



Go Abroad, Young American

The Biden Administration Must Democratize International Education

BY DINYAR PATEL March 29, 2021

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After the 9/11 attacks, a bipartisan assemblage of U.S. lawmakers came to the conclusion that sending more American students to study abroad was a national security and foreign policy priority. Too few Americans possessed a comprehensive understanding of a world that now seemed full of threat and uncertainty. Mere weeks after the terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush pledged to “reaffirm our commitment to promote educational opportunities that enable American students to study abroad.” Congress translated this commitment into the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Commission, which lawmakers tasked with finding ways to encourage more U.S. students to go overseas.

Nearly two decades later, that commitment has remained largely unfulfilled. Congress never acted on the recommendations of the Lincoln Commission. And now the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have kept even more students at home.

Once the pandemic abates and international travel becomes easier, the U.S. government and educational institutions should return to the spirit of the Lincoln Commission. Study abroad helps foster new generations of globally minded U.S. citizens and leaders. The administration of President Joe Biden should take concrete action to promote it, reaffirming the 9/11-era understanding of study abroad as a national security and foreign policy priority.

At a time of polarization and internal strife, moreover, the administration would do well to also understand international education as a domestic political priority. For decades, study abroad was a privilege largely enjoyed by wealthy Americans at elite colleges, most of whom would choose to travel to a handful of comfortable destinations in western Europe. This model requires urgent transformation. Americans from underrepresented minorities, first-generation students, and students from parts of the country with the lowest rates of passport ownership—such as the South (according to State Department data, Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, and West Virginia have the lowest rates of passport ownership in the country) and where former President Donald Trump’s ideology of “America first” continues to resonate—deserve the opportunity to travel and learn from the rest of the world. The federal government must help democratize access to study abroad and encourage young Americans to visit important, dynamic countries outside of western Europe. Meaningful international travel opens minds, widens frames of reference, and counteracts xenophobia and jingoistic nationalism, which thrive on lack of exposure to the world beyond.

THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM

Promoting study abroad is an exceptionally smart investment. Reams of academic studies have demonstrated that international education benefits students and, by extension, the wider society. Alumni of study abroad programs are more knowledgeable about the complexities of global affairs, more civic-minded, and more academically accomplished than their peers who stay closer to home. They also perform better in a job market that has come to value international experience and foreign-language competency. The political scientist Calvert Jones has argued that international education promotes “enlightened nationalism,” a sense of pride in one’s country tempered by a certain humility rather than xenophobia or a belief in U.S. exceptionalism. Studying abroad has also produced particularly positive outcomes for students from minority groups. A study of community college students in California established that participants who studied abroad were more likely to earn degrees and transfer to four-year institutions than those who did not. These outcomes were especially pronounced among Hispanic students.

But reforms are necessary. Study abroad remains, for the most part, an exclusive club. In the 2018–19 academic year, the last one before the pandemic interrupted global travel and education, just over 344,000 Americans studied abroad for academic credit. That number represents a paltry 1.8 percent of Americans enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education. Certain populations are less likely than others to study overseas: Black Americans, for example, constitute 13.4 percent of total higher education enrollment in the United States but only 6.4 percent of study abroad participants. In addition to the prohibitive cost of such programs, study abroad opportunities are not sufficiently advertised and discussed in certain schools and communities. Northeastern states enjoy impressively high rates of study abroad—more than five percent of students in Vermont, for example, traveled to foreign countries for their education in 2018–19—while many southern states lag behind.

Just as a diverse range of students should have the opportunity to travel, so too should those students head for a diverse range of destinations. Most U.S. students study abroad in a handful of wealthy, English-language-friendly countries. Just six countries—France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom—accounted for nearly 45 percent of all U.S. overseas students in the 2018–19 academic year. More Americans studied in Denmark that year than in India. Despite China’s ever-increasing political and economic importance, the number of U.S. students going to China has actually decreased in recent years.

Other emerging economies and places of strategic importance, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Russia, Senegal, and Turkey, barely register on the map. Security and health concerns discourage many American students from studying in these countries, but they cannot explain everything. Too often, study abroad is packaged to students as a glorified vacation. Educators should instead frame study abroad as an immersive cultural experience designed to take students outside of their comfort zones, stimulating them to grow intellectually and socially as they grapple with an unfamiliar environment.

Educators and policymakers have long recognized shortcomings in the running of study abroad programs. Indeed, in 2005 the Lincoln Commission delivered a sweeping mandate for transforming U.S. education abroad. The commission wanted to increase the number of American students going overseas to one million by 2015. To do so, it advocated a dramatic democratization of international education, setting aside federal funding to put study abroad within reach of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged American students. The commission proposed a national competition for international education scholarships, open to all American undergraduates, and special grants to institutions that had historically lower study abroad participation rates among their student bodies. It stipulated that most funding should go to students who wanted to head somewhere other than western Europe. Democratizing study abroad, commissioners believed, represented the “next step in the evolution of American higher education,” something that would position “future generations of Americans for success in the world in much the same way that establishment of the land-grant university system and enactment of the GI Bill helped create the ‘American century.’”

The commissioners outlined an initial budget of \$50 million, which would be increased to \$125 million by the 2011–12 academic year. That larger figure amounted to about half the cost of a single F-35A fighter—and it would have undoubtedly constituted a better return on investment than a chronically malfunctioning warplane. But in 2006, the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Act failed to muster support in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and died.

FIXING STUDY ABROAD

Since the death of the Lincoln Act, other entities have stepped in to help begin democratizing study abroad. Several noteworthy initiatives have helped deserving students see the world. In the first decade of this century, Towson University greatly expanded short-term programs abroad, which appealed to part-time students or those who had families or jobs. Penn State University has run passport application drives that have opened doors to international education opportunities for undergraduates from disadvantaged communities. Its Perreault Fellows Program offers summer internships overseas for students who might otherwise find it difficult to accommodate a semester away from campus—a particular problem for those majoring in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics). The University of Minnesota, meanwhile, recently achieved an important milestone: students of color make up a similar percentage of overseas students as they do of the overall student body. For its part, the U.S. State Department has encouraged diversity through its IDEAS (Increase and Diversify Education Abroad for U.S. Students) initiative, which provides small grants to universities for study abroad program capacity building.

These efforts were only a beginning, and financial cuts due to COVID-19 have devastated many of them. According to Natalie Mello, vice president of the Forum on Education Abroad, international education has been “probably the hardest-hit part of academia” during the pandemic.

The federal government needs to offer its vigorous support for boosting study abroad. It can begin by revisiting the Lincoln Commission’s policy proposals from the beginning of the century. Since 2016, Senator Dick Durbin, Democrat of Illinois, and Senator Roger Wicker, Republican of Mississippi, have reintroduced the 2006 Lincoln Act as the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act, renamed after the late Democratic senator from Illinois who vociferously championed international exchange after 9/11. The Simon Act has received strong bipartisan support in both houses—no mean feat, given the current political climate. Similar to the Lincoln Act, it envisions a federally funded competitive scholarship program to boost the number of American students abroad to one million within ten years.

BROADER HORIZONS

Like many alumni of international education programs, I can attest to the transformative effects of study abroad. I grew up in Bakersfield, a relatively insular city in California’s Central Valley where many people held xenophobic and virulently antigovernment views well before Trump’s rise. In my youth, I found the political and intellectual horizons of the Central Valley to be quite stifling. Then, in the early in the first decade of this century, I studied abroad in China and the United Kingdom and interned in Thailand and India. These experiences completely transformed my own views on everything from U.S. exceptionalism to foreign policy to the nature of history. I found the chaotic dynamism of Bangkok and New Delhi to be a refreshing change from the post-9/11 atmosphere of fear and paranoia in the United States. Traveling by rail through western China, I witnessed the colossal scale of the country’s infrastructural and urban development and conversed with people my age who had risen from poverty and taught themselves English. The future seemed to be there. The openness, optimism, and energy of these societies vividly contrasted with the world I had known in the Central Valley.

My overseas experience put me on a distinctly global educational and career path. It also showed me why democratizing study abroad is so necessary. Study abroad is too valuable an experience to be just the privilege of a self-perpetuating elite: in terms of transforming lives, it most benefits those students who have had the least access and exposure to the wider world. Unlike many of my peers from Bakersfield, I was lucky to have parents who instilled in me a curiosity about global affairs, attend an elite college, and not require the financial and logistical assistance for study abroad outlined by the Lincoln Commission. I knew many students from my hometown who merited the overseas opportunities I enjoyed. They, too, deserved the chance to see the world and broaden their horizons.