

# Asian Americans: Factors Influencing the Decision to Study Abroad

**J. Scott Van Der Meid**

*Brandeis University*

## Introduction

As our global society becomes increasingly interconnected, people from all cultures, races and ethnicities have more contact with other parts of the world. To be an informed citizen in this society requires an understanding of other cultures and societies. International educational exchange is one avenue that allows students from all over the world to develop an international understanding by experiencing life in a new culture or country. Participants in study abroad programs, however, do not come from all spheres of U.S. society. To increase the number of students who opt to study abroad as part of their higher education career, academic institutions must begin to identify ways to increase the participation of under-represented and minority groups in international education exchange.

Once thought of as a privilege for only the predominately white upper class, students of all ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic classes are increasingly choosing to study abroad. However, research into the study abroad options for these new groups of students has not kept pace with the emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity in higher education institutions today. In the past 15 years, what little scholarly research we have has focused attention on the topic of under-representation in study abroad. This interest evolved on the heels of discussions of diversity and multiculturalism in the late 1980s. In most cases the term “under-represented,” instead of the word “minority,” is used to describe groups of students who have lower levels of participation (for the purposes of this study, in study abroad) than their levels of enrollment in higher education.

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However, most research and published materials on under-represented students deal with African American students and students with disabilities.

This study aims to clarify the influencing factors for Asian American students when making the decision to study abroad. By understanding the influencing factors, efforts could be made to help increase the overall participation of students in study abroad and, more specifically, increase the rate of participation of Asian Americans.

### **Asian Americans in Higher Education: Background and Review**

Asian Americans are one of the least understood ethnic groups in the United States. As Juanita Lott explains,

*The Asian American category encompasses a broad and varied range of populations from fourth-generation, upper-middle-class Japanese Americans to newly arrived Southeast Asian refugees on welfare. Generalizations of such distinct populations must be made with caution. In addition, interethnic and interracial unions are increasing, especially among Asian Americans, calling into question the notion of mutually exclusive groups. Finally, the changing socioeconomic profile of Asian Americans is much closer to a non-Hispanic White majority than to other racial ethnic minorities.<sup>1</sup>*

Asian immigrants arrived in this country came in two distinct waves.<sup>2</sup> The first group came primarily for economic reasons, while the second wave saw more forced immigration from war-torn homelands. These separate waves of immigration have created a semi-divided Asian American community in which some Asian American families are more established in the U.S. than others. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino and Indian families have been here several generations and are more assimilated into U.S. culture than recent refugees from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. As a result, different socio-economic levels exist within an ethnically heterogeneous community.

Asian Americans constituted the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States from 1970 to 1990, according to the U.S. Census. They

have doubled their population for the past three decades, from 1.4 million to 7.3 million.<sup>3</sup> Based on the success of first-wave Asian-immigrant families, there is a “model-minority” myth, perpetuated by the media. Nowhere is this myth more prevalent than in the views of the white majority toward Asian Americans in higher education. In 1991 Eugenia Escueta and Eileen O’Brien published their research brief, which highlighted the discrepancy between reality and myth.

*The media has labeled Asian students in America as ‘the model minority,’ yet research indicates that this stereotype has hidden the academic difficulties faced by many Asian Americans—particularly members of certain groups.<sup>4</sup>*

While there are differences among certain ethnic groups, Escueta and O’Brien’s findings show that Asian Americans had a higher level of participation in higher education than any other group in the U.S. In 1990, 40 percent of all Asian Americans, ages 25 and above, had at least four years of college, almost double the figure for whites (23 %), though this rate of education does not exist for all the Asian American ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup> When studying Asian Americans, their perceived success in higher education and their rate of participation in study abroad programs, it is important to note this variation of rate within this community.

Research from the fields of Asian American studies and education provides a better understanding of the experiences of Asian Americans in U.S. higher education and how study abroad fits into that experience. Three main themes emerge from the literature: racial category injustices, the myth of success, and realities for Asian Americans in higher education today.

When different ethnic minorities are combined into a single racial category, the heterogeneity of the community is seldom acknowledged. Several authors and scholars have addressed this issue, as it applies to Asian Americans, in greater detail. Juanita Lott’s book, *Asian Americans: From Racial Category to Multiple Identities*, clearly articulates the injustice done when the many diverse Asian ethnic groups are combined into the racial category of “Asian American.” Wendy Walker-Moffat continues to clarify this injustice. Her book, *The Other Side of the Asian American Success Story*, outlines the problematic nature of having one category, thereby ignoring the significant differences in academic achievement by

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the ethnic subgroups. Jayjia Hsia (1988) outlines the differing ethnic groups and their degree of achievement in institutions of higher education, further proving that the one racial category glosses over disparities in the community. Taking into consideration the above discourse, this study will use the term "Asian American," but it seeks to show as many differences between ethnic subgroups as possible, given the demographics of study participants.

The second important theme to emerge from the literature is the debate around the myth of success. A commonly held stereotype maintains that Asian American students do not need any special assistance or attention because, on average, they are more successful in academia than the general student population. *Asian Americans: Opposing Viewpoints* contains two articles that debate both sides of the success issue. David Bell claims that, despite some differences in success among ethnic groups, Asian Americans, as a whole, are improving their standing in U.S. society. Bell's claims devalue the ethnic groups, like the Cambodians and Laotians, which are doing very poorly in academic settings. The opposing view, offered by Deborah Woo, maintains that the success myth overlooks the problem faced by Asian American women, making gender another issue that interfaces with the myth of success among Asian Americans. A study conducted in the early 1990s by Northwestern University to see why Chinese, Korean and Japanese American students had such a high rate of academic success in secondary education (in Greenfield's *Cross-Cultural Roots of Minority Student Development*), further illustrates the success myth. The three ethnic groups chosen in the study have the longest established history in the United States, and research has shown that the longer an ethnic group is in the United States, the higher the success rate for people in that group. Thus, those Asian American families who are less well-established in the United States may show greater reluctance for their children to study abroad, because the focus is on becoming better established in the United States. Jayjia Hsia's extensive work, *Asian Americans in Higher Education and at Work*, outlines Asian Americans' ability on college entrance exams and the achievement levels during high school that affect entry into higher education institutions.

Research specifically on Asian Americans and higher education helps to clarify the diversity found in this ethnic group and highlights the third theme in the field, realities for Asian Americans in higher education.

Hsia's research deals with the aspirations, enrollment and major fields of study for Asian Americans, the achievement factor in higher education itself, and it presents information about occupation data and income levels after graduation. Hsia's analysis suggests, among other things, the disproportionate achievement levels of the different ethnic sub-groups within the ethnic label of Asian American. Escueta and O'Brien, in their article *Asian Americans in Higher Education: Trends and Issues*, provide further clarification on the realities of Asian Americans in higher education. Using the 1990 Census, they present statistical data on student enrollments, degrees granted, Asian Americans holding faculty positions, and the resulting implications of the findings. Finally, trends in the admission of Asian Americans in colleges and universities are examined by L. Ling-chi Wang. Highlighting historical patterns of enrollment, including breaking down the patterns into groupings by class and national origin, Wang goes on to discuss future trends and emerging issues that Asian Americans face in the education arena in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The above literature on Asian Americans may contain little direct insight into the study abroad experience, but it does begin to unlock the experiences of Asian Americans in higher education. However, it does provide this study with a context in which to locate the Asian American study abroad experience.

### **Factors Influencing Study Abroad Participation**

Differential participation rates are determined by a variety of factors, both in the general student population and with under-represented student groups. Factors that influence a student's decision to participate in study abroad are as varied and many as the number of students themselves. Some research has been conducted to analyze these factors, including studies on the general study abroad population as well as some on under-represented groups, such as African Americans. Still, there is a need for more in-depth study of this general topic.

The factors in the general student population, which influence a student's decision to study abroad include (in no particular order): limited commitment to international education; insufficient institutional and student funding; inadequate preparation in foreign languages and lack of

knowledge of other cultures; curricular requirements on campus; limited support services on campus and abroad; and inadequate information on opportunities for education abroad. This research comes from the only statewide survey on study abroad to be conducted to date, the New York State Task Force on International Education, which collected data from statewide institutions during the 1995–96 academic year. Since New York represents more than 10 percent of the national undergraduate study abroad population, this research is of value for both national and regional demographics. Ethnic background was not a category recorded for this study and there is no explanation given for the exclusion.

Several articles and two known studies have been published on the factors that hinder ethnic minority participation in study abroad. Though similar to the factors that influence the general student population, these studies reveal that some groups are affected by additional factors.

Previous findings indicate that funding is a major roadblock that prevents many ethnic minority students from studying abroad (Heimbrough, 1993; Mattai and Ohiwerei, 1989). Often, campus funding does not apply to overseas study and for ethnic minority students, part-time jobs, which provide additionally needed funding, keep students from leaving for an extended period of time. A plurality of minority students in a Northeastern University study (23 %) listed financial concerns as the top factor influencing their decision to study abroad.<sup>6</sup>

Fearing discrimination overseas is also a factor for some ethnic-minority groups (Carter, 1991; Heimbrough, 1993). Based on the amount and type of discrimination faced in the United States, some students do not wish to travel to another country and face more types of discrimination, especially if the country is thought to be racist based on reports in the U.S. media or from returning students' accounts.

Linked to the fear of discrimination is the fear of travel to unknown areas (Heimbrough, 1993; Mattai and Ohiwerei, 1989). Evidence suggests that ethnic minority students are reluctant to travel to areas that do not have familiar social organizations, such as community centers, schools and churches, at the destination site. Mattai and Ohiwerei claim that the presence of relatives and friends is thought to play a supportive role in the face of racial discrimination and, thus, African American students would be reluctant to study abroad in environments where this support did not exist.<sup>7</sup> Finding ways to reach out to ethnic communities at the destination

sites could help solve this problem.

Another factor deals with the anxiety over language difficulties in foreign countries. Studies have shown that ethnic minority students place language difficulties high on their list of reasons for not studying abroad (Heimbrough, 1993; Carter, 1991). Study abroad programs located in foreign countries where the language of instruction is not English are unpopular with such students.

A common thread in most of the factors discussed so far is the minority students' lack of reassurance about their abilities in a study abroad program. Mattai and Ohiwerei point out the lack of peer mentors and information networks for minority students about study abroad issues. The lack of some or all of the various support elements mentioned above, as well as a lack of faculty encouragement, support from family and friends, shared knowledge from returned ethnic minority participants, and the lack of ethnic minority students appearing in study abroad promotional materials, all contribute to the perception that study abroad is not for ethnic minority students.

Closely connected to reassurance is promotion (Carter, 1991; CIEE, 1991). Without promotional initiatives that seek out ethnic minority students, many such students do not even know that study abroad programs exist. The Northeastern University study showed a majority of those surveyed (55 %) had no knowledge of international education program offerings at the institution.

Other factors influencing minority student study abroad participation include the education level of minority students, choice and availability of program offerings overseas, and family and social constraints. For African Americans, the relatively high percentage of students who do not finish a four-year degree program prohibits many from studying abroad in their junior year. Most study abroad programs are located in Western Europe, a heritage destination for white students, but not for many minority students. Family and social constraints to stay in the United States and help the family establish themselves in this country often inhibit newly-arrived immigrant groups from participation in study abroad. All three factors might also have influence on Asian Americans and their decisions about study abroad.

These findings highlight some of the factors that inhibit access to study abroad participation for some under-represented groups. While it

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should not be assumed that these factors are the same as for Asian Americans, they do serve as a benchmark for comparison with the results of this study.

## **Methodology**

This study was conducted over a period of one year and included five components: an examination of previously published literature in the field of international education and an analysis of Asian American enrollment data in U.S. higher education; two Web-based questionnaires for Asian American students enrolled in U.S. academic institutions; interviews conducted with Asian American students who had studied abroad and those who had not; a comparison of the results from two questionnaires; and an analysis of how this study can aid in further understanding the concerns and influencing factors of Asian Americans for use by personnel in both U.S.-based study abroad offices and at overseas sites.

In seeking to learn more about Asian Americans and the field of study abroad, it is important clearly define “Asian American.” As with any racial category, disagreement persists around an exact definition. For the purposes of this study, “Asian American” will refer to those students raised primarily in the United States who self-identify as Asian American. “Study abroad programs” refers to academic study on programs run by U.S. academic institutions in a foreign country, or the direct enrollment in a foreign university by a U.S.-based Asian American student.

## **Questionnaires**

Information was sought from Asian American students in four different areas: family background, educational background, students’ experiences overseas and a general demographics section, which helped to illustrate the differences between ethnic subgroups among Asian Americans.

Two different questionnaires were used. The first one was for Asian American students who had not considered study abroad as an option in their academic careers (Non-Study Abroad questionnaire). The other questionnaire was geared towards Asian American students who were currently or had in the past participated in abroad programs (Study Abroad questionnaire).

## Respondents and Questionnaire Response Rates

This project aimed to reach Asian American students from a cross-section of academic institutions and major fields of study. Student respondents were sought from across the United States, including Hawaii. A total of 153 questionnaires were returned 78 from the Study Abroad and 75 from the Non-Study Abroad group.

Both questionnaires for this project were located on a website, so they could be accessed by students from across the United States and overseas. Since only electronic questionnaires were used in the final study, the respondent rate had to be determined by counters on the website. The first counter was located on the main page of the website; each survey also had a counter attached to it. By comparing the number of surveys received by the author to the number of “hits” (the number of times a page is viewed) on a given survey page, a return rate of participation could be determined. Some hits made by search engines and random Web surfing must be accounted for in analyzing this data. The Study Abroad questionnaire had 234 hits on its web page during the four months of data collection. With 78 completed questionnaires, returned via electronic mail, the overall return rate for this group was 33 percent. In contrast, the Non-Study Abroad questionnaire had 150 hits on its web page during the collection period. With 75 completed questionnaires, returned via electronic mail, the return rate for this segment of the study was 50 percent.

Although the return rate for the study abroad group is lower than that for the Non-Study Abroad group, there are at least two possible explanations for this discrepancy. The Study Abroad questionnaire was listed first on the website and, therefore, the “curiosity factor” (people on the Internet, surfing into the page) might account for fewer questionnaires being completed. Also, students who had not studied abroad could have mistakenly picked the wrong questionnaire, clicking on the first link for their first choice before clicking on the correct survey.

## Results

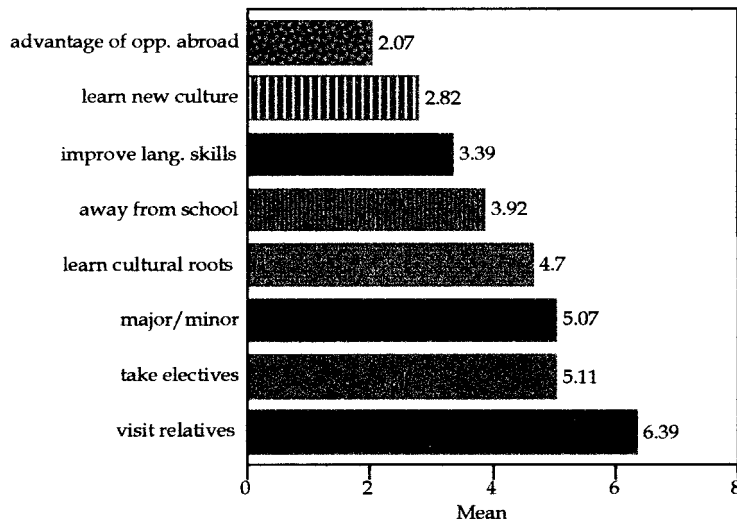
### Reasons to Study Abroad

The reasons a student decides to study abroad are varied but for the

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Asian American students in this study, the most popular reason was the desire to take advantage of an opportunity to be overseas. To learn about a new culture was the next most common reason, followed by the desire to improve language skills. Being away from school ranked fourth, while the desire to learn about one's own cultural roots ranked fifth. Taking electives, as well as fulfilling major/minor requirements, were both ranked sixth. The least common reason for studying abroad was the desire to visit relatives overseas.

*Table 1. Asian American Students: Reasons to Study Abroad (Mean)*

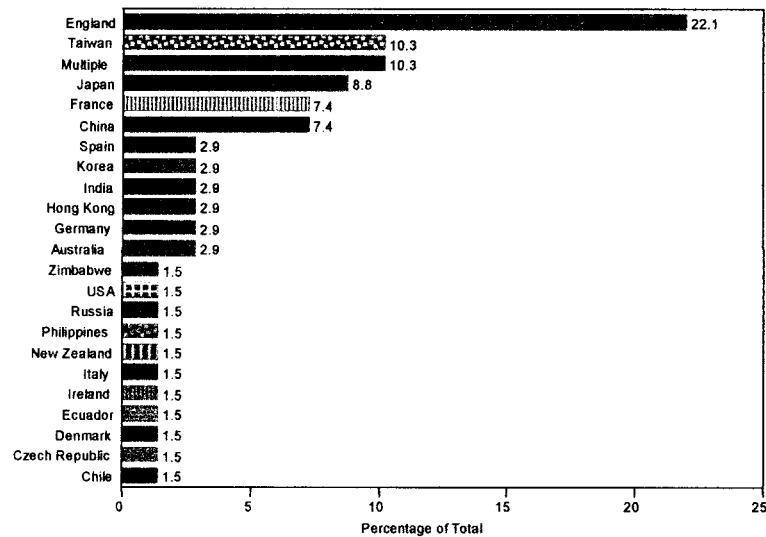


The lower the mean, the more influence a reason had.

Program location also has an impact on whether students study abroad. For those Asian American students who went overseas, the country of destination was as diverse as the group of Asian American students itself. There were 22 countries represented, with an additional category for those visiting multiple countries. The most popular destination was England (22 %), followed by Taiwan (10 %). In addition, another 10 percent of the students went to multiple destinations: more than one country on the same program and/or going on more than two different study abroad programs during the student's academic career. The majority of

students in this category went to one Asian country and to one European country. Japan received 9 percent of the student group, while France and China each saw 7 percent of the student group study abroad respectively. With the exception of England and France, the top countries for Asian Americans were all in Asia. These figures for Asian Americans do not parallel the top 10 countries for the general study abroad population. Thus, an influencing factor in an Asian American student’s decision to study abroad is whether or not the program is located in an Asian country. With the majority of students studying in Western Europe, institutions looking to increase the number of Asian Americans going abroad should consider identifying program locations in Asia.

*Table 2. Asian American Student Study Abroad Destinations (Percentage)*



When students were asked they chose to study on their selected program, the majority ranked “location” as the primary reason. The second most important was the “other” category, which included reasons such as the opportunity to use a foreign language or to pursue a family and/or cultural interest. In some instances there was no choice involved; the program was the only possible offering at a student’s institution. “Academics” ranked third, while “having a friend going as well” was the least popular reason for choosing to study abroad

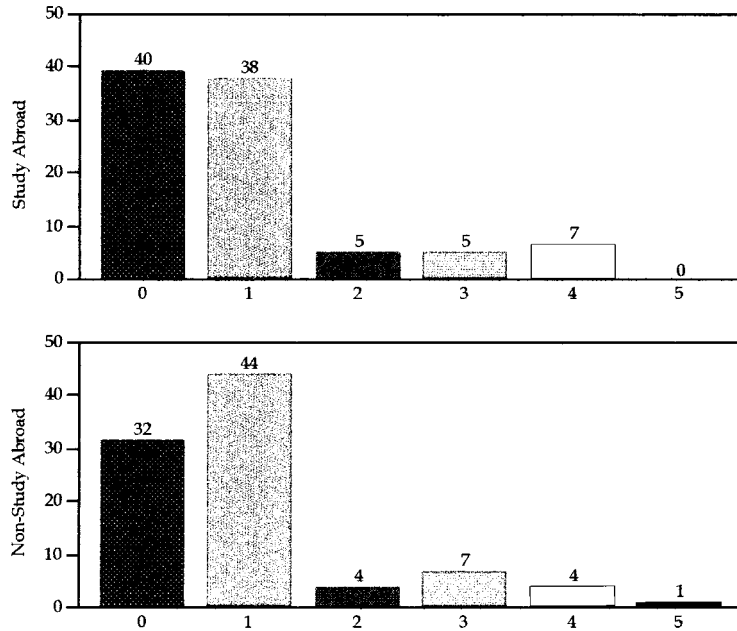
## Family and Immigration

Several factors that influence an Asian American's decision to study abroad relate to his or her family and how long they have resided in the United States. Research has shown that, in general, Asians value family greatly.<sup>8</sup> This was true for both the Study Abroad and Non-Study Abroad students, both had similar family demographics. In the Study Abroad Group, 95 percent came from families with both a mother and a father, and 44 percent of students had at least one sibling. In the Non-Study Abroad, group 91 percent had both a father and mother, while 43 percent students had a sibling.

Research on the success rate of Asian Americans in higher education links the amount of time a student's family has resided in the United States to a student's choice of a major field of study and subsequent career plans.<sup>9</sup> In this study, students were asked how many generations of their families were born in the United States. No differences were noted between the groups; both had similar distributions of generations born in the U.S. (Table 3). For families of students who had studied abroad, the number of generations born in the United States ranged from zero to four. The largest majority of study abroad students (40 %) were born in the United States, but they had parents who were born overseas. 38 percent of the study abroad students had parents who were born in the United States, making the Study Abroad students second-generation, U.S.-born Asian Americans. The students studying abroad were mostly from newly-established families in the United States. Of the 38 percent of Study Abroad students born overseas, the median age at the time of immigration to the United States was 4 years old.

The plurality of Non-Study Abroad students (44 %) revealed that one generation of their families had been born in the United States. Nearly 32 percent of the Non-Study Abroad students did not have any family members who were born in the United States, making them either immigrants or the children of immigrant parents. Not included in these figures are those students who were adopted or whose parents' families came to the United States at different times from each other. With 76 percent of the Non-Study Abroad students having recently arrived in the United States, the families in this group, as well as the Study Abroad group, have had less opportunity to establish themselves.

Table 3. Distribution by Generation of Asian Americans (Number)



*A zero value for generation means the student immigrated with his or her parents to the U.S. Students who were adopted or whose parent's came to the United States at different times are not listed in this chart. Sample Size = 72.*

While evidence suggests that the amount of time residing in the United States is related to the degree of success in higher education, the data from this study, shows that generation has little effect on Asian Americans' decision to study abroad.

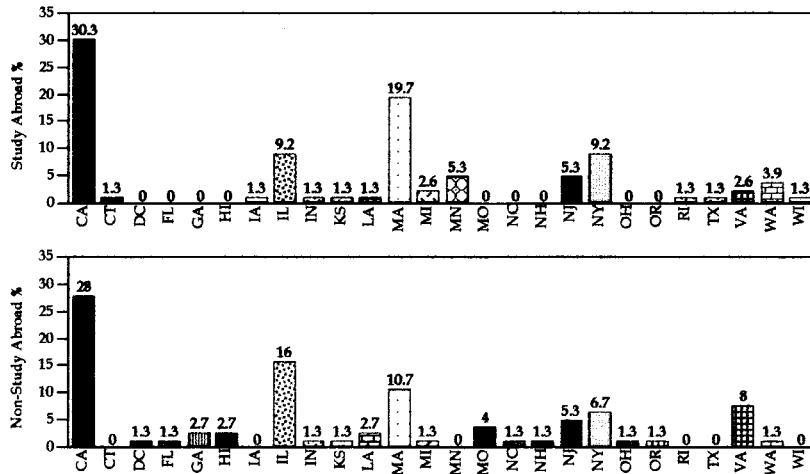
### Birthplace, Hometown and University/College Locations

Whether or not a student was born in the United States and where the student grew up might have an influence on the decision to study abroad. A common stereotype reinforces the notion that a student's geographic location, in part, determines his or her knowledge about educational opportunities and the access to such opportunities. Asian Americans, when first arriv-



for the Non-Study Abroad group (11 %). In reverse order, Illinois was third (9 %) for the Study Abroad group and second (16 %) for the Non-Study Abroad group. New York (9 %) tied for third with Illinois with the Study Abroad group. While the Study Abroad sample came from 17 different states and the Non-Study Abroad sample came from 20 different states, concentration was evident in places where universities and/or colleges had a strong Asian American student group with a website supporting their organization. As with the Non-Study Abroad group, announcements about this study were sent to student groups that could be found through Web search engines or through personal contacts. The number of Asian American students enrolled at institutions of higher education in Hawaii should be noted.<sup>10</sup> The Study Abroad Group had zero enrolled, while only three percent were enrolled among the Non-Study Abroad group.

*Table 5. Asian American Respondents in Higher Education Institutions (Percentage)*

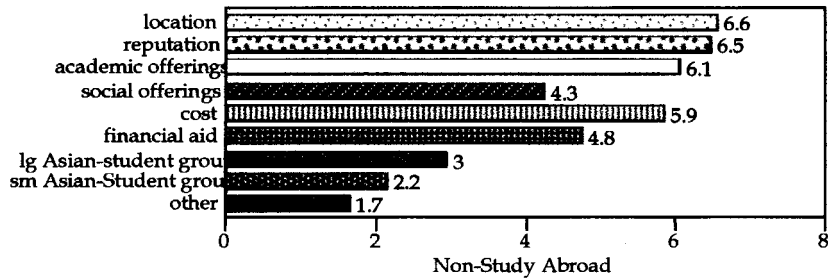
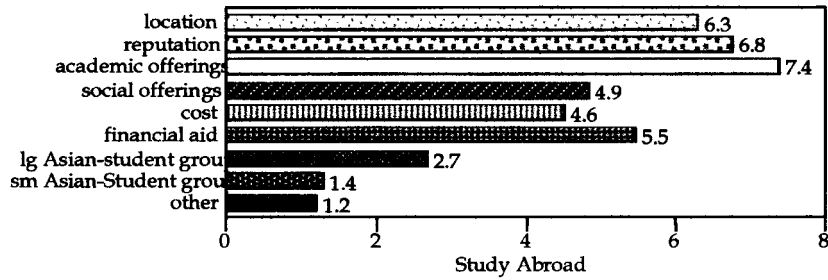


The location of the student’s home institution had little influence on the student’s decision to go overseas. While overall the New England region sends the highest percentage of students abroad, the Asian American students who studied overseas came from a variety of states across the country. These states paralleled the national trends of Asian American student enrollment with the exception of Hawaii, which had little representation in this study.

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Reasons for choosing to attend a particular institution might explain why Asian American students do or do not study abroad. Students were asked to rank eight factors in terms of their influences in choosing their academic institutions. Do Asian Americans, like other ethnic-minority groups, seek out places with people from similar cultural backgrounds, or do other factors influence their decision to attend a particular institution. And, if they do seek out this environment, might this be associated with their decision about whether or not to study abroad? Table 6 shows the mean scores of influencing factors for both groups. Among the Study Abroad students, the number one ranked influence was the academic offerings at the institution, followed by the reputation of the institution. The third most influential factor for Study Abroad students was where the institution was located, followed by the amount of financial assistance available. For the Non-Study Abroad students, the top three ranked influences were the same, except in a different order. Non-Study Abroad students listed reputation as the primary influence in choosing an institution, followed by its location and academic offerings. The size of the Asian American student population on campus was the least influencing factor for both groups when making their decision to attend university. The influencing factors chosen do not support the claim that finding a similar cultural setting, as is common with African Americans, is important.<sup>11</sup> However, the Non-Study Abroad group had a higher mean score for the cost of the institution, compared to the Study Abroad group, who were more concerned about financial aid. Study abroad students are concerned about financial aid than they are about costs, whereas Non-Study Abroad students are more concerned about costs than they are about financial aid.

Table 6 Factors Influencing Choice of University/College (Mean)



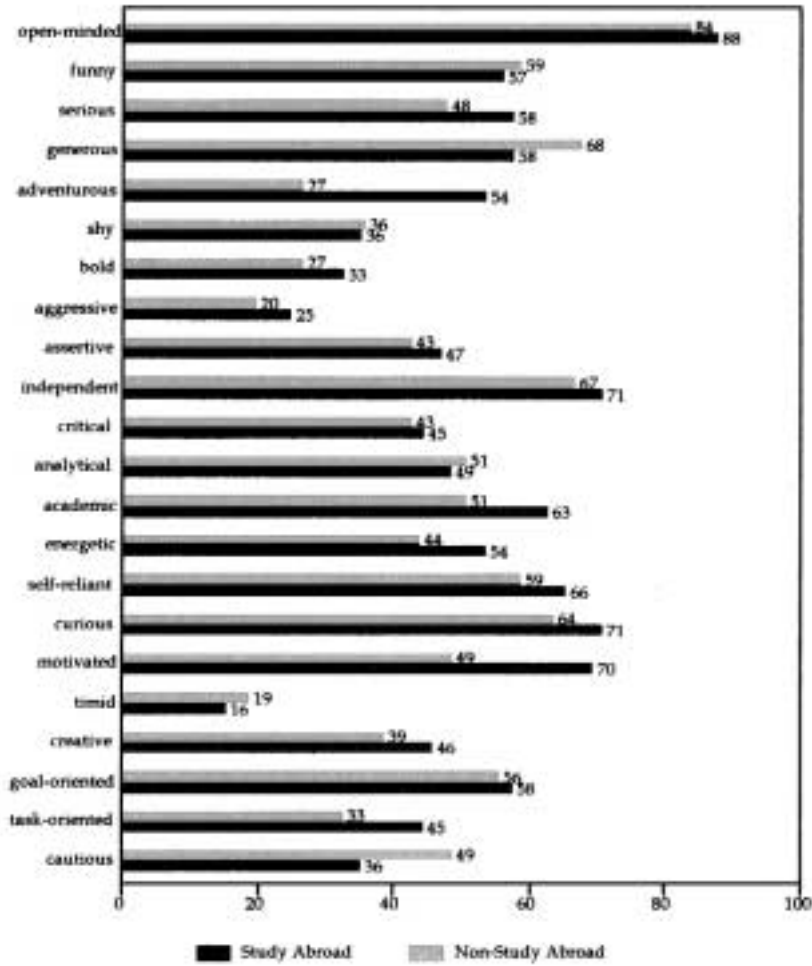
### Personal Qualities

Study abroad selection is often based on an applicant’s personal qualities that program administrators either deem as necessary for or as strong indicators of a successful experience overseas. Study Abroad students, like the Non-Study Abroad students, were asked to check as many qualities that applied to them from a list of 22 adjectives to see if the two student groups reported significantly different qualities. See Table 7 for the distribution of self-described personal qualities. The most chosen trait for both student groups was being “open-minded.” “Independent” and “curious” both ranked in the top five personality traits most often checked for both groups. “Timid” had the least amount of responses in both groups of students. Study Abroad students saw themselves as being “open-minded” (88 %), “independent” (71 %), “curious” (71 %), “motivated” (70 %), “self-reliant” (66 %) and “academic” (63 %). They were less likely to see themselves as “timid” (16 %) and “aggressive” (25 %). Non-Study Abroad students saw themselves as being “open-minded” (84 %), “generous” (68 %), “independent” (67 %), “curious” (64 %), “funny” (59 %) and

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“self-reliant” (59 %). They were less likely to see themselves as “timid” (19 %) and “aggressive” (20 %).

*Table 7. Personal Qualities (Percentage)*



There were some notable differences between the two groups. Overall, the Study Abroad group checked more qualities, and a significantly higher percentage of themselves-identified as being serious, motivated, energetic, academic, adventurous and task-oriented. These qualities support the notion that study abroad is for serious, academic students who

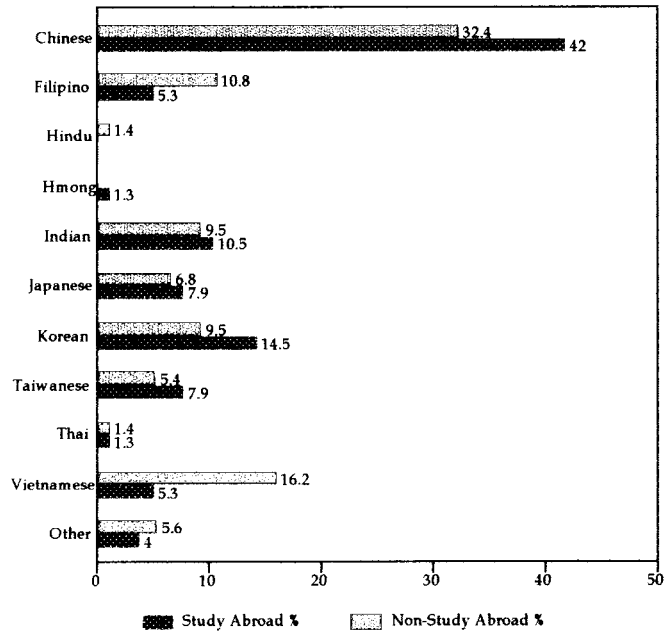
possess energy to handle experiences abroad. The qualities “adventurous” and “motivated” had the greatest difference in their percentages between groups. This finding reinforces the belief that students who study abroad must be strongly motivated and ready for the adventure that comes with unknown situations overseas. For the Non-Study Abroad group, students showed higher percentages for being “generous” and “cautious.” Being cautious highlights the student’s desire to take less risk in his or her life and, thus, a study abroad experience would therefore not be a principal goal while completing an educational degree.

### Ethnicity

Since the Asian American category includes peoples from diverse ethnic backgrounds, ethnicity was considered in order to see if different patterns emerged between the ethnic subgroups as compared to the general study abroad population. In discussing Asian Americans, the importance of looking at the differing patterns among ethnic groups can not be emphasized enough.

According to the 1990 U.S. Census, Chinese (23 %) were the largest Asian ethnic group in the U.S. Filipinos (19 %) and the Japanese (12 %) were the second and third largest groups. On the national level, Koreans constituted 11 percent of the Asian population while the Vietnamese made up 8 percent.<sup>12</sup> In keeping with national trends, the Chinese made up the largest group of respondents in both the Study Abroad group (41 %) and the Non-Study Abroad group (32 %). Table 8 shows the ethnic make-up of all Asian American respondents in this study. In second place were different ethnic groups. Koreans made up 15 percent of the Study Abroad group, while the Vietnamese made up 15 percent of the Non-Study Abroad group. Respondents of Indian ancestry (11 %) came in third place in the Study Abroad group, while Filipinos held third place with 11 percent in the Non-Study Abroad group. Included in the “other” category for the Study Abroad group were some students with more than one Asian ethnic background, such as Vietnamese Chinese, Chinese Thai and Chinese Japanese.

Table 8. Ethnicity of Asian American Respondents (Percentage)



Note: Some students with Taiwanese backgrounds might have listed their ethnicity as Chinese.

The “other” category in the Non-Study Abroad group included Thai, Hindu, Okinawan and some multiple groupings. The ethnic make-up of the study sample does not parallel the makeup of Asian Americans in the United States.

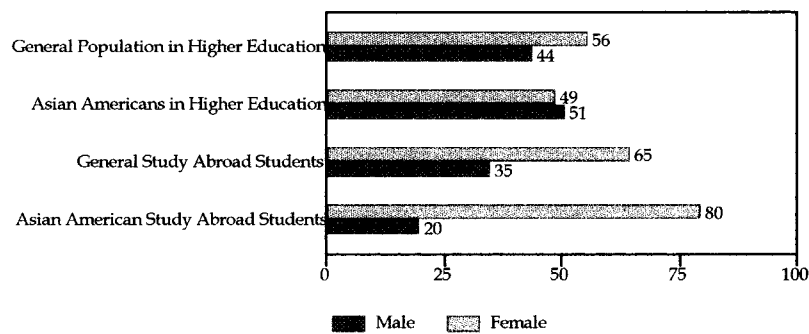
Reinforcing the belief that those ethnic groups that have resided in the United States for less time have lower study abroad rates, the ethnic subgroups of Filipinos and the Vietnamese had significantly fewer students studying abroad than the more established ethnic groups, i.e. Chinese, Korean and Taiwanese.

Sex

The distribution of Asian Americans in higher education based on sex

does not follow national trends. The general student population is 56 percent female and 44 percent male,<sup>13</sup> while the Asian American population enrolled in institutions of higher education is 49 percent female and 51 percent male.<sup>14</sup> Neither participant group, in comparison to national figures, shows the same distribution patterns based on enrollment, as seen in Table 9.

*Table 9. Distribution by Sex*

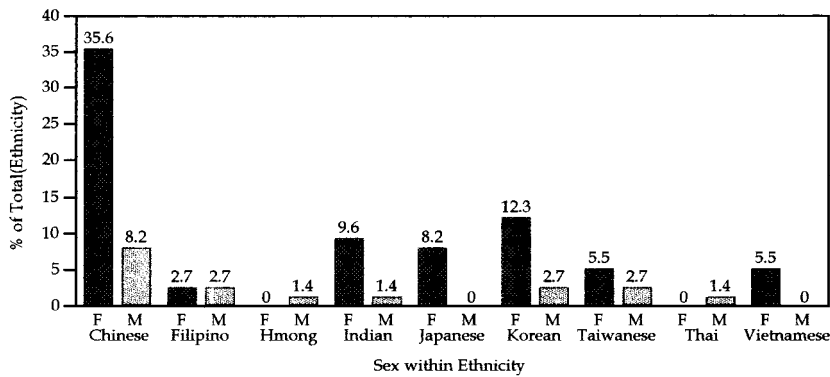


The distribution of participants by sex in study abroad is an important topic. In the United States the majority of study abroad students are females (65 %).<sup>15</sup> This study reveals that the Study Abroad group had a distribution pattern between female and male students similar to the general study abroad population, while the Non-Study Abroad group did not show the expected inverse distribution. In the case of the Study Abroad group, 80 percent of Asian Americans who went overseas were female, while males made up only 20 percent of the group. Since Asian Americans have an almost even distribution between female and male students in higher education, the large difference in participation rates by sex is significant. The Study Abroad group shows an uneven distribution, while the Non-Study Abroad group distribution parallels Asian American enrollment in higher education more closely. This indicates that Asian American men are more under-represented than males in the general study abroad population.

When sex is combined with ethnicity, different distributions of sex make up the various ethnic subgroups for Asian Americans. The percentages of ethnicity by sex for Non-Study Abroad students are shown in Table 10. The Study Abroad group shows a distribution by sex similar to

that of general study abroad participants, but the study does not show a similar distribution for Non-Study Abroad students. The results reveal that the more established ethnic groups send more students abroad. More females than males studied abroad, regardless of their ethnic background, reinforcing the under-representation of Asian American men in study abroad regardless of their ethnicity.

Table 10. Ethnic Background of Study Abroad Students by Sex (Percentage)



### Major Fields of Study

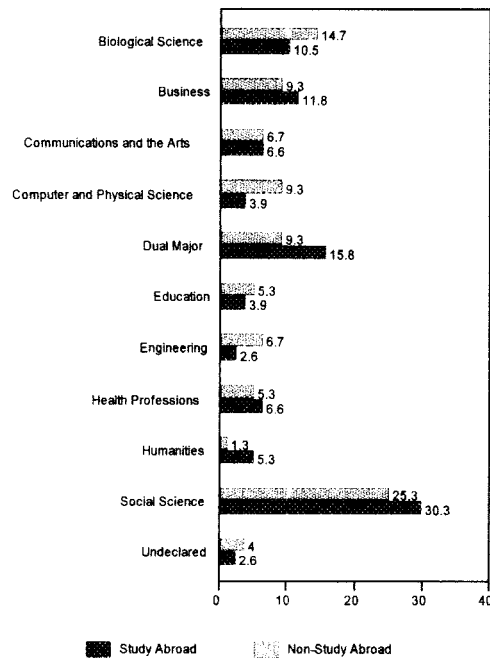
Study abroad advisors believe that a student’s major has a strong influence on his or her participation in study abroad. What motivates students to choose a particular major field of study might also have relevance on their decisions to study abroad. This study’s results parallel the national trends for Asian Americans and the major fields of study in higher education today. As reported by the American Council on Education, the top three subject fields for Asian Americans are business, engineering and social sciences, in that order. When broken down by sex, men graduate with degrees in business, engineering and social sciences, women graduate with degrees in business, social science and life sciences.<sup>16</sup>

A popular stereotype is that more Asian Americans do not go abroad because they are more likely to major in the natural sciences and other traditionally under-represented major fields of study. However that is not reflected in this study. The fact that the social sciences are popular major fields of study in the general Asian American population and the general study abroad population suggests that a student’s major is not the sole

influencing factor in the decision to study abroad.

With the increasing popularity of overseas study, more students with majors from diverse fields have been going abroad. Table 11 shows the breakdown of major fields of study for both Asian American student groups. In the Study Abroad group, the majority of students came from majors in the social sciences (30.3 %). The second largest category was dual majors (15.8 %), followed by the biological sciences and business with 10.5 percent each. Communications and the arts, as well as health professions, each represented 6.6 percent of the Study Abroad group.

**Table 11. Major Field of Study by Group (Percentage)**



*Note: The category 'Dual Major' includes all students whose two majors fall into different fields of study categories.*

The largest group of Asian American students who did not study abroad had majors in the social sciences (25 %), the same major as the largest group of students who did study abroad. The other significant

**J. Scott Van Der Meid**

majors for the Non-Study Abroad group were in the sciences and education.

Related to the major field of study are factors that influence choice of a major. If a student chooses a major primarily because of a career goal versus, say, the advice of a professor, this might also influence the student's decision to study abroad. The top three characteristics influencing major field choice for the Study Abroad group were "genuine interest in the major," the "student's decision alone," and "future career prospects." In the Non-Study Abroad group the top three factors, according to their mean, were "genuine interest," "future career prospects," and student's "decision alone." The least important influence on the choice of major for both groups was "faculty/advisor influence".

Both Asian American student groups listed the same three influencing factors, in different order, when choosing their major. The biggest factors that were not listed as important were influence from parents, peers and faculty. The data suggests that students are making the decision themselves out of genuine interest and future career prospects.

### International Travel

One of the survey questions asked the respondents to indicate which world regions they had visited, and it was designed to access the amount of international awareness the student possessed. While the question was not precise enough to give the detailed analysis originally desired, it does provide a basic indicator of exposure to other cultures around the world. Overall, 100 percent of the Study Abroad student group had traveled internationally. What is unclear is how many students traveled internationally when the study abroad period is excluded from the findings. Taking the country of study abroad participation and subtracting it from the student's travel totals makes possible a better comparison. However, this does not take into account those students who may have traveled to the region where they studied abroad before participating in their study abroad program.

Table 12 shows the percentage of international travel by region for both student groups. 89 percent of all Asian American students in the Study Abroad group had been to Asia, while Europe was the second most popular destination (58 %). Africa remained the region least traveled to with only 2 percent reporting a visit to this area. The "other" category



**J. Scott Van Der Meid**

region, on average, 20 percent more often. Overall, the Study Abroad group had more international travel experience to more areas of the world than those who did not study abroad. Africa remained a region barely visited by either group.

### Study Abroad Interest

Interest in study abroad came at various times for different students. For the majority of Asian American students in the Study Abroad group, high school was the time when they first became interested in study abroad (42 %). The second most popular time for 35 percent of the students was in college or university. Both “prior to junior high school” and in “junior high school” represented 11 percent of the respondents. Thus, just over 63 percent of all students who studied abroad had become interested in an overseas experience by the time they finished high school.

For Non-Study Abroad students, two questions sought to gauge their awareness of study abroad and of financial aid support. Awareness of study abroad among Non-Study Abroad students was 100 percent. Those Asian American students who were not interested in the topic of this study were not required to fill out the questionnaire; thus the Non-Study Abroad group is not representative. In terms of awareness of institutional financial assistance for study abroad from their university or college, 68 percent of the students said they knew about such aid. When broken down by ethnicity, Filipinos and Indians had the highest rates of awareness of financial aid at 88 percent and 86 percent respectively, while Koreans had the lowest rate of knowledge about financial aid at 43 percent.

### Sharing the Experiences of Asian Americans Overseas

Utilizing returned students to generate interest in study abroad programs has proven useful. Once a student comes back, he or she proves to be a successful means of spreading the excitement, joy and, sometimes, negative experiences of such opportunities to other students in their peer groups. Because of this, learning about the experiences of Asian American students who have studied abroad or who are currently studying abroad are important factors in prospective students’ decisions about whether they, too, should study abroad. To understand better the experiences of



























