

**Study and Learning Abroad:  
Integration with and Support for Internationalizing Curriculum and Learning**

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**Paper Summary**

This paper starts from the assumption that study abroad, although widely misunderstood, is growing rapidly and offers huge potential value for undergraduate education in the United States. The paper identifies fundamental problems that currently hinder the acceptance of study abroad on American campuses and the integration of study abroad into undergraduate curricula. Interest in learning about other countries, other cultures and other languages is growing among pre-college students. Growth in study abroad participation by undergraduate students and a simultaneous decline in language learning are noted. The paper then makes the case, not only for providing American students with international knowledge and first-hand inter-cultural experience, but for making study and learning abroad a key strategy for attaining that end. Essential components of the strategy include the integration of study and learning abroad throughout the undergraduate curriculum and recognition that internationalization of the on-campus curriculum and expansion of opportunity to study abroad are mutually reinforcing and equally essential components for achieving overall educational objectives.

**Challenges and Trends**

Among American students today, the absence of fundamental information about the world and the other peoples with whom we share it is appalling. Studies, reports and anecdotal stories about Americans' lack of global, cultural and linguistic awareness

abound. Citizens 18-24 years old are as deficient as other population groups in these important areas. It is not merely ironic and embarrassing; it is dangerous and potentially disastrous that the citizens of the world's only superpower are frightfully ignorant about the rest of the world. If the United States and its huge educational system continues to permit students to succeed in elementary and secondary school as well as in baccalaureate degree programs without assuring that they have at least basic knowledge about other lands, political systems, cultures, peoples, languages and beliefs, the risks to American national security and the United States' world leadership are immense.

More and better data about social studies learning, cultural studies, language teaching and the study and learning abroad activities undertaken by American elementary and secondary schools need to be gathered and made available. Further, there is a need to establish receptivity among younger students to the study of languages and cultures. The adoption of the proposed foreign language standards for elementary and secondary schools can be an important step toward this end.

Widely held misconceptions about the importance and potential effectiveness of study and learning abroad continue on American campuses. In spite of these, undergraduate study abroad participation has mushroomed in recent years. More American students are earning transferable credits by enrolling in overseas programs than ever before. This number has more than tripled (from under 50,000 to over 150,000) since 1985.

The inexorable annual increase in the number of Americans studying and learning abroad can and should be seized upon by individuals interested in broadening language acquisition and internationalizing curricula in this country. Study and learning abroad

can be a powerful tool in the arsenal of those who seek to expand internationalization efforts on American campuses.

Although there is a need for more and better data reporting on study abroad, the paper reports the existing statistics to describe important trends. These include an increase in student participation, a growth in the diversity of destinations, and shifts in the areas of academic interest. There is, however, an alarming decline in the amount of foreign language being studied by American undergraduates. This decline is reflected in the study abroad data as well.

Today's study abroad participants take advantage of a wider variety of destinations and pursue a richer diversity of courses than in previous years. The percentage of all study abroad students enrolled in programs in Europe has declined from nearly 80% to under 65% during the past fifteen years. Programs in Africa and Oceania have experienced exponential growth during that time.

Participation in foreign language courses by American undergraduates has stagnated during recent years. Enrollment numbers remain very small in less commonly taught languages, while over half of the undergraduates taking language courses are enrolled in Spanish. There is a potentially significant role for study abroad to play in reversing this trend.

As participation has increased, the kinds of study abroad programs available to institutions and to students have also grown. Fewer of today's students opt for a full academic year's experience; many more of them participate in shorter-term programs during a single semester, term or summer.

Despite these increases in the number of students who study abroad each year, the percentage of all undergraduate students who study abroad in a given year remains very low. About 1% of all undergraduates (about 3% of those enrolled in four-year degree programs) participate annually. A reliable system for collecting and sharing annual information about the numbers and percentages of baccalaureate degree recipients who present credits earned abroad toward the satisfaction of their degree requirements is needed.

### **Developments on Campuses**

With these concepts established, the paper looks at recent developments on campuses. It documents the need for outcomes assessment and presents examples of recent projects intended to address shortcomings in this area. Each project discussed is designed to be replicable by other institutions interested in working along similar lines.

In order to inform decisions about the value and appropriate role of study and learning abroad in undergraduate educational programs, reliable objective data are needed about learning outcomes. Projects aimed at production of that information are now being implemented. It is hoped that these will provide not only preliminary information but, more importantly at this stage, models for other researchers and practitioners to follow.

Other important projects intended to integrate study abroad into undergraduate curricula and majors have been funded and are underway. These will be closely watched during the coming several months and years.

The paper then identifies five critical areas for development and strengthening in order to improve access to study abroad programs and to assure their relevance and

effectiveness in curriculum internationalization. It moves from this to the development and presentation of a suggested role for the federal government, in partnership with colleges and universities, to advance a national goal of increasing this nation's knowledge of the world, its languages and cultures by tripling participation in effective study abroad programs during this decade.

### **Barriers**

Significant barriers to widening student access to study and learning abroad remain. These prevent participation by large numbers of students and need to be addressed. They include:

- A. Availability. Study abroad program costs can hinder students from participating.
- B. Choices. Students in all majors should have a wide variety of quality options.
- C. Curricular Integration. Effective preparation and advising for enrollment abroad depends upon full and accurate information about programs, courses, approaches, standards and expectations.
- D. Institutional Responsibility. Matters of quality, equivalence, insurance, responsibility, health, safety and security need to be taken seriously by American institutions that send students abroad.
- E. Quality and Impact Evaluation. Institutions, consortia and accrediting bodies should join together to establish guidelines for good practices.

### **Addressing Barriers**

To address these concerns, the authors suggest the creation of a new partnership between the federal government and higher education by means of a program that will make available up to \$100 million annually in a study abroad support program intended

to expand study abroad by reducing barriers and developing program options. The goal is to raise study abroad participation to 25% of college and university graduates within this decade. Funds would be available for scholarships and for program development for institutions having clear study abroad growth goals and commitment to reducing barriers to participation.