

Examining the Motivation of the Bahamian Brain Drain

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Abstract

This study attempts to understand what motivates high-skilled Bahamian emigration. Since high-skilled emigration remains a commonly discussed topic in The Bahamas, across the Caribbean region, and globally, this study sought to investigate the primary drivers of this phenomenon. This study excavated themes related to the motivation of Bahamian emigration from historic and contemporary literature in addition to analyzing 20 interviews with diasporic Bahamians as well as 250 surveys completed by native Bahamians residing globally. The findings of this study indicate that Bahamian emigrants are motivated by the desire for educational, professional, and athletic development opportunities not available in The Bahamas, giving responses largely from the higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, including: *to make family at home proud* and *to be all they can be*. Participants also emphasized the importance of faith in their journey to migrate, highlighting their desire to evolve spiritually as an individual and follow God's plan. Participants further shared that their motivation was ignited by the appeal of living in global communities where nepotism, political preferences, and people's perceptions do not limit one's social, financial or career trajectory.

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Introduction

If asked, most Bahamians would confirm that they have at least one relative working or studying outside the country. Bahamians, including Galanis (2019) and Hartnell (2017), have speculated about why many have migrated from The Bahamas, with little conclusive evidence on the exact motivation for this occurrence or any strategies to mitigate its impact. While awareness of the brain drain is a common aspect of life within The Bahamas and the broader Caribbean region, the motivation for the migration of Bahamians has been subject to only limited systematic inquiry. While many speculate about why students and professionals are

leaving The Bahamas, there is little conclusive evidence to support the various hypotheses (see, for example, Rencher, 2022). This study, including the reviewed literature, bridges the gap between previous research regarding Bahamian migration. This study's examination of diasporic Bahamians aimed to understand their motivation as high-skilled migrants and what respondents believe can be done to mitigate this phenomenon in The Bahamas.

Literature Review

Migration has been a central feature of Caribbean history for centuries (Yelverton,

2000), and much more needs to be known about how the brain drain impacts individual countries and policymakers (see, for example, Gibson & McKenzie, 2012). According to Brissett (2021), very little has been written about the reasons skilled people leave the Caribbean. The current study research aims to narrow this gap by focusing on a subset of Caribbean skilled emigrants, specifically Bahamians residing globally.

Studies of international migration have found that economic and social factors play a crucial role in people's decision to migrate. Gibson and McKenzie (2012) noted that the recent increase in brain drain rates should not be attributed to the African continent but rather to small island states, such as The Bahamas. Sands et al. (2020) cited the International Organization for Migration (2017), which confirmed that countries such as Antigua and Barbuda, Cuba, Guyana, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and The Bahamas are identified as countries lacking comprehensive studies on migration patterns and trends, as well as legislation and policies.

Current research on the Caribbean region's brain drain focuses on the impact to healthcare and education, given the volume of nurses, midwives, and teachers migrating to Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom (Sands et al., 2020; Wilkinson, 2023). The lack of information in the literature that examines the motivation and impact of the Bahamian brain drain presents a research gap.

Examining the motivation factors of Caribbean nurses, Sands et al. (2020) noted that the motivating push factors include the need for professional growth, financial benefits, educational advancement due to poor remuneration, lack of professional development, and stressful working conditions. Conversely, the motivating pull

factors for nurse and teacher migrations include: improved working conditions, enhanced salaries, advancement opportunities, access to good healthcare, and solid education for dependents, each of which supports a higher standard of living (Simpson, 2017; Wilkinson, 2023; Sands et al., 2020).

Bahamian emigration existed long before The Bahamas gained independence in 1973. Perez (2019) confirmed that early emigrants played a significant role in creating the infrastructure and cultural identity of Miami, Florida. Bahamian emigrants were pioneers who established and maintained community ties with those in The Bahamas, creating a legacy that persists among contemporary Bahamians (Nebhrajani, 2016; Perez, 2019). From the 1940s until 1965, over 30,000 Bahamian women and men migrated to the United States to work as agricultural laborers on "The Contract", when the United States Government solicited workers from abroad to maintain food production. Dawson and Thompson (2024) confirmed that the migration of Bahamians during the era of The Contract economically and socially impacted The Bahamas, as many sent home savings that enabled the purchase of homes and the launch of businesses. The narrative of Bahamian emigration was highlighted in the memoir of the late Sir Sidney Poitier (2009), detailing his humble beginnings in the southern Bahamas, and his journey to becoming an Academy Award-winning actor, director, philanthropist, and diplomat. The perspectives of Poitier (2009), Perez (2019), and Dawson and Thompson (2024) further confirmed that emigration was common in The Bahamas and that migrants remain connected to the nation and seeking educational and professional opportunities to be all that they can be, perspectives that parallel Maslow's (1943) fifth level of needs: self-actualization.

The literature review confirms that Bahamian and other Caribbean leaders are aware that the brain drain has created workforce shortages across the region, impacting the delivery of healthcare, education, and other services. Researchers further confirm that leaders representing CARICOM member states have a desire to work collectively to reduce emigration (Galanis, 2019; Mukasa, 2020; Barribeau, 2021). While CARICOM (2023) and Brissett (2018) confirmed that currently there is no standard policy implemented by Caribbean governments individually or collectively to address skilled emigration, efforts have been made to develop a regional migration policy. This study further presents actionable strategies, if implemented, that can attract, retain, and regain high-skilled migration in The Bahamas and the Caribbean region.

The Mystery of Motivation

The American Psychological Association (2018) defines motivation as: (a) The impetus that gives purpose or direction to behavior and operates in humans at a conscious or unconscious level; (b) A person's willingness to exert physical or mental effort in pursuit of a goal or outcome; (c) The act or process of encouraging others to exert themselves in pursuit of a group or organizational goal.

Kast and Rosenzweig (1985) discussed that a motive is what prompts a person to act in a certain way or at least develop an inclination for a specific behavior, and Dessler (1986) believed that all motivation is ultimately derived from a tension that results when one or more of our essential needs are unsatisfied. The perspectives of Kast and Rosenzweig (1985) and Dessler (1986) were each developed on the foundation of Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation. Dohlman et al. (2019) and Rojas et al.

(2023) confirm that Maslow's theory remains relevant as a tool to understand people's motivation and as a framework to identify pivotal factors for immigrants making decisions to emigrate.

Examining Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs specific to the global brain drain notes that the factors that primarily influence migration include: (a) a need for personal security (level 2), (b) social acceptance (level 3), (c) a need for educational and professional opportunities (level 4), and (d) a need for self-actualization (level 5).

The desire for professional development, access to quality training, and higher standards of living align with Maslow's (1943) fifth level of needs, self-actualization—the desire to become everything one can be. As Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation provides a valuable framework for assessing high-skilled migrants, this study aimed to examine the motivation of Bahamian migrants by utilizing the authentic feelings, emotions, reflections or expressions (Tenny et al., 2022) of the migrants themselves.

Citizens, policymakers, and global financiers have discussed for decades the increase in high-skilled individuals eager to migrate to developed countries. This study aims to contribute to the global discussion on migration by examining the perceived motivations of Bahamian high-skilled migrants, providing a unique opportunity to examine Caribbean migration through the lens of natives of The Bahamas. Additionally, by examining the motivation of participants who represent a diverse range of ages, socioeconomic statuses, educational levels, and professions, the study expands on the perspectives of other researchers focused on migrants in the education or healthcare sectors.

Methods

The study was conducted by a native Bahamian who completed elementary and secondary education in The Bahamas before migrating to complete studies in the United States. The decision to study Bahamian migrants was sparked in part by Saloma (2019), who suggested that the challenges resulting from the brain drain are not insurmountable and can be overcome if policymakers and government leaders understand their nature more accurately. This study utilized a combination of data collection methods to close the gap in understanding Bahamian high skilled emigration, including inductive analysis of emigrant perspectives (Creswell, 2017).

Making use of open-ended questions, which do not provide participants with a predetermined set of answer choices (Cleland, 2017), I opted instead to develop research questions and subsequent interview and survey questions that allowed for analysis that captured each participant's authentic perspective. I created a formatted Excel spreadsheet to track participant recruitment, interview and survey responses, as well as thematic analysis to responses. Given the importance of migration to both The Bahamas and Caribbean region, each participant of this study was confirmed to be a native of The Bahamas and was given latitude to share their authentic perspectives as a participant in the Bahamian brain drain phenomenon. Three research questions (RQs) were formulated to address the purpose of this study:

RQ1: What do the respondents believe motivates the Bahamian brain drain?

RQ2: How do the respondents believe the brain drain impacts The Bahamas?

RQ3: What do the respondents believe The Bahamas can do to mitigate the brain drain?

The study's thematic descriptions ensured that future readers understood the predominant and essential themes that characterized the phenomenon under investigation. Validity and reliability were established through prolonged engagement with each of the 20 interview participants including recorded interviews, where transcripts were reviewed and confirmed for accuracy before final data analysis. Additionally, each of the over 250 anonymous survey participants were able to review survey responses and comments before final submission. The study received IRB approval from Columbia International University.

Participants

As oral traditions are significant in Bahamian culture, it was critical for this study to interview at least 20 participants, allowing for the examination of authentic feelings, emotions, reflections, and expressions (Tenny et al., 2022). Since Bahamian migrants are not a monolith, this study sought the perspectives of over 250 diasporic Bahamians via an anonymous survey. Each of the study's interview and survey participants confirmed completion of high school in The Bahamas and had migrated globally for academic, professional, and other reasons, representing a diversity of age ranges, socioeconomic statuses, educational levels, and professions. Each participant was identified based on their willingness, availability, and technical capacity to share their lived experience with the motivation and impact of the Bahamian brain drain. Participants were also recruited through referrals from others to participate in both the interview and the anonymous survey segments of this study—that is, by snowball sampling. Table 1 details the some of the educational background and demographics of the interview participants of the study while Tables 2 and 3 provide the other demographic information for all

participants in the study, including interviewees and survey respondents.

Table 1
Demographics and Highest Level of Completed Education

ID#	Age Range	Gender	Highest Level Education
1	Over 70	Female	Master's
2	Over 60	Female	Associates
3	Over 40	Female	Bachelor's
4	Over 60	Female	Associate's
5	Over 40	Female	Bachelor's
6	Over 30	Male	Master's
7	Over 20	Female	Master's
8	Over 40	Male	Bachelor's
9	Over 20	Male	Bachelor's
10	Over 70	Male	Doctorate
11	Over 70	Female	Bachelor's
12	Over 40	Male	Bachelor's
13	Over 50	Female	Master's
14	Over 60	Female	Master's
15	Over 60	Male	Master's
16	Over 50	Male	Bachelor's
17	Over 60	Male	Master's
18	Over 60	Female	Master's
19	Over 60	Female	Master's
20	Over 50	Female	Bachelor's

Table 2
Current Locations

Participant Location	Percent
United States	64.7%
United Kingdom	11.8%
Continental Europe	10.3%
Middle East	6.2%
Canada	3.3%
Caribbean	1.5%
Africa	1.5%
Asia	0.5%
Central and South America	0.2%

Table 3
Participant Professions

Profession	Percent
Business / Finance / Economics	24.1%
Engineering / Technology / Computer	21.0%
Energy / Aerospace / Mining	11.8%
Education	10.3%
Healthcare	7.4%
Government	5.9%
Hospitality	5.9%
Construction / Architecture	4.4%
Entrepreneur	4.4%
Entertainment	2.3%
Agriculture / Fisheries / Environmental	2.0%

Results

RQ1 – Motivation of the Bahamian Brain Drain

The significant themes developed from responses to RQ1: *What do the respondents believe motivates the Bahamian brain drain?* Major themes in the interview participants responses included:

- The opportunity to become all that I can be!
- Access to academic programs and careers not available in The Bahamas.
- Better compensation and career advancement.
- Access to careers without political connections, biases or nepotism.
- I was encouraged by my parents and moving away allows me to make them proud.
- Freedom to explore socially and culturally without criticism or emotional harm.

As one can see, these responses to RQ1 align with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs levels 2, 3, 4, and 5 (see Table 4).

Table 4
:Motivation of the Bahamian Brain Drain Analysis

What motivates migration?	Alignment with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The desire to be all that I can become, without limits. • Access to academic programs not available in the Bahamas or Caribbean region. • Exposure to emerging technology and access to new fields of study or a career. • The desire to make use of academic skill and gain a competitive advantage and access to skill and expertise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-actualization (level 5): accomplishing all of what an individual is capable of. • Access to educational, athletic, or professional opportunities (level 4). • Social belonging (level 3): respect from family, social groups, and community.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement with different cultures. • Broaden perspectives and improve my quality of life. • Even if you try to return after graduation overseas, you are told too often you are overqualified. • Limited professional network locally as globally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-actualization (level 5): accomplishing all of what an individual is capable of. • Access to educational, athletic, or professional opportunities (level 4). • Social belonging (level 3): respect from family, social groups, and desired community.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience social interests that do not exist or are under supported in The Bahamas. • Freedom to exist and not be a disappointment. • Seeking opportunities elsewhere, as there is nothing new coming to The Bahamas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-actualization (level 5): accomplishing all of what an individual is capable of. • Access to educational, athletic, or professional opportunities (level 4). • Social belonging (level 3): respect from family, social groups, and desired community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going off to school is a rite of passage and is an aspect of Bahamian culture. • Most of us leave to study and stay abroad to use our degree and make use of our parent's investment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-actualization (level 5): accomplishing all of what an individual is capable of. • Access to educational, athletic or professional opportunities (level 4) • Social belonging (level 3): respect from family, social groups, and desired community.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to athletic training not available in The Bahamas, preparing for global competition. • The capacity to evolve an explore new careers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-actualization (level 5): accomplishing all of what an individual is capable of. • Access to educational, athletic, or professional opportunities (level 4).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom from abuse or community issues. • The ability to excel without nepotism, freedom from political, romantic, and social prosecution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social belonging (level 3): respect from family, social groups, and desired community. • Physical and Emotional safety (level 2).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fulfillment of God's plan for my life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-actualization (level 5): accomplishing all of what an individual is capable of.

Galanis (2019) assessed that the imperatives of national development demand the creation within 21st-century Bahamas of an atmosphere for Bahamians educated abroad to return, make a positive contribution, and develop meaningful careers. While the

migration of Bahamians was not a contemporary challenge, it has consistently proven an essential barrier to technological innovation and national development (Sands et al., 2020).

RQ2 – Perceived Impact of the Bahamian Brain Drain

Many of the perspectives shared aligned with (Roberts-Kasmally, 2011) who confirmed that the migration of skilled and educated Caribbean citizens was significant, resulting in an imbalance in the regional workforce. The central themes developed from the responses to RQ2: *How do respondents believe the brain drain has impacted The Bahamas?* Major themes in the responses included:

- The loss of nurses, teachers, and other professionals strains public services.
- Over-dependency on expatriate professionals.
- Inequities that limit women and disabled individuals to lead in all sectors.
- Limited academic and career accommodations for disabilities.
- An aging workforce with antiquated practices.
- Limited opportunities for non-traditional careers.
- Professionals with a global education considered overqualified and overlooked.
- Stagnant professional growth for those unable to study globally.
- Limited of opportunities for the diaspora to contribute to national development.

Participant responses to RQ2 confirmed, as Barriteau (2021) observed in developing countries, that “brain drain will happen; we can’t prevent it, as they take the crème de la crème- our brightest and best, and our societies cannot absorb the impact” (p. 3), creating a hardship for organizations that need relevant skills (Johnson, 2009). Gaining awareness of the perceived impact of the Bahamian brain drain can support national development by providing strategies to enhance domestic human capital and improve labor supply through the engagement of Bahamian diasporic skills.

RQ3 – Suggested Strategies to Mitigate the Bahamian Brain Drain

Roberts-Kasmally (2011), Joshua et al. (2014) and Jeffers-Knight (2015) each confirmed the need for leaders to develop and implement strategies for mitigating the brain drain. Responding to RQ3: What do the respondents believe The Bahamas can do to mitigate the brain drain? Major themes in participants responses included:

- Expanding national academic degree and certification programs.
- Expanding public sector bonding scholarships and grants that include technical fields.
- Improving career counseling services for public and private sector opportunities.
- Creating paid internships that secure jobs after graduation.
- Increase awareness of careers in the manufacturing, construction, and agriculture sectors.
- Developing public sector recruitment and retention programs to counter the global pull.
- Improve compensation, professional development, and advancement opportunities.
- Introducing students from ages 14 to public sector roles.

Former Bahamian Ambassador C. A. Smith (Bahamas Guide, 2019b) and Galanis (2019) each discussed how having access to affordable education and professional advancement opportunities are push factors that drive human capital away. Galanis (2019) further challenged national leaders to take steps to encourage the brightest and best diasporic Bahamians to return to the country of their birth after obtaining an education abroad. When Bahamians, regardless of their location, intentionally engage and share ideas, the country can return to its rich legacy that benefits all Bahamians. Florino (2021), narrating the

perspectives of Bahamian artist and gallery curator John Cox, challenged and encouraged a shift by Bahamian leaders to provide opportunities for diasporic Bahamians to return and contribute.

Participants of this study shared a desire for normalizing a more equitable view of Bahamian leadership. The Royal Bahamas Police Force (2025) appointed Assistant Commissioner of Police Shanta Knowles as the first female Commissioner of Police, thereby demonstrating one aspect of The Bahamas' normalization of women in leadership roles. While Bahamian women have led politically, culturally, and in many social sectors of Bahamian society for decades, there is a need for more women to lead alongside their male counterparts in non-traditional sectors. Participants of this study shared perspectives that aligned with Rencher (2022), who reported “our brightest and best students have been steered based on the trajectory of our secondary school system to want leadership, managerial or scientific roles” (p. 159)

Strategies to attract, retain, and regain Bahamian talent must include fostering a relationship of trust with the diaspora, by identifying goals, mapping diaspora location and skills, maintaining communication, and ultimately encouraging contributions to national development (Newland & Plaza, 2013). Roberts-Kasmally (2011) challenged the Caribbean to harness and utilize the intellectual capacity of their diaspora. Similarly, during the Second Annual Caribbean Formal Affair, former Dominican Republic Ambassador Roberto Saladin offered that “the next frontier of growth for the Caribbean is the pool of manpower that lives outside the region, but is being trained and getting rich, and can potentially give back” (Bahamas Guide, 2019a, para. 11). When emigrants and their descendants

create and maintain engagement with their countries of origin or ancestry, this can take the form of business development and job creation, direct investment, and the strengthening of social and professional networks (Lacarte et al., 2023).

Discussion: Creating Talent Alignment Opportunities

As migration plays a pivotal role in the cultural identity of The Bahamas and the Caribbean region, retaining talent in-country and attracting those who have emigrated requires intentionally exploring and launching economically sustainable industries. Participants of this study confirmed having access to global opportunities in a diversity of disciplines, many of which do not exist, or only exist on smaller scales remains a factor in emigration. Strategies to retain and even regain the Bahamian skilled workforce must consider:

- Creating job boards to socialize public sector openings.
- Expanding scholarships, on-the-job training, job shadowing programs.
- Expanding existing regional programs that encourage cultural exchange for professionals.
- Developing mentorship programs supporting a diversity of sectors.

Reversing the Bahamian brain drain and encouraging a brain gain requires intentionally including the Bahamian diaspora. The concept of brain gain or brain circulation, encompasses a practical continuum that occurs when students or workers who have studied or have been employed abroad do not return home immediately but rather return after acquiring advanced learning and skills to their country of origin (Teney, 2021). The participants of this study confirmed that Bahamian leaders

need to serve as a connecting rod to mitigate the brain drain, as no country can experience sustainable development without giving adequate attention to human capacity building and a mitigation to the loss of skilled manpower (Joshua et al., 2014). By assessing existing skills, Bahamian leaders gain an understanding of the existing capacity to streamline processes, reach new markets, and provide seamless citizen experiences. Recruiting and retaining Bahamian talent should include:

- Defining roles that cover key operational areas and strategic goals.
- Developing salary structures that support equity with appropriate oversight.
- Creating partnerships with credit unions that offer financial literacy training.
- Identifying and nurturing potential leaders for a sustainable leadership pipeline.
- Incentivizing continual skill development and apprenticeship programs.
- Expanding employee recognition and development opportunities.

Strategies to retain and regain Bahamian talent must also include regulating programs that support continuous skill development that the existing and emerging needs of the country and include Bahamians from the diaspora to sustain the economy and foster national development.

Conclusion

The perspectives of this study were gained from 20 interviews and anonymous surveys completed by over 250 native Bahamians residing globally. Each of this study's perspectives confirms that the motivation of Bahamian high-skilled migration largely aligns Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Diasporic Bahamians participating in this study confirmed the need for personal security (level 2), social acceptance (level 3), access to educational and professional opportunities or self-esteem (level 4), and the need for self-actualization (level 5), to become all that they can become. By sharing what motivated their migration, participants of this study also confirmed being supporters of Bahamian national development.

Researcher Reflection

Growing up in The Bahamas, I recall staring at the ocean and wondering what I would become. Today I am a researcher, and by connecting with the participants of this study, I proudly confirm that we diasporic Bahamians maintain strong community ties back home and are proud of the skills we have acquired. Each participant further shared a willingness to support Bahamian national development and mirror the sentiments of the former Prime Minister of The Bahamas, the late Sir Lynden Pindling, who opined, “we believe that we can contribute to a better international understanding by sharing our experiences” (Bahamas Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021, para. 4).

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