



## The GAPS Think Piece - Issue 19

### **Building Confidence and Cultural Competences in First-Generation and Low-Income Students Abroad**

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According to the International and Educational Exchange Generation Abroad initiative, students who study abroad represent less than 10 percent of the 2.6 million students graduating with an associates or baccalaureate degree each year. The number for first-generation, low-income and underrepresented minority students is significantly less. However, moving beyond mere mobility, global access must include a broader emphasis on and a holistic consideration of cultural learning outcomes and the confidence of first-generation and low-income students enrolled in study abroad programs. Despite a nationwide movement to increase study abroad participation of disadvantaged students, there remains a significant need for developing best practices for robust in-country curriculum and support, in order to ensure that those who do participate achieve these learning outcomes. In the course of five years of planning study abroad experiences for low-income/first-generation students at Purdue University, Horizons TRIO Program has cultivated the critical components of a program that meets the particular needs of their students through holistic care. The Horizons TRIO global leadership curriculum provides students with skills that contribute to increased confidence and better developed core cultural competencies. Students return to the United States with a heightened sense of self-efficacy and the opportunity to apply new knowledge and skills in their daily lives.

Study abroad programs are often made accessible for first-generation, low-income students through scholarships and subsidized aid. Although financing a study abroad experience is a crucial element for participation, vulnerable student populations have multiple needs beyond monetary funds which, if left unmet, could potentially detract from their overall program experience. One of the major intangible obstacles that first-generation, low-income students face is a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed in a study abroad context.



Programs must demonstrate the direct impact on confidence levels that participation in a study abroad opportunity has on students from underprivileged backgrounds and highlight the overall growth they can experience. Intentional curriculum design should reflect the increase in student confidence spanning from their experiences in-country to their post study abroad re-acclimation. Purdue University's Horizons TRIO study abroad curriculum was created with the intent to: 1) develop student understanding of global leadership success strategies, 2) foster skills which enhance leadership effectiveness, and 3) provide instruction on incorporating their experiences for career development. As students are exposed to a breadth of diverse cultural experiences, they are challenged to reflect on their emotional response and active participation within that culture, and integrate these lessons into their personal and professional world view.

### **Study Abroad Curriculum**

During the development of the global leadership curriculum the scope of the course was focused on seven cross-cultural competencies found within global leadership. These competencies are: a willingness to engage, cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, ethnocultural empathy, a tolerance of uncertainty, intercultural development, and self-efficacy. The curriculum employs three separate components of implementation: A series of "internal" lectures developed and presented by staff members leading the study abroad program, individual "external" lectures presented by five different professors from the host country, and various cultural experiences over the course of the trip. The series of lectures are specifically chosen to enhance student understanding of the cultural, social, and economic climate of the host country, and reinforce the skills necessary for global leadership effectiveness. These lectures are supplemented with the students' exposure to a wide array of experiential learning activities, providing a plethora of opportunities throughout the program for students to deeply engage with the host culture.

The "internal" lecture series is the foundation of the global leadership curriculum. The initial lecture is an overview of global leadership aimed at introducing students to the concept of global leadership and its various components and providing students a framework for the remaining lessons.



Additionally, the students are asked to consider both their place in the world and the role that the United States plays on a global scale. The remaining program staff-led lessons cover cognitive flexibility, authentic leadership, intercultural development, and self-efficacy. With each lesson, students are encouraged to consider how they would incorporate the ideas presented into their own educational experiences and career trajectories. In particular, the lectures on cognitive flexibility and intercultural development, which utilize the Intercultural Development Inventory as a formative assessment, are reported by students to be the most salient within the context of the study abroad experience. Students have felt that these lessons were the most applicable to their time in the host country. Furthermore, each lecture is paired with an hour-long group debriefing session in order to reinforce the content of the lecture as well as to manage and develop the emotional regulation of the students while abroad. These debriefing sessions offer opportunities for students to discuss concerns, fears, questions and plans they may have.

“External” lectures are facilitated by local professors in the the host country who are recruited by professional study abroad program agents. These guest lecturers teach topics within the framework of global leadership, and although specific topics differ depending on the country, there are lecture attributes that are consistent each year. One consistently included component is an introductory lesson on the language of the host country. Some very basic politeness phrases and survival vocabulary allow students to feel more confident as they explore the host country and lead to an increase in their willingness to engage with members of the local culture. The other lectures often vary in topic; however, they focus on the role the host country plays in the global arena, what challenges the country currently faces, and how the professors feel the country’s role may, or may not, change in the future. These lectures help to give the students a deeper understanding of the worldview of the host culture. Through these guest lectures students begin to develop greater ethnocultural empathy, which manifests as an increase in reported interest in the history and current events of the host country. This interest is reinforced by the cultural experiences the students take part in over the course of the trip.

The specific experiences that the students participate in are dependent on the country. With assistance from a professional study abroad agency, the Horizons TRIO staff plan experiences that are typical of the culture of the host country.



The students may take part in historical tours, cooking lessons, performances, and other events that immerse the students in the local culture. While abroad, students also have an opportunity to interact with local college students. This experience is often one of the most meaningful and serves to create a personal connection between the American students and those of the host country. An additional benefit of this experience is that the American students now have contacts in-country with whom they can connect if they wish to explore the host city on their own. Every study abroad program also includes a service learning component during which students volunteer with local agencies in various capacities. Through service learning participation, students are able not only to develop a deeper connection with the host city, but also to increase their ethnocultural empathy and tolerance of uncertainty.

### **Effects on Confidence**

The global leadership curriculum was designed to demonstrate the direct impact on confidence levels that a study abroad opportunity has on students from underprivileged backgrounds and to document the overall growth they experience. The skills associated with confidence growth include *navigation through an unfamiliar environment, cross-cultural communication, ability to solve conflict, knowledge of their discipline in a global context, ability to perform their job in a global context, ability to make a difference in the world, ability to lead others, and cultural sensitivity*. Based on the program data from pre and post testing, 100 percent of all low-income, first-generation students who have studied abroad through Horizons TRIO experienced an increase in confidence in all topic areas. Kuh (2008) emphasizes study abroad as a “life changing” experience and one of five “high engagement” activities a student can partake in while at university:

Such an undergraduate experience deepens learning and brings one’s values and beliefs into awareness; it helps students develop the ability to take the measure of events and actions and put them in perspective.

As a result, students better understand themselves in relation to others and the larger world, and they acquire the intellectual tools and ethical grounding to act with confidence for the betterment of the human condition.



The confidence students acquire abroad extends far beyond their in-country experience; it remains a part of them as they return to their home country. Students return with a sense of “self” that they did not have prior to their experience abroad, and they are, as Kuh would phrase it, more aware of their own values and beliefs. The curriculum was designed to offer students a balance of challenge and comfort by safely aiding them in this self-discovery process, while heightening their confidence as demonstrated through evaluation.

## **Conclusion**

First-generation, low-income students participating in a study abroad experience must be provided an intentionally-tailored program curriculum designed to support their learning. It is important for universities and organizations to extend support beyond monetary aid due to the particular needs of vulnerable students abroad. This piece was written with the understanding that traditional resources for providing students with holistic services are uncommon while abroad. However, through intentional curriculum design and partnership with study abroad agencies, it is possible to construct a program that not only minimizes the financial barriers that may be in place for first-generation, low-income students, but also offers students an opportunity to develop important competencies that are relevant to student success across academic disciplines. Engaging these students with best practices designed to increase confidence and cultural competence provides evidence that further validates the need to move beyond global access, ensuring the quality and not merely the quantity of disadvantaged student participation in study abroad programs.



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