

# Transforming the Study Abroad Experience into a Collective Priority

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**T**he need for more U.S. students to go abroad is now proclaimed in academic mission statements, business associations' manifestos, and even federal legislation. Gaining the knowledge, skills, and attitudes through an international experience is no longer just the interest of individual students. It has now become a priority of the collective. Why, then, has study abroad emerged as a national priority? There may be myriad explanations, but we can certainly all agree on one: globalization. The world is becoming "flat," as Thomas Friedman argued. With the explosion in communications technology and the multinationalization of production, we recognize the importance of an educated workforce becoming more knowledgeable about other cultures as essential so that the United States remains economically competitive. In the aftermath of 9/11, the Iraq war, and Abu Ghraib, we regard sending students abroad as one of the most effective diplomatic tools, both to improve our damaged reputation in the short term and to help resolve intractable international conflicts in the long run. In terms of the environment, health, and poverty, we know that finding global solutions to the toughest problems facing our planet depends upon armies of individuals capable of cooperating across borders.

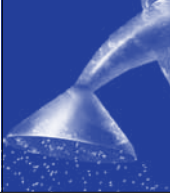
But in the face of this dramatic growth and these sweeping changes across our society, are we in fact succeeding in developing a mass of global citizens? Are our students meeting the challenges of globalization and our priorities as a nation?

## RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBALIZATION

Let us begin with the bad news. The percentage of U.S. students studying abroad lags far behind that of most highly industrialized countries. As a percentage of all U.S. students, study abroad participation has actually not increased significantly over the last decade. Our students also tend to study abroad for ever shorter durations,

especially as compared to their Asian and European counterparts. Fewer of our students succeed at even attaining the minimum goal of study abroad—the acquisition of intercultural competencies. Most disturbingly, while we witness substantial growth in the number of students going to centers of globalization, such as China or India, to areas of national security interest, such as the Middle East, and to countries most adversely affected by the global economy, such as in Africa and Latin America, the vast majority of students continue to choose to spend their semesters abroad in affluent European nations. Our study abroad pedagogy indeed still follows in the tradition of the European grand tour, whereby aristocratic students traveled to European capitals to supplement their liberal arts educations and to accumulate the treasures of the "Old World." Where we have succeeded in study abroad is extending its access and attraction beyond the upper economic tiers of our student bodies.

In the course of this democratization, however, study abroad has also experienced what I would label "massification." Too many of our students, if anecdotal information serves, express greater interest in filling their passports with stamps of different countries than in learning the languages of the nations in which they are studying. Undergraduates show more facility at finding the best bargains for travel and shopping—not bad skills in and of themselves—than at creating networks of peers from different cultures with whom they may end up collaborating. Many still see study abroad as a semester off, a break from the grueling demands of higher education in the Age of Globalization. They may, in fact, seek in the study abroad experience an escape from the more complicated implications of globalization, including a more competitive job market, the fading of their own national identity as exceptional, as well as effects of terrorist threats, environmental degradation, and the plight of those most suffering in the world.



## FOSTERING GLOBAL CITIZENS

Fortunately, not everything is so bleak. While the United States falls behind its European and Asian counterparts in deploying international education for purposes of workforce development and national economic competitiveness, it stands in front in using the study abroad experience to instill in students a sense of civic responsibility and action. Across the country, study abroad programs are emerging in developing countries that either encourage or require volunteer or internship work in community service organizations. More and more study abroad programs include research projects that pertain explicitly to environmental, health, and social problems afflicting the most vulnerable regions of the world. Civic engagement has even entered into our traditional “island” programming in Western capitals where one finds American students volunteering and interning, and, as a result, having a positive impact on those locales. The American zeal for civic life that Tocqueville described and the call for U.S. higher education to strengthen democratic participation that traces back to Jefferson now extend beyond our regions and borders. Our students are not merely striving to improve the commonwealth of their own country, but of the entire globe.

Alas, while the number of these types of opportunities grows, they still constitute the minority. Why is that? In part, this lack of civically oriented study abroad programs can be ascribed to American identity. Our strong sense of individualism has, of course, filtered down to higher education, which emphasizes satisfying the desires of individual students over meeting the needs of our society. Moreover, if we are to believe a common lament, the increased cost of higher education has turned students into customers who are treating their college education as a product that they have purchased. The culture at U.S. universities is thus not well suited toward

the expansion of knowledge and skills in service of the public good. Study abroad offices are largely self-supporting, which equally compromises our efforts to create programs conducive to the development of global citizens. Study abroad offices feel tremendous pressure from central administrations to meet numerical goals. This forces them both to intensify their own marketing efforts and to rely on an emerging study abroad industry replete with providers endeavoring to exceed their own bottom lines and turn a profit using amateur Madison Avenue techniques. So even when the curricula of our study abroad programs contain greater exposure to global issues, increased opportunities for civic engagement, and more skill development aimed toward solving global problems, we find ourselves pushing these loftier goals onto students against their primary expectations for travel, adventure, and general pleasure-seeking.

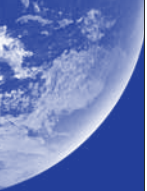
## PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE FORCES OF GLOBALIZATION

How, then, can colleges and universities militate against the business of study abroad and attract students to participate in programs that might better prepare them for the forces of globalization? In editing *The Handbook of Practice and Research in Study Abroad: Higher Education and the Quest for Global Citizenship*, a volume conceived by some of my comments above, I have identified several recommendations, explicit and implicit, from higher education administrators, business leaders, and study abroad practitioners from across the country and the world. Let me mention a few that I regard as helpful to those of us navigating our way through this exciting period of internationalizing our campuses.

First, we need to underscore the American Council on Education’s recommendations that are already underway at several colleges and universities across the United States: senior administrators should

promote the need to internationalize their campuses as a means of preparing their students to meet the challenges of globalization. Presidents and chancellors must advocate for study abroad to external constituencies, including legislators, businesses, the local community, and donors as crucial to workforce development and economic competitiveness of their states and regions. Chief academic officers, for their part, need to champion study abroad internally to deans, department heads, faculty, and students as a central component of the process of internationalization. With the help of our senior leaders, we should witness continued growth in study abroad in a way that serves the needs of our communities here and abroad.

Second, we should articulate a vision for study abroad, as for global learning more broadly, that is aligned with the type of institution in general, and the values of the specific institution in particular. For example, a research university might tie study abroad to its need to train graduates in skills that make them capable of working alongside other academics in international settings. A land-grant institution might connect study abroad’s focus on global civic engagement to the university’s commitment to transfer knowledge and help improve the standard of living in the region, state, and even across the world. Nursing schools may advertise the need to prepare nurses who can spend time assisting others around the globe and also become more adept at working with diverse cultures at home. Liberal arts colleges may link global learning to the development of a moral citizenry that has the critical capacity, cultural sensitivity, and experiences to make a difference through their graduates’ lives. If a particular university values, say, individual creativity or human rights, these might be integrated into study abroad as well. The principles must be broad, so as to provide sufficient room for grassroots development from all university constituencies. Individual



schools and departments should be encouraged to develop their own programming based on their unique needs within the broader framework outlined from central administrators. Individual faculty should be motivated to do the same. We should even encourage students to assist in developing study abroad programming based on their own engagement experiences and interests within or outside the institution. By envisioning from above but cultivating development from below, not only will more students study abroad, but our programming will be better oriented toward meeting our collective values and goals. University partnerships can also be identified within this context, as well those partnerships that go beyond study abroad, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and businesses. We can make a much more convincing case to donors who are considering supporting study abroad, and we will have a better idea how to fund study abroad from limited resources. In fact, when a vision is spelled out, students will enthusiastically get with this “team spirit.”

Third, growth of global-citizenship-oriented study abroad depends upon its integration into the rest of the curriculum. We often complain that our students land in their study abroad destinations expert on where to find the lowest-priced drinking holes and the best places to access WiFi, but with faint knowledge about their host country’s culture, history, geography, or politics. At the same time, students return from some of the most effective study abroad experiences finding neither coursework for them to take in order to deepen their knowledge, nor engagement opportunities for them to continue developing their civic sensibilities. The antidote to the former is a haphazard rush to develop predeparture courses linked explicitly to individual study abroad programs, only to be hamstrung by logistical challenges, especially since such courses require extra-

early application deadlines, and additional financial resources for their instruction. The solution to the latter is essentially nonexistent. I would, however, recommend colleges and universities take a different tack and follow many of their peers who show less concern for linking specific predeparture, study abroad, and post-experience coursework, and more concern for ensuring the existence and expansion of general coursework that exposes students to global systems, area studies, and world language training; with affording them a recognized global pathway that appears on their official college transcript; and with providing them a cultural milieu whereby faculty invoke more international examples as a pedagogical tool even in their courses that do not inhere international content. When we integrate study abroad into the curriculum, participation levels will increase in a direction that most of us will find meaningful.

Fourth, study abroad programming must intentionally engage students. One of the most important lessons in higher education in the last ten years has certainly been that the more engaged students are in and outside the classroom, the better they perform academically. George Kuh, founder of the National Survey of Student Engagement, who famously proposed this idea, has correctly identified study abroad as a model of engaged education. Living abroad by itself is, however, insufficient, as we know painfully well that students can virtually isolate themselves from the culture at large, living with other Americans and frequenting only places catering to American students. Even living in “home stays,”—sometimes touted as the hallmark of a seriously engaged study abroad program—does not adequately meet the global learning goals of study abroad today. Students need menus of accredited courses at foreign institutions that actively help them achieve particular global learning skill sets. They need research opportunities

that both teach them how other countries conduct research and facilitate the creation of international teamwork that they can develop over their lives. They need opportunities to participate in civic projects to learn how to work alongside people from across the world to cultivate the habits of mind and action that will promote further engagement in the future.

Fifth, colleges and universities should strive to make quality study abroad programming accessible to everyone. Accessibility is not merely a moral issue but also a practical one. Currently, too few science, engineering, and agriculture students study abroad, when we may need them most to graduate with international experience. Males study abroad in significantly lower rates than females, in part due to the entrenched narrative of study abroad in the United States as an extension of a kind of Swiss finishing school that has little to do with serious academic work. If we do not rewrite this story and get more men abroad, we face a serious gap among our graduates as compared to other rich countries. Most importantly, the percentage of minority students studying abroad does come close to approximating their overall representation at colleges and universities. The fact that African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans too infrequently study abroad may relate to the significant expense of the study abroad experience. It may also be attributed to cultural fears, family anxieties, and, as we have learned, the need for greater pastoral care in preparing these students for the experience. Their disproportionately low representation may also have to do with how we have sold the study abroad experience. Whatever the reasons, these low participation rates among minorities not only widens the academic achievement gap so many have worked so hard to narrow, but also fails to meet our collective need of preparing as many people as possible for the global challenges confronting us all.

## PARADIGMS IN STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMMING

Finally, we should rethink our traditional student learning paradigms in our study abroad programming. Over the last decade, study abroad has made great strides in integrating itself into the undergraduate curriculum. It has, in fact, adopted many of the student-centered learning models that predominate our campuses. Study abroad is setting goals, establishing student-centered learning activities in support of them, and matching all of these with assessment tools. Study abroad has adopted the actual learning categories of home curricula, including knowledge, skills, and attitudes, by simply modifying them with the word “global.” Unfortunately, the grafting of the learning models used at our own universities does not always work very well in some of the study abroad programming we most wish to expand.

A wonderful development in international education has been the spawning of deep partnerships between U.S. colleges and universities and poorer higher education institutions and NGOs around the world. These new types of partnerships should be applauded, but they cannot always be expected to replicate our own student learning models. They may have neither the infrastructure nor the resources. Their principle business, as is in the case of the NGOs, may not be the development of students. To expect these institutions to mirror our own paradigms may be unreasonable at best and imperialistic at worst. That is, we should be mindful that the development of the U.S. student in these contexts may come across to our partners as yet once again about the development of the colonial subject, the American student, at the expense of those students and citizens in the countries with which we are partnering. If our aim is to develop global citizens, we must understand that the experience of studying at a university in a developing country may

not be only about the formal acquisition of knowledge delivered in the classroom but also the holistic experience of studying at that institution, including adapting to its academic culture and the institution’s limited resources. With regards to NGOs, the U.S. student may have to be decentered and integrated into organizations trying to fulfill their main goal, the development of the community. In this experience, too, we can still expect deep learning to occur. Indeed, what justifies the conveyance of college and university credit may have to be reconsidered in light of these new types of partnerships. If we fail to show flexibility here, we will fail to attract our students to these destinations and programs.

More students than ever are studying abroad. In fewer than fifteen years, participation has risen over 300 percent, from under 75,000 students in 1994 to nearly a quarter million last year. As a result, more of our young people are graduating with greater knowledge about the world and able to move within it with greater maturity. Yet as much as we can laud these accomplishments, we should not become self-satisfied. Our times demand setting the study abroad bar even higher. Study abroad can now be one of the main educational vehicles to reach what our country and world need most: masses of individuals capable of understanding, analyzing and actually helping to ameliorate the challenging problems confronting humanity. ■

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