

African Studies and the Undergraduate Curriculum

Patricia Alden, David Lloyd and Ahmed Samatar (eds).
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As a destination for U.S. students studying abroad, Africa ranks at or near the bottom of world regions, parallel to its ranking on almost all indicators of comparative development. For those who support a “whole world” approach to study abroad, diversifying destinations to include more of the less-developed, non-traditional areas, this has long been a source of considerable frustration. A decade ago, Africa accounted for a mere 1.2% of total U.S. undergraduates studying abroad. The good news is that this is changing, not as rapidly as for Latin America and some other areas, but quite consistently over the past decade. Africa’s share of the total had more than doubled to 2.8% in 1998-99, about 3,600 of the nearly 130,000 U.S. students abroad counted.

While there is substantial study abroad literature focused on issues relevant to Western Europe, and more and more on Latin America, Eastern Europe, Australia and East Asia, there is little available for the advisor or administrator investigating study abroad in Africa.¹ This book review, therefore, represents a modest effort to fill that gap, with reference to a useful edited collection on African Studies and the Undergraduate Curriculum.

While its two dozen contributions are now almost a decade old (and published in 1994), most are still quite relevant to African area studies faculty and study abroad professionals. The volume is directed to both

audiences, especially to teachers of undergraduate courses on Africa, but with a section on programs abroad and recurrent references to designing and evaluating such programs.

The editors' Introduction sets forth the dominant approach of the various contributors, with its dual emphasis on intellectual and physical journeys as a metaphor for liberal arts education in general:

The students travel out from the self, encountering new experiences and ideas, liberating the imagination from the singularity of personal experience and local environment. (...) While the study of any subject can inaugurate such a journey out from the self, the study of other cultures, and perhaps particularly the study of distant cultures like Africa's, constitutes an especially demanding engagement with this process.

Several chapters on "Interculturalism and African Studies" make arguments about the place of African studies in the undergraduate curriculum. Gregson Davis, a classicist, insists on a global approach to "the classics," with a place for African and other literatures parallel to the study of Greco-Roman texts, in order to focus on comparisons and interchanges among cultures. Joel Samoff challenges Western triumphalism and our myths about development and underdevelopment, especially our misconceptions about Africa, "the most extreme other."

The second and much longer section provides a range of disciplinary perspectives on the need for new directions in African studies, including chapters on comparative literature, art, economics, history and the sciences. Neil Lazarus on post-colonial literatures, Patrick McNaughton on the visual arts in Africa, and Thomas Spear on African history write especially engaging pieces on their respective fields, while Ben Wisner and Ann Seidmen contribute provocative arguments on problem-solving approaches to teaching, respectively, various scientific fields and comparative economic development. Wisner addresses the reasons for the frequent failure of undergraduate field trips to Africa, which tend to separate their research projects from their community-based experiences, including "home stays."

The third section is the core for study abroad professionals: undergraduate study programs in Africa. Three different types of such programs are described: the long-time experiential learning program of St. Lawrence University in Kenya; Kalamazoo's even older university-based programs

in several African countries; and the Associated Colleges of the Midwest's more recently developed program in Zimbabwe. Neil Sobania then raises important questions about such programs—e.g., the deteriorating quality of African universities in the past 20 years; the value of “island” programs which attempt to control academic quality and enhance personal security at the cost of distancing students from the African experience; and the costs and difficulties of reciprocity with African universities.

The final section addresses changes in African studies programs and curricula at the major Title VI Research Centers, in the creation of the Association of African Studies Programs for smaller centers, at two liberal arts institutions (University of Richmond, College of Charleston), and at the University of Kansas. These are probably of only marginal interest to study abroad professionals, but worthwhile for Africanist faculty.

A concluding chapter by the editors connects some of the key issues in internationalizing undergraduate curricula through African studies and in evaluating the goals and benefits of study abroad programming in Africa. This is a collection of value for both of its intended audiences, though more for teachers than for administrators.

What is needed next is an updated comparison and evaluation of a broader range of overseas study programs in Africa, which are significantly more numerous and diverse than those profiled here. In addition to issues of cost, academic quality and reciprocity, we need to learn more about how to deal with the dilemmas of increasing concentration of programs in only a few African universities and countries (particularly Ghana and South Africa), health and safety risks, communication problems, how to develop more extensive and effective pre-departure orientations, and much else that many of us are coping with as we seek to develop new programs in Africa and to direct more of our students there.

Study abroad in Africa is certainly not for everyone, perhaps never for more than a relatively small minority, but there are many more of our students (and faculty) who have the requisite enthusiasm for learning about very different places, the spirit of adventure, and the capacity for self-reliant coping with a lack of familiar comforts who would benefit immeasurably from such an educational and cultural opportunity, and who could thereby contribute to the constructing of “bridges between themselves, the wider academic community and the global community” called for by the editors of this book.

Note

1 For a brief overview of study abroad issues in Africa, see my article, "Why Study Abroad in Africa?" *NAFSA*, 1993; excerpted in *Transitions Abroad* (May-June 1995), p. 83. The article is also available at: <http://www.nafsa.org/secussa/whystudy.html>.