



III. Why Study Abroad?

“In an age of globalization, the United States cannot ignore problems in distant regions... We learned on September 11 that events in poor countries half way around the world can do us great harm.”

— Joseph Nye, former U.S. assistant secretary of defense

Americans need enhanced international skills and knowledge to guarantee our national security and economic competitiveness. An educational opportunity outside the United States can be among the most valuable tools for preparing a student to participate effectively in an increasingly interconnected international community that demands cross-cultural skills and knowledge.

We understood the fundamental importance of international education at the conclusion of World War II, when presidents and Members of Congress set in place the underpinnings of what became our principal educational gateway to the world, beginning with the Fulbright Program in 1946. Nearly 100,000 Americans have studied under the Fulbright aegis in other lands. Alumni of the program include Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winners, governors and senators, Supreme Court justices, ambassadors and artists, CEOs, and numerous professors and scientists. The roster includes economists Milton Friedman and Joseph Stiglitz, opera singer Renee Fleming and actor John Lithgow, poets Rita Dove and Maya Angelou, journalist and jazz critic Nat Hentoff, Intel Corporation CEO Craig Barrett, and DNA co-discoverer James Watson. Senator Fulbright, who was himself a Rhodes Scholar, summarized the importance of these exchanges:

Man’s struggle to be rational about himself, about his relationship to his own society, and to other peoples and nations involves a constant search for understanding among peoples and cultures—a search that can only be effective when learning is pursued on a worldwide basis.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan was in the third class of Fulbright Scholars, studying at the London School of Economics in 1950 before returning home to pursue an extraordinary career as scholar, author, bureaucrat, diplomat, and senator. Moynihan once observed:

I only wish that there were more Fulbright opportunities so that others would have the enlightening experience that I enjoyed. The great problems of the world require careful study, but not solely cloistered in one’s own nation... Our young must go abroad to study, see, taste, touch, feel.

Like the Rhodes and Marshall scholarships, the Fulbright is for recent college graduates who have already achieved academic distinction. These programs have merited their sterling reputations, and they deserve our strongest support. But study abroad is not and should not be just for Rhodes Scholars. Its value is too great to be restricted to a student elite. These opportunities can and should be available to every American college student. That is our vision and our challenge.

Breaking the Language Barrier

Inexplicably, many Americans justify our monolingualism with the fact that the rest of the world is learning English. But it is to our disadvantage that we are able to conduct foreign relations and international commerce in only one tongue, while the rest of the international community continually builds upon its proficiency in multiple languages. The General Accounting Office reported to Congress in January 2002 that a shortage of qualified translators was plaguing the U.S. Army, the Department of State, the Department of Commerce’s Foreign Commercial Service, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Shortfalls “have

adversely affected agency operations and hindered U.S. military, law enforcement, intelligence, counterterrorism, and diplomatic efforts. Many shortages were in hard-to-learn languages from the Middle East and Asia.” Our adversaries around the world may well speak English in addition to their mother tongues, but we can be sure that they will not be planning attacks against American interests in the one language we are capable of deciphering.

It is very common for students in Europe to speak a second language, or even a third, often having begun their language training in grade school. Yet a bilingual nonimmigrant American student remains an anomaly. And we often fail to encourage heritage speakers to build upon their language skills. Most of the 150,000 U.S. students who study abroad head to English-speaking countries, or take special courses taught in English in Spain, France, Russia, Japan, China, or elsewhere. More than 90 percent spend a semester or less overseas. Unfortunately, language immersion for American students is the exception, not the rule.

The current worldwide popularity of English—and of American culture—is no argument for Americans’ resistance to and recalcitrance at learning other languages. Our security and economic prosperity will depend upon the ability of future generations to understand others around the globe. Immersion in another language through study abroad is one of the best ways to gain proficiency in another language. Last year, in a congressional hearing on critical skills for national security held by the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, the benefits of study abroad on language learning were touted by government officials and language experts alike. Susan Westin, managing director of international affairs and trade at the General Accounting Office, noted that in her experience, GAO applicants with fluency in another language had studied abroad. Dr. Ray T. Clifford, chancellor of the Defense Language Institute, stated that “the way to learn a foreign language is to go overseas.”

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Understanding Others...

The benefits of study abroad are hardly limited to language gains. President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell have repeatedly spoken of the value of Americans’ studying in other countries. The President spoke out forcefully on this topic soon after September 11:

By studying foreign cultures and languages and living abroad, we gain a better understanding of the many similarities that we share and learn to respect our differences. The relationships that are formed between individuals from different countries as part of international education programs and exchanges can also foster goodwill that develops into vibrant, mutually beneficial partnerships among nations.

Not long after NAFSA and the Alliance first called for a national policy to promote international education, President Bill Clinton—himself a former Rhodes Scholar—instructed federal agency heads to promote study abroad and “the exchange of teachers, scholars, and citizens at all levels of society.”

Many colleges and universities are heeding the call to promote study abroad on their own campuses. Two-thirds of the students at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, study overseas before they graduate. Dean of Students Joyce Bylander said these students return with an increased capacity for tolerating the “dissonance and discomfort” that accompanies life in an unfamiliar setting. “That is such a critical life skill: to be in discomfort and still be able to function. The more they learn that skill, the more places they’ll be able to go in the world,” said Bylander.

This is not only in the students’ interest, but also in America’s interest. Collectively, the same skills and talents that bolster an individual resume can make the country more secure and economically competitive. The United States can no longer afford to be passive about study abroad. We need to aggressively promote it to each rising generation.

And we need to remove the roadblocks that stand in their way.

Other countries have long recognized the need to clear these roadblocks. The European community created a network called Erasmus in 1987 to encourage college students to venture out to study in other countries across Europe. Today Erasmus serves nearly 60,000 exchange students at universities in two dozen countries. It minimizes the hassles of moving from one campus to the next and of articulating different courses and credits. The network still receives extensive support from the European Union as well as from hundreds of universities, colleges, and businesses involved in these exchanges, all toward the end of “creating the conditions for better understanding of each other’s cultures and national habits between students of different nationalities.”

...Understanding Ourselves

However, lest anyone think that study abroad solely entails learning about other cultures, we should stress that it is also about understanding our own culture and values. In their struggle to learn among other people in distant places, students learn about themselves in ways that simply cannot be replicated in the comforting and familiar confines of an American campus. For many young Americans, encounters with a host family or classmates in a foreign university force them to consider for the first time what it means to be an American. They are surprised to find that ordinary citizens of the country they are visiting will grill them on American policies and politics, and force them to defend beliefs they may always have taken for granted. This is an education that no civics class back home can duplicate. Study abroad brings an increased appreciation for one’s own culture and traditions, as well as a more sympathetic understanding of the views and norms of others. Elaine Sergeyev, 21, a Dickinson Spanish major who emigrated from Latvia as a child, said, “You feel more American being abroad. I got a more solid definition of America by looking from the outside into it.”

Americans need to be able to understand how others see the world now more than ever, for personal growth, for prosperity, for security. Yet, while no one would gainsay the power and importance of the relationships that American students build when they study abroad, our actions do not always match our rhetoric on this score. As far back as 1966, Congress passed an International Education Act meant to expand federal support for international and area studies programs on campuses and to underwrite more educational exchanges. But lawmakers never funded the act, which fell victim to the political and budgetary backlash from the Vietnam War. Funding for Title VI area studies and language programs languished at 1960s levels, although Congress quickly boosted funding and the Department of Education opened new strategic language centers after September 11.

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In 1991, under the leadership of Senator David Boren, Congress established the National Security Education Program (NSEP). NSEP is focused on equipping Americans with an understanding of less commonly taught languages and cultures, thereby developing a cadre of professionals with expertise in foreign areas imperative for our national security. Upon completion, award recipients are required to seek employment with a federal agency involved in national security affairs or, failing that, in higher education in an area related to their NSEP-funded study. Yet the survival of this small but highly valuable program is perennially threatened in Congress.

Congress also created in 2001 the Benjamin Gilman International Scholarship Program, which provides grants up to \$5,000 to help several hundred financially needy American students study abroad each year. Unfortunately, funding inadequacies have forced the program to turn away thousands of qualified and eager applicants. For fiscal year 2004, the prospects for continued funding were unclear as this report went to press.

Recent events and the globalization of the world economy now have given a new impetus to making good on the rhetoric about the importance of international studies and study abroad. Students preparing to enter the workforce have a clear interest in obtaining international skills and knowledge that can make them more marketable and more productive once they land a job. More importantly, America has a vested interest in having a more informed and globally competent citizenry.