Barriers & Stereotypes**

For more information, email [globalmerrimack.edu](mailto:globalmerrimack.edu)