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The Study-Abroad Solution

How to Open the American Mind

By Sanford J. Ungar



In the Internet age, the world feels far smaller than it used to. But many Americans still know little about the rest of the world and may be more detached from it than ever. Such a lack of awareness is, in certain respects, understandable. Once the Cold War ended, some 25 years ago, Congress, perhaps out of a false sense of security, cut the foreign affairs budget, which led to the closing of some U.S. overseas posts. The news media, especially the commercial television networks, took their cue and began to reduce overseas coverage—responding, they said, to the decline of public interest in such matters, which conveniently coincided with their own economic woes. Although the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent wars in [Afghanistan](#) and [Iraq](#) stimulated renewed attention to international events, that phenomenon proved short-lived. Consequently, as new global challenges have arisen in recent years, American discourse on world affairs has lacked historical context or deeper understanding. It has become difficult to stir thoughtful, informed debate on foreign policy issues during congressional—or even presidential—campaigns. Many politicians who aspire to lead the country seem not to understand what constitutes a [foreign policy](#) issue, let alone the complexity of dealing with one. A candidate who speaks a foreign language appears almost suspect.

One symptom of Americans' new isolation is a sharp contrast between the positive, even zealous views they hold of the United States and its role in the world and the anti-Americanism and negative perceptions of U.S. foreign policy that flourish almost everywhere else. This gap persists in part because relatively few Americans look beyond, or step outside, their own borders for a reality check. Less than [40 percent](#) of Americans hold passports. Compare that figure with the numbers from other English-speaking countries that are geographically isolated: 50 percent of

Australian citizens hold passports, as do more than 60 percent of Canadians and 75 percent of New Zealanders. In the United Kingdom, which is admittedly much closer to foreign destinations, some 80 percent of citizens carry passports.

Given the United States' determination to project its hard and soft power and preserve its influence in a restless but interconnected world, the almost universal failure of the broader U.S. public to know and understand others, except through a military lens, is not just unfortunate but also dangerous. It severely hinders the creation and implementation of a rational, consistent, and nuanced foreign policy that reflects American values and enjoys public support.

Luckily, there exists a disarmingly simple way to help address this problem and to produce future generations of Americans who will know more and care more about the rest of the world: massively increase the number of U.S. college and university students who go abroad for some part of their education and bring home essential knowledge and new perspectives. The federal government should pass ambitious legislation, akin in scope and impact to the transformative National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, that would directly fund more study-abroad opportunities and create incentives for colleges and universities to put them in place and for students to pursue them. Such action would help democratize study abroad by making it more affordable and accessible, spreading its benefits beyond the relatively narrow cohort of mostly white and well-off students at a relatively small number of institutions who tend to take advantage of it today. To realize the tremendous potential of study abroad to improve American society and U.S. foreign policy, many more Americans—and more kinds of Americans—need to take part.

THE BENEFITS OF WORLDLINESS

It is hardly a new discovery that sending young Americans abroad promotes [better understanding](#) of global affairs and has other profoundly positive impacts at home. Many current and past leaders in U.S. business, government, science, education, the nonprofit and foundation sectors, and the arts participated in overseas study, service, or work experiences at an impressionable stage in their lives. Their time spent in other countries broadened their perspectives and deepened their appreciation for the many different ways that other societies approach common problems. Traditionally, Americans have tended to gravitate to western European destinations, but many have also spent formative months and years in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where they came to see how the world does not always correspond to American preconceptions.

The benefits of an overseas experience are difficult to quantify, but there is little doubt that studying abroad can be beneficial for all students, regardless of their income level, background, or the school they attend. Two public institutions that have examined the issue, Indiana University and the University System of Georgia, found [concrete results](#) that contradict common misperceptions: higher four-year graduation rates among those who studied abroad. And international education, especially if enhanced by language training, can open doors and confer lifelong contacts and interests that a student might not have developed otherwise. Now that every academic field, profession, and industry has taken on an international dimension, study abroad increasingly appears to be an essential element of success, a requirement to compete in the global marketplace. And there is some evidence that obtaining part of one's education overseas likely increases one's lifetime earning potential—a further bonus on top of the extra \$1 million or so that experts believe results from an undergraduate degree, on average, depending on the field of study.

The United States must massively increase the number of Americans who study abroad.

In 2001, when I became president of Goucher College, in Baltimore, about a third of the college's undergraduates were already studying abroad, some in traditional semester- or year-long programs and others in intensive short-

term courses led by Goucher faculty and staff members. It was easy to see that the participants returned with new ideas, stronger personalities, and a better sense of who they were as individuals and as Americans. They described transformative adventures that allowed them to see their own country, with all its strengths and weaknesses, more clearly. They spoke of things they had observed and experienced abroad that the United States might be able to learn from: the ways that other societies organized urban housing and transportation for the poor, conducted immunization and literacy campaigns, made cultural events accessible to a broad audience, and—one of the most frequently mentioned—honored and cared for older generations.

It became clear that if Goucher could dramatically and quickly increase participation in study abroad, the college would become a different, indeed distinctive, place—a great advantage in the competitive liberal arts college market. Within a few years, after some gut-wrenching internal deliberations, Goucher made study abroad mandatory for undergraduates, provided a stipend to make it more affordable for all, and turned its little corner of the world alongside the Baltimore Beltway into a laboratory for international exploration. Enrollments grew, horizons broadened, and opportunities beckoned. In every possible venue, including in the residence halls and over meals, returning students regaled one another, and those yet to go, with stories of where they had been and what they had learned. Instructors soon accommodated these new perspectives, and the campus became a more welcoming environment for international students, who often found people at Goucher already aware of their countries and cultures.



INFREQUENT FLIERS

The trouble is that relatively few Americans currently enjoy this kind of life-changing overseas experience. According to the most reliable estimates, some 304,000 U.S. students studied abroad for credit during the 2013–14 academic

year, which represented about 1.5 percent of all American students enrolled in institutions of higher education that year. The number of Americans studying abroad seems especially low compared with the flow in the other direction. International students, for whom the United States has become the top destination of choice, now make up almost five percent of the total enrollment in U.S. higher education, split roughly evenly between undergraduate and graduate programs. According to the [Institute of International Education \(IIE\)](#), the foreign population in U.S. colleges and universities increased by ten percent in the 2014–15 academic year, to a record high of nearly 975,000 students, over 30 percent of whom were from China. Put simply, that means that there are more than three times as many foreigners studying at U.S. colleges and universities as there are Americans studying abroad altogether, and about the same number of Chinese students matriculate in the United States as do Americans anywhere in the world.



A UK Border Agency worker poses with a passport at Gatwick Airport near London, November 2009.



A number of significant obstacles have long stood in the way of more Americans heading overseas during college. First, students at institutions with a core curriculum may find it difficult to complete all their requirements on schedule if they go away for a substantial period of time, and few of those colleges and universities have been inclined to offer core courses or approve their equivalents overseas. Some advisers to premedical students counsel against education abroad, on the theory that it could somehow make those students less competitive for admission to the top U.S. medical schools. Other tightly structured courses of study, such as teacher-training programs, may also discourage students from straying down international paths.

Believing that any season could become a championship season, the coaches of highly competitive athletic teams (especially men's teams) have been known to warn players that they might miss a once-in-a-lifetime experience if they go abroad at the wrong time. Students involved in other absorbing extracurricular activities, such as student government or newspapers and radio stations, may also risk losing their chance to compete for top positions while away. A lack of advanced foreign-language skills may make students hesitant to enroll in overseas programs. And some elite universities, while not explicitly discouraging study abroad, perpetuate the subtle message that students could not possibly learn enough elsewhere to justify sacrificing important intellectual and practical opportunities on their home campuses (although some of those institutions are now scrambling to get their study-abroad percentages up). Finally, many colleges and universities treat overseas education as essentially "pass/fail," with grades obtained

overseas not appearing on a transcript, and that may make it seem less important and less desirable.

Another major obstacle to study abroad is cost: concern about affordability is the number one reason cited in surveys that explore Americans' reluctance to study abroad. At public institutions, which are less likely to have endowed funds to support overseas education, the concern is often justified; if a public university does not offer its own international programs or otherwise underwrite the expense of studying abroad, a student's semester or year away could add significantly to his or her family's financial burden. And even intensive short programs, if they are organized outside the standard curriculum and require additional tuition, can be out of reach for those with scant resources.

A growing number of study-abroad programs, however, now cost no more—or even less—than ordinary enrollment, and some colleges permit students to take financial aid overseas with them for a semester or two. Cooperative arrangements are emerging, especially among liberal arts colleges, that should eventually produce economies of scale and lower costs. Many European countries with excellent universities, including Finland and Germany, provide students from other nations the same tuition-free opportunities their own citizens enjoy—and often in English. U.S. undergraduates of limited financial means who already qualify for federal Pell Grants may also apply for Gilman International Scholarships for overseas education; if they are studying a language on the State Department's "critical need" list—such as Arabic, Chinese, or Russian—they may be eligible for a further additional stipend. Many scholarly associations and foreign governments also offer grants for language study overseas. And a slowly increasing number of students are figuring out that they can save money by enrolling directly in language and other programs overseas, rather than going through their home institutions.

A BROADER STUDY ABROAD

In addition to the relative paucity of U.S. students who study abroad and the obstacles that stand in the way of increasing that number, there exists another problem: a lack of curricular and socioeconomic diversity among those who do go overseas. According to the IIE, for many years, two-thirds of American students who went abroad majored in the traditional social sciences, the humanities, or business and management. Only recently has there been a surge of study abroad by those in the so-called STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and math), to the point where they now represent 23 percent of the total—an improvement, but still an underrepresentation, given that 36 percent of all U.S. undergraduates major in STEM fields. Knowledge of the world and of different cultural perspectives is, of course, important in all fields.

If overseas education remains overwhelmingly a pursuit of the white elite, it cannot realize its potential.

More troubling are gaps that exist when it comes to class, ethnicity, and gender. "The majority of study-abroad students are white, female liberal arts majors," notes Marlene Johnson, executive director and CEO of the Association of International Educators (commonly referred to as NAFSA). Minority students, particularly African Americans and Hispanics, tend to study abroad at lower rates than whites, who now compose less than 60 percent of the overall undergraduate student population but still make up almost 75 percent of U.S. students overseas. In recent years, Johnson says, there has been "some progress on diversity [in study abroad], but it's very small." She blames higher education administrators for failing to deal adequately with this issue and for often quietly discouraging study abroad.

If overseas education remains overwhelmingly a pursuit of the white elite, it cannot realize its potential to stimulate a broad-based shift in American perceptions of, and dealings with, the larger world. American elites, especially on the coasts and in major interior cities, already tend to have broader, more cosmopolitan views on global affairs than other citizens, and studying and traveling overseas no doubt affirms those attitudes. But if study abroad were to become a more widespread, mainstream experience, it would have far more profound effects on American society. One of the most basic promises and purposes of U.S. higher education is to [broaden elite circles](#) and make it possible for anyone to aspire to any position, regardless of his or her background or ethnicity. Expanding participation in study abroad will be an important part of [realizing that ideal](#).

As it stands, however, many first-generation college students and children of immigrants likely see study abroad as a luxury or a rite of passage intended mostly for those from wealthy white families, and they may consider it more a form of tourism than a serious academic endeavor. That stereotype is often reinforced in the news media and in literature and films. But at Goucher, we found that as study-abroad participation expanded quickly, students from inner-city, rural, or multicultural backgrounds were among the greatest enthusiasts, often adapting far more readily to new environments than their peers from upper-middle-class suburban families, who might never even have shared a bathroom as they were growing up. Coincidentally, studying overseas together sometimes improved relations among members of different ethnic, social, and religious groups on campus when they returned.

STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

In a tacit recognition of the dangers of isolation from and ignorance of the rest of the world, since the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government has stepped up efforts to encourage young Americans to study overseas. Few people contributed as much to that goal as the late U.S. senator Paul Simon, Democrat of Illinois. For decades, he advocated federal challenge grants to encourage making overseas experience part of the academic preparation of every U.S. college student. After Simon died, in 2003, federal legislators proposed bills in his memory that would have set an annual goal of enrolling one million U.S. undergraduate participants in credit-bearing study abroad by the year 2020. At the time, that figure represented about half the total number of people receiving bachelor's or associate's degrees every year. The [Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act](#)—which was never signed into law—also emphasized the importance of diversifying the gender, ethnicity, income level, and academic major of those who study abroad; the variety of institutions sending them; and the geographic range of their destinations.

Senator Dick Durbin, the Democrat from Illinois who succeeded Simon, now champions Simon's cause. In 2005, with bipartisan support, Durbin introduced a bill creating the nonpartisan Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, with the long-term goal of building an internationally educated citizenry. The commission's report, issued later that year, urged the establishment of what Johnson, of NAFSA, called "a bold, visionary study abroad program that will serve our national interests." Although the commission recommended a relatively small federal investment in need-based study-abroad scholarships, it issued a clarion call: "Our national security and domestic prosperity depend upon a citizenry that understands America's place in the world, the security challenges it faces, and the opportunities and perils confronting Americans around the world. Responding to these realities requires a massive increase in the global literacy of the typical college graduate."

More than ten years later, the goals of the Lincoln Commission remain unfulfilled, but new, narrower ones have emerged. In 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton established the "100,000 Strong" initiative to increase to that level the number of U.S. students in China. The Chinese government, supportive of the effort and recognizing that a vast number of Chinese students receive financial aid in the United States, pitched in with 10,000 scholarships for Americans who study in China. The goal of increasing the number of U.S. students in China has proved elusive, however. In fact, the number has been slowly declining: in the 2013–14 academic year, there were fewer than 14,000 Americans studying there.

There are more than three times as many foreigners studying at U.S. colleges and universities as there are Americans studying abroad altogether.

In 2011, U.S. President Barack Obama launched a drive to increase the number of Americans studying in Latin America (then about 40,000) and the number of Latin Americans studying in the United States (then about 60,000) to 100,000 annually in each direction. Progress toward that goal has also been slow, but in the 2013–14 academic year, there was an 8.4 percent increase in the number of U.S. students in Latin America compared with the prior year. First Lady Michelle Obama got on the bandwagon in 2014 during a trip to China and in speeches back home, in which she urged that study abroad be regarded as a key element of U.S. foreign policy and that more college students participate as “citizen diplomat[s].” She revived attention to an often-neglected advantage of overseas education: it helps other societies develop a [more favorable view](#) of Americans than they might otherwise have if all they know of the United States are its television programs and movies, military interventions, and tourists, not to mention the anti-American propaganda prevalent in some parts of the world. Last year, the State Department established the U.S. Study Abroad Office to facilitate overseas arrangements for students from all backgrounds; this was mostly a symbolic gesture, but it laid the groundwork for more official, high-level attention to the matter.

The IIE, meanwhile, has inaugurated Generation Study Abroad, which invokes a five-year plan to double the number of American students going overseas through cooperation among colleges and universities, employers, governments, and civic and professional associations. As a McKinsey Global Institute [report](#) noted in 2012, 40 percent of new jobs in advanced economies around the world now go to foreign-born workers because of their superior language skills and cross-cultural competency. In a 2014 paper outlining its goals, the IIE concluded that study abroad amounts to “basic training for the 21st century.”

MAKE IT HAPPEN

So far, efforts to increase the number of Americans studying abroad have been piecemeal and only partially successful. The time has come to establish a clear and forthright U.S. national education policy that recognizes the importance of international literacy and global awareness for the future of the United States. This will be essential in the years ahead to ensure U.S. competence and competitiveness in a rapidly evolving world. It will not be easy to eliminate from U.S. political discourse the routine invocations of American superiority and invulnerability, complete with divine blessings, which no longer have credibility beyond U.S. borders. But at a minimum, it must become acceptable for presidents and other politicians to acknowledge openly that Americans may find ideas and inspiration abroad. The United States will need many more civil servants, congressional staff members, leaders of business and science, and journalists with international exposure. This is a long-term process that has nothing to do with partisan rivalries or political posturing, and it will take a generation or more to see progress. But it is essential to begin, and a good place to start is in U.S. institutions of higher learning.



Tourists on a sightseeing bus pass the Houses of Parliament, in London, January 2009.



There are other ways for Americans to learn about the world, of course. Many who serve overseas in the military come back committed to global understanding, and a growing number of academics now frequently conduct joint online courses and other online exchanges with students from other countries. Many nontraditional students simply cannot go abroad due to obligations and responsibilities at home; institutions must find other ways to deepen their understanding of the world. But only through a national commitment to encouraging and financing a dramatic long-term expansion of overseas study by American students can the United States begin to build a more healthy relationship with the rest of the planet.

The goal must be ambitious: within a decade, at least a third of all Americans pursuing an undergraduate education should have access, without financial hardship, to an academically rigorous study-abroad experience ranging in duration from a few weeks to a full academic year. Longer programs are preferable to shorter ones, and opportunities for immersion in host cultures are better than “bubble” programs, where Americans are exposed almost exclusively to one another. But given the degree of most Americans’ ignorance of international issues and sensibilities, the crucial first step is to cross the threshold of awareness. Any study-abroad experience is better than none at all. After 2026, participation in overseas education should continue to expand annually, with an ultimate goal by midcentury of universal access among undergraduates and a concerted effort along the way to include many more students from graduate and professional schools.

Within a decade, at least a third of all American undergraduates should have access to an affordable study-abroad program.

To achieve such objectives, study abroad will need significant financial support from both the public and the private sectors. Congress should enact a new, modern counterpart to the NDEA, providing federal funding for study abroad as a critical investment in the national security of the United States, just as the 1958 law was intended by President Dwight Eisenhower to advance the country’s technological sophistication. Key officials from the executive and

legislative branches, along with respected leaders of business and higher education, will have to use their bully pulpits to promote this cause, with major corporations providing supplemental funds through fellowships, incentive grants, and research opportunities. Models for such support already exist: the initiative to increase study-abroad exchanges between the United States and Latin American countries features the 100,000 Strong in the Americas Innovation Fund, whose contributors include Santander Bank and the Coca-Cola and ExxonMobil Foundations. Educators and advocates should also encourage states and cities that rely on international ties to participate politically and financially, sending their students overseas and inviting their counterparts to the United States. Existing programs sponsored by the Rotary Foundation and other service organizations may be another useful model.

To address the immediate obstacles posed by the cost of studying abroad, the federal government should amend its student loan program to provide forgiveness of a percentage of a student's debt if he or she has had a credit-bearing international experience that meets certain quality criteria—just as some teachers, law enforcement officers, and other public service professionals now benefit from such provisions. Any costs associated with that experience overseas, up to \$10,000 a year, should also be deductible on federal (and perhaps some state and local) income tax returns; legislators could create a means test for this deduction, as they have done in other areas.



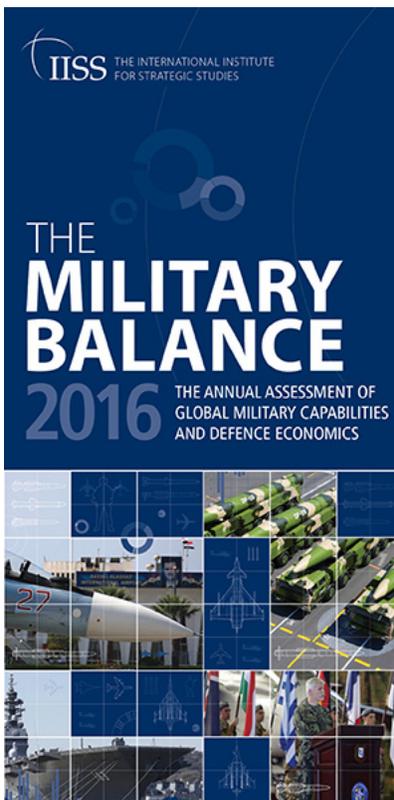
U.S. first lady Michelle Obama (R) gestures as she watches students practice Taichi at Chengdu No. 7 High School during her visit in Chengdu, Sichuan

To increase the diversity of the Americans who study abroad, municipal and state governments, backed by philanthropic foundations, should help colleges and universities recruit more of their minority and lower-income students to go overseas. Pell Grants and Gilman Scholarships offer useful precedents and guidelines. Institutions of higher education should also go out of their way—as McDaniel College, in Maryland, has done, for example—to provide study-abroad experiences for learning-disabled students who might otherwise be denied the opportunity. It is not difficult to foresee a day when colleges and universities compete on the basis of how many of their students go abroad, as they do now on the percentage of Pell Grant recipients they enroll and the number of recent alumni who go on to graduate education.

To give students an extra incentive to study abroad and to increase the chances that doing so will represent not just a

valuable experience but also a good investment, the federal government, and possibly some state and local governments, should provide those who have studied abroad with an affirmative hiring preference for jobs that deal with international matters, much like the advantages that benefit military veterans. Meanwhile, the faculties of U.S. colleges and universities also need to improve their [international awareness](#). The U.S. Departments of State and Education, working together, should establish a program of competitive grants to provide for and reward international experiences for faculty members in all academic fields and for certain staff members, as well. (NAFSA is already conducting “global learning colloquia” for faculty, which focus on strategies to help students develop the knowledge and skills they need to engage with the wider world.)

The recent [paralysis in Congress](#) and the vigorous antipathy of conservatives toward any proposals for increased government spending might lead seasoned observers to be skeptical of the prospects for a comprehensive national policy supporting study abroad and greater international awareness. But both political parties include an internationalist wing, and a focus on the importance of this issue to national security could bring them together to support a significant bipartisan effort.



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To defeat violent extremism and surmount other formidable political and economic challenges in the international arena, Americans will have to stop preening and begin trying to understand how the world looks through others' eyes—and how determinedly the rest of the world resists U.S. supervision and dominance. The only prospect for beginning that transformation lies in broadening the basic definition of an excellent higher education to include direct exposure to other cultures and their ways of dealing with shared problems. As successive generations emerge with this perspective, their impact will grow; change will become inevitable. The international scene will still be full of tyrants petty and grand, and the need to defend the United States and help others defend themselves will hardly disappear overnight. But the United States would be able to function far more effectively if its people and its leaders felt more comfortable in the world.

CORRECTION APPENDED (February 16, 2016)

This article has been revised to clarify the nature of the support that existed for the bill that created the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program. 🌐

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