

By Charlotte West

Advancing the Work of Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity Abroad's Andrew Gordon on Celebrating Progress, Leaning into Areas of Needed Growth, and the 'Intangibles' of Studying Abroad



Andrew Gordon

A semester in the southern Spanish city of Seville propelled Andrew Gordon to found Diversity Abroad in 2006. As the organization's chief executive officer, he advocates for diversity and inclusive excellence within international education and, according to a new strategic plan, pursues systemic changes in global education.

With a range of U.S. institutions and partner organization as members, Diversity Abroad has become a go-to resource on issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity for international education professionals. Gordon spoke with International Educator about what these themes mean in the context of international education, what progress he has seen in the field, and the opportunities for growth.

How did your personal experience lead you to found Diversity Abroad?

My older brother studied abroad in Spain, and I went to visit him and traveled around Europe. After that, I [thought], "I want to do this," so I did a summer program in Mexico. The following year, I did a semester in southern Spain studying, and then I interned in Madrid when I got out of school.

All of those were awesome experiences in their own way, but the experience in Spain was the one that was instrumental in founding Diversity Abroad. It was a fairly large program, probably hundreds of students, and I can count on two hands the number of brown and black kids that were there.

Fast forward a few years, while I was preparing to get my MBA, I started thinking back to my experience with study abroad—how that experience really impacted me as a person, how I viewed myself, how I viewed the world, how I viewed the opportunity in so many different

ways. At that point, I was involved with several diversity-related organizations: the National Association of Black Accountants and Association of Latino Professionals for America. I started to understand the importance of organizations whose sole focus was on diversity, equity, and inclusion within certain sectors. I started doing the research on diversity within international education in 2005. [At that time,] NAFSA had some things going on, individual provider organizations and divisions in universities had some things going on, but there wasn't a central organization focused on this work.

That's the genesis of Diversity Abroad. We started the website for students; it wasn't for professionals. Several years in, universities and professionals started asking us for resources. We had this conversation on a Monday—that maybe we should build a website that has resources for professionals, as well—and by Friday, we had decided to create a consortium.

COURTESY ANDREW GORDON

There were all of these great organizations within our space. But there was no organization that was solely focused on advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion within international education, particularly through the lens of professionals. Previously, so much of the work had been very student focused, which is important, but there wasn't as much of a focus on what we are doing internally and structurally as organizations to advance this work. We can't just put it all on the students.

What does diversity mean in the context of international education?

Diversity is very much tied to the demographics of the student population, and we try to look at [it] from a broad perspective. The primary focus has been on students of color, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, LGBTQ students, students who are the first in their family to go to college, students with a disability, and students from diverse religious backgrounds. By no means does it discount the importance of other groups of diversity. And when you think about intersectionality, to a certain extent, it widens the number of folks that we're talking about as a whole.

How do the issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity intersect in education abroad?

Inclusion is different, and, arguably, [achieving] diversity is easier than inclusion. Just by the nature of enrollment patterns in higher education, we'll get more diversity because we're enrolling more students from different backgrounds. [Diversity Abroad] made a conclusion that the specific definition or two that we use for inclusion is that it's the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity in ways that increase awareness, constant knowledge, and understanding of the complex way that individuals interact with systems and institutions.

We look at the student's experience: Are our programs and cocurricular

activities developed in a way that [all students] are going to feel like, "Yes, this is something that's best for me—that who I am as a person was taken into consideration"? Frankly, any increased diversity without actually asking a question of, "How is inclusion embedded into the work that we do?" can be very problematic. Research shows [that as] you increase diversity, there's more probability for tension, if you will, between different groups. From an inclusion standpoint, it's both. How are we supporting students who are coming to us from a variety of different backgrounds?

Equity is the question of fairness and impartiality. When we talk about equity, we talk about who has equitable access to the benefits of global education—the academic, interpersonal, and career benefits that are gained from meaningful international experiences. How are we ensuring that all students have equitable access to those benefits? Part of that goes back to the question of inclusion. Are we prepared to support all of our students in a way that takes their identity into consideration and takes a location where they're studying into consideration? This is equally important for how we recruit, retain, and advance professionals from diverse backgrounds in the field of international education. These three definitions can be applied to that as well.

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What progress have you seen the field achieve in these areas?

We've definitely made some progress in diversifying the population of students who are going abroad. Even just pulling [the Institute of International Education's] *Open Doors* numbers, we can look and say that we've made some progress as we've increased overall enrollment in education abroad. We've made some progress with respect to students from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds. That feels like something we should be proud about. There's still a lot of work to grow, but we've made progress.

Where is there room for growth?

I'll highlight three areas. One, I would say the inclusion-equity part. If what we're doing is just about student mobility, then we would be glorified travel agents. We're not. And the reason we're not is that it's not just about the mobility of students, it is about the experience they have and the ability for that experience to be transformative. Transformation doesn't happen by itself. [It requires] looking at how we support students before, during, and after they go abroad to ensure more students have equitable access to the benefits of these programs. And that [includes] training and development of staff, as well as resources for students, staff both here in the United States and outside, and faculty members. [It is] a constant understanding of what diversity

and inclusion mean in different parts of the world so that we can support our students' success.

The second area is with respect to international students. We're not going to send all the U.S. students abroad that we want under the current way things are structured. [There are] a variety of reasons why certain students won't go, but that doesn't mean they can't have access to a high-quality, twenty-first-century education, which includes global learning. It involves them interacting with international students around campus. So how are we working with international students to improve their experience and help them understand what diversity means in the United States—and also encouraging more engagement between international students and [domestic students], particularly diverse students from underrepresented backgrounds, on our campuses?

The third and final area [of growth] is: What does diversity, equity, and inclusion mean for our profession? Who are we hiring to work in the field of international education? How are we to retain professionals from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds? And how are we ensuring that there is a sense of belonging, both in our offices and organizations, but also instilled as a whole for professionals from a variety of backgrounds? How can we work to make sure that at all levels of the higher education sector—from the entry level up into leadership—reflect the rich diversity of the students who we serve? We can't be successful, with respect to diversity and inclusion initiatives, if we don't address the lack of diversity in our field from the professional aspect in a sustainable and systemic way.

Tell us more about the importance of increasing diversity among international education professionals.

It's twofold. We want to train and empower everyone who works in the field right now, regardless of their background, to be able to support students from

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increasingly diverse backgrounds who are coming to the colleges and universities. But we're in a field of really well-intentioned professionals, and sometimes that can be a barrier to [recognizing that] we have some of the same challenges here that we see in other places. The tech industry gets beat up a lot for its lack of diversity because it's the 800-pound gorilla, but we also need to take a look and see that this is one of the areas where there's a tremendous amount of room for growth. We see Diversity Abroad as being a place of pushing this aspect of diversity and inclusion forward within our field as well.

What is the role of campus leadership in achieving diversity, inclusion, and equity?

This past March, we hosted the second annual chief diversity officer (CDO) and senior international officer strategic leadership forum specifically on equitable access to education abroad. There are a number of CDOs who are very much engaged with international education—I think primarily because of the benefits that come from education abroad in regard to student success and interpersonal growth. Folks in diversity offices [consider as] part of their mandate to look at diversity, equity, and inclusion for the campus as a whole, and how [they] support the goals of the academy—which, in part, is graduating students who can thrive in the twenty-first century.

If we know [education abroad] is tied to student success, what are we doing to make sure more students have access to it? [Most institutions] have a multicultural office, a pride center, and a disability office to support various students as they're participating in their underlying activity, which is academic achievement. We don't have [diversity] offices overseas, nor have I ever heard a CDO advocate for that. But there are many CDOs who are interested in how to support our students outside the United States as well, and [they] are seeing their offices as being more global and more engaged with both outbound and inbound students.

The other part we haven't talked much about—and work that Diversity Abroad is doing—is what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean to inbound international students. There are a number of CDOs who are very interested in that. As an organization, we are working in this space as well.

Why is it especially important for minority students to have experiences abroad?

I'm always careful in trying not to make too broad of generalizations, but I think most folks would agree that our country still grapples with issues related to race. Particularly with respect to students of color, the ability to leave the United States and go to places where the narrative about who

you are might not already be embedded into the consciousness of folks [can be transformative]. This is a deeply personal aspect of Diversity Abroad.

It is important for students of all backgrounds, particularly students of color, to see their position in the world. To see themselves reflected in people who look like them, but who have very different experiences. To see their culture celebrated by people of all different backgrounds around the world. And to truly see themselves as global citizens. Some folks have issues with that term, but depending on how you define it, I think you can be a citizen of a country but still be a global citizen—meaning really appreciating your place in the world. I also think it is important for people outside the United States to have an understanding of, “this is who an American is.”

There’s a level of increased confidence that comes from being outside of your comfort zone, particularly for certain communities where international engagement hasn’t historically been part of that community. For someone from that community to go and do that, there’s much more [of the feeling that] “I did something that a lot of people like me haven’t done.”

These are intangibles, and I think that’s part of the opportunity we have as a field—to better understand [students’ experiences] by having metrics about impact. Primarily, we have data on mobility, but not the actual experience. That’s a huge area for growth in our field. We often talk about students of color abroad through the lens of deficit—racism and other issues that are obviously real. But there are a ton of assets that students of color and other diverse students bring to the education abroad experience just based on their experience on campus as a whole. I think that’s an area for us as a field to celebrate. ■

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