

Open Doors, Secure Borders: Advantages of Education Abroad for Public Policy

IT HAS VIRTUALLY BECOME CONVENTIONAL WISDOM SINCE SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 that the world needs to know the United States better. Public officials at the highest level have expressed concern over declining international student enrollments and have expressed the commitment of the United States to welcoming international students. Both the current and the preceding secretaries of state and homeland security have mentioned the subject frequently, and the Department of State has adopted a much publicized policy of “Secure Borders, Open Doors.” With strong congressional prodding and support, the Department of State has committed itself to improving the visa process and has made considerable progress. Although the nation still has a long way to go to recapture its edge in attracting international students, the commitment is clear, and progress is being made. Once top officials translate their stated commitment into comprehensive policy, we will be well on our way toward addressing this issue.

Less attention has been paid to the flip side of this coin: The United States needs to know the world better. Rather than “Secure Borders, Open Doors,” it could be called “Open Doors, Secure Borders”: By opening the door to education abroad for more college students, we gain the security that comes from greater understanding of and familiarity with what’s going on around us in the world. That is also part of post-September 11, 2001 conventional wisdom—and it’s on public officials’ minds, too. But the commitment has been less clear, and new, bigger, and better programs are not being put in place.

At the urging of the late Senator Paul Simon, Congress created the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program at the end of 2003. With NAFSA’s active support, Congress and President Bush selected the commission members and, in November 2005, the commission issued a report calling for the establishment of a national study abroad program whose mission was that in 10 years’ time the United States would be sending one million students abroad. NAFSA also worked with

the Senate to pass a resolution declaring 2006 as the “Year of Study Abroad,” recognizing the important contribution study abroad makes in shaping globally competent graduates and encouraging initiatives at all levels to promote and expand study abroad opportunities for all students.

NAFSA continues to serve as a resource to Congress on these issues and supports legislation to implement Senator Simon’s vision for a Lincoln program that dramatically increases the number of U.S. students studying abroad each year with an emphasis on developing nations and underserved populations. Leadership will be required at all levels to ensure the implementation of this program. Why is this important for our country?

At 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001, America’s ignorance of the world became, incontestably, a national liability. Not only did almost 3,000 individuals perish on that awful day; our nation’s smug confidence that we could afford to be ignorant of the rest of the world also came to an end.

Significantly increasing the number of U.S. students who graduate from college having pursued part of their



undergraduate education abroad will serve U.S. national security, foreign policy, and world leadership many important ways.

National Security

Americans all remember the desperate search for speakers of Arabic, Farsi, and Pashto that followed September 11. Nothing could more dramatically demonstrate the importance of education abroad—which is one of the major ways we produce foreign language speakers and which greatly enhances foreign language learning—to U.S. national security. But we need to raise our vision. The need is broader than foreign language learning, crucial as that is. As NAFSA and the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange noted in *Toward an International Education Policy for the United States*:

We no longer have the option of getting along without the expertise that we need to understand and conduct our relations with the world. We do not have the option of not knowing our enemies—of understanding the world where terrorism originates and speaking its languages. We do not

have the option of not knowing our friends—of understanding how to forge and sustain international relationships that will enhance U.S. leadership and help our values prevail.

These important national security imperatives are served crucially by education abroad. Education abroad doesn't produce experts, but it does begin a process of inculcating international sensitivity and of learning how to learn interculturally. Quite often, an education abroad experience awakens a commitment to lead a more international life than the student had previously imagined. Producing successive generations of students who have had this experience will enable the United States to hear the world, to see the world, to know the world, in ways that will alert us to emerging threats and help us understand how to deal with them effectively. If we want never again to repeat the experience of wondering, "Where did this come from? We never saw it coming and we don't understand why it happened to us," the best course of action we can take is to ensure that our U.S. college graduates are people who have experienced, learned in, and communicated with other cultures,

and who have learned how to "hear" what others are saying, who can speak with them in their language, and who will continue to do so throughout their lives.

Foreign Policy

Generations of U.S. foreign policy leaders have lamented the absence of a domestic constituency for foreign policy. They perceive U.S. public as being unwilling to support foreign policy commitments, programs, and appropriations that are necessary to the defense and promotion of important national interests. There is a way to address this problem—and the time is now. We need to ensure that U.S. students graduate from college with some minimal degree of knowledge of and sensitivity to the world. U.S. citizens who have never been abroad except on guided tours to tourist attractions cannot be the foreign policy constituency that our leaders seek. Those who have spent some time studying and learning abroad, who have developed an interest in a foreign country or region, who have friends there, and who speak their language, can be and will be.

We cannot know today what all of tomorrow's foreign policy issues will be. But if we begin today to implement a policy of sending U.S. college students to diverse destinations around the world to learn about and understand those destinations as part of their higher education, then we do know one thing: When tomorrow's foreign policy issues arise, there will be U.S. leaders prepared to understand them.

What is important is not just to send U.S. students abroad to learn about places that are today's foreign policy priorities. A nation that pursues global interests and faces global threats must have global understanding. The promotion of U.S. foreign policy interests today and into the future requires that U.S. students have studied broadly throughout the world.

Goals of the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program

- Dramatically increase the number of American students studying abroad
- Promote ethnic, socioeconomic and gender diversity in study abroad
- Diversify locations study abroad with a special emphasis on developing countries
- Increase the study of major world languages that are less commonly learned by Americans
- Increase study abroad in underrepresented subjects such as mathematics, physical science, and business
- Create a public-private partnership to leverage higher education resources and reform

U.S. Leadership

Most U.S. citizens would agree that if the world is to be a place in which the United States can be secure and U.S. and Western values can prosper, and if people throughout the world are to have the opportunity to live in democratic societies where they can achieve their aspirations for themselves and for their families, then the United States must lead. Neither the United States nor the world can “get there” without U.S. leadership. Indeed, many people throughout the world would agree that U.S. leadership—exercised wisely and sensitively and inclusively—is a good thing.

But there’s a problem: We cannot effectively lead a world that we do not understand. If U.S. leadership is crucial for the world, then the United States must understand the world. Today, our country is woefully unprepared to do that. Most Americans have never been abroad except just across the border or on the aforementioned guided tours. In fact, only about 25 percent of U.S. citizens hold passports. Most Americans—excepting the growing number of immigrants whose first language is not English—speak no other language. Today, the United States leads by necessity and by default, but is in many

respects ill-equipped to exercise this responsibility.

This situation is dangerous. It threatens our interests, and it threatens the ability of our values to prevail. We must begin to make it the norm, rather than the exception, for U.S. students to graduate from college with a basic understanding of other countries and other languages. If we fail to do so, we cannot ensure that the United States is not blind and deaf in the world it purports to lead.

Globalization and Economic Competitiveness

Of course, the case for study abroad was compelling before September 11. Since well before then, our students have been graduating into a global world, our businesses have been competing in a global marketplace, our economy has been buffeted by global economic forces, and our problems have become global problems. CEOs in increasing numbers are recognizing that their

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firms must and will in the future be led by people with global skills, and the students who prosper in this world will be the ones who graduate with those skills or at least the beginnings of those skills.

We could add the myriad educational and personal-growth benefits that students derive from education abroad. Those benefits, which are well documented, are extremely important. As educators, we value them highly. But it is the national security, foreign policy, U.S. leadership, and economic competitiveness benefits that cause study abroad to rise from an educational to a public policy concern. [See “Wanted: Global Workers” on page 40 for more on global workforce development.]

A Call for Leadership

A December 2005 poll commissioned by NAFSA found that more than 90 percent of U.S. citizens believe it is important to prepare future generations for a global society

and that more than three-quarters believe that students should study abroad during college. Everyone agrees that international education is an important instrument for achieving vital national interests. However, it is striking that we do not have a coherent, comprehensive policy for using international education for that purpose.

In fact, only one percent of U.S. students study abroad each year—a pitifully small portion of the student body. In the 2003–2004 academic year, less than 25 percent of those students studied abroad in Asia, Africa, Russia, the Middle East, Central or South America. That means less than one quarter of one percent of U.S. students studied in countries representing more than 80 percent of the world’s population.

The evidence is clear: If we believe that studying abroad has these public policy advantages, then there should be a bold national program to address the lackluster performance of U.S. graduates in the area of

global knowledge. The vision for such a program now exists. Congress must act quickly to establish a comprehensive national program to increase the global competency of future generations.

Every student today needs to be given the opportunity to be educated internationally. Students need to be given a gateway to live in and learn about those cultures critical to U.S. success. Education abroad should become the norm, not the exception, in U.S. higher education. The opportunity to study abroad cannot and should not be a frill reserved only for the advantaged students—it should be voraciously encouraged for all students. **IE**

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Editor’s Note: This article is adapted from material submitted by NAFSA to the Lincoln Commission.

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