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*Opportunities for studying outside one's home country are often viewed with skepticism by students, parents, or advisors who see them as the domain of a privileged or eccentric few. Yet these experiences are increasingly valuable in a world in need of individuals with advanced foreign language skills and a grounding in multicultural understanding. Universities are experimenting with new ways to encourage students to participate in study abroad, even if the initial experience is something less than high immersion. This article describes the benefits of study abroad, special challenges to metropolitan universities, and ways to increase participation by more diverse groups of college students.*

# **Advancing Study Abroad: *Beyond Our Students' Means?***

There is increasing sentiment for the idea that American universities have a responsibility to educate their students on multicultural issues and international understanding. El-Khawas (1994) reviewed current international activity by four-year colleges and universities in the United States. She concluded that many are moving toward a "global university" by encouraging the international flow of students and faculty, integrating international subjects into academic programs and courses, and implementing collaborative projects with institutions in other countries.

Colleges are experimenting with effective ways to promote international and multicultural understanding. This is happening even at institutions in isolated locations with a less than affluent study body. Buena Vista College in rural Iowa, for example, has brought an international perspective to campus by encouraging faculty exchange, study abroad, and recruitment of foreign students. Two-thirds of the faculty have studied overseas, and about 5 percent of students study abroad each year. More graduates report finding jobs using their international experiences (Briscoe, 1991).

Study abroad, a time-honored means of introducing students to other peoples and cultures, has traditionally been viewed as one of the most effective methods of opening students' minds to the "otherness" of the world around them. From a results-oriented view-

point, many believe that the ideal form of multicultural education is a long-term study-abroad or exchange program, following two or three years of foreign language training. By studying in another country for two semesters, students have the opportunity to become part of another society and culture. They meet host nationals and develop long-term friendships that often continue beyond the end of the program, thereby extending and intensifying the learning process, sometimes for a lifetime. Students studying a foreign language often become fluent after a year abroad, depending on previous language training. Beyond the cultural aspects of learning, a long-term program is likely to foster increased self-understanding and objectivity, and can have a beneficial impact on a student's self-esteem. However, many universities in the United States, especially metropolitan universities, are challenged to develop effective programs and to increase the number of participating students.

### Room for Improvement

Astin's 1993 studies of the impact of different aspects of college on students—*What Matters in College?*—suggest that study abroad is associated with modest gains in cultural awareness and foreign language skills, as well as in grade point average and affective development. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), however, the small body of research on the effects of study abroad is somewhat inconsistent, and “one reasonably consistent thread indicates that study abroad produces only limited gains in students' ‘worldmindedness’...there is even some reason to believe that overseas study programs may have fewer positive effects on students' tolerance for others than domestic off-campus study programs...” (p. 306). Such conclusions must be tempered by the fact that until recently the preponderance of research on the effects of study abroad has not been characterized by rigorous methods.

In any case, there is ample room for improvement in designing study-abroad programs, in assessing the extent and quality of student involvement in them, and in measuring the outcomes of these experiences. NAFSA, The Association of International Educators, recently published a series of papers on education abroad, related advising issues, and program development and evaluation. Also, more colleges are using student surveys and testing as evidence of skills or knowledge gained as a result of study abroad by participants in specific programs.

A recent evaluation of study abroad programs within the State University System (SUS) of Florida (Burn, Cole, and Fliozzo, 1993) revealed that a very high proportion of SUS students do not fit the profile of typical study-abroad students. The evaluators reported that although study-abroad programs in Florida are impressive in their scope, systemic program improvement will require better coordination with community colleges, increased participation by students, better administration, implementation of a foreign language requirement, systematic evaluation, professional development for study abroad administrators, and encouragement for students to participate in programs of institutions other than their own.

There is also anecdotal evidence from the experiences of advisors that students who are seriously considering study abroad have not thought enough about the deeper issues of involvement or immersion in another culture. Too often, they become so caught up in the logistical and financial planning of study abroad that they fail to prepare themselves to make the most of the actual experience. Miller (1993) refers to students' lack of "coping strategies" and speaks in terms of the resulting "culture shock." He stresses that all phases of study abroad must be enhanced and improved: before, during, and after the actual immersion stage.

A few colleges are heeding such advice. Earlham College, for example, has been redesigning study-abroad programs to incorporate predeparture orientation, a structured ethnographic or fieldwork project, and a postexperience program (Lamson and O'Maley, 1995).

The biggest challenge of all may simply be to increase the number of students who are able to take advantage of study abroad. On a relative scale, only a handful of American students are interested enough, academically prepared, or flexible enough to travel and study among other peoples of the world. The number of foreign students enrolled in the United States is ten times as large as that of American students who are enrolled in other countries. In a time when business and communications are increasingly conducted in a global environment, there may soon be a clarion call for more study abroad by American students. As graduates, their successful involvement and prosperity in a world economy may depend on it.

### **Challenges to Metropolitan Universities**

Public, metropolitan universities generally face even greater challenges in involving students in study abroad, and in evaluating their experiences.

The majority of their students may not possess the necessary financial resources or academic preparation to participate in the programs that offer the best results. Long-term study-abroad programs are generally the most effective, and these involve certain demands that further limit the ability of metropolitan students to participate: study-abroad programs require a significant amount of time and money; a high level of maturity, independence and courage; a strong desire to learn about another culture; and, in many cases, substantial knowledge of a foreign language. Consequently, students who are able to participate usually have access to additional funds, have encouragement from family members or friends who have either been abroad or recognize the importance of it, are not under time pressure to graduate within four years, already have some understanding of different cultures and international issues, and possess substantial foreign language skills. Students at public, metropolitan universities typically do not have the skills or support necessary for a study abroad program. These schools tend to have a large community of "non-traditional" students, who perceive study abroad as an unattainable luxury for a privileged few. A very large percentage of these students attend university part-time and work off-campus to pay for their education. Many are the first in their families to study at the postsecondary level; consequently, their main goal is simply to earn an undergraduate degree without complications.

For these students it is also intimidating to deal with the complexities of foreign travel, transferring credit, choosing an appropriate program, or financing the whole experience. They may have limited knowledge of international issues and usually do not seek out information in such areas. Most of them have not even considered the academic benefits of a study-abroad program because it seems so far beyond their means.

Minority student participation in study abroad is an area in need of special attention. Researchers have found that overall, minority participation may be limited by early attrition, economic issues, fear of travel to unknown areas, fear of discrimination, and anxieties about language difficulties (Hembroff and Rusz, 1993).

### **Encouraging Participation**

Leaders of metropolitan universities must begin to acknowledge the obstacles to study abroad faced by their students, and adjust their approaches to international education. If a primary goal is to encourage more students,

especially nontraditional students, to participate in study-abroad programs, they must make extraordinary efforts to promote the benefits of study abroad, address perceptions that it is beyond students' means, and remove some of the very real roadblocks. This may mean creating new programs to encourage students with varying needs, interests, and circumstances.

What can be done to increase the probability that students will participate in and derive maximum benefits from study abroad? Administrators can help students overcome the obstacles to study abroad programs in several ways:

- by offering programs that will incorporate their degree requirements, thereby reducing the risk of extending graduation;
- by increasing the number of faculty exchanges and recruiting more international students to campus, thereby raising awareness of and interest in different cultures;
- by involving faculty in encouraging students to participate and in helping them through difficult planning decisions; and
- by providing a combination of need-based and merit-based scholarships to help meet the additional costs.

Universities can also appeal to students by designing programs that will engage them at different levels of awareness. At the most basic level, they can offer international films, exhibits, and art on campus, which increase student curiosity. They can also sponsor free seminars on international topics to provide an avenue for students with basic interest to expand their knowledge and to meet faculty and others who have an interest in that area. By “internationalizing” the curriculum and offering international degree programs or certificate programs, they can provide students with an option of studying international issues while still working toward a degree. By instituting a “global awareness” requirement, metropolitan universities can expose students to international topics.

Additionally, encouraging or requiring foreign language study leads to increased understanding of a particular culture and its language. Students are more likely to participate in a study-abroad program if they have the needed language skills and have learned something of related cultures in class.

By sponsoring low-cost, low-immersion, and short-term study-abroad programs, metropolitan universities can address the desires of some students to go abroad without great cost or time commitment. For many students,

this may encourage a later return to host countries for a longer period of study. Admittedly, some controversy exists regarding short-term study abroad programs that allow for little interaction with host citizens. Such programs are sometimes criticized for creating "American ghettos" or "American islands," providing students with an atmosphere in which their professors, classmates, roommates, and travel partners are all Americans. Many ask, "What's the point of going abroad if you spend all your time with Americans?" While it is true that these students do not enjoy all of the benefits of a year-long, fully integrated exchange program, these kinds of programs are beneficial for certain types of students, including those who are otherwise bound by time and work commitments, or who simply cannot afford longer-term alternatives.

Ideas for encouraging participation of minorities in study-abroad programs, written from the perspectives of experienced administrators, have begun to appear in the literature. One brochure published by the Council on International Educational Exchange ("Increasing Participation of Ethnic Minorities in Study Abroad") cites specific examples of creativity in six major areas of action: funding, reassurance, promotion, choice and availability of programs, goal setting, and data collection. For example, program suggestions include offering programs in nontraditional areas, and funding suggestions include identifying special minority scholarships, using program revenue to assist students with travel grants, and seeking tuition waivers abroad.

Some students do not yet possess the maturity or communication skills necessary to survive or to be successful in a fully integrated program. For them (and for many of their concerned parents), a more structured program with American supervisors and classmates is the only option for study abroad that they will even consider. The hope is that when such students are introduced to the richness of other cultures, they will want to experience more. By this measure alone, such programs may be a success. Many students will wish to return to the host countries for travel, study, or work, and thereby create for themselves more opportunities for meaningful interaction with host country natives.

Conversely, students who are highly motivated and adventuresome will likely become bored with the limitations of low-immersion programs. Consequently, the study-abroad advisor plays a very important role in advising students about which programs may be suited to their skills and ambitions. The advisor must understand the different types of programs available and

realize that students differ significantly in their skill levels and personalities. It is important to give the student, and parents, as much information as possible so that they can make the best choices and decisions from among the available study-abroad programs.

Another powerful technique for encouraging otherwise hesitant students to consider study abroad is to generate and share with them more information from their peers, particularly other students who have gone before them. The self-reported outcomes of returning study-abroad students, especially those who have been expected to chronicle their experiences, are rich and exciting. In one study of how 30 Pennsylvania State University students used out-of-class experiences while studying abroad to enhance their learning, it was concluded that participant observation, personal interaction, and travel had helped students to learn more about the host culture and break down their own stereotypes (Laubscher, 1994). In other words, students themselves reported the importance of putting forth an active effort to involve themselves in the host culture. The study recommended that international programs build in experiential activities, monitor the quality of the exchange experience, develop appropriate pre-exchange orientation programs, prepare students for reflective observation, force critical thinking and reflection, and develop more exchange programs in nontraditional areas.

### Conclusion

If public metropolitan universities are to successfully promote international and multicultural knowledge, skills, and understanding through study abroad, they must fully consider the needs and skill levels of their students and develop programs accordingly. Since many students at these universities do not possess the resources or experience necessary for a long-term study-abroad program, these universities must work to promote the benefits of study abroad, eliminate barriers to this experience, and design programs that will meet them at a variety of levels. It is certainly important to assess and improve the outcomes of a study-abroad experience. At the same time, as the world calls out for greater acceptance and understanding among all of its peoples, we are challenged to simplify and expand the number of opportunities for cultural interchange.

***Suggested Reading***

Briscoe, K. "Broadening Horizons: Institutionalizing an International Perspective." *Educational Record*. (72) 4, 1991: 62-64.

El-Khawas, E. "Toward a Global University: Status and Outlook in the United States." *Higher Education Management*. (6) 1, 1994: 90-98.

Hembroff, L., and Rusz, D. *Minorities and Overseas Studies Programs: Correlates of Differential Participation*. Occasional Paper on International Educational Exchange, Research Series 30. New York, 1993: 89

Lamson, H., and O'Maley, P. "International Education and Liberal Learning." *Liberal Education*. (81) 1, 1995: 24-29.

Laubscher, M. *Encounters with Difference: Student Perceptions of the Role of Out-of-Class Experiences in Education Abroad*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.

Pascarella, E., and Terenzini, P. *How College Affects Students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1991.