



**Strengthening Study Abroad:  
Recommendations for Effective Institutional Management for  
Presidents, Senior Administrators, and Study Abroad Professionals**

Report of NAFSA's Task Force on Institutional Management of Study Abroad  
January 2008

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## We commend this report to you . . .

*Dear Colleagues,*

The growth of study abroad—an integral part of any campus internationalization effort—brings with it new challenges for presidents, senior administrators, and study abroad professionals. Study abroad is an integral part of your efforts to provide the highest quality educational experience for students at your institution. Many of us expect substantial, additional growth in the coming years.

Like any other rapidly expanding activity, study abroad needs the attention of top campus leaders to ensure that it is integrated into the academic program; operates in a fashion that is consistent with sound business practices related to contracting, risk management, and accountability; and serves the needs of students. Getting that balance right is ultimately the responsibility of institutional leadership.

The management of study abroad goes beyond the study abroad or international office to encompass other facets of the university, including academic departments, registrars, university counsel, and other key stakeholders. Integration and communication across the campus are vital to the success of study abroad programs. In light of these challenges, NAFSA's Task Force on Institutional Management of Study Abroad has produced guidelines that will help you facilitate discussion of effective institutional management of study abroad on your campus.

Sincerely,



Marlene M. Johnson  
Executive Director and CEO  
NAFSA: Association of International Educators

*On behalf of:*

American Association of Community Colleges

American Association of State Colleges and Universities

American Council on Education

Association of American Universities

National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities

National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges

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# *NAFSA Task Force on Institutional Management of Study Abroad*

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# *Introduction and Overview*

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The Task Force on Institutional Management of Study Abroad was formed by NAFSA: Association of International Educators to recommend guidelines for the effective management of study abroad, a key element in campus internationalization that is increasingly viewed as an essential component of the education of today's college graduates. Growth and change in study abroad have brought significant opportunities and challenges.

## **Study Abroad Is a Public Good**

Study abroad programs provide opportunities for learning that are critical to the education of American college students and, over the long term, to the ability of the United States to lead responsibly, collaborate abroad, and compete effectively in the global arena. Such learning includes foreign language skills, cross-cultural understanding, and an appreciation of our diverse and interconnected world—essential tools of citizenship and leadership in the 21st century.

## **The Challenge of Growth in Study Abroad**

In the past decade, the number of students studying abroad for credit each year has grown from 84,000 to more than 220,000, and is poised to grow at an even faster rate in the coming years. American students recognize the importance—indeed, the necessity—of an education that is global in scope.

In 2005, the congressionally and federally appointed Lincoln Commission issued recommendations that set an ambitious goal: within the next decade, one million American students will study abroad annually in quality programs around the globe. Members of Congress are coming together around that vision. As of the writing of this report, the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act has been passed by the House of Representatives and is awaiting consideration in the Senate. The legislation enjoys strong support from Congress, the higher education and educational exchange communities, and citizens across the country.

Despite this momentum and a widespread recognition among the American public of the importance and the educational value of study abroad, higher education institutions vary substantially in the degree to which they have committed to the advancement of study abroad as part of their internationalization efforts. At one end of the continuum are colleges and universities with long-established programs that are well integrated and relevant to both the general curriculum and the majors. A few institutions have even made study abroad a requirement for graduation. At the other end of the continuum, study abroad is still just an “option” that is not well supported, and may even be discouraged.

In this environment of rapid growth and change, study abroad professionals in vastly differing institutional contexts have worked diligently to develop and maintain quality programs that serve their students well and are effectively managed, academically rigorous, accessible, and safe. As study abroad continues to grow, and as demand for study abroad expands, it is the responsibility of institutional leadership to undertake a deliberate and proactive approach to developing and supporting this important component of the education of today's college students.

## **The Charge to the Task Force**

In August 2007, Ron Moffatt, president of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, commissioned the Task Force on Institutional Management of Study Abroad to recommend:

core principles, values, and behaviors for senior campus administrators to consider as they develop policies and practices to guide the management of the study abroad function.

The task force was formed at a time when certain study abroad program practices were in the news. The issues raised—the existence of potentially questionable financial arrangements between institutions and program providers and questionable credit-transfer policies, among others—will prove, the task force believes, to be limited in scope. But these issues do focus our attention on the rapid growth of study abroad, the increasing diversity of student needs, the challenge of integrating study abroad into all aspects of an institution, and the unique risk-management and quality-control issues inherent in study abroad.

The task force has focused its work primarily on undergraduate study abroad that carries academic credit. However, the basic principles of study abroad and the task force's recommendations easily apply to graduate student study abroad as well. For-credit study abroad experiences trigger the consideration of issues such as academic oversight, attention to the transfer of credit, and evaluation of study abroad experiences as credit toward graduation. Current trends suggest that the creativity and diversity of study abroad programming will expand further in the coming years. The task force also recognizes that a wide range of international learning experiences fall under the banner of "study abroad"; all can be valuable experiences that contribute to the global education of our graduates, and all require institutional oversight when facilitated, endorsed, or sponsored by an institution.

## **Study Abroad Program Providers Are Integral to the Field**

Task force discussions repeatedly reaffirmed the potential value of program providers. Program providers come in various forms and provide a wide variety and scope of services. They can be associated with home institution programs as well as programs sponsored by sister institutions, not-for-profit organizations, and for-profit companies.

Many institutions cannot offer a wide range of study abroad opportunities solely through their own programs. Consortium arrangements, programs run by other institutions, and programs offered by independent providers, even though they may raise monitoring and accountability issues, can broaden student options considerably, especially for students interested in locations off the beaten track and in particular academic specialties.

## **Institutional Management of Study Abroad**

There is great variety in the approach institutions take in developing study abroad opportunities for their students. Determining factors include the size of the institution, the range of majors that offer study

abroad opportunities, the mission of the school, financial considerations, and others. Indeed, diversity is one of the hallmarks of study abroad. There is no one “right” model to guide campus leaders seeking the best means to serve their students and the institution’s mission.

The task force believes that institutions should make a commitment to study abroad as a vital component of the undergraduate experience, provide the necessary infrastructure and resources to maintain high-quality study abroad programs, and conduct study abroad programs in a manner characterized by clear expectations and accountability. The task force also believes that the management of study abroad must hold service to students as the top priority and maintain a high degree of integrity in keeping with the institution’s mission and in its efforts to provide the highest quality educational experience for its students.

Attention, involvement, and commitment at the highest levels of an institution’s leadership are vital to the success and growth of study abroad. It is crucial that campus leaders act deliberately with respect to a set of specific challenges that virtually all institutions face: building institutional commitment, establishing a study abroad infrastructure, providing adequate resources, and ensuring clarity and accountability. It is on these broader issues—related to the institutional management of study abroad—that the task force focused its work.



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Vice President for Global Engagement and  
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# *Criteria for the Institutional Management of Study Abroad*

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## **Institutional Commitment**

1. Institutional planning has established and embedded study abroad as an integral element in the academic offerings of the institution.
2. A financially sustainable plan is in place to support the study abroad office.
3. Study abroad is integrated into the academic life of the institution.
4. Systems and processes are in place to provide institutional oversight.

## **Study Abroad Infrastructure**

5. There is a structured approach to program planning and a faculty-driven process for course approval and credit transfer.
6. Study abroad options are regularly updated to respond to academic opportunity and student need.
7. Clear institutional policies guide study abroad credit transfer.
8. Programs promote the health and safety of students studying abroad, and manage institutional risk.
9. Programs are regularly evaluated, and evaluation leads to improvements.

## **Adequate Resources**

10. The institution actively seeks and retains knowledgeable and experienced personnel to lead and operate the study abroad office.
11. Financial aid policies and fundraising practices encourage student participation in study abroad.
12. Policies and practices are in place that control the costs associated with study abroad programs.

## **Clarity and Accountability**

13. Critical information related to study abroad is communicated to all stakeholders.
14. Clear contracting and auditing procedures exist, including conflict-of-interest policies.

## **Institutional Commitment**

Most, if not all, institutions express support for the idea of study abroad, but for some there is a gap between words of support and the actual student experience. Structured planning and clear communication are essential in translating institutional commitment into actual student experience.

### **1. Institutional planning has established and embedded study abroad as an integral element in the academic offerings of the institution.**

If study abroad is a central element in an institution's mission—as it should be—planning must begin at the highest institutional level. Study abroad touches on many aspects of institutional life, and the success of a student's experience depends on cooperation and communication among several offices on campus.

Each institution, in accordance with its mission, should develop a coordinated vision for study abroad as a core component of its internationalization efforts. To be meaningful and sustainable, planning for study abroad must involve a wide array of institutional academic and nonacademic offices. In addition to the academic units, assistance from various academic support units (e.g., admissions, financial aid) becomes essential, as does the involvement of campus offices dedicated to travel, housing, risk assessment, health, and insurance, to name a few. Proper support for study abroad extends to providing adequate financial support and training about the interrelationships between a successful study abroad program and other campus services.

Study abroad must not be an island on campus. Leadership at the top levels on campus is essential to cultivating support for study abroad from academic leaders and faculty throughout the institution.

### **2. A financially sustainable plan is in place to support the study abroad office.**

Decisions about the financing of study abroad, both with respect to program administration and seeking funding from gifts, should be made in the planning stage. Many funding models exist. Support can come from tuition, special fees, low-cost bilateral exchange agreements, incentives negotiated with partner institutions of higher education, and fundraising, among other sources, but each institution must determine the model that best serves its students and is consistent with its unique context and academic mission.

Thinking about study abroad for the long term is crucial. Study abroad programs, like any program, benefit from being able to plan for the future based on a reliable financial plan. Year-to-year uncertainty is a handicap to program quality.

With respect to funding considerations, the study abroad office should be viewed as any other campus office or academic department and receive direct institutional support. However, some types of study abroad programs have unique cost features (e.g., preprogram advising by study abroad professionals, or extraordinary instructional, transportation, or field-support costs) that can justify the use of modest fees.

### **3. Study abroad is integrated into the academic life of the institution.**

Opportunities for study abroad must be incorporated into every aspect of the institution. Study abroad should be integrated into curricula and courses of study rather than appended

to them. The key role of faculty and academic advisers throughout the institution is discussed in a later section.

Each institution must also identify and address the barriers to participation in study abroad. Those barriers can be as simple as poor promotional efforts, unnecessarily rigid residency requirements, or conflicts with the academic calendar. Other barriers are more challenging to address, such as financial limitations, rigidities in the curriculum, or faculty indifference. Campus policies that inadvertently discourage study abroad should be changed, to the extent feasible.

An institution's commitment to diversity and inclusion should extend to study abroad. Institutions should offer a range of programs and make a deliberate effort to accommodate students from a variety of backgrounds, students with special needs, students of limited financial means, and students from a wide variety of majors. Ideally, the demographics of an institution's study abroad participants should reflect the demographics of its overall student body.

#### **4. Systems and processes are in place to provide institutional oversight.**

Institutional oversight requires a clear administrative mechanism for and assignment of accountability. In practice, the study abroad office and those offices that bring special governance, legal, financial, academic planning, and oversight perspectives share this responsibility.

Institutions should have open and transparent policies and processes for approving program participation in a manner consistent with regulations. This assures that programs are aligned with the institutional mission, academic requirements, risk-management policies, and the financial needs of the students and the university. These policies should be considered in faculty and administrative arenas and should be publicly available to students, faculty, program providers, and other stakeholders.

Ideally, because of the cross-departmental nature of study abroad, accountability must rest at an appropriately high level. The task force believes that linking the study abroad office to an academic office with institution-wide purview, that in turn reports to a senior campus administrator, is necessary to achieve such accountability.

## Study Abroad Infrastructure

The administrative infrastructure of study abroad should promote academic quality. It should also include program planning, review, and approval; predeparture advising; support during the study abroad experience; follow-up when the student returns to campus; and ongoing program assessment. A comprehensive view of high-quality study abroad as an academic experience is needed, not just a “program operations” function.

A solid infrastructure is characterized by a good fit between the academic thrust of the institution, the major courses of study, and the types of study abroad experiences that are available. Competent preprogram coordination on the part of the relevant campus offices is part of the infrastructure, as are contingency planning for emergencies or unforeseen problems and attention to program logistics and support. These are complex, cross-organizational responsibilities that demand oversight to ensure they are well coordinated.

### **5. There is a structured approach to program planning and a faculty-driven process for course approval and credit transfer.**

The important task of assessing the academic value of a study abroad program lies with the faculty. It requires a carefully developed approval process that can withstand normal institutional change (e.g., turnover among the faculty who approve courses).

A program approval process is only as good as the information it gathers. There are many ways to gather information (e.g., on-site visits, reports from on-site faculty, student feedback, documents that describe the programs and the courses associated with them, and past experience with the partner institutions). Judging specific cases requires institutions to use the appropriate combination of tools from such options to yield sufficient information.

Faculty commitment to the range of study abroad programs offered by the institution is essential. If the faculty are as committed to courses offered through a study abroad program as they are to those courses that are taught on their own campus, both the students and the institution will be well served. Consequently, senior campus administrators should seek to foster a strong sense of ownership of study abroad programs among the faculty.

### **6. Study abroad options are regularly updated to respond to academic opportunity and student need.**

Student and institutional needs are constantly changing. As the institution grows, and as faculty and student needs and interests evolve, the variety of study abroad options should change and expand to meet those needs. The institution needs an effective means of tracking these developments and anticipating opportunities in study abroad programming; regular reviews of the program portfolio are necessary.

Academic advisers must be knowledgeable about study abroad options available to their advisees and should actively educate the students about their choices.

### **7. Clear institutional policies guide study abroad credit transfer.**

Difficulties in this area arise from a lack of transparency or misunderstandings about the policies that govern the transfer of study abroad credit. And to make it more complex, policies on the transfer of credit from other institutions or programs vary widely.

Policies and procedures need to be established to ensure that transfer credit review is based on consideration of program substance and quality and the program's fit with the institution's academic program and curriculum. Prospective study abroad students should be made aware of the policies and procedures during the course of their application and preparation for study abroad, and copies of the policies and procedures should be readily available to them. Academic advisers also need to be aware of these, especially when advising students considering direct enrollment abroad.

**8. Programs promote the health and safety of students studying abroad, and manage institutional risk.**

Student health and safety is always of paramount importance. Institutional policies and procedures for risk management and crisis response should be in place for all study abroad programs, and their application should be regularly monitored.

At the institutional level, policies must be designed to sustain an effective health and safety approach for study abroad programs, consistent with the institution's risk tolerance. The task force discussed many methods to achieve this goal. One example is a cross-departmental health and safety review group. An institutional health and safety review group—independent of the study abroad office and reporting directly to a senior campus administrator—can further ensure that when students go abroad in the care of outside program providers, a proper review has been conducted.

At the program level, there is a need to ensure the implementation of institutional policies related to health and safety, the monitoring and supervision of programs in process, and the assessment of changing conditions and relevant responses. Institutional protocols for dealing with incidents or emergencies, if they arise, should also be established, including developing program exit strategies to be implemented when necessary.

At the individual level, study abroad professionals prepare students to make the most of their experience while avoiding unnecessary risk. This is a necessary component of all predeparture advising.

**9. Programs are regularly evaluated, and evaluation leads to improvements.**

A process for the regular evaluation of the institution's study abroad programs should be in place. Each institution should also monitor the policies and practices of its program providers and require that they, too, have regular evaluation measures in place. Program providers often have publicly available evaluation protocols that can assist an institution in evaluating its own programs.

Evaluations range in complexity and cost. From a quality perspective, institutions need an evaluation process that can alert them to program strengths and weaknesses at a level of specificity that facilitates the implementation of improvements.

## **Adequate Resources**

If study abroad is an essential element in an institution's offerings, it must be treated like any other unit and receive adequate resources. Such resources include adequate staffing, finances, space, and access to technology.

### **10. The institution actively seeks and retains knowledgeable and experienced personnel to lead and operate the study abroad office.**

Institutions must be willing to compete for experienced study abroad professionals. Inexperience and high turnover among the study abroad staff can quickly erode high-quality programming.

Experienced and responsible leadership is necessary for the success of any program or organization. It is important to appoint a person for the lead position in the study abroad office who has experience and knowledge across the range of issues identified in this report. Study abroad requires specialized knowledge to effectively manage the complex academic, programmatic, operational, and cross-cultural issues inherent in the field.

To be effective, the study abroad office needs productive working relationships with many other campus offices and the faculty. The head of the study abroad office should be a person who can gain and maintain respect throughout the institution.

Study abroad is an ever-changing field, with new program types, an increasing variety of nontraditional destinations, expanding participation by students and faculty, and a growing body of field-specific knowledge and theory. An investment in the ongoing training and development of study abroad professionals is crucial to ensuring high-quality programs.

### **11. Financial aid policies and fundraising practices encourage student participation in study abroad.**

Students' financial limitations often top the list of barriers to study abroad. Campus policies should facilitate access to study abroad for students with varying levels of financial means; study abroad should not be available only to those who can easily afford it. Although financial aid policies vary from institution to institution, at all institutions such policies should be designed to promote participation in study abroad. A review of financial aid policies should be undertaken, with particular attention to enhancing the portability of institutional financial aid and widening access to study abroad for all students, regardless of socio-economic status.

As institutions have grappled with the challenge of making study abroad accessible and affordable, new approaches to financing study abroad have emerged. Some institutions are raising funds for study abroad as part of the institution's general development effort or developing endowments for study abroad, whereas others are exploring the role of grants to support study abroad.

In sum, the institution that values study abroad will rise to the challenge of making it affordable for all students.

**12. Policies and practices are in place that control the costs associated with study abroad programs.**

Presidents and senior campus administrators should pursue an institutional commitment to controlling the student cost of study abroad programs, in a manner that widens access to the study abroad experience. This can be accomplished by controlling operational costs, maintaining low tuition and fees, carefully selecting program sites, and effectively using a variety of program designs such as exchanges, campus programs, institutional partnerships, and program providers.

When making arrangements with other institutions and with program providers, an institution should maintain a commitment to its own mission and to the service of its students, and it should be able to demonstrate this commitment through its partnerships.

Knowledgeable study abroad professionals should provide students with a range of acceptable choices with different academic, programmatic, risk, and financial implications. Choices should be clearly explained to help the student make an informed decision about participation in any study abroad experience. In all cases, the adviser's first commitment is to the student and the home institution.

## Clarity and Accountability

Study abroad involves students, their families, study abroad professionals, faculty members, other campus offices, and frequently the services of professional study abroad providers. Clear and accurate information is crucial to making decisions regarding academic suitability, affordability, and health and safety. When expectations are clearly articulated and those involved are held accountable, all parties benefit.

### 13. Critical information related to study abroad is communicated to all stakeholders.

Difficulties arise when expectations are not clearly stated or there is a lack of adequate information about institutional policies that can affect the study abroad experience. Many campus policies either directly or indirectly affect study abroad participation, such as those related to financial aid, health and safety, or the transfer of credit.

It is important that these policies be communicated clearly and in a timely manner so that all parties possess the information they need to make an informed decision. Information about campus policies related to study abroad should be articulated to the student as part of the program advising and enrollment process. This information should be widely available through the study abroad office and other communication vehicles, such as Web sites and advising handbooks or guides. Predeparture orientation should emphasize this information, and also inform students of issues such as managing academic status and financial aid while abroad, supply information on course registration and approval and housing applications, and address other key issues.

### 14. Clear contracting and auditing procedures exist, including conflict-of-interest policies.

As in any business relationship, it is expected that all parties will exercise care to see that financial dealings reflect clear expectations and accountability for providing services, and serve the best interests of the students and the institution.

All institutions of higher education should have general conflict-of-interest policies, which typically include prohibiting arrangements that result in personal benefit. Each institution must develop policies that are consistent with overall institutional policy, yet specific to study abroad, and include guidance on issues such as complimentary site visits, exclusivity agreements, cash payments to the institution, discounts, service on advisory boards, service on fiduciary boards, and so on. Institutions must be able to clearly explain their policies and demonstrate that those policies directly benefit students.

Especially in situations in which the study abroad office works with many providers, the same audit rigor should apply to the study abroad function that applies to other contracted services. Contracts with study abroad program providers should be sufficiently clear regarding the details of expected services and payments, and any other additional arrangements between the provider and the university. Such agreements are a commitment of the institution and as such should be signed at the appropriate senior administrative level.

Staff should receive training in the institution's policies and should be expected to consult in advance with an administrative supervisor if there is any question about the appropriateness of an intended practice or activity. A procedure for monitoring situations that have the potential to be a conflict of interest, or other difficulties, is a requirement of effective management.

The task force feels it is important to make a brief comment on the myriad institutional arrangements between schools and outside program providers. Some institutions may selectively choose program providers for health and safety, program quality, or other reasons. However, arrangements with outside providers should never have the effect of limiting students' other options for study abroad where these other options meet institutional standards for health, safety, and program quality.

Some services that outside providers offer, such as familiarization trips, are important tools that study abroad professionals can use to fully evaluate potential program offerings. However, to the extent an institution chooses to allow such trips—or other financial benefits—they should serve to expand program choices rather than limit them.

In a similar vein, to the extent an institution chooses to accept discounts received from outside program providers, these should be used to expand study abroad options on the campus and increase accessibility for all students. These arrangements should be openly disclosed in compliance with relevant institutional policies.

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# *Concluding Thoughts*

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The challenge that lies before presidents and campus leaders today, in an increasingly interconnected and complex world, is to promote high-quality study abroad within the broader context of campus internationalization, while offering students the highest quality educational opportunities available. In order to thrive in the global marketplace and lead effectively in a global context, college graduates must learn foreign languages, experience other cultures and societies, and have an understanding of how the international system functions at both the macro and micro level.

Study abroad will become the routine, not the exception, on U.S. college campuses. College and university leaders are responsible for encouraging and facilitating academically rigorous and effectively managed study abroad programs. Demonstrating commitment, providing infrastructure and resources, and holding programs accountable are crucial steps in this journey.

## Resources and Reference

*NAFSA: Association of International Educators provides a Web resource and reference page as a companion to this report. On that page, links and reference material are organized according to the four major areas of this report, and the Web site will be updated with new materials and samples as they are identified.*

[www.nafsa.org/imsa-resources](http://www.nafsa.org/imsa-resources)

### NAFSA: Association of International Educators

With nearly 10,000 members, two-thirds of whom work in or supervise study abroad activities, NAFSA provides a rich source of information about study abroad. Two of its knowledge communities—International Education Leadership and Education Abroad—have online resources, offer training programs, and provide sessions at NAFSA’s annual national conference and regional conferences that address the issues discussed in this report. NAFSA is a leading advocate for the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act, and has developed a number of resources to support the rapid expansion of study abroad anticipated in the coming years. Relevant links to NAFSA resources will be found at [www.nafsa.org/imsa-resources](http://www.nafsa.org/imsa-resources).

### Forum on Education Abroad

Formed in 2001, the Forum on Education Abroad focuses on developing and implementing standards of good practice, encouraging and supporting research initiatives, and offering educational programs and resources to its members. Forum members, currently numbering more than 300, include U.S. colleges and universities, overseas institutions, consortia, agencies, and provider organizations. Information about the Forum’s Standards of Good Practice, the Quality Improvement Program for Education Abroad (QUIP), and other relevant Forum resources can be found on its Web site, [www.forumea.org](http://www.forumea.org).

### Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS)

Established in 1979, CAS develops and promotes standards in student affairs, student services, and student development program. Standards and guidelines are developed through a cooperative process of member associations. NAFSA contributed to the development of CAS’s standards and guidelines for Education Abroad Programs and Services (EAPS), though these also include CAS-specific items. CAS standards are available for purchase from their Web site, [www.cas.edu](http://www.cas.edu).