

Toward equal and equitable access:
Obstacles and opportunities in international education

Five Page Brief

by

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Summary

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Examination of barriers and challenges to international and foreign language education for low-income, disadvantaged and underrepresented students. Included will be the obstacles to providing the education, training and credentialing that is prerequisite for successful pursuit of careers in the international arena, as well as for creating a more internationally aware body of global citizens among less advantaged students, particularly low-income, first-generation and minority students. The research will also focus on best practices, or proven models, for increasing these underrepresented students' participation in international education and, ultimately, international careers. (Nicole Norfles, Council for Opportunity in Education)

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INTRODUCTION

A multifaceted goal of higher education should be to internationalize education, which would include providing foreign language training, study abroad programs, and an internationally focused academic curriculum, and awarding promotions to faculty with international experience. Yet, according to Green (2002), campus internationalization efforts are low: Foreign language enrollments has fallen 50 percent since 1960, the number of four-year institutions with language degree requirements has fallen 22 percent since 1965, fewer than one percent of postsecondary education students are studying abroad, and only 40 percent of higher education institutions even include international education as a goal within their strategic plan.¹ While the goal of this paper was to examine barriers and challenges to international and foreign language education for low-income, disadvantaged and underrepresented students, particularly the obstacles to providing the education, training and credentialing that is prerequisite for their successful pursuit of careers in the international arena, capturing the best available data on that population of low-income, disadvantaged and underrepresented students proved a daunting challenge. However, one set of data led to further questions. Could information about low-income and first-generation TRIO students' lack of participation in study abroad programs provide more insight into institutional barriers to internationalization?

TRIO and the Council for Opportunity in Education

The Council for Opportunity in Education is a nonprofit organization, established in 1981, dedicated to furthering the expansion of educational opportunities throughout the United

States. Through its numerous membership services, the Council works in conjunction with colleges, universities, and agencies that host TRIO Programs to specifically help low-income and first-generation Americans enter college and graduate.

In the summer of 2000, the Council for Opportunity in Education provided international experiences to TRIO students by sponsoring the first study abroad courses in partnership with MSU to South Africa and with the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater to Mexico. Although both opportunities were beneficial to TRIO students, questions still arose as to why, out of over 203,000 college level TRIO program students, only 30 (.01%) participated? How can the Council get more TRIO students involved in study abroad opportunities?

This study was undertaken enhance the community's knowledge base from which to improve the organization, delivery and effectiveness of international education programs for U.S. students by presenting on a broader level international education issues as they limit low-income, first-generation and minority student involvement. The Coalition/Duke Conference on *Global Challenges And U.S. Higher Education: National Needs And Policy Implications* provided the needed impetus to begin such research. In the summer of 2002, a study to understand what barriers prevent TRIO students' participation in study abroad began.

Research Design

The study design for this research project sought input from college level TRIO program directors – Student Support Services and the Ronald E. McNair Program Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, whose aim are to support low-income students' retention and persistence to college graduation. TRIO staff serve low-income and first-generation college, and, in many instances, large numbers of minority students. The objective of college-level TRIO programs is

¹ Green, M. (2002). "Internationalizing undergraduate education: Challenges and lessons of success." In Promising

to provide students from low-income and first-generation families with academic and social support to complete college. Although familiarity with international populations and global technology was not one of the skills necessary for success in postsecondary education in 1970, today few would question that to be competitive at the postsecondary level and in the work environment, international awareness, exposure, and language training is truly advantageous.

The current study seeks to understand 1) Do TRIO program directors' perceive the study abroad opportunities for TRIO participants as important; 2) Are TRIO participants made aware of study abroad opportunities; and, 3) What are the perceived barriers to study abroad for TRIO participants?

The Council conducted this study in order to obtain information from SSS and McNair Program directors regarding their perceptions of barriers to study abroad experiences that TRIO participants encounter. The research design utilized a Quick Information Survey (QIS) questionnaire. Initially, the intent was to survey the more than 203,000 TRIO Student Support Service and TRIO McNair Program participants. A survey of that magnitude was not a simple task, nor was it definitive that a survey of those TRIO participants could yield new and valuable insights given the population's current predisposition not to participate in study abroad programs. Hence, with knowledge of the population and the literature regarding barriers to and support of minority populations, the study sought to understand what supports and barriers were perceived by TRIO SSS and McNair Director relative to their students. Understanding the perceptions and beliefs of program administrators may yield a deeper understanding of what is needed to support low-income and first-generation students.

Barriers

Barriers perceived by directors that affect participation include cost, lack of information, family constraints, and individual limitations. Language was not perceived to be a barrier.

Cost Cost was perceived by TRIO directors as the major barrier to TRIO students' interest and participation in study abroad. Two questions were asked of TRIO directors regarding their perceptions and experiences of barriers facing TRIO students in study abroad. In both questions, more than three-quarters (76%) of the responses indicated that high costs and limited financial aid and funding were barriers to TRIO college-level students.

Lack of Information Although costs and needed financial support for TRIO students dominate the list of barriers perceived by TRIO directors, lack of information was also cited. Information and workshops to help students understand the costs, benefits, arrangements, expectations and how an experience abroad can contribute to their academic, personal and/or professional goals are lacking.

Family constraints Family constraints also pose a barrier to students' ability to study abroad. Some family constraints, though they may appear simple on the surface, involve the complex limits of the family's income, information, and childcare issues.

Individual limitations In the process of explaining information limitations perceived by TRIO students, the survey uncovered limitations of individuals that work with these students. The individual limitations of some program directors and how they perceived study abroad opportunities for their TRIO students and themselves create barriers to students' possibility of participation.

Language Language is frequently mentioned as a potential barrier to students' interest to study abroad (Carroll, 1996; Washington, 1998). However, the data from this study reflect that the majority (45%) response was that language is not a barrier to student options to study abroad.

Current Reality

The current reality in college level TRIO programs is that many directors are not clear about the costs and potential funding opportunities available to their students. Information from the Council's Barrier to Study Abroad Survey suggests that college level TRIO students, projects and staff all experience some level of disengagement in the value, interest and knowledge they have regarding study abroad opportunities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is important to remember that through education the internationally aware global citizen is created. Creating such citizens of college level TRIO students and other underrepresented and disadvantaged student populations means involving them in study abroad opportunities. Recommendations to support these students' involvement should include:

1. establish a pilot project with SSS and McNair programs focusing on 5-10 colleges and universities that have identified global education as a priority;
2. establish another pilot project at 10 institutions that have SSS and McNair programs but are not listed within the Open Doors report;
3. establish an informational campaign for TRIO college-level programs.;
4. identify funds particularly directed toward international opportunities for low-income students; and,
5. expand COE study abroad for TRIO students and staff and continue to actively invest association resources to eliminate financial obstacles to students who are interested in studying abroad.

It was the hope that this study will enhance the community's knowledge base from which to improve the organization, delivery and effectiveness of international education programs for U.S. students by presenting on a broader level international education issues as they limit low-income, first-generation and minority student involvement.