

# Opening the Doors Wider

## Funding Education Abroad for Nontraditional Students

**MOST INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS**—perhaps most educators, period—would agree that study abroad is, or would be, an invaluable experience for most students, and that getting more U.S. students to study abroad is important not only for them as individuals, but for the country as well.

We also know that for many students, being able to study abroad is not easy, for a variety of reasons.

“The challenges for nontraditional students can be vast,” says Taylor Wood, special projects manager in the Office for Study Abroad at George Washington University (GW) in Washington, D.C. “For instance, students who come from a low socioeconomic status (SES) background often rule out study abroad because they perceive financial barriers, and may worry about leaving a job and traveling to a location where they will not be able to earn wages. Students with disabilities usually worry about services available, and the stigmas that are attached to disabilities in their host countries. STEM students often believe their curriculum is too rigid to incorporate an international experience, and veterans are usually dependent on Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits that have complex regulations. The challenges vary from student to student, but the real hurdle these students face is breaking down their perceived barriers early in their academic career, so they can plan ahead and overcome these barriers.”

Nikitia Pentchoukov, a GW student who received a Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarship to study finance and international business at the University of Melbourne, agrees. “I have told many younger friends to start planning ahead of time,” he says. “Seeking advice from financial aid and study abroad advisers early is a great way to get ahead of the game and find the scholarship program that works for you.” In his case, the money he was awarded was enough to pay for his round-trip ticket as well as for housing for most of the five months he was in Australia. Pentchoukov points out that many students also avoid studying abroad because they don’t want to slow down their progression toward graduation. But early and careful curricular planning can make a difference. “If advisers are involved in helping students understand what kinds

of courses would be easier to transfer and apply to their degree, many more students could fit study abroad into their college experience,” he says.

### Breaking Down the Barriers to Education Abroad

The Diversity Abroad Network is the leading professional consortium of higher education institutions, government agencies, for-profit and nonprofit organizations dedicated to advancing diversity and equity in international education. According to the Network’s manager, Lily Lopez-McGee, “We’ve been trying to flip the question a little bit, about access to international education. Rather than ask about the challenges students might be facing, we’re asking what can we, as educators, do? How can we make study abroad more relevant to the students that we would like to be reaching? Why have we had trouble making it relevant to a wider group of students? In our marketing, are we just solely focusing on personal growth, or are we also focusing on the career benefits of study abroad? Are we focusing on the competencies and skills that will make students more competitive once they graduate?”

Students from underserved backgrounds often face a challenge in convincing their parents that study abroad is not a diversion from their academic career, but an important part of it, Lopez-McGee says. “Some of the students I’ve worked with have said that the clearest message they can give their families is to say, ‘This is actually going to help me make more money after I’m done. This *is* connected to my larger career goals. It’s not taking time off, it’s not frivolous.’ Helping students to articulate that message, and to communicate that message to their families, can be very helpful.”

At GW, a variety of tactics have been employed to help support nontraditional students find a way to study abroad. The first step, Wood says, is for educators to

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develop a better understanding of the concerns nontraditional students have. “We’ve partnered with offices on campus that support these students—Disability Support Services, Multicultural Student Services, Transfer Students Services, etc.—through informal meetings, structured roundtable discussions, and formal trainings,” he says. “These partnerships have led to effective communication and policies, inclusive advising practices, updated websites and online resources, and intercampus collaborations and recruitment. We are also an active member of Diversity Abroad, and we regularly participate in professional development opportunities like NAFSA conferences, and the Gilman Selection Panels.”

Garrick Hildebrand, senior associate director of academic scholarships and financial aid at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, agrees with the importance of interdepartmental cooperation. “A huge challenge for nontraditional students in going abroad is basic financing,” he says. “It’s important to build strong and clear pathways of communication and interaction between the study abroad office, financial aid/scholar-

ships, the faculty, the offices of multicultural and nontraditional students, and student organizations, among other campus entities. We work collaboratively with multiple offices on campus, and participate with them in information fairs and group presentations to both incoming and current students, in addition to one-on-one advising with students.”

To identify the students they want to reach out to early in the application process, Wood says, “We’ve synced student data information from financial aid with our study abroad application database. For example, students with low SES indicators in the student data system automatically pull into a query in our database. I used this query to communicate with students, and encourage them to attend a scholarship workshop. I made sure that taking this workshop wasn’t just another box they could check on their application, but a truly useful opportunity to help them break down barriers, explore resources, practice essay writing, and develop close ties to our office.” Wood continues to actively support and encourage these students throughout the process, by keeping them informed of additional scholarship

resources, reminding them of deadlines, and helping them to create budgets and edit essays. This kind of individual attention is labor intensive, to be sure, but it pays off. According to Alexandra Copeland, a GW student who went to Amsterdam on a Gilman scholarship, “Simply put, I would not have been able to study abroad without Mr. Wood’s guidance. I was able to pay for study abroad without any worries and attend a program that taught me more than I could have ever imagined. I am so grateful.”

Wood also works to engage returning students in the process. Fawziyya Muhammad is a GW alumnus who also received a Gilman scholarship. Upon her return to GW from studying in China, Muhammad worked with Wood to create the Gilman Alumni Association, a student-run organization that provides additional outreach, helps students review and edit their application essays, and advises them about scholarships. “Peer to peer advising practices had previously been successful in our office,” Wood says. “This seemed like a logical next step.”

In an effort to “change the voice of study abroad” on campus, a few GW staff mem-

bers also teamed up, applied and won an internal grant offered by the institution's VP of diversity and inclusion. The resulting Global Identities Scholarship not only highlights international and minority student study abroad experiences, but also strengthens the ties between education abroad and diversity educators on campus, Wood says.

### Show Me the Money...Please?

Examining institutional and curricular barriers and finding ways to help students both understand and articulate the career benefits of study abroad are important. But for individual students who want to study abroad, there is a more immediate concern. Just where are they going to find the dollars to fund their study abroad? Right now?

"Study abroad is as essential as attending college," Muhammad says. "Ideally it should be in the core curriculum. But I think for many students it's not a question of should I go. It's more a matter of can I afford to go."

Hildebrand advises students at the University of Arkansas to "cast a wide net" when it comes to funding resources, looking to organizations like the Institute of International Education, the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, the American Indian Graduate Center and scholarship search engines, "to name just a few." He adds, "I've also heard of kickstarter campaigns, bake sales, or students who have reached out to their hometown communities for help."

"Students from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds come to higher education with a different set of social and cultural capital that we may not have focused on in the past," Lopez-McGee says. "One thing we've been telling both advisors and students is to really take advantage of the community network. Students who come from these backgrounds might have relationships with community churches, organizations, their parents' workplaces, that kind of thing. These community resources can help them finance their study abroad experience, but can also help spread the message that study abroad is available for all kinds of students, to a community that



## Tips for Making Study Abroad More Accessible to Nontraditional Students

"Institutions need to harness the creative energy of their staff and campus resources," says Taylor Wood, special projects manager at George Washington University. "We are a community of intellectuals. We have the power and the resources: we just need to use these resources more effectively."

Here are a few of his suggestions:

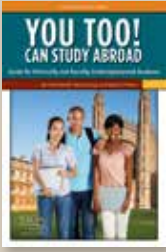
- Don't stop tweaking! Every year revisit your practices and reconnect with both your advocates and critics.
- Ask yourself if there are institutional barriers preventing students from going abroad.
- Utilize technology or other resources to reach your underrepresented students early.
- Develop an office-wide mission, diversity statement or strategic plan to speak to and reach your nontraditional students.
- Speak the language of higher-ups: collect data and use it when developing or advocating for aid.
- Integrate your policies with university-wide policies.
- Show up at new student and transfer student orientations.
- Create walk-in hours at academic advising offices.
- Create liaisons between offices (especially with financial aid).
- Instill the value of study abroad in student support offices.
- Educate yourself on the concerns and critiques of study abroad at your institution.
- Publicize your successes on campus websites, newsletters, and in international education publications.
- Use your alumni to access hard-to-reach student populations.

may not have heard that message very consistently in the past.”

Wood agrees. “Students need to be empowered to find additional resources,” he says. “They should be encouraged to ask everyone, from academic departments and financial aid offices to embassies, host country cultural groups, local businesses, and friends, family and student organizations, for funding opportunities.” He adds that when they find new sources of funding, they should let other students know about them, too.

### **The Payback: What It’s All About**

We know that study abroad pays big dividends both for individual students and for their communities. Indeed, for the students, the career benefits are very important. “Taking courses in Australia strengthened my skill set in terms of international outlook and global market analysis,” Pentchoukov says. “It also helped me learn a lot about the importance of culture and tradition in business. Despite the multitude of cultures in America, it provides a very limited perspec-



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tive into international events and customs. Australia is a melting pot in its own way: I had a great opportunity to learn more about Australian as well as assorted Asian cultures and business practices.”

“I wanted to become a better rounded, competitive, and more informed individual, and I knew that studying abroad would help me achieve that,” Muhammad says. “However, the effect it has had on me is most apparent in my career path.” During the time she was abroad, she was in the midst of transitioning from biology to economics as her major. She had a strong interest in the natural sciences and the environment, and a growing interest in business. But she didn’t know how

she could combine these interests. The coordinator of her program in China connected her to a carbon-trading company in Beijing, where she spent the semester working. “That was my first exposure to the energy industry, and it opened the doors to many opportunities here in the U.S.,” she says. “It paved the way for me to intern at the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the statistical agency of the U.S. Department of Energy.” Soon after graduating, she landed a job at one of the largest energy companies in the United States. Her plans now include continuing study in the field of energy, which, she points out, is “a global industry.” She adds, “Having international experience and awareness is a major advantage.” **IE**

**JANET HULSTRAND** is a writer, editor, and teacher based in Silver Spring, Maryland. She has created and taught literature courses for Queens College, CUNY in Paris, Florence, Honolulu and Havana, as well as faculty development workshops for education abroad. Her most recent article for *IE* was “Creating Sustainable Education Abroad Programs in Nontraditional Locations” in the July/August 2014 issue.

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