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AS THE CONGRESSIONALLY DESIGNATED

Year of Study Abroad comes to a close, international educators are excited about possibilities for the future of foreign study that are outlined in legislation introduced in mid-summer in the U.S. Senate.

If the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Act is enacted as it was proposed, and fully funded, it will bring study abroad into a central place in the mainstream of higher education in the United States, with potentially positive implications for the nation's role in world affairs, educators agree.

But they also see challenges ahead to make it work, including needs to significantly revamp curricula and infrastructure on college and university campuses. That will require, in addition to funding, “a sea-change of attitude” among faculty and administrators, says JoAnn McCarthy, assistant provost for international affairs in the University of Pennsylvania's Office of International Programs.

That already is underway on many campuses, driven largely by student interest in international study, but educators say the Abraham Lincoln Act could give it a huge boost. “Having study abroad identified as a national priority will help institutions commit to making it an institutional priority,” says Patricia Willer, director of international programs in the University of South Carolina-Columbia's International Programs for Students.

With funding, the measure could be “a powerful tool in terms of integrating study abroad into the curriculum, actively engaging faculty, and having it considered important and valued by administrations,” Willer says.

“To have the national legislature say that study abroad is a worthy pursuit would have a positive influence,” like earlier federal initiatives including the Fulbright and Gilman programs, adds David Larsen, vice president of Arcadia University and executive director of its Center for Education Abroad.

More Students, More Places

The Abraham Lincoln Act, introduced by Senators Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Norm Coleman (R-Minn.), proposes an innovative partnership between the federal government and higher education to dramatically expand participation by U.S. undergraduates in education abroad programs.

It envisions that one million U.S. college students will study abroad annually in 10 years. Currently, fewer than 200,000 students participate in study abroad programs in a given year.

“Having a million students a year going abroad will change the nature of higher education in the U.S.,” says Joseph L. Brockington, associate provost for international programs at the Kalamazoo College Center for International Programs.

The legislation also would diversify study abroad participation to include more students who do not participate now for ethnic and socioeconomic reasons; promote study in non-traditional locations, particularly in developing countries, and in underrepresented fields like mathematics, physical science, and business; and boost accessibility of study abroad to students at community colleges, historically black colleges and universities, and other institutions that serve minorities and nontraditional students.

The Act was inspired by the work of the late Senator Paul Simon of Illinois—the state where Lincoln lived before he was elected president and where his Presidential Library is located today. Simon identified international education as a crucial issue of importance for the future. In his preface to the 2003 NAFSA task force report—*Securing America's Future: Global Education for a Global Age*—Simon laid out his vision that with more students studying abroad, the United States would be “more understanding of the world... creating a base of public opinion that would encourage responsible action.”

In 2005 a bipartisan federal Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, appointed by

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If it eventually passes, the recently introduced Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Act could be the biggest thing to hit international education in the United States since the Fulbright program.

■ BY ALAN DESSOFF



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Congress and President George W. Bush, submitted a report recommending a national effort to dramatically increase study abroad by U.S. students, with special attention to expanding education abroad opportunities in the developing world.

Moves to expand education abroad already are underway on some campuses, driven largely by student demand, and universities should recognize what that means, McCarthy suggests. “More and more students are selecting universities based on the potential they have to complete some of their degree requirements in an international environment. The institution that doesn’t have decent kinds of experiences available to their students will grow less and less competitive,” she explains.

Some faculty and senior administrators “are beginning to see this as a marketing plus, and referencing it in their promotional materials. But whether their performance matches the rhetoric is something else,” McCarthy says.

Campus Changes

The legislation introduced by Durbin and Coleman, which calls for funding of an amount to be determined later through grants and fellowships, focuses attention on obstacles to study abroad that are greater than financial ones. It underscores that while some students need financial support to study abroad, on-campus factors—related to curriculum, faculty involvement, institutional leadership, and programming—often make the biggest difference.

Accordingly, educators cite broader changes that will be necessary to fulfill the goals of an expanded study abroad initiative. Academically, students will need advance preparation for their education abroad experiences, Brockington says. That means courses about the locations where they will study, language training, and intercultural orientation. When they return, “they will be fired up about the regions where they have been we will see a tremendous demand on their part for more coursework in those regions, including additional language study,” Brockington says.

“So it won’t be that we will send students overseas and ignore them when they get back. They are not going to let us do that. We are going to have to pay attention to the curriculum before they go and after they return,” Brockington states.

It also means, he continues, that “we are going to have to pay attention to the professors” to ensure that they are at least as “internationalized” as their students.

Additionally, says Brockington, colleges and universities will have to develop the infrastructure to support expanded education abroad programs. “The time has long passed when education abroad was an amateur sport,” he says. “We’re dealing with educational issues, intercultural issues, and liability issues that have coalesced into a profession, and parents, students, and university administration—especially university counsel—want us to pay attention to the details.”

“Everybody who has half a brain is in favor of more Americans going abroad to study,” and more will go “if the money is there and

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there is a big push by the higher education community,” says Philip G. Altbach, director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College.

“But to get the kinds of numbers they are talking about will be a challenge, particularly to get kids from ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds who are not going now. I don’t know if American colleges and universities are thinking about a huge ramp-up of staffing and general campus concern for these kinds of issues—to get kids prepared and out the door,” Altbach says.

Most institutions, “particularly the non-elite ones,” have “a completely inadequate infrastructure” for informing students of education abroad opportunities and serving students who join the programs, he says.

“There also will be a huge problem on the other end, particularly in the nontraditional countries that are at the very beginning of this kind of experience. To create the kinds of facilities that American students will need is not going to be so easy,” Altbach adds.

On the other hand, he says, “there already are institutional linkages”—the cites IIE offices—in some countries. Also, countries like China and India “are thinking of attracting” students from other countries, he says. Japan also would welcome foreign students because demographic changes in the country are going to result in “lots of empty seats in their classrooms,” Altbach says.

McCarthy says sending more students to nontraditional locations will require more staff resources on home campuses. “It’s one thing to run 200 students to Western Europe and place them in programs with established infrastructure and lots of experience handling Americans. But if you’re trying to send them into countries where the infrastructure is not always as well developed, you’ll have a whole different set of issues to deal with. It will be more labor-intensive,” she says. Educators agree that while the goal of the



Abraham Lincoln Act is to be hailed, making it happen will present new challenges. Altbach, citing “the fear and reality of terrorism,” suggests that it might be difficult to encourage more students to go abroad, particularly to nontraditional destinations.

“One hopes that when this bill is passed, things will have calmed down in the Middle East, but who knows,” Altbach says. “The world situation creates all kinds of challenges for study abroad planning.” Beyond a “hard core of study abroad types—and even they go to very safe places,” getting more students to participate in study abroad programs will require “a significant sell,” Altbach asserts, “because Americans are not the most internationalized of people, and not the most intrepid, either.”

Beyond the details of expanding study abroad programs through changes in curricula and infrastructure, international educators cite the broader benefits of an initiative backed by the federal government. The Abraham Lincoln Act would send a strong message to higher education, says Larsen, “that we can’t be so self-centered. We have to be more expansive in our thinking. We have to understand how other people view America and be willing to say that we have a lot to learn from other people in the world.”

“Certainly not all university presidents or trustees need to hear that, but there still are a substantial number who do,” Larsen says.

Expanding Community College Participation

He also applauds the measure’s emphasis on trying to get more students into study abroad programs from underserved institutions including community colleges, which enroll more than half the country’s undergraduates. “That could have a tremendous impact. A lot more people in this country would understand more about how the world works,” Larsen says.

But he acknowledges that it will be a challenge “to all of us who care about this” to develop effective programs for many community college students who study part-time in nonresidential programs while managing family and job obligations.

Federal funding will help, but “other things need to happen as well” to boost education abroad programs at community colleges, says Boze-

na Morton, director of grants at El Camino College, where she formerly was acting director of the Center for International Education.

Emphasizing that she is speaking only for herself and not necessarily for El Camino, Morton points to “a lot of institutional obstacles.” One, she says, is that community colleges “traditionally don’t see themselves as institutions that should be involved internationally.” Their traditional role, she explains, is at the local level, and “there still are a lot of people at community colleges who think that’s what it should be and that international involvement is not appropriate for a community college.”

The particular needs of community college students also require attention, Morton continues. Semester-long education abroad programs are too long for many students, and students who will have to give up jobs to study abroad will need money to replace the income they will lose. Combining the academic components of study abroad with hands-on experiences, maybe through internships, would be “a more attractive option” than the traditional design of education abroad programs, Morton says.

Additionally, it is important that students who go abroad gain academic credits for the courses they take, she says. At El Camino, that happens if courses are approved by the college and college faculty travel with the students to teach them.

“We have opportunities to send students to study individually in partner universities in other countries, and there are students who are interested in that, but there is no way to articulate those courses and they won’t count for anything. Students have to submit them for evaluation and maybe for some elective credit, but it’s a cumbersome process. It’s an area that could be improved,” Morton declares.

More Options

Larsen says he expects the funding that results from the legislation to generate more short-term, faculty-led programs, which “makes sense” for community colleges and other institutions not already involved in education abroad. However, “it also reinforces a direction toward shorter programs where I see higher education heading, and I am not happy with it,” he says.

What once was the traditional junior year abroad—a full academic year—has been shortened to a single semester and even less than that for more than half the students who now go abroad, Larsen says. “For some, it’s just a week or two,” he says.

“Some time abroad is better than none, but I wish the programs were longer. You can’t learn much of a foreign language in a semester and you sure as heck can’t learn much in just a few weeks. We include a lot more than foreign language in these programs, but language is key to understanding people, and there needs to be a place for it,” Larsen declares.

Altbach also thinks that the trend towards shorter study abroad periods is “a bad idea.” He hopes the Abraham Lincoln Act will result in longer programs that will include language study. Although English is becoming “the world language of science” and students



who go to China probably will find English-language programs, it is important to learn native languages as well, Altbach says.

McCarthy says an expanded study abroad initiative will require educators to “reconceptualize what study abroad is.” At Penn, “we are calling it ‘education abroad’ because it is slowly transforming into a much broader range of experiences than just a semester seated in a classroom in a traditional program at a partner university.”

She sees “a growing array of options” becoming available to students, including brief experiences abroad that are appended to their home-campus courses, internships, and volunteer opportunities. At Penn, “we’re looking at paradigms for providing meaningful opportunities for students overseas,” McCarthy says.

In another area, Larsen cites the shortcomings of the Durbin-Coleman legislation as proposed to include a role for third-party providers like Arcadia. “It ignores the positive, creative role that third-party providers have played in developing study abroad opportunities in the past,” he says. The omission is “an inherent weakness” in the measure that could be resolved by an amendment as the bill moves through the legislative process, Larsen says.

Brockington points to another aspect of the legislation that educators as well as policymakers should consider. “If we’re going to send a million students out there, we’d better be ready to receive a million more back from other countries,” he says. “There’s a world out there that wants to see what the U.S. is like. This has to be a quid pro quo matter, mutually beneficial and reciprocal.”

If Congress enacts the Abraham Lincoln Act, Brockington says, it also should “return to a sane foreign student visa policy. Why should we expect a country to receive our students with open arms when we put up every barrier possible to theirs? We can’t send our students out there and keep our doors closed to the rest of the world.”

Broader Impact

International educators agree that in addition to its direct impact on education abroad programs specifically and higher education generally, the Abraham Lincoln Act offers a historic opportunity to ensure that future generations of U.S. students are prepared with the international skills and knowledge they will need to effectively manage foreign policy challenges and to succeed in an interconnected world.

Larsen hopes the country’s political leaders will get the message, as well as educators. He cites “an appallingly small number” of Congressional members, government administrators and even education leaders who have studied abroad. “We have to broaden that,” Larsen says.

In the long run, he continues, greater emphasis on education abroad “will produce a greater likelihood that the voting public will not be turned off every time a politician starts talking about international issues. There will be more people who have been out there, who have had the world included in their educational curriculum at some point and who realize to a greater extent than people do today the huge importance of these issues.”

Education abroad program directors tinge their optimism with caution about whether the federal funding to make it work will actually be forthcoming. “Show me the money,” says one educator, skeptically.

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Show Us the Money

The funding that the Durbin-Coleman legislation includes, while not defined in terms of dollars or specific uses, is a key element that excites educators. “The money is the key,” says Willer. “It would make a significant impact on those institutions that today are very limited in their ability to support students abroad,” says Gary Rhodes, director of the Loyola Marymount University Center for Global Education. He served as a member of the staff of the Abraham Lincoln Commission.

But education abroad program directors tinge their optimism with caution about whether the federal funding to make it work will actually be forthcoming. “Show me the money,” says one educator, skeptically.

It will help if educators “push their legislators to make this not only a significant piece of legislation but one that is followed with a significant amount of funding,” asserts Rhodes.

Larsen, who attended several meetings of the Abraham Lincoln Commission, recalls speaking with Simon years ago about a federal initiative to enhance study abroad. “His vision was that we needed \$3.5 billion a year. He had a formula by which he came up with that and it made a lot of sense. If we have funding at that level, a lot can result from it. But if we get only some sort of token funding, there will be a lot less,” Larsen says.



Empowerment Through Education Abroad

Nevertheless, “however you play it, passage of this Act would constitute a shot in the arm for international education in the United States, and that would be a good thing,” says Larsen, and other education abroad administrators agree.

“If you have just one student with a greater international background and interest, it can change the atmosphere of an institution,” says Rhodes. “If

you have an increase in students participating, with more faculty and staff to support the programs, it becomes a significant part of the curriculum, and puts pressure on the institution to see that it becomes a significant part of the educational experience on campus.”

Further, education abroad can “provide empowerment” to students and impact the United States role in global affairs, Rhodes continues. “To be informed is, in a sense, to be empowered,” he explains. “If students understand the languages and cultures of countries around the world, whether it’s dealing with political, environmental or business issues, there is a better chance that they will support U.S. interests, and also support the idea of collaboration among people around the world,” he says.

“If all students and faculty in higher education had passports, and some travel experience outside the U.S., with a significant number of them taking part in a formal study abroad experience, I think we would produce graduates who, in many ways, would be able to support a more positive world in the future,” Rhodes concludes.

“It would have an impact,” Morton agrees, “because these young people will be the decision-makers of the future, and if they are exposed to these experiences as students, they will think differently. They will approach political issues and negotiations and business opportunities differently, and that will have an impact on almost every aspect of our lives.”

She cites the legislation’s intent to direct more students to non-traditional locations. “That’s important. Going to Europe is easy, but there are issues in developing countries that you will not face in Europe,” Morton says.

For students and faculty who participate, study abroad is “a transforming experience,” she continues. “Creating a globally literate person is not just learning about other cultures. It’s a way of thinking, of opening the mind to other ideas, of accepting, of being able to look at other points of view and incorporate them into your own thinking and negotiating.

“All this takes place when you go abroad and meet and talk with other people and have experiences that you never had before. You have to deal with your own feelings and your own culture and define who you are, and I don’t think that can be accomplished in any other way,” Morton says.

When the millions of students who eventually would study abroad under the Abraham Lincoln Act return home and graduate,

“there is going to be a change, I hope, in how they view the world,” says Brockington. For one thing, “they are going to want to return to the places where they have been, and discover new areas as well.”

Also, “as these folks mature and vote, they are going to have a major influence on public policy,” Brockington says. “A million 22-year-old graduates is a drop in the bucket in national politics, but after 20 years of this, it will start to have an effect.”

Already, Brockington notes, many Kalamazoo graduates with study abroad experience “pop up in interesting places, in the U.S. government and in international nongovernmental organizations. They gravitate toward decision-making positions that have an international focus,” Brockington says.

If the Durbin-Coleman legislation is implemented as it is proposed, and fully funded, “we will see a lot more graduates working in the international arena and that’s going to bring on a great change; a new openness, I hope, to considerations of public and international policy. It’s hard to kill somebody you’ve had lunch with,” Brockington declares.

Morton says she envisions a future of study abroad that includes “free student mobility, so students can move from institution to institution, from country to country.” For example, she says, “if somebody is studying engineering and wants to go to a foreign university to study for a semester, they should be able to do that, and the credits they get there should be transferable to an American university without much bureaucratic hassle.”

McCarthy projects that education abroad will increasingly become “borderless” with more collaboration among institutions in different countries. “We need to move to a point where students entering a university can expect that they are going to spend part of their educational experience in a very different environment, and only those who can produce compelling reasons not to do so would be exempt from that expectation,” she says.

That will require “a major change in attitude” at U.S. universities, McCarthy says. But “globalization is affecting every sector of society, and higher education is one of the last sectors to realize that it is globalizing as well,” she says.

“Strong study abroad programs are important to our economic competitiveness, our future diplomacy and security, and clearly the education of our students. For the American workforce to be competitive in the global marketplace, our students need experience in and knowledge about the world about the United States,” David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, told Coleman and Durbin in a letter endorsing their legislation.

The measure’s stated goal of having one million American students studying abroad in 10 years “is vital and feasible, and your legislation will help us get there,” Ward concluded. **IE**

ALAN DESSOFF is an independent journalist in Bethesda, Maryland. His most recent article for IE was *Balancing Act: Quality and Cost in Education Abroad* in the July/August 2006 issue.