Support U.S. Study Abroad Programs Impacted by COVID-19

Ask: NAFSA urges Congress to ensure the survival of study abroad programs at U.S. colleges and universities impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study abroad programs run by U.S. college and universities and private-sector providers equip American students with the essential global competencies and experiences needed to succeed in today’s global workforce and are important employers as well. Many U.S. higher education institutions across the country have reported that they are reducing hours, furloughing employees, and eliminating positions due to the cancellation of study abroad programs, resulting in thousands of job losses. The grim picture extends to staff layoffs at study abroad companies who provide essential support to overseas programs.

Academic year 2020-2021 could turn into the year without study abroad, with the cancellation of spring and summer study abroad programs and the strong likelihood that most, if not all, in-person programs this fall will be cancelled. Without these programs, U.S. students are losing a key component of their education and colleges and universities are losing an important source of revenue. NAFSA conducted a survey in April to gauge the financial impact of COVID-19 and results indicated that U.S. higher education overall potentially had lost nearly $1 billion due to shortened or cancelled study abroad programs alone. Without additional financial relief, it could take years for study abroad to fully recover; leaving U.S. students with fewer international education opportunities, U.S. higher education institutions with fewer international collaborations, and our country less prepared to tackle global challenges or compete in the global marketplace.

To this end, NAFSA requests that Congress implement the following stimulus and policy changes:

**Direct emergency aid to support education abroad, to include funds for virtual exchanges.** Unlike the retail, construction, or manufacturing sectors, which should be able to start up again once the threat from the pandemic has been reduced, study abroad will not be able to snap back quickly. Most programs are planned out well over a year in advance, making it incredibly difficult to restart education abroad programs quickly. Many programs at U.S. colleges and universities are fee-funded, and if there are no students studying abroad, then operating budgets will be significantly reduced, potentially putting additional people out of work. Fewer staff and less infrastructure to support students will make restarting programs more difficult. Funding is necessary in order to maintain American students’ access to study abroad to prepare them to tackle global challenges and compete in the global marketplace while protecting American jobs on campuses around the country.

**Needed Congressional Action**

- **Increase or newly establish funding for virtual exchange programs.** Increasing funding for virtual exchange would allow institutions to continue to offer intercultural exchange programs for their students and maintain international partnerships and agreements while there may still be travel restrictions or a general hesitancy to travel by
students, faculty and staff. For example, the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs administers the Stevens Initiative to promote virtual exchange between the United States and the Middle East. Increased funding for this initiative, along with an expansion of its mandate to promote virtual exchange to other parts of the world, or one like it would provide much needed support for institutions to expand or develop new virtual exchange opportunities.

- **Increase funding for the Increasing and Diversifying Education Abroad for U.S. Students (IDEAS) program run by the U.S. State Department’s Educational and Cultural Exchange Bureau’s USA Study Abroad Office.** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was considerable interest in increasing institutional capacity for study abroad programming. As U.S. higher education recovers from the pandemic, there will be considerably more need to support study abroad offices on campuses across the country. In Fiscal Year 2019, the IDEAS Program funded 22 out of 120 grant applications submitted.

- **Establish funding in the U.S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) to support innovation in study abroad consistent with the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act.** For higher education to fully recover and be able to serve the needs of its students after this global crisis, new models for study abroad will need to be developed, new partnerships will need to be formed, and new opportunities will need to be created. Establishing funding in FIPSE consistent with the Simon Study Abroad Program Act (S.1198/H.R.4555) will provide higher education institutions much needed support to develop innovative programs and study abroad models that will allow them to adapt to the changing reality of global mobility in the post-COVID-19 education landscape.

The requested resources detailed above will save jobs and preserve vital study abroad programs for U.S. students, programs necessary to tackle the global challenges of the future.

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