



Top 10 Reasons for African American Students to Go Abroad

Before going abroad, I was an armchair traveler. I sat at my desk semester after semester doing my job as an international student adviser. I was fascinated by all the students I met, but I was most impressed with the commitment of the Jamaican teachers. For the first time in their lives they were a minority in another country. Yet they never stopped pursuing their educational goals. Against the odds, year after year, they came and went, each with that prized possession: a bachelors or masters degree in education.

I wondered what enabled them to be so confident in their ability to succeed in the U.S. Over the years, it became apparent to me that no one had told them that they could not be successful. Study abroad was the ultimate means to achieve the best possible education.

The students I advised became my role models. They are also the model I put before all African American students.

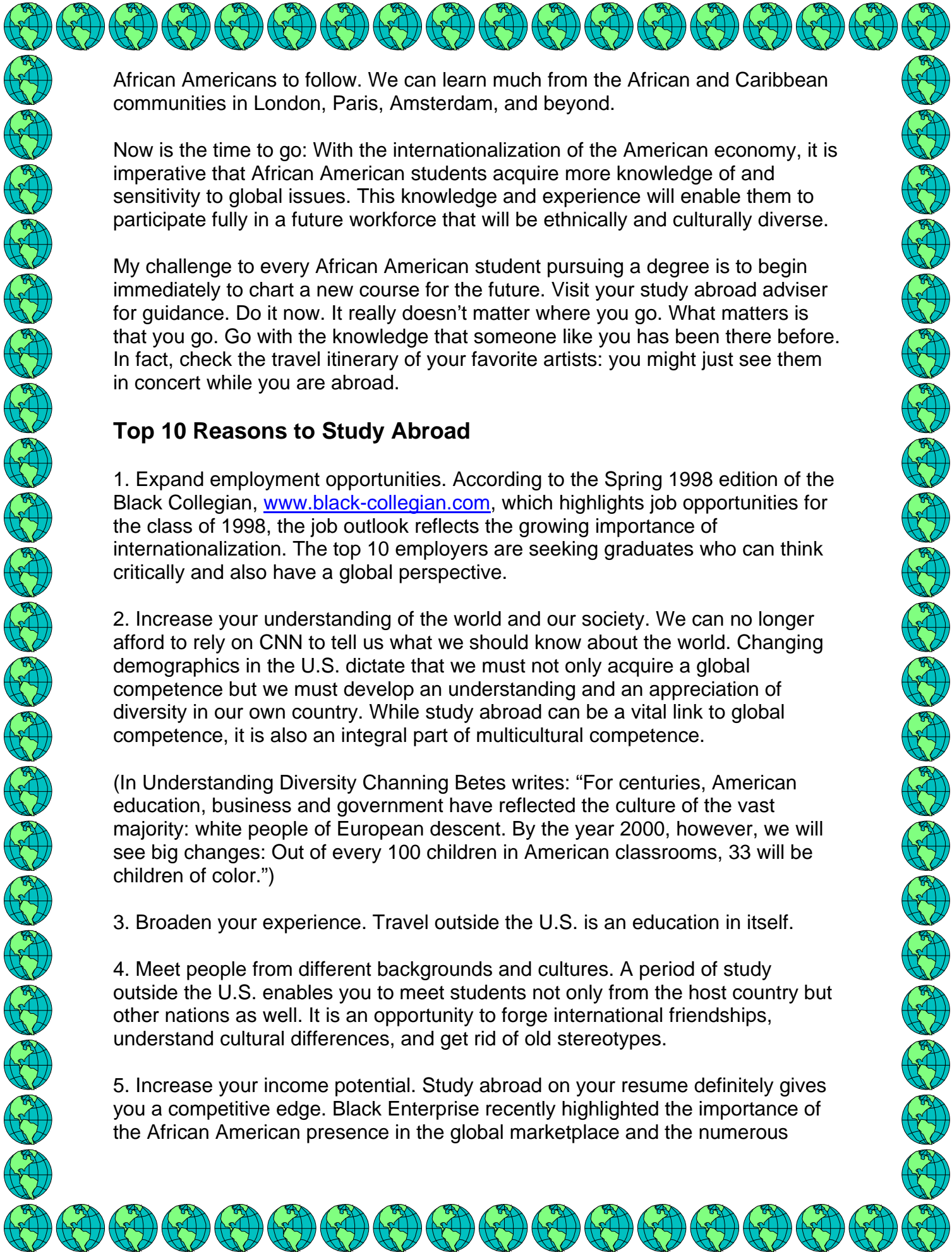
At the urging of minority advocacy groups, like Black and Multicultural Professionals in International Education (B/MCPIE), Black Professionals in International Affairs (BPIA), and the United Negro College Fund, many student exchange organizations have established scholarships and special projects to promote diversity in study abroad.

Dealing with the Myths

Since African American students form the largest ethnic group in U.S. higher education, it is important to understand the myths associated with study abroad that have limited their participation in student exchange programs and replace them with positive reasons to go abroad. The present generation of African American students will have to work through these myths and overcome racial prejudice in order to achieve their educational objectives abroad.

The number one myth is that the education abroad experience is not for Black students, especially in the traditional European study sites. The assumption is that European racism is so overwhelming that Black students would be better off remaining in their own country where they understand the politics of racism and can make the necessary adjustments. Black students who travel abroad are in fact shocked when they are treated as Americans first and as intelligent students who have earned the right to be studying in the host country. African American students should not fear traveling abroad because of racism.

In my own travels through Europe, I have found the African community in every major city. I was delighted to find that others have already paved the way for



African Americans to follow. We can learn much from the African and Caribbean communities in London, Paris, Amsterdam, and beyond.

Now is the time to go: With the internationalization of the American economy, it is imperative that African American students acquire more knowledge of and sensitivity to global issues. This knowledge and experience will enable them to participate fully in a future workforce that will be ethnically and culturally diverse.

My challenge to every African American student pursuing a degree is to begin immediately to chart a new course for the future. Visit your study abroad adviser for guidance. Do it now. It really doesn't matter where you go. What matters is that you go. Go with the knowledge that someone like you has been there before. In fact, check the travel itinerary of your favorite artists: you might just see them in concert while you are abroad.

Top 10 Reasons to Study Abroad

1. Expand employment opportunities. According to the Spring 1998 edition of the Black Collegian, www.black-collegian.com, which highlights job opportunities for the class of 1998, the job outlook reflects the growing importance of internationalization. The top 10 employers are seeking graduates who can think critically and also have a global perspective.

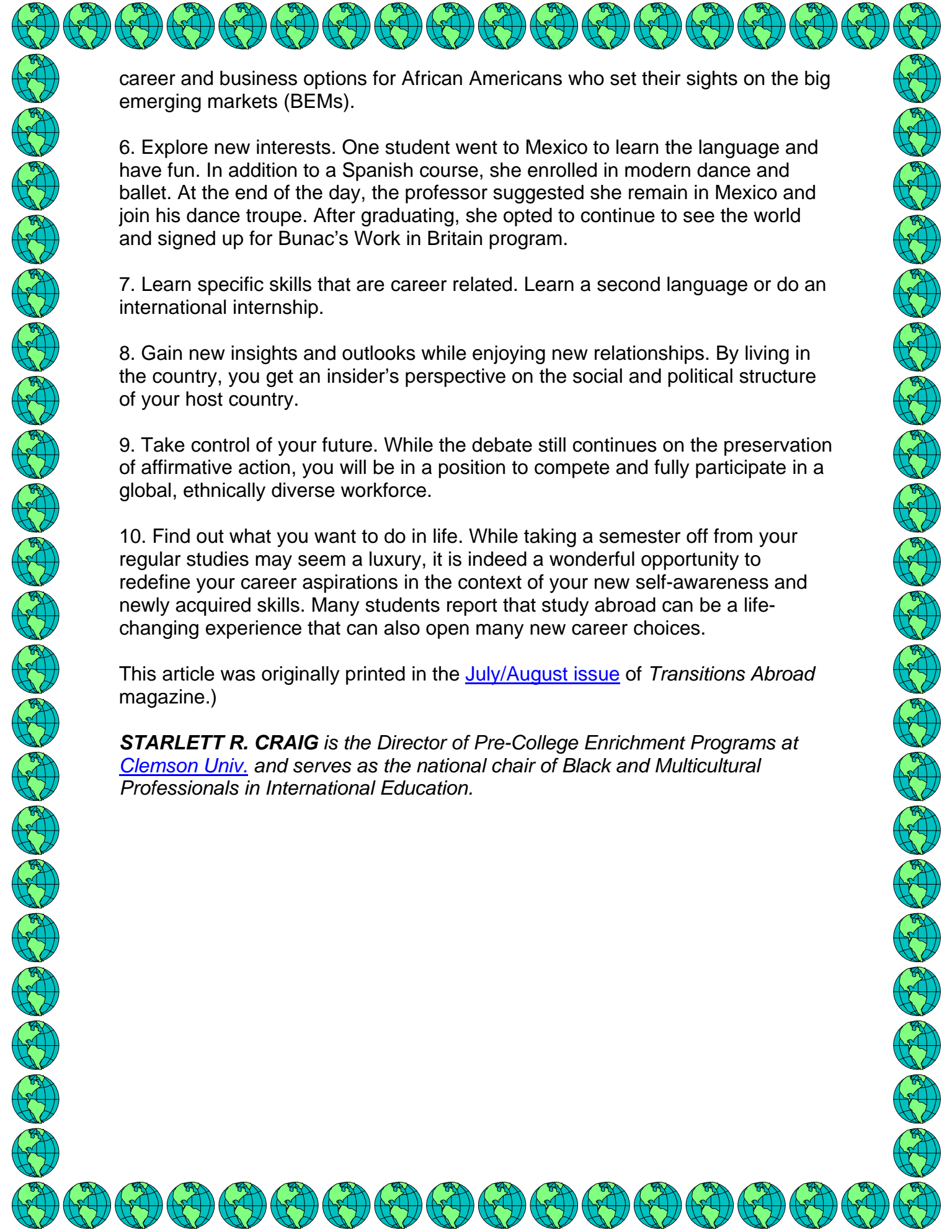
2. Increase your understanding of the world and our society. We can no longer afford to rely on CNN to tell us what we should know about the world. Changing demographics in the U.S. dictate that we must not only acquire a global competence but we must develop an understanding and an appreciation of diversity in our own country. While study abroad can be a vital link to global competence, it is also an integral part of multicultural competence.

(In Understanding Diversity Channing Betes writes: "For centuries, American education, business and government have reflected the culture of the vast majority: white people of European descent. By the year 2000, however, we will see big changes: Out of every 100 children in American classrooms, 33 will be children of color.")

3. Broaden your experience. Travel outside the U.S. is an education in itself.

4. Meet people from different backgrounds and cultures. A period of study outside the U.S. enables you to meet students not only from the host country but other nations as well. It is an opportunity to forge international friendships, understand cultural differences, and get rid of old stereotypes.

5. Increase your income potential. Study abroad on your resume definitely gives you a competitive edge. Black Enterprise recently highlighted the importance of the African American presence in the global marketplace and the numerous



career and business options for African Americans who set their sights on the big emerging markets (BEMs).

6. Explore new interests. One student went to Mexico to learn the language and have fun. In addition to a Spanish course, she enrolled in modern dance and ballet. At the end of the day, the professor suggested she remain in Mexico and join his dance troupe. After graduating, she opted to continue to see the world and signed up for Bunac's Work in Britain program.

7. Learn specific skills that are career related. Learn a second language or do an international internship.

8. Gain new insights and outlooks while enjoying new relationships. By living in the country, you get an insider's perspective on the social and political structure of your host country.

9. Take control of your future. While the debate still continues on the preservation of affirmative action, you will be in a position to compete and fully participate in a global, ethnically diverse workforce.

10. Find out what you want to do in life. While taking a semester off from your regular studies may seem a luxury, it is indeed a wonderful opportunity to redefine your career aspirations in the context of your new self-awareness and newly acquired skills. Many students report that study abroad can be a life-changing experience that can also open many new career choices.

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