

From Self-Segregation to Self-Affirmation through Global Education: Nine Case Studies from the Texas Southern University Paris Noir Study Abroad Program

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ABSTRACT: *When immersed in a foreign country, individuals first tend to revert to self-segregation, because it is the most practical way to cope with an unsettling new environment. However, global education seems to give students various tools with which they can make the choice of diversity, through customized authentic experiences with locals of the culture visited, and personal interpretations of random events.*

KEYWORDS: *HBCU, Global Education, TSU Paris Noir Study Abroad Program*

I. INTRODUCTION

As defined by the U.S Department of Education's White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, "HBCUs are a source of accomplishment and great pride for the African American community as well as the entire nation". The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as: "any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation". HBCUs offer all students, regardless of race, an opportunity to develop their skills and talents. These institutions train young people who go on to serve domestically and internationally in the professions as entrepreneurs, and in the public and private sectors.

Teaching at a HBCU, Texas Southern University since 2004, has allowed me to observe how globalization, while slowly taking over campus, has not been one of the top university priorities, and that students do not generally consider study abroad as an option. Indeed, there seems to be a stigma that prevents African American students from studying abroad. *Increasing diversity in international careers: Economic challenges and solutions*, an Institute of International Education Report, states that "many minority students do not have international travel experience prior to college, and going abroad can have a profound impact on further study and career choice. Yet, those who stand to benefit most are often constrained from participation in overseas study due to curricular, financial, and informational barriers. Minority students comprise only 20% of U.S. students who study abroad", and "only 5% of Americans who study abroad are black". Simultaneously, according to the U.S. Department of Education, minority students represent over a third of students in U.S. higher education, and 92% of African American students receive financial aid, compared to 77% of white students.

Therefore, I created the TSU Paris Noir Study Abroad Program in 2015, to advocate, promote, and encourage global education in Paris, while making the program accessible to students from low-income backgrounds. Indeed, the TSU Paris Noir Study Abroad Program was developed as an alternative to programs offered by study abroad providers, which tend to cost more than our students can afford. Being a native of Paris, France, I am aware of the real costs of a study abroad experience, and I designed a short-term program, mostly because our students not only rely on financial aid or student loans to pay their tuition, but also work part-time or full-time, and simply cannot miss more than two weeks of work.

Specifically designed to meet the needs and interests of TSU students, who are part of the newest generation of a global community, the program allows the selected TSU students to experience Paris firsthand not only through instruction in French language and culture, but also through retracing the steps of world renowned African American artists, musicians and writers in the very places which inspired them. Outside of class, students have opportunities to experience Paris not simply as tourists but also through visiting museums, bookstores, cafés, restaurants, along with viewing ever-changing street art, and attending music and theater venues. These tours and activities are conducted by Parisian native guides, further adding to the authenticity of the experience, and special presentations will be provided by expert guest speakers.

We will discuss the findings gathered while observing and following up with the nine groups of students who participated in the program since 2015. After defining the concept of self-segregation, we will describe the cohorts we surveyed, and share some common group dynamics among those who self-segregated and those who did not. Finally, we will show how the program encourages students to set lifetime goals in their quest for success.

II. THE CONCEPT OF SELF-SEGREGATION

Self-Segregation is the deliberate decision for a religious or ethnic group to separate from the rest of society, which can lead to the lack of a normal societal interactions, and cause a form of social exclusion. In today's global society, "diversity is often touted as highly desirable. Indeed, in professional contexts, we know that more diverse teams often outperform homogenous teams. Diversity also increases cognitive development, both intellectually and socially. And yet actually encountering and working through diverse viewpoints, experiences, and perspectives, is hard work. It's uncomfortable. It's emotionally exhausting. It can be downright frustrating. Thus, given the opportunity, people typically revert to situations where they can be in homogenous environments. They look for "safe spaces" and "culture fit". Systems that are "personalized" are highly desirable. Most people aren't looking to self-segregate, but they do it anyway".¹

It seems that the tendency for individuals to gravitate towards people of the same background while abroad is common, as it is human nature to look for the familiar in unfamiliar settings. However, studying abroad gives college students the opportunity to really immerse themselves willing to blend in and make efforts to interact with the locals.

III. COHORTS SURVEYED

Our observation focuses on the nine following groups.

Group	Year	Total	Gender	Ethnicity	Age Range
1	2015	8	6 females 2 males	7 African American 1 Hispanic	7 in their 20s 1 older
2	2016	7	3 females	1 biracial	5 in their 20s

¹ "Self-Segregation: How a personalized work is dividing Americans", Danah Boyd, *The Guardian*, January 3, 2017.

			4 males	1 African 5 African American	2 older
3	2017	5	5 females	5 African American	5 in their 20s
4	2018	8	4 males 4 females	4 African American 4 Hispanic	8 in their 20s
5	2019	4	1 male 3 females	3 African American 1 Hispanic	3 in their 20s 1 older
	2020	No program because of COVID			
	2021	No program because of COVID			
6	2022	6	6 females	5 African American 1 Haitian American	5 in their 20s 1 older
7	2023	4	2 females 2 males	3 African American 1 African	3 in their 20s 1 older
	2024	No program because of Olympic Games			
8	2025	8	5 females 3 males	8 African American	7 in their 20s 1 older
9	2026	8	7 females 1 male	7 African American 1 Asian American	6 in their 20s 2 older

All groups were diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, and classification, except groups 3, all female, all African American, all young, and groups 5, 8 and 9, mostly young and African American. Coincidentally, group 3 tended to self-segregate the most in terms of ethnicity, while group 5 tended to self-segregate in terms of nationality, while groups 2 and 4, the most diverse in all respects, interacted with locals the most. Groups 6, mostly made of African American females, also blended in with Parisians, compared to other groups.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Students were asked to describe their expectations in workshops held before the trip, and to capture their experiences orally, daily in conversations at the beginning of classes or during fieldtrips while in Paris, as well as in writing, in the forms of essays on their last day. Approximately two months after their return to Houston, they shared their impressions with the rest of the university through academic presentations at the *Paris Noir Reflections* ceremony, where they received their certificates of achievement.

Our research used the ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979), a type of qualitative research combining immersive observation with one-on-one directed interviews, which allowed us to identify cultural domains after

asking open-ended questions such as: “how did you feel about the city and its people”, “what did you learn when you were experiencing the city on your own, outside of the program’s activities?”, or “what did you expect before going to Paris?”.

V. FINDINGS

On the one hand, it seems that self-segregation is a tool encouraging group affiliation and bonding, ensuring group solidarity and greater control over group dynamics.

This was the case for group 3, 5, 8 and 9 members, who tended to react to any given situation through a conflictual reading lens of “us vs. them”. For instance, when verbally harassed on the metro like all passengers in their car, group 5 members expressed that they felt it was because they were Black, and not because the belligerent individual was an inebriated or mentally impaired homeless person. Similarly, when they found out that French admirers of Josephine Baker’s were maintaining her artifacts at her former *Château des Milandes* estate, the group expressed their disappointment at “white people exploiting a black woman’s legacy”, when those “white people” founded a non-profit organization to keep preserving La Baker’s heritage. Last but not least, none of the group members seemed to notice the many French interracial couples or families around them, but when they found out that the Black French tour guide’s girlfriend was from the Antilles like him, the group “leader” shouted “Black Love” in the street, and the group members cheered and congratulated each other. Such racially biased behaviors did not stem from French locals, but from the two most outspoken individuals in the group, who used their “Blackness” to unify the group. A member of group 8 was stopped in the subway for not validating her Navigo Pass and felt harassed by the French RATP officer because of her blackness. Members of group 9 also felt watched and followed by white staff members, while visiting Louis Vuitton and Longchamp luxury boutiques. Finally, one member of group 9 felt racially targeted in a Chinese restaurant, because she wanted to take her chopsticks home, when Asian restaurants in France now use ceramic chopsticks and wash them for next customers to use, similarly to any silverware, because of environmental factors. In the case of the subway incident and the chopsticks misunderstanding, the language barrier was the main obstacle and the situations both could have been handled differently by the students if their French language skills had been better, but the first reflex to justify any type of conflict was to think they were racially profiled.

Self-segregation also served to unify groups 5, 8 and 9, interestingly not in terms of ethnicity, but nationality, because the only factor that all group members had in common was their “Americanness”. When given free time or free choice of a restaurant where to eat without their professors, group 5 members chose “Five Guys Burger”, or “Indiana Café”, a French chain mimicking Tex-Mex cuisine, or had American dishes such as hamburgers in French restaurants. Similarly, several group members went to the movies while in Paris, to see “Spiderman” and “The Lion King”. Subconsciously, that small group who was “forced” to try French foods and do French things while in the program, reverted to being American as a bonding dynamic while not supervised.

On the other hand, relating to one’s peers can turn self-segregation into opportunity. During the stay of group 2, two African American students from Tulane who were lodged at the same housing center in Paris chose to remove themselves from their all-white group, and joined the courses and activities designed for the TSU Paris Noir students. In doing so, they were exposed to academic cultural contents on which they would have missed out, had they stayed with the non-minority students on their program. In the same vein, by reclaiming their African roots, group 3 and group 5 participants attended the Afro-punk festival and had stimulating exchanges with Francophone members of the African diaspora.

However, students in other groups made the choice of diversity, which shaped their experiences positively. Even if they initially felt overwhelmed as a minority in a new place, some students had to take it upon themselves to get over that disturbing feeling. Several individuals in groups 2, 4 and 8 looked for their own Paris outside of the program, and “away” from their peers. In small groups or individually, they experienced local venues where they

interacted with French people their age and made friends with whom they kept in touch via social media. As individuals, they also had their own experiences, mostly in restaurants.

For instance, an African American male from group 4 went “to enjoy authentic pizza” by himself, because some of his ancestors on his mother’s side originated from Italy. Similarly, an African American female from the same group described her experience in a French bistro, and how hard she had to struggle to avoid self-segregation, in an essay entitled “My Moment in Time”. Her essay goes as: “Growing up in Chicago, IL, I was always warned about going out alone. For two reasons: one, I was a female, and two, I was a Black female. But I have always loved to go on adventures alone. While in Paris, I thought I would take a moment and [...] fill my quest for real French food [...]. Now I will be honest, the first thing that popped into my mind was: “Who does this Black girl think she is to be walking into the Maison Péret? Let alone who is she to order escargots, salad, and wine? But it was also in that moment that I realized I had a unique opportunity. Most of my life, I was taught by the world how I should view the things around me and myself. But today, I was determined to change the narrative. I walked in, and with my very little French, I asked for a table, sat down, and ordered my escargots, salad, and wine. I was so nervous, not because the people were not friendly, but because I was trying to hide the idea of being Black. I wanted to blend in, and enjoy my moment in time., because I knew once I went back to America, it would go back to normal. So that’s what I did, I enjoyed escargots for the first time, which were actually really good once you get past what they are. And for a moment in time, I was simply happy being just me, enjoying my Moment in Time”.

VI. MEASURING PROGRAM SUCCESS THROUGH ALLUMNI FOLLOW-UP

Group 1: After graduation, the 2 African American males moved to New York, where they just received their Master of Fine Arts. 1 African American female started taught English in the French government’s Teaching Assistantship Program in France (TAPIF) for a year after she graduated.

Group 2: 1 African American male moved to Paris and completed a master’s degree in international diplomacy, then started teaching English in French corporations. He is now teaching at the Sorbonne and started his own French family. 1 African American male has been performing with various musical theater companies statewide and nationwide, and moved to New York to try his luck on Broadway.

Group 3: 1 of the 5 African American females returned to Paris with group 4 and is now applying to graduate art programs in Paris.

Group 4: 1 of the African American males returned to Paris with group 5 and joined the Voice 100 European gospel choir after he graduated.

Group 5: 1 Hispanic student kept traveling to various countries, such as Egypt and Mexico.

Group 6: Several African American students are currently performing in international choirs. 1 student is working for an international marketing firm.

Group 7: 1 African American student went on to join another study abroad program in Tanzania after the Paris trip.

Group 8: 1 African American student is pursuing graduate studies in International Fashion and actively looking for internship in Paris. Another African American student applied for scholarships through Campus France to pursue graduate studies in Paris and also applied to be an au pair in France through an international agency.

Group 9: 1 of the African American male members from group 8 returned to Paris with group 9. Group 9 just returned from Paris

All those alumni credit the Paris Noir program in the bold academic and professional choices they made after graduating from TSU. Their unique immersion in Paris helped them “step out of their comfort zone.

VII. CONCLUSION

Our observation of ten cohorts of TSU Paris Noir students demonstrates that self-segregation seems like an easy way to cope with the challenges of study abroad at first, as it may be used as a unifying force for some. Smaller groups tend to self-segregate, through actions which give them a clear sense of belonging to a common race or nationality, while larger groups give individuals more freedom to evolve separately from the group.

Nevertheless, whatever the size or composition of each group, there is no success without risk-taking, and taking the risk to overcome self-segregation leads to rewarding choices which impact long term academic, professional, and personal paths.

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