



# Center for Teaching Excellence Hampton University Teaching Matters

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## In This Issue

◆ Special Issue: Faculty Research Article

## Grants Related Links

- ◆ The Center for Minority Special Education (CMSE)
- ◆ The Foundation Center
- ◆ School Grants

## Other Useful Links

- ◆ Collaboration for the Advancement of College Teaching and Learning
- ◆ Associated New American Colleges (ANAC)
- ◆ Quality Education for Minorities (QEM)

## In the Next Issue

◆ Special Issue: Faculty White Paper/Article

### **A MARKETING OPINION LEADER APPROACH TO INCREASING AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN STUDY ABROAD EDUCATION**

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In the spring of 2003, seven students participated in a University's Study Abroad experience and in the spring of 2004 eleven students participated. In the spring of 2005, a group had grown to 33 students along with three faculty, who traveled to Italy and France. All of the students were junior and senior level with the majority being Business majors. The students enrolled in a 3 credit International Marketing course where the study abroad trip was 8-10 days in duration and the balance of the summer course was held at the home institution.

Students were required to complete readings in advance to assist in framing some of their prior awareness of the targeted European cultures. In addition, students were expected to complete a daily journal of activities and reactions to culturally different experiences. Most assignments were identified in advance of the international trip to assist students with planning, analysis and review of international marketing topics. The professor of the course required students to submit a final report, which included personal experience, cross cultural analysis, and marketing applications. In addition students were to prepare for expected business problems when conducting marketing in new or different countries.

There were a total of six writing assignments required, listed as follows: (1) a cultural analysis of Italy and the USA, (2) a cultural analysis of Paris, France and USA, (3) an industry study in Italy and France, (4) a firm study in Italy, (5) a firm study in Paris and (6) a study on tourism in Italy, Paris and the USA. The major academic topics studied were in the areas of business and international marketing. Students were expected to observe and assess several areas at both the corporate and entrepreneurial levels. The tourism industry addressed many related business areas and it was a major component of the economy. These areas included but were not limited to transportation, food, entertainment, retail and other products. For example: students were required to visit a McDonald's restaurant to observe noticeable similarities and differences from the American counterpart.

The structure of the course included varied culturally relevant pedagogical strategies. That is, it incorporated the intersection of culture with perspectives. In addition to the informal discussions held in small groups, more formal discussions were held daily with faculty while in a variety of settings such as while traveling or in restaurants. Discussions regarding student observations as well as the various businesses and marketing issues were woven into experiences. Inquiries regarding the discussion of similarities and dissimilarities were a part of the on-going discussion process. The opportunity to identify the ethnocentric issues that may have been included in their analysis was a primary component of these discussions.

There were both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study abroad experience. We proposed that African-American students who increased their cross-cultural awareness and competence and had a culturally relevant experience would be more likely to speak positively to other students regarding the experience conveying the benefits of traveling abroad. That in turn would not only pique the interest of other students, but hopefully cause them to overcome personal barriers (i.e. discomfort,

unfamiliarity, myths) to also go on a study abroad trip. Hence, during the last three years, previous students served as “opinion leaders” and recruited their peers for the program. Quantitative results show that the number of students participating in the study abroad program increased each year from 7 in 2003, to 11 in 2004 and tripled to 33 students in 2005. Results that were obtained from student papers and oral discussions revealed that students did in fact share this information with other students and expressed the benefits associated with the enhanced job search efforts.

The pedagogical structure and implementation of the course provided students with many opportunities and avenues from which to learn, discuss, reflect and review their international experiences. The faculty served as a nexus to keep students focused on multiple perspectives. The required papers provided various learning opportunities. There were several areas that most students mentioned required them to actually “be there” for the experience to appreciate the impact on their awareness and understanding of people of other cultures. One of the significant areas of discussion for this group was the seeming large business of “hostels” in Europe where guests have their own bed and closet but share rooms with 2 to 10 beds in a room. Very few of the students had been exposed to this type of overnight accommodations. Initially, many were very uncomfortable with it and expressed “fear of sleeping in the same rooms with people they did not know. After discussion, several students changed their perspective. Though some still preferred not to stay in a room with people previously unknown, they started to see similar American practices such as being paired with a college roommate or summer camp mate. Further, they were able to go beyond their initial view to see the benefits.

Several other areas of differences surfaced such as in the area of music, films, local television and religious beliefs. At the end of a very high tech train trip from Florence to Venice, students had to cross very steep bridges with many stair steps to get over the numerous canals in route to the bus station. This experience is where the group learned the value of light packing. In the middle of the day there was a group of 33 African-American students and faculty struggling with luggage. The first steep bridge was met with initial disbelief but somewhat good humor. However, on the second bridge, students were strained and much of the humor dissipated. Later students observed, with appreciation, traditional channels of distribution of goods in Venice in areas where no cars were allowed. Distributors used dollies and boats to stock businesses with needed supplies.

In United States in the fall 2005, there was a follow-up meeting in an Italian restaurant. Thirty of the 33 students and 2 of the 3 faculty attended. It was mentioned that many heretofore common routines were viewed much differently after their study abroad experience. One student mentioned that she had gone to Paris with a high school group four years earlier. However, she stated that she learned much more the second time, as she shared and critically discussed experiences with her peers. She stated that she had a “broader lens from which to view other cultures and that she was enlightened” about the professional and societal applications.

The findings of this study indeed support the proposition that African American students can benefit from a study abroad experience. The respondents recognized a significant benefit from studying abroad. Study abroad programs can be a crucial curricular or extra-curricular component in exposing a student to other cultures. The subject of studying abroad is important now more than ever, especially in our global economical world. The chance of a student interacting with someone from a different culture in their professional pursuits as a supervisor, peer or customer is very high.

The contribution of this research studied the value of international experience for African Americans students from their as well as faculty perspectives. Furthermore, the study suggested additional pedagogical practices or methods that increased students' engagement and participation in the study abroad experience. This addressed the national call for involving more students in the process to better promote the diversity competence that will be required of most of our citizens. Studying abroad is a growing trend. African American participation must be addressed to allow previously low represented group to compete in a global society.