

Why Study Abroad Is Essential to Students and the Future of the United States

by Fanta Aw and Melissa A. Torres, opinion contributors - 02/26/24 5:00 PM ET

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Feb. 26 is Study Abroad Day, making now an opportune time to reflect on the state of education abroad. Twenty years ago, the congressionally-appointed [Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program](#) set an ambitious goal for the United States: send one million college students abroad each year by 2010. Today, a few years removed from the crippling effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we remain far short of this goal, with [less than 200,000 students studying abroad, amounting to 1 percent of all U.S. college students](#). This is to the detriment of our students, overall U.S. competitiveness, and our country's standing on the global stage. Some may even argue—with an increasingly polarized climate on campuses mirroring the growing divide across ideological lines in U.S. society—risking the very fabric and functioning of our democracy as well.

Student interest is not the issue. We know that a majority (72 percent) of college students [express a desire to study abroad](#). And universities are doing their part by offering safe educational overseas programs that reflect innovations in technology and the changing educational and workforce landscape. Yet only 10 percent of students study abroad before they graduate.

At issue, in our view, is that we have not boldly and loudly communicated to students the positive effects of study abroad on their career opportunities. We have not, despite the ample evidence, convinced the broader public that study abroad is vital to U.S. global engagement and national and economic security. We have not done enough to make education abroad affordable for every college student.

An education abroad experience is imperative on the individual and societal level for many reasons. For one, it enables students to develop critical skills needed to compete in today's global economy, including foreign language fluency, strong problem-solving, and analytical capability, a tolerance for ambiguity, and cross-cultural communication skills and understanding.

These skills are increasingly in demand in a globalized workplace. It is estimated [that 39 million jobs in the United States are tied to international trade](#). [NACE's 2024 Job Outlook Survey](#) finds problem-solving, teamwork, and flexibility/adaptability among the top skills employers are looking for this year—all skills that students can develop while abroad. Recent studies also show a positive correlation between students who study abroad and [higher grade point average](#) and [degree completion rates](#), including among first generation college students and those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Yet what seems even more important these days is how the study abroad experience is so well suited to serve our democracy and sustain civil society. We need a citizenry that can embrace the discomfort that comes with discourse and disagreement and navigate difference with humility

and respect. Students who find themselves negotiating a new context while abroad learn greater empathy and perspective. They also have a greater appreciation for other cultures than those who do not. Students are also [more civically engaged after they return](#), benefiting local communities and fortifying our nation's identity as a beacon of democracy and justice.

Further, major challenges such as climate change, public health pandemics, migration, and forced displacement require global solutions. The U.S. needs policy makers, entrepreneurs, business leaders, and scientists with the tools to collaborate across borders or we will be left behind.

So, how can we put the world within reach for more students during their formative college years?

One ready solution would be for Congress to pass the [Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act](#). This bicameral, bipartisan legislation—inspired by the work of the Lincoln Commission and named in honor of the international education champion, the late U.S. Sen. Paul Simon (D-Ill.) — is designed to remove institutional, cultural, and curricular barriers that prevent more students from going abroad. It would do so by codifying and renaming for Sen. Simon an existing State Department competitive grant program, the Increase and Diversify Education Abroad for U.S. Students (or IDEAS), which helps U.S. colleges and universities build study abroad programs for a wider community of students.

Importantly, the legislation would also enable students to use the funds to reduce their expenses related to studying abroad. We know that cost is a significant factor impacting study abroad participation: a [2023 survey](#) revealed that 84 percent of students interested in studying abroad and 34 percent of those who did not plan to study abroad, cited cost as the top prohibitive factor.

Congress has the tools at its disposal to make a major investment in the future of the U.S. workforce, U.S. global standing, and the democratic foundation of this country. The time to pass the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act is long overdue. Together with the bill champions, Sens. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) and Reps. Brad Schneider (D-Ill.) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.), we urge Congress to pass this legislation before the end of the year. The U.S. cannot simply not afford to make an education abroad experience available to only a small sliver of its college population.

Fanta Aw, PhD, is executive director and CEO of NAFSA: Association of International Education and Melissa A. Torres is president and CEO of The Forum on Education Abroad.

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