

ISSUE BRIEF:
The Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Act



Goal: NAFSA urges Congress to ensure that significantly more students graduate college with the international knowledge and experience essential for success in today's global economy through the establishment of the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program.

A generation ago, there was a national concern that students without access to computers would fall behind their peers and be at a competitive disadvantage in seeking jobs; the same could be said today of students without access to global educational opportunities. At a time when access to higher education and college completion rates have become top national priorities, attention must also be given to the quality of education provided, which in today's global economy, must include an international element.

Study abroad opportunities are effective in helping students develop practical skills that complement classroom learning, including foreign language fluency, improved problem solving, analytical skills, tolerance for ambiguity, and cross-cultural competence. Recent studies also show a positive correlation between students who study abroad and higher grade point averages and degree completion rates. Over time, such programs have also proven to be a solid investment in increasing Americans' global awareness, sensitivity, and capacity to work effectively with other countries. Currently, however, only about one percent of all college students have access to study abroad each year.

Program

The Simon Study Abroad Program is based on the vision of the late Senator Paul Simon and the recommendations of the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program. The program would significantly expand study abroad through a competitive grant model that encourages institutions to demonstrate how they would go about promoting and sustaining a culture across the campus in which study abroad is considered an integral part of a college education. The program will require institutions to collaborate in ways that leverage both knowledge and resources to incentivize changes that increase access to study abroad for U.S. students. In so doing, the initiative aims to make good use of public and private investments, broaden opportunities for students and institutions, inspire momentum, and bring about change to significantly increase and diversify student access to global educational opportunities.

The specific goals of the program are to:

- Have one million U.S. students studying abroad each year within the next ten years.
- Encourage diversity in student participation in study abroad.
- Diversify locations of study abroad, particularly in non-traditional countries.
- Encourage a greater commitment by institutions of higher education to expand study abroad opportunities.

Status

Senator Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) is planning to introduce new legislation that builds upon the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act (S. 473), which is a bill that he introduced with Senator Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) in the 111th Congress and that carried significant bipartisan support. A nearly identical bill also passed the House as part of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 2010 and 2011 (H.R. 2410) during the last Congress.