

Stepping From Behind the Redwood Curtain: Using a Cultural Wealth Approach to Support Study Abroad at Humboldt State University

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Recommended Citation

Holmes, Alison R.; Lipiec, Sam; and Spoelstra, Ileanna () "Stepping From Behind the Redwood Curtain: Using a Cultural Wealth Approach to Support Study Abroad at Humboldt State University," *IdeaFest: Interdisciplinary Journal of Creative Works and Research from Humboldt State University*. Vol. 5 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ideafest/vol5/iss1/5>

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Acknowledgements

All the students, staff and faculty interviewed for this project.

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Abstract

Studying Abroad is considered a “high impact practice” because it is one of the most transformational experiences offered in a college setting. Humboldt State University (HSU) has an excellent record of sending a diverse range of young people abroad (including first generation, low income, and minoritized or under-represented populations often known as URM) when compared to other universities. However, as our demographics change and campus staffing and unit responsibilities shift, we need to constantly review our processes to ensure best practice in support of student success. This project set out to assess HSU’s current systems and the connection between curricular learning outcomes and staff advising and support for study abroad. Our conclusions point to a number of observations and practical recommendations broadly guided by Tara Yosso’s six-part Cultural Wealth Model. Specifically, we have found that Yosso’s approach—which she only applies to students of color—should be applied to all students as it would benefit anyone seeking this experience. Our findings, using interviews with relevant faculty and staff as well as study abroad data collected at HSU, suggest a need to better connect academic and student support and advising services and the creation of a more collaborative, strength-based (i.e. Yosso inspired) support network across campus, as we promote study abroad opportunities and help students prepare for, and return from, their experience overseas. The goal should be the addition of a global dimension to the “cultural wealth” of all our students.

Keywords: Study abroad, cultural wealth, student affairs/curricular integration

Humboldt State University (HSU) is a small, remote, rural campus located on the far northern coast of California. Historically, HSU started as a normal college to train

teachers and nurses, but eventually joined the California State University system. Today HSU is a liberal arts university with just under 7,000 students, 48 majors and 61 minors

divided among three colleges: Arts Humanities and Social Sciences (CAHSS), Natural Resources and Sciences (CNRS) and the Professional Studies (CPS).

In an effort to assess the processes and potential roadblocks that students seeking to go abroad may experience, this project examined Humboldt State University's (HSU) study abroad student data and interviewed six staff members directly relevant to the study abroad process. This included staff from the areas of academic affairs, the cultural centers, program advising and financial aid. Through this project, it became clear that more could be done to better understand the needs of our student populations and to connect the existing advising efforts on campus. A cultural wealth model argues that higher education should do more to bring the diverse perspectives, "knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized" by different cultural or identity groups into academic spaces (Yosso, 2005). However, given that study abroad is not owned by any specific academic area but brings a more global perspective to the entire campus, there is work to be done to bring together the curricular and co-curricular support for this "high impact practice," delineated by scholars such as George Kuh, as an experience that makes a significant difference to overall student success (Kuh, 2008). Institutions of higher education have traditionally focused on the academic or curricular aspects of campus life often to the exclusion of other aspects of student well-being. However, as student demographics change, the mission of equity and accessibility must increasingly influence our efforts to improve retention and graduation. Our goal is to show that a holistic approach to the relationship between academic goals, student support and identity, through extra- or non-curricular activities, is a vital factor in student success and fundamental to any advising support infrastructure. This paper argues that HSU's evolved career curriculum model offers a template for study abroad by undertaking more proactive advising to engage students.

In some respects, HSU was ahead of the curve from the founding of what today is called the Native American Center and the creation of a student-run Multicultural Center (MCC) twenty-five years ago. Less than ten years ago the university established the Centers for Academic Excellence (CAEs) (e.g. the African American Center for Academic Excellence and El Centro Académico Cultural) as a further effort to address the gap identified between academic and co-curricular support. However, relatively little was done at that time to evolve what could be seen as more traditional campus units such as the Career Center or, more relevant

in this case, the study abroad office, now called the Center for International Programs. Both of these units maintained the more traditional profile of waiting for students to take up their services rather than reaching out directly to the increasingly diverse student population. That said, eight years ago, the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences created a committee specifically charged with the task of re-imagining, scaffolding and integrating the career curriculum into both the academic programs and co-curricular areas. Since then, this innovative approach has spread across the university.

In Kuh's terms, study abroad is recognized as one of several high impact practices, but significant racial and ethnic disparities remain. According to the National Association of International Educators (NAFSA) nearly 71% of students who study abroad identify themselves as white. While this is often assumed to be true across the country, this national data stands in contrast to HSU where a relatively small number of students go abroad, but they are from a wide range of backgrounds. Specific data pulled from HSU's Office of the Registrar indicates that over the period covering Fall 2014 through Summer 2018, 579 HSU students studied abroad. This breaks down by the university's three colleges as follows: 330 from Colleges of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (CAHSS); 131 from Colleges of Natural Resources and Sciences (CNRS); 96 from College of Professional Studies (CPS); and 22 undeclared. The largest major sending students abroad by a significant margin is International Studies (INTL), a small interdisciplinary program that sent 86 students abroad in this period (representing 15% of all HSU students who studied abroad and over 25% of the students from CAHSS). More impressive is the fact that over 50% of all students going abroad from HSU were first generation and 43% identified as under-represented minorities.

Tasha Willis, among various scholars, has offered some recommendations to help students of color make the most of their study abroad experience by taking advantage of (1) travel peers, (2) campus climate, and (3) critical reflection (Willis, 2015; Buffie, 2019). However, HSU's experience with similar students suggests that intensive advising and support before and after a study abroad experience, including coursework that focuses on reflection, may also help address the needs of a broader range of students. Similarly, it suggests that the cultural centers could potentially have more of a role both in offering study abroad programming as well as support both pre and post a student's foreign experience. Such conclusions are supported by the approach

taken by the International Studies program, which requires a study abroad as part of the major. This ensures intensive advising and support for all students as well as a presumption of success that could be broadly identified as following the cultural wealth model. The fact that this program's demographics reflect those of the university as a whole (i.e. not skewed to white or wealthy students, which one might expect based on the national statistics) and all students in the program successfully complete a study abroad.

The International Studies program's intentional support network could also help to explain student choices in terms of the programs they choose to use for study abroad. For example, again using the Registrar's data from 2014-18, HSU's faculty-led programs are consistently a first choice for students and assures them they will not only have travel peers, but faculty who are known to them (249 students). Similarly, HSU students also regularly choose California State International Programs (CSUIP) where they will at least be familiar with the system and faculty style (110 students). By extension, it seems logical that other programs have less take-up by HSU students but remain fairly evenly balanced and include bilateral programs (110 students) and various consortia of universities (100 students). This leaves the smallest group as those choosing organizations that students apply to directly (27 students) with some anecdotal evidence that students seek these out for a specific location or type of programming.

Higher education has long operated on models of learning such as Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs or, more recently, Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy, as attempts to apply theories of learning to educational pedagogies. Traditionally, most academics have focused almost exclusively on Bloom's Cognitive Domain that covers the area of mental skills and knowledge acquisition (Bloom et al, 1956). While many have attempted to focus on the higher levels of this domain (e.g. evaluating and creating vs rote facts and remembering) there has been relatively little effort to include Bloom's other two domains: Psychomotor (mainly physical and deemed more appropriate to manual/skills learning than higher education); and, more relevant here, the Affective Domain (which includes emotional learning, attitudes and awareness of self) (Anderson et al, 2001). Though updated in the 1990s, Bloom et al have been critiqued by scholars, such as Tara Yosso, who identified gaps in this cognitive-centric view - particularly for students of color. Yosso therefore developed a Cultural Wealth model focusing almost exclusively on students who need a more holistic ap-

proach and the identification of what is termed the six forms of "cultural capital." Yosso's six forms of cultural capital are aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance. Each form represents the unique qualities students of color embody and develop while attending college. Yosso argues that cultural capital helps enrich a student's learning experience (Yosso, 2005). The result of this approach and similar critiques has been to help campuses reflect on the connection between student identity and what they effectively bring with them to campus and how that can be better recognized and effectively honored. Furthermore, such approaches focus on ways in which academic and support units—the curricular and the co-curricular—could better meet each student "where they are."

In that spirit, HSU's career center began to work directly with faculty on ways to extend its offering through major programs, as well as more direct services like the CAEs and other student programming spaces such as library *Skillshops*. The slow, but organic, evolution of this holistic approach, now reaches deep into a huge range of academic programs and helps students connect their real-world career interests to their scholarly pursuits and to better articulate and translate the skills they have gained to their plans after college. The career center staff have found that this approach provided a huge step forward in terms of reaching more of the diverse student body and a more coherent and collaborative effort between staff and faculty. However, to date, this integrative approach has not been extended to other areas—including study abroad. When interviewed, staff in all the CAEs regularly expressed a need for promotional and informational materials that are "welcoming and representative" of different groups as suggested by scholar Whitney Schulze.

Furthermore, and again in keeping with Schulze, the CAEs felt the need for any such materials to be designed *in conjunction* with other units on campus (Schulze, 2016). HSU staff working in these co-curricular spaces regularly identified what they perceived as their own lack of knowledge to be a potential issue and voiced an interest in having more information and training, or, at the very least, some kind of fact sheet they could offer students. They also expressed a desire for a more concrete and practical connection with the study abroad office, in much the same way other services or units on campus, not only careers but the advising center and the library, have developed plans to include the CAEs in their outreach. Interestingly, in the interviews conducted for this project, faculty in the colleges and majors that do not

traditionally send many students abroad echoed these same sentiments. This makes the contrast all the more distinct from the sentiment of the study abroad office, who felt they were offering information and materials that all students were welcome to access—if they came to them—and were often disappointed that more students did not take advantage of the resources they felt to be freely available.

Data gathered by the faculty of the International Studies program as part of their leadership of HSU's International Education Week clearly suggests that more students are interested in studying abroad than reflected in the numbers who end up going (Holmes, 2014-2020). Since 2016, 100% of students who offered feedback at this week-long campus event have indicated that they would like to study abroad. However, when asked why they might not, their concerns were twofold. The issue most commonly listed by far was financial (or lack of knowledge on how to plan/using financial aid). Secondly, they were concerned about time to graduation (and/or what they felt to be the complexity of the process/lack of advisor support). This information all seems to indicate a significant disconnect between what *students* believe to be the obstacles and the perspectives of those advising students at key points in their college career.

A number of practical steps suggest themselves. For example, a relatively easy first step would be a set of general information and inclusive fact sheets could be designed for CAE staff as well as faculty across all colleges. These could be very general for staff in different offices around campus, but they could also be tailored to the university's three colleges or even to a specific major. This would not only help faculty and staff feel more confident they are giving correct information, but they would also begin to counter the disturbingly common problem of students believing it is "too expensive" or will delay their time to graduation. While there is generally a need for more financial awareness among many groups on campus—and particularly among students of color—all such information should be sure to include early and specific information on how study abroad can be organized and planned so that it need not be the burden that many students fear. Similarly, materials and events that showcase the fact that HSU, contrary to common mythology, already sends a range of students abroad, could include testimonials, panel discussions, and student ambassadors to conduct outreach to specific CAEs. Following the career curriculum model, faculty champions in each college could be created to ensure a stronger connection between the staff and faculty and begin to integrate this high impact practice into more

majors and programs. None of these initiatives are difficult, but such relatively simple steps would go a long way to creating the necessary campus climate and advising support for all students, and particularly students of color.

Yosso focused on students of color, but this research suggests there is much to be gained by taking what could be called a broad cultural wealth approach to meet all students where they are in the area of study abroad at HSU. A more coordinated and collaborative approach between staff and faculty would not only offer more students the opportunity of a lifetime and the ability to develop their global cultural wealth, but such an approach would also bring a much-needed global awareness and wealth back to the campus as a whole.

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