

Go Exotica?

Education Abroad to Nontraditional Locations

OF THE 174,629 STUDENTS WHO STUDIED ABROAD IN 2002–2003 a disproportionate 59,048 did so in nontraditional locations compared to the 115,581 who studied in traditional ones (commonly considered Western Europe)—only one third of all study abroad. But more and more we are hearing calls for increasing the participation rates in less traditional locations. The Lincoln Commission, the Gilman Scholarship, the National Security Education Program (NSEP), National Security Language Initiative, and presidential speeches, are all recent examples to increase the destinations of U.S. students studying abroad. Why? What could be so vital that we would throw in millions of dollars in federal resources, countless hours of recruitment and program development, and the vast collective resources of institutions of higher education? What makes it so important to encourage students to study outside of Western Europe? Everything.

As noted by the Lincoln Commission:

By increasing the diversity of students studying abroad, the diversity of institutions sending them abroad, and the diversity of the host countries in which they study, Americans achieve two objectives. They greatly improve the educational experience for many students, and they develop a pool of Americans with the skill and experience to more fully engage the world, an essential talent pool during times of crisis.¹

From the future of the higher education to the spread of democracy, from national security to world peace, now more than ever, it is important for U.S. citizens to not only have a greater understanding of the rest of the world but also for the rest of the world to understand U.S. culture. And the rest of the world includes nontraditional locations.

Exotica: The Allure of the Non-traditional

From the dawn of humankind we've been drawn to the exotic. The mystery of what lies beyond the known shores has driven human exploration to the farthest reaches of the earth, the moon, and even to the planet formerly known as Pluto. We become acclimated to the familiar and we seek to know more—to



Pousse-pousse driver in Madagascar

We must ask our students now to reach deeper and search farther afield to incorporate into our collective knowledge base that which is now exotic.

Language and Cultural Understanding

Critics of the calls for higher participation in nontraditional locations might point to the lack of practicality of learning the host country's language or even the lack of availability of learning such languages on our campuses. Less commonly taught languages are, after all, less commonly taught because there is a lower demand for them. And while in recent years there has not been significant growth in the languages to warrant larger budgets and more classes on our campuses since 1965 the enrollments in Arabic have jumped more than 300 percent, Chinese more than 475 percent, and Japanese more than 875 percent. By comparison, enrollments in Spanish have increased a mere 64 percent while French and German have both declined by 48 percent and 56 percent respectively.

Regardless of the total enrollments, growth, or perceived demand, it has never been the job of higher education to simply satisfy the current desires of students. Our *raison d'être* is to lead, not to follow; to look forward and create in our curricula the opportunity and the motivation for study and to use our knowledge to anticipate the needs and to train students for the future. And that future is foretold in reality—among the largest growth areas of the world's economy are found the places where our participation rates in programs abroad are the lowest. For example, both China and India are experiencing remarkable economic growth but host less than 6,000 students combined compared to the United Kingdom's 31,706.

If we are intent on preparing our students to be global citizens, to aid in the development of a global workforce where a student is as at home working in Shanghai as she is in Altoona, then we must engage students in learning the languages of the world. It is through language that one can begin to understand the culture. Few would argue that reading Dante in translation has the same impact as reading his words in his native tongue. Urdu, Zulu, and Mandarin will hold similar keys to their respective cultures.

learn new things, to see new lands. Are we simply marking off places we've been and people we've met?

Certainly, it's easy to argue that studying in a nontraditional location is nothing more than checking off the boxes of *1001 Places to Visit Before You Die*. Or that students will simply choose or be advised to study in a location because it's different. That among the rites of passage that include a Sony PlayStation, an iPod, a high school diploma, and a t-shirt that says "been there, done that," studying abroad in an exotic location is a given. Some might argue that no real learning can take place because the rich U.S. students cannot, in fact, even remotely have an experience similar to native students. That from their privileged position they will fail in attempts to understand the real struggle of the poor or the oppressed. And while it's true that you always get to go home there's much more to a well constructed experience than a photo safari of the locals.

What is missing from the critics' denouncements of studying abroad in nontraditional locations is the recognition that students can and do have the opportunity to learn in a new environment, with different rules, and different values. When properly done, students cross over from tourist to participant and from objective researcher to interactive accomplice in shaping one's own world view and those of others. Instead of simply exploring a new way of learning, students affect the environment as much as it affects them. The active participants return home changed. Not just in the way of having seen more, or experienced what it is like to live over 3,000 miles from home—that can be done in any education abroad program. Students change because they have begun to understand a new set of cultural values. The natural assumption to make is that studying in a nontraditional location is somehow different than studying in a traditional one. But that's an oversimplification; make no mistake, Mozambique is as different from Ghana as France is from Italy. Students don't learn about studying in a nontraditional location, they learn about

studying in a particular location. And it is that knowledge that they brings home.

Also missing is that the exotic is exactly what some students need. The average 18-year-old living in the United States today is exposed to far more diversity than the teen of a generation ago. For evidence one need not go beyond today's television programming, which now features actors from a multitude of backgrounds in roles unheard of 25 years ago. Thomas Freidman's central theme in *The World is Flat* is that the accelerating forces of global communications, trade, and exportation of culture are leading to a homogenization of life. It is certainly true that developed and "Western" cultures are engaged in this trading of cultural ideas. Television service in the United States today comes with channels from Italy, the United Kingdom, and other locations around Europe. European football stars' names are common in our vocabulary. In short, the U.S. population is exposed more and more to cultures other than our own, from immigrants to television to the international foods aisle at the supermarket.

And as we grow comfortable with the 'other,' with things and people from foreign lands, it becomes time to expend our horizons, to push the boundaries of who we know and what we can learn from them. And as evidenced by the number of students who do study in Europe and other traditional destinations, we are comfortable with these cultures, we have learned much from our European counterparts. We must ask our students now to reach deeper and search farther afield to incorporate into our collective knowledge base that which is now exotic.

Global Stability and Political Security

On almost any campus you will find voices who argue for and against using education to achieve our national security goals. Some will say that we should not allow U.S. educational policy to be dictated by U.S. political interests—that to do so will undermine the educational goals in favor of political ones. But this is certainly an argument that fails to comprehend the complexities and interweaving of politics and education.

Higher education has often served national political goals of the day. Past policies calling for increasing the number of students studying in areas where there is a significant lack of knowledge has served the interest of students and the nation for a long time. In 1862 the Morrill act in the United States created what we commonly call the land grant colleges to serve the needs of the citizens as well as the students. The GI Bill of Rights enacted in 1944 created opportunities for those who served in the Armed Forces to attend college and better educate themselves. One major reason the GI Bill is so significant is that not only did it educate our GI's, but it also moved the nation forward. It created a more competitive nation. The passage of the GI Bill was motivated as much by a desire to educate a nation as it was to create a workforce that was the greatest in the world. The point here is that good educational policy doesn't have to be in conflict with political goals. Today's calls from the U.S. government for study in nontraditional locations serve the needs of international educators, students, and the nation. It should be noted as well that political desires extend well beyond tightly defined definitions of national security to diplomacy and international understanding. While significant funding earmarked for these programs comes from the Department of Defense, other programs are supported through the Departments of State and Education.

Development Assistance and Capacity Building

The case for increasing student enrollment to nontraditional locations has often been attacked on the basis of a general statement

on the lack or preparedness of receiving institutions to host U.S. students. There is no denying the demands placed by additional students but it is inappropriate for U.S. institutions, international educators, and policymakers to make a decision on behalf of the host university. Directing students away from foreign schools may even serve to deny valuable resources to these institutions. Rich U.S. institutions (by comparison to their overseas counterparts) can create growth among schools in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia though student enrollments. When properly designed, the flow through of funds to institutions can aid in building of classroom space and residence halls as well as the hiring of new faculty and staff. This growth will not only serve the needs of the visiting students while they are attending, but it will also serve local students present and future. Alternatively, funds are often used instead to support local students or faculty in studying overseas in America. Faculty grants, coming mostly from tuition paid by U.S. students studying abroad, can serve to create a stronger faculty who will return home to teach and complete research affecting many students for years to come.

Should Student Demand Dictate Resource Allocation?

Is higher education destined to become another commodity that is bought and sold like Coca-Cola or designer clothing? Much of that answer lies in the direction we take as a society to the value and purpose of education. If we choose the commodity route, then we, as educators and ultimately, education providers, will cater to the market forces—supplying the best product at the lowest cost that will yield the highest return. However, if we choose to see education as something greater than a commodity that is bought and sold on the open market and see it instead as a common good (a right for all), then we have the opportunity to mold that educational experience in a way that serves the needs of the students regardless of the market forces of demand. It would be absurd (and the plot of a Hollywood movie) to allow market forces to

design our curricula. Yes, asking all students to take a course in ethics, or economics, or even engineering might be unpopular but we're not here to make friends, we're here to supply students with the best possible education we can provide. As such, student demand should be less of a factor than we allow it to be. The statistics are well known: the numbers to the most popular destination are much greater than those going to the most popular non-traditional destination. There is no solid reason (other than profit) to let the current demand drive the programs of the future. Instead we must engage the students, and build the curriculum to direct the demand for programs abroad to nontraditional locations. To follow any other course of action would lead to the closure of departments of classics, philosophy, and other low-demand disciplines across the country.

Five Reasons for Promoting the Nontraditional

So is it worth it? There are five prevailing reasons to divert energy and resources into the development and encouragement of study in nontraditional locations: (1) living among a culture so different than one's own can lead to emotional growth in self-awareness (pursuit of exoticism); (2) emersion can create intellectual growth (language and culture learning); (3) studying among others who are forming life-long opinions of the world and it's geopolitics can lead to greater understanding among people and nations (global security); (4) when programs are well designed significant resources can flow to developing nations (capacity building); (5) and as interest in global affairs grows, it can be reasonably expected that faculty and students will be asking to study in an ever diverse set of locations (demand). Each of these reasons could stand alone as justification to encourage more study in nontraditional locations but taken together they compel us to take urgent action to uphold our responsibility as international educators. **IE**

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