

Were the Obstacles Too Great?

Why Minority Students are Underrepresented in Education Abroad

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Non-Formal Education; University/Higher Education

Setting

This case is set in a large, urban public research university, with a high percentage of non-traditional students and students of color. Although the majority (86%) of students are in-state residents, less than one third of students are white. Sixty-five percent are minority, primarily of Hispanic (30%), Asian (16%), and AfricanAmerican (8%) descent. As one of only two major research universities in the state, this institution encourages applicants from a variety of academic and personal backgrounds, including commuter students, working students, older students and minorities.

Case

Valeria is a second-generation Colombian student pursuing a double major in Spanish and international business. She lives with her parents, grandmother, adult brother and two younger siblings. In addition to her studies, she works a part-time job to help her family, and is responsible for certain household chores and babysitting duties. Because of this, she knows that she will take six years to graduate, but is still proud to be the first in her family to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Valeria wants to study abroad in Latin America, and she knows that the university has a program in Costa Rica that would support her degree requirements and match the low price of her in-state tuition. Even so, Valeria

does not want to discuss the idea with her parents because she is sure that they would disapprove. The price of airfare and living expenses abroad is beyond their means and her parents rely on her for help around the house. Now that her brother has started working the night shift, she is the only one able to help the two youngest siblings with homework, since her parents and grandma cannot read or write in English. Valeria also knows that her parents would be concerned for her safety. They insist that she and her siblings live at home until marriage. Thinking about it more, Valeria feels a twinge of selfishness and guilt. Studying abroad would not help the family and she could already hear her grandmother's voice in her head: *La familia primero* [family first].

As a Spanish and international business major, Valeria interacts with many bicultural students and teachers every day. In fact, half of her courses are in Spanish with instructors from Spain, Puerto Rico, Mexico and other regions of Latin America. Her classmates are also diverse, with roots or experiences in Argentina, Paraguay, Mexico and many other countries. By contrast, the university's abroad programs are facilitated through an American center and the majority of participants are middle to upper-middle class white students. Students come from different majors and universities across the nation. This set up of an American center and class offerings in English is advantageous in that it allows for easy credit transfer and opens the programs to more participants. However, the result is also that students have less interaction with the host culture, usually stick together and mostly speak English.

In the computer lab, Valeria discusses study abroad with her classmate in their usual code-switching dialect: "I'd love to go on the programs here, but they're so expensive *y ya sabes cómo es*. I mean, I could just visit my family in Colombia this summer instead." Her classmate agreed, adding that she had no intention to study abroad when she would rather apply to nursing school in Mexico City: *No he regresado desde cuando tenía doce años y lo echo mucho de menos. Son más amables en México. [I haven't gone back since I was twelve and I miss it so much. They're nicer in Mexico]*.

Valeria did eventually ask her parents about study abroad. Her mother told her "no," and her father told her she should be proud to live in America now. She had to respect their wishes, after everything they had done for her, so she did not push the issue further. To her teachers and advisors, Valeria said she could not afford to participate in an abroad program, since nobody needed to know details about her family situation. In the end, Valeria never formally studied abroad, but she did visit her relatives in Colombia, a rewarding bicultural experience that she received no academic or professional recognition for. Valeria was the first in her family to receive not one, but two bachelor's degrees, and is fully bilingual and bicultural, although she is still uncomfortable highlighting her Colombian heritage on her resume.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- In addition to socioeconomic concerns, Valeria faced family pressures that made her feel guilty and selfish about studying abroad. As educators and advisors, is it our place to encourage students to go abroad against the family's wishes?
- How can we educate parents with limited English proficiency and education about study abroad? How can we explain the benefits of study abroad to parents who value family more than independent academic and professional development?

- What value do we as educators place on bicultural and multicultural experiences in the domestic sphere? Would Valeria's summer trip to Colombia meet the same learning objectives that we have for our study abroad programs?
- Valeria is graduating fully bilingual with, in essence, over twenty years of experience interacting with the Colombian culture. Yet she feels ashamed to highlight this on her resume. Meanwhile, her peers are receiving recognition for a five-month study abroad program and intermediate Spanish proficiency. Is this an issue of racial equity in our educational system, and if so, how can we address it?
- Valeria interacts with bicultural students and teachers daily at her local university, and she speaks Spanish in half of her classes. How does Valeria's domestic academic experience compare to her university's study abroad program at an American center where many classes are held in English with fellow Americans?
- How might Valeria's story be different if her parents were from China, India, Cuba or another country? How might the family values in each of these cultures affect parent and students' attitude toward education abroad?