

# Black student study abroad participation stalls

Elon pushes for study abroad diversity but hasn't influenced black students' experiences

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Between the 2015-2016 and 2017-2018 academic years, the numbers of Elon University's non-white students studying abroad increased from 9 to 17.3 percent. Despite those gains, black participation went up less than 1 percent — from 3 to 3.3 percent of all undergraduates studying abroad — though from 2015 to 2018, the percentage of black students at Elon increased by more than 8 percent.

Alongside institutional initiatives, the university's Global Education Center has taken steps to augment diversity and inclusion in its global engagement programs, a designation that includes study abroad and Study USA.

These efforts include hiring a more diverse pool of Global Ambassadors, increasing awareness of financial aid and providing predeparture programming for students from underrepresented groups.

Another step was creating a position specifically to focus on issues of diversity and inclusion. Allegra Laing proposed the position and has served as assistant director of diversity and inclusion since earlier this year. Her job is outreach to and coordination with underrepresented groups on campus to address these gaps.

"I really saw a need for the GEC to deepen their level of involvement and knowledge in the areas of diversity and inclusion," Laing said.

The GEC began reporting race and ethnicity demographic data in the 2015-2016 annual report. The university has established 100 percent access to global engagement, but access and participation are not the same thing, said Amanda Allen, the GEC's business and data manager.

"We know that there's a lot of different reasons that students will participate in our programs; we just want to make sure that they have the opportunity to do so if they choose," said Allen, who is part of the team

behind the annual reports.

"There has been a noticeable shift in kind of national marketing and financial support and program types to support students of diverse backgrounds," Allen said. "It may be we should have been looking at this sooner, but we're looking at it now."

The Institute of International Education ranks Elon no. 1 among masters-level institutions, but lags behind national demographics.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, 70.8 percent of American students who studied abroad were white. Black students made up 6.1 percent of study abroad participants nationally. At Elon during the same year, those numbers were 90.3 percent and 3.6 percent, respectively. That year, the undergraduate student body was 80.6 percent white and 5.3 percent black.

The sparse number of black or other minority students has perceptible impacts on students of color abroad. Many top destinations are European countries, many of which have experienced recent waves of anti-immigrant and minority sentiment.

Seniors Bridgette Agbozo, Charleen Martins Lopes and Eric Cunningham studied abroad in spring 2018.

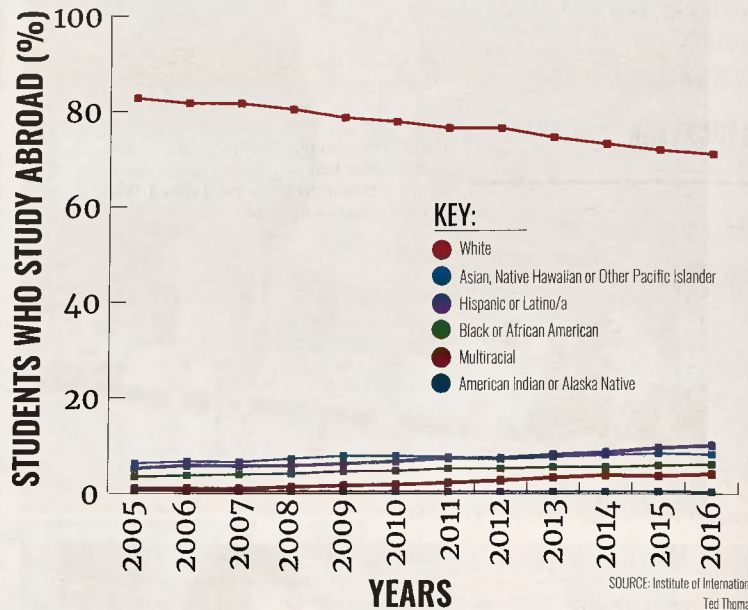
Agbozo was placed with a host family in rural Denmark before moving to Copenhagen. Her host family's reaction to her arrival gave Agbozo the impression they weren't made aware she is black. She saw her host family interact differently with their other American student — a white man — but

keep her at arms length. She later discovered from her host sister that the mother's boyfriend, who didn't live in the house but was around often, "didn't like refugees or like immigrants."

Agbozo said the locals kept their distance from her, which she assumes stemmed from associating her with a nearby refugee settlement. After continued discomfort, she moved to Copenhagen and connected with a Facebook group of women of color in Denmark.

"Once I started to have a social network, when I started talking to other people, when I started sharing my experiences as a brown person in

## NATIONAL STUDY ABROAD DEMOGRAPHICS



SOURCE: Institute of International Education  
Ted Thomas | Designer

“THERE WERE MOMENTS WHERE I WAS THE ONLY BLACK PERSON IN THE ROOM, IN THE CLASSES, JUST LIKE I AM HERE [AT ELON].”

CHARLEEN MARTINS LOPES  
SENIOR

Denmark, I felt a lot more connected," Agbozo said.

Cunningham and Martins Lopes studied in London in the spring, where one other black Elon student joined them.

"There were moments where I was the only black person in the room, in the classes, just like I am here [at Elon]," Martins Lopes said. She faced insensitive questions from classmates about race and ethnicity.

"No one wants to feel like they have to defend themselves in every space that they walk in on campus, or sometimes you do feel like certain things are expected of you because you are a person of color," Martins Lopes said.

Martins Lopes reported fewer negative experiences in classes that were not strictly for Elon students. She said non-Elon classmates were more willing to speak up when they saw her being treated differently.

Cunningham was the only black man from Elon in the program.

"I felt like I kind of knew the challenges there would be ... that I was going with a lot of Elon students specifically and that there really wouldn't be a lot of black students on the trip," Cunningham said. "There really wouldn't be a lot of other students I wish I could kind of share my own experiences and cultures and kind of have some sort of a cultural understanding, being a black American student."

Senior Jazmine Langley studied abroad in Cape Town, South Africa, in fall 2017. After, she attended a study abroad conference where she spoke to other students about their experiences. She said "it seemed as if those who traveled to the European countries had a different type of racial and cultural shock" than she did in South Africa. "The majority of South Africans are black," Langley said. "I think over 80-something percent of the population identify as black, and so it's everywhere you go, everywhere you are, every space, you see black people. And so for me, that was a wonderful feeling, because I'm like, in the U.S., black people are the minority; we only make up like 13 percent of the population."

"I felt like I was affirmed all the time in spaces by black women, by black men, in classes and social spaces, like all different places," Langley said. "It felt like people valued my presence and me being there, and they always sought to let me know that."

Cunningham, one of two student coordinators of the Global Ambassadors program, said he's seen a "strong initiative" to address these problems.

"I've had the opportunity to talk to a variety of different counselors working for the GEC about kind of my experience and kind of what we can kind of do ... to make the experience a little bit more reflective as well," Cunningham said.

Laing said its important students see themselves reflected in the group representing the GEC. "What does it mean if my ambassador group is homogenous but that's a group that does all the outreach to all the first-year Elon 101 classes, that does outreach to the admissions events?" Laing said.

The GEC is also working working to establish relationships and programming with organizations like the Center for Race, Ethnicity and Diversity Education and the Gender and LGBTQIA Center.

"I wasn't really seeing study abroad programs marketed to the Black Student Union, which I'm a part of, or you know, I wasn't really seeing them in partnership with the CREDE, where I work, where most black students — where most students of color are," Langley said.

Laing has seen an uptick in diversity-centered conversations and resources, but says initiatives must be forward-focused to make change.

"Historically, people approach it as almost like one-offs like, 'Let's make sure this marketing brochure is diverse,' or 'Let's make sure that we have like X, Y and Z on that,' but not really a deliberate, intentional, thought-out approach to diversity and inclusion that's looking at it from a broad angle and actually making strategic goals every year that you're trying to move forward to," Laing said.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAZMINE LANGLEY

Senior Jazmine Langley spent her fall study abroad semester in Cape Town, South Africa.

### ELON TOP SUMMER STUDY ABROAD DESTINATIONS IN 2018

1. United Kingdom
2. Spain
3. Italy
4. Ireland
5. Denmark
6. Australia
7. Los Angeles (Study USA)
8. New York City (Study USA)
9. Czech Republic
10. New Zealand

Source: Global Education Center's 2018 Report

### ELON STUDY ABROAD

# 17.3

percent of non-white Elon students studied abroad in the last school year.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIDGETTE AGBOZO

Bridgette Agbozo traveled to Copenhagen, Denmark, for her spring semester study abroad.