

# Who's NOT

For a wide variety of physical, social, economic, cultural, and academic reasons, certain populations in U.S. higher education tend to be underrepresented in education abroad programs.

But, many educators in the field are working diligently to open up these important educational opportunities to more students. **BY ALAN DESSOFF**



# Going Abroad?

2006 IS THE “YEAR OF STUDY ABROAD” as designated by the U.S. Senate in a resolution last November, and directors of study abroad offices at U.S. colleges and universities are pushing to expand international academic opportunities and encourage more students to take advantage of them. But they are finding it isn’t easy to increase underrepresented student participation in study abroad programs.

While U.S. students studying abroad for academic credit reached a record 191,321 in 2003/04, up 9.6 percent over the previous year, most of them were Caucasian women. Male students were outnumbered nearly two-to-one by females; and members of racial and ethnic minorities lagged far behind Caucasian students according to *Open Doors 2005*, the annual report on international education published by the Institute of International Edu-

cation (IIE) with funding from the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Students in some disciplines, including engineering and math or computer sciences, trailed behind those studying social sciences and the humanities, business and management, and foreign languages, according to *Open Doors*. In addition, higher education authorities agree that students attending community colleges and those who have disabilities are vastly underrepresented in study abroad programs.

An array of financial, cultural, and institutional obstacles often discourage underrepresented students from even thinking about studying abroad. But educators maintain it is vital to overcome the barriers so these students can join others in gaining an enriching experience.

“Many U.S. campuses now include international ed-



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education as part of their core education mission, recognizing that increasing the global competence among the next generation is a national priority and an academic responsibility," IIE President Allan E. Goodman said when the latest *Open Doors* report was issued in November.

"It is critical that students who study abroad mirror all the students who study at U.S. colleges and universities. Those in the field are convinced it makes a significant impact on understanding the world and having a better career," declares Gary Rhodes, director of the Center for Global Education at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

### Rooted in Tradition

The underrepresentation of male students in study abroad programs seems to have its roots in decades-old practices. "Perhaps the reason international education participants are predominantly female stems from the eighteenth and nineteenth century practice of sending affluent daughters to finishing schools in other countries like Switzerland. Back then, finishing schools placed emphasis on learning other languages and cultures as well as preparation for social activities," says Dawn Anderson, associate director of international study programs at Northeastern University. She also chairs the advisory board of a NAFSA subcommittee on underrepresentation in education abroad.

Lewis Fortner, associate dean of students in the college and academic director of study abroad at the University of Chicago, recalls that when he was in college, "the only study abroad programs were junior year abroad programs operated by women's colleges. It was almost like going to a finishing school."

Most foreign language majors, particularly in the romance languages, were women, and the junior year abroad programs attracted mostly "well-to-do white students," adds Connie Perdreau, director of the office of education abroad at Ohio University.

"I think the perception by males in many cases is that it still is mostly just something for women to do," she says. Fortner agrees that perception still lingers with male students and with some parents who dismiss study abroad as nothing more than "taking a few courses, doing a little shopping."

Foreign language programs abroad continue to overwhelmingly attract more females. Perdreau says she is sending a program to France this spring with 18 females and two males. A recent language program in Ecuador drew 19 females and one male.

## THE YEAR OF STUDY ABROAD

NAFSA will be hosting an online discussion forum during late March based on the topics discussed in this article. A number of the international educators interviewed for the article will be participating in the forum. You can join the discussion at [www.nafsa.org/talkyosamarch](http://www.nafsa.org/talkyosamarch).

But some programs out of her university now are drawing more males than females. She cites programs in China and Germany that are not language-based. "When you give males the opportunity to take courses in English, that breaks down the language barrier," Perdreau says.

Fortner suggests that the underrepresentation of males in study abroad programs reflects a broader pattern on campuses. He says women generally make better grades than men, win more graduate-level scholarships, and otherwise are "making the most" of their education. "They are making better decisions and out-performing the men," Fortner asserts.

Athletics and other campus activities also restrict male participation—and some female as well—in study abroad, according to Perdreau. Athletes want to be home during their sports' seasons. Student leaders and those active in their fraternities and sororities hesitate to leave for fear that they might "miss something" back on campus, Perdreau says.

### Short-Term Alternatives

Short-term study abroad programs help alleviate those concerns and encourage more underrepresented students to consider the programs, Perdreau says. In fact, short-term programs—from a single semester down to as little as a week or two—have emerged in recent years as an attractive alternative for many students who do not want to spend a long period abroad or are unable to do it for financial or other reasons.

"The largest growth in study abroad in the last 10 to 15 years has been in shorter programs," often during summer breaks, says Rhodes.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Prior to 1994, study abroad numbers were only reported every other year but after 1994, *Open Doors* data was reported on an annual basis. NAFSA's Section on U.S. Students Abroad began a data collection initiative in 1999 and worked with practitioners and IIE to improve the accuracy of data collection, which may have contributed to the more accurate reporting of education abroad students in recent years. As a result, substantial increases in data may not accurately reflect the true numbers but rather better systems for tracking data. That is, data from more recent years includes students from programs that were not previously reported on a regular basis.

*Open Doors 2005* data shows that only six percent of students who studied abroad in 2003/04 did it for a full academic year while 38 percent limited the experience to a semester. Most students (56 percent) selected summer programs and others shorter than a semester.

In addition to costing less than longer term programs, shorter study abroad experiences also relieve concerns by students who have never traveled abroad before, and their families, Perdreau says. Short-term programs can be "a foot in the door" for students, giving them "some experience, hopefully positive, outside their city and state and a bigger vision of the world than they have known," asserts Rhodes.

"For some students, one or two weeks abroad is as big as going for a year because they might not even have thought before about getting on a plane and traveling that far," says Perdreau.

"A lot of students shrink from being away for a year. They know what they have here. They have certain professors they don't want to leave, and they know that at a foreign university they won't find a seven-million volume open-stack library that is open until midnight like they have here. They miss a lot by being away," says Fortner.

"Although to us professionals it's quite short, the impact can be substantial for a student who has hardly traveled anywhere. Spending two weeks in another country, even an English-speaking country, can have a major impact. For some students, it's still that full

year, but for others, even two weeks in Mexico or the Caribbean could be life-changing," says Perdreau.

Even brief study abroad experiences whet students' appetites for more foreign study and travel, she adds. "It helps them get over their fear of the unknown, of going to another country. Going on the first trip, even for a short term, breaks the ice and can have a critical impact on a student's life," says Perdreau.

### Financial, Cultural Barriers for Minorities

For African American students and ethnic minorities, other obstacles, principally financial, stand in the way of a study abroad experience. Insufficient financial aid is "the greatest barrier" for many students, says Perdreau.

Because many minority students at the University of Chicago also are "high-need" students in the parlance of financial aid officers, "the availability of financial aid for study abroad is essential," declares Fortner. "Without it, there's no need to speak further."

But that, he hastens to add, is not the only solution. "If it were, the percentage of minority students in the study abroad population would match their percentage in the student body as a whole," Fortner says.

While discussions with minority students about study abroad

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**For some students who are first-generation college attendees, just getting into college and leaving their homes can be a big push,” says Rhodes. “Getting beyond that to think about study abroad doesn’t come naturally to them.”**

often are couched in financial terms and they are “not insignificant,” they also frequently are “the stand-in for more profound educational and cultural questions,” he continues.

Many minority students confront “a significant psychological barrier” to study abroad, Fortner explains. While many or most non-minority students, especially those from middle-class, education-oriented homes, view overseas study as “normal and desirable,” it can seem “an elusive opportunity, utterly out of reach and even inappropriate” to students from working-class or impoverished backgrounds, minority and non-minority alike, and their families, Fortner says.

“Overseas travel is not a part of the family culture, and the educational value of serious time spent abroad is not taken as a given. For a first-generation college student, counseled to view his or her education in narrowly pre-professional terms, a term spent learning Italian in Italy or something like that can seem low-yield, even frivolous.”

For some students who are first-generation college attendees, “just getting into college and leaving their homes can be a big push,” says Rhodes. “Getting beyond that to think about study abroad doesn’t come naturally to them.” The “chief challenge,” he suggests, is “to move study abroad into a central position in the world view of a student who has been coached to see it as marginal and exotic and educationally dubious. For such a student, we need to present study abroad as normal, generally beneficial, and certainly worth the extra effort and cost.”

At historically black colleges, study abroad is seen “more as a luxury than an enhancement in your education,” says Margery A. Ganz, director of study abroad and international exchange at Spelman College and a member of the NAFSA subcommittee advisory board.

“We have a lot of people who want to go but we have challenges with money,” Ganz says. A new international studies major at Spelman requires students to spend a semester abroad, “but we’re having trouble making sure they can come up with the money,” Ganz declares.

Like other schools, Spelman taps a wide range of resources including government aid, foundations, corporations, and other organizations for financial support for study abroad and other programs. Spelman also requires its scholarship students to ap-

ply for Congress-funded and State Department-sponsored Gilman scholarships. “I want us to be able to help students go abroad, but we also need them to be proactive in seeking support,” Ganz says.

Even if minority students can afford to go abroad, some have other concerns, including apprehensions about racism. “Students and parents are nervous about it. It’s a real fear,” says Ganz. Racism exists even in African countries where some Spelman students study, she says. [See “Into Africa” on p. 29 of the winter 2004 *IE* for insights into this phenomenon.]

Spelman confronts the racism issue in a session at family weekends when parents come to campus and students who have returned from study abroad, and their parents, relate their experiences, Ganz says.

### **Barriers at Community Colleges**

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), about half of all minority undergraduate students in the U.S. attend a community college. Judith T. Irwin, director of international programs and services at AACC, agrees that is a key reason that students from those institutions are underrepresented in study abroad programs. She adds that many community college students also hold down jobs, either full- or part-time, and may have family responsibilities as well, which further limit their opportunities for foreign study. “You can’t leave for a semester if you are a working adult,” Irwin says.

“The work environment and the money situation are significant. Even if a program costs just \$2000, some students can’t afford that,” says Rosalind Raby, director of the California Colleges for International Education, a nonprofit consortium of 72 community colleges in California.

While financial aid programs cover study abroad, financial aid often “dwindles out” before summer, when short-term study abroad programs are most popular, Raby adds. Most at risk of missing the study abroad experience, she says, are “students in the middle” who are not eligible for financial aid but “too poor to spend a couple of extra thousand dollars on an education program.” She hopes they and other underrepresented students will be able to gain scholarship support through the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, created by Congress to expand study abroad opportunities in higher

education. Irwin says AACC is “very active” with the Lincoln Commission, “giving input” on behalf of community colleges.

Limited funding also leads to institutional barriers at cash-strapped institutions, Raby says. While an “overwhelming” number of community college presidents and chancellors agree that international education is important, “when the time comes to fund a position, even half a position, to support an office, it doesn’t happen,” Raby declares.

“Without an office, a staff, even a single person to run it, a college will not have a program, and if there is no program, the students can’t go. There is a terrible disconnect between the philosophy that international education is a good thing and the reality that there is support for it,” Raby declares.

Another factor, says Raby, is that many community college study abroad programs are faculty-led. “Students feel more comfortable with faculty from their own colleges, and community colleges are more likely to support study abroad if their faculty are involved. But if you don’t have enough faculty who are interested in study abroad, you’re not going to have a program. Even if you do, you still need somebody at the college to help organize it, run it, get the word out.”

### Challenging but Not Impossible for Students with Disabilities

Students who have physical or mental disabilities face additional challenges getting into study abroad programs. A 2004 survey conducted by Mobility International USA (MIUSA) and IIE found that, while participation by disabled students has grown, it has been at a lesser rate than with nondisabled students. Compared with their populations on campus, students with some types of disabilities still are underrepresented in overseas programs.

MIUSA, based on Portland, Oregon, has served since 1995 as the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE), a project sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. One of its objectives is to expand the participation of people with disabilities in international study programs.

Many obstacles confronting students with disabilities are in the form of physical limitations—for wheelchair users, for example. “If you use a wheelchair, it depends on the kind of experience you want,” says MIUSA CEO/Executive Director Susan Sygall, a wheelchair user herself. “If you want to study at a site where you don’t have to be a pioneer and can get support services and can expect that at least some of the buildings will be accessible, there are colleges that have a history of having

students with disabilities,” Sygall says.

On the other hand, she continues, “if you want to venture out somewhere, perhaps in Africa or Latin America, there might not be as many ramps and things like that. You might find more obstacles than you do at home, but it’s not impossible.”

Sometimes, adds MIUSA Project Specialist Michele Scheib, students with disabilities “perceive” obstacles “that are not actually going to be a problem. They just have to learn how to get through them.” Study abroad professionals have to learn, too, she adds. Often “they cannot visualize how some things will work,” Scheib says.

“You just have to be aware that there is a disability and make special arrangements to accommodate the students,” adds Perdreau at Ohio University, which has sent a number of students with hearing disabilities abroad.

For students with disabilities and study abroad professionals, the clearinghouse MIUSA offers free information and technical assistance on subjects like finding sign language interpreters in foreign countries, mobility trainers for blind students, counseling services for students with mental health disabilities, and peer support networks that disabled students can tap into. The organization also recently published *Building Bridges*, an updated comprehensive manual for people with disabilities and the professionals who work with them.

Scheib says MIUSA is going to focus this year on fostering more collaboration on campuses between study abroad staff, disabilities services offices, and counseling centers. Through that type of relationship, “the study abroad office can learn a lot more about how to best serve these students” while also encouraging them to consider study abroad opportunities, Scheib says. The disabilities services



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providers and counselors who work with disabled students also will become more aware of study abroad opportunities, she adds.

“For any student, disabled or not, study abroad is going to pose some challenges,” says Sygall. “If you have a disability, there can be extra challenges. But the opportunities are out there.”

### Underrepresented Disciplines

As the *Open Doors* data reveals, students in some particular fields of study also are underrepresented in study abroad programs. One of those is engineering.

Generally, “engineering students do not study abroad very much,” says John M. Grandin, professor of German and director of the international engineering program at the University of Rhode Island (URI). Study abroad, he says, “has largely been for students in the languages and the humanities. The engineering curriculum is prescribed and rigid, with little wiggle room. In a tight four-year engineering curriculum, there was no room to learn a foreign language and study abroad. It just wasn’t seen as something that was important.”

That has been changing in recent years as engineering educators at Rhode Island and other institutions have moved to add international experience to their programs. It is important to do that, Grandin explains, because “given the pace of globalization and the nature of business and technology in engineering, engineers going into the workplace really have to work internationally

no matter where they are located. If they go to work for American companies, the chances are that they will get involved with global teams in research and development, manufacturing, whatever.”

At URI, engineering undergraduates can choose a five-year program that requires them to spend the fourth year abroad. Many go to Germany, where they study during the fall semester at Rhode Island’s partner institution, the Technical University of Braunschweig, then undertake a six-month professional internship that URI arranges with a German company.

The Rhode Island program includes study opportunities in France and Spain as well, and the university is trying to develop a Chinese program, Grandin says. Whatever the country, the bottom line is the same. “We’ve taken a hard line. We want students to come out of the pipeline proficient in a second language and with significant international experience under their belts,” Grandin declares.

About 200 students—20 percent of URI’s engineering undergraduates—have signed up for the five-year program, which awards them with both a bachelor of arts degree in the language they have

studied and a bachelor of science degree in the engineering discipline they have chosen.

The university also has expanded the program to the graduate level. Students with bachelor’s degrees who choose to “go deeper” in their studies can spend a year at Rhode Island and another year at Braunschweig and earn master’s degrees from both universities, Grandin says.

A third of the students in URI’s undergraduate program are women. “Engineering by itself usually runs around 17 percent female participation, but we have found this program is a good recruitment option for young women,” Grandin says.

For eight years, URI has sponsored a colloquium on international engineering education. Cosponsored last year by the Georgia Institute of Technology, it brings together about 150 engineering and international educators to consider interdisciplinary ways to further internationalize engineering education programs.

**The “chief challenge,” he suggests, is “to move study abroad into a central position in the world view of a student who has been coached to see it as marginal and exotic and educationally dubious. For such a student, we need to present study abroad as normal, generally beneficial, and certainly worth the extra effort and cost.”**

While Rhode Island’s study abroad program for engineering students is voluntary, Goucher College is ensuring that underrepresented students get a foreign study experience by making it mandatory for all students. Starting in the fall of 2006, Goucher will require all incoming undergraduates to participate in at least one three-week intensive course abroad to graduate.

“You don’t have to look any further than the front page of the nearest newspaper to see that global events have a direct and immediate influence on all of our lives,” says Goucher President Sanford J.

Ungar. “We in the business of higher education are simply not living up to our responsibility if we don’t find ways to educate our students not only to understand what’s happening on the international scene, but also to bring their learning to bear in addressing the global challenges of our time.”

Goucher claims to be the first liberal arts college in the United States to institute such a requirement, and its move represents a conscious effort by the college to raise standards for international education nationwide. Goucher, Ungar says, is “taking the lead in redefining what it means to provide a comprehensive education for the world of the twenty-first century.”

The new study abroad requirement is part of a broad new curriculum that also calls for students to demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language. To offset the cost of traveling overseas, Goucher will give each student a special voucher of \$1,200. Students may satisfy the new requirement by participating in any of 18 intensive courses abroad that the college offers in three-week periods, generally during semester breaks, or any of its semester- or year-long programs.

**The “personal testimonial” is particularly effective with minority groups when other minority students who have been abroad “get up and talk about the financial aid part of it and how they got their scholarships,” Perdreau says.**

### Reaching Out to Students

Most colleges do not require study abroad, but they are seeking ways to encourage it among underrepresented students. Still, many of those students who can benefit from study abroad lack the information, as well as the resources and support, that can motivate their participation, says Rhodes at the Center for Global Education.

In 2004 the U.S. Department of Education awarded a grant to the Center and partner organizations to begin work on Project for Learning Abroad, Training, and Outreach (PLATO), which will assist institutions working on increasing participation in study abroad, increasing diversity of students.

“At many institutions where there is a largely diverse student body, there may not even be a study abroad office and no special scholarships or support for students to go abroad,” Rhodes says.

Outreach is critical to provide information to “a broader range of students” and their parents as well as the institutions they attend and even secondary schools, Rhodes says. He suggests that colleges include study abroad information in recruitment and orientation publications, parent guides, and other materials they send to students applying for admission or even just thinking about it.

PLATO is developing “new styles” of flyers, posters, e-mail, Web content, and other forms of information to help institutions reach students “in a more interesting way that hopefully will result in greater interest,” Rhodes says.

One challenge, he adds, is trying to support students at colleges without study abroad offices “through the process of figuring out where to go, how to get there, how to get credit for it, and everything else they need to know,” Rhodes says.

It helps if study abroad officers make sure student advisers know of program options, including diversity of locations and length of programs, so they can help students make choices, says Perdreau. “The advising part is so important,” she says.

Collaboration like that with campus colleagues, especially those who “have a relationship” with underrepresented students, is vital for study abroad officers, agrees Anderson, herself an African American study abroad alumna.

Many institutions find that some of the most effective encouragement they can offer students comes from students who have

returned to their home campuses and are eager to talk to others about their study abroad experiences.

“They are the most enthusiastic spokespeople for the value of studying abroad,” says Fortner. “They are filled with enthusiasm and tales of adventure that they talk about in the dorms. They are great ambassadors.”

“Do not underestimate the value of word-of-mouth. It has one of the greatest effects,” agrees Perdreau. She suggests encouraging students who have studied abroad to make presentations about their experiences to fraternities, sororities, clubs, and other campus organizations.

The “personal testimonial” is particularly effective with minority groups when other minority students who have been abroad “get up and talk about the financial aid part of it and how they got their scholarships,” Perdreau says.

As they seek to expand participation of underrepresented students in study abroad programs, campus officers must not become discouraged themselves, says Anderson. The challenge for study abroad officers is “so vast and overwhelming at times, it can make inaction the preferred option for professionals in the field,” she says.

However, she asserts, “it is our jobs as educators to make sure the students on our campuses benefit from what the universities have to offer, and if we see gaps in the system, we have a responsibility to bring attention to it and work to close it.”

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