

Creating Global Citizens Through Study Abroad

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One of the greatest challenges for a student today is how to live as a responsible citizen in a globalizing world. Today's interconnected world cannot afford bystanders or passive participants. It demands confident, skilled citizens who will make responsible choices that take into consideration how we allocate resources and what impact our decisions will have on future generations.

We need citizens who make decisions marked by the following characteristics:

- **Intercultural understanding** that helps people walk across differences to find commonalities and better ways of doing things.
- **Mindfulness** that encompasses the empathy, compassion, understanding, self-awareness and tolerance that enables people to listen, engage, and learn—allowing for better partnerships.
- **Partnerships** with others who bring different experiences and perspectives from our own, thereby enriching us all.
- **Pragmatic hope** that falls between cynicism and idealism, helping people learn how to do what is pragmatically possible to make the world a better place.
- **Social entrepreneurship** that uses innovation, creativity and calculated risk-taking to create social value.

How do we help students develop these capacities? Among other strategies, higher education must increase the number of students who study outside the United States as part of their formal education.

Naana Opoku-Agyemang, an African scholar and dean of graduate studies at University of Cape Coast, leads a group of 10 to 15 American students studying in Ghana each semester through World Learning's School for International Training (SIT) Study Abroad program. The students start the semester with an intense language seminar to learn Fanti. This leads into a series of classes and seminars on the African

diaspora taught by African scholars. During this period, students take a number of excursions, where they spend time immersed in cultural dialogues with Ghanaians—elders, chiefs, healers, scholars, students, families and townspeople—in settings ranging from classrooms to remote villages. Throughout their visit, they live with Ghanaian families and work on community problems. They spend the last four weeks of their semester abroad doing an independent research project, making a deep, field-based exploration of one aspect of their experience.

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The program is designed with the hope that students will remember that a story is never complete until all sides have been told and heard, says Opoku-Agyemang. Students should leave Ghana understanding how people are shaped by their historical and current realities and how to bridge those differences in daily life.

A student who participated in the program a few years ago wrote, "At the end of the program, I finally began to view myself as a citizen of the world. I learned how to adapt to another culture without making it change for me."

Study abroad programs teach important intercultural and language skills, but the true success of a program occurs within a student, when she realizes that she can see the world from a different cultural viewpoint. This is true global citizenship. A study published in *Transitions Abroad* magazine by Mary Dwyer and Courtney Peters of the Chicago-based Institute for the International Education of Students documented strong and lasting impacts of study abroad. Years after students return, they continue to learn languages, are keenly aware of other cultures and are more confident and committed to a sensitive global point of view. There is a growing body of literature that documents these and other impacts.

And yet far too few U.S. students study abroad—about 1 percent by most estimates—and the numbers are skewed to wealthier students from elite colleges and universities. We need to do better. We can start in three places:

- **More financial assistance from universities, the federal government and study abroad providers.** The Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Commission created by Congress in 2004 to expand study abroad opportunities emphasized the need for more financial aid. We agree. At World Learning and SIT, we will do our part by increasing the amount of financial aid we make available from our resources,

lobbying Congress to provide more funding for under-represented populations and developing programs that are accessible to a broader population of students. We ask others to do the same.

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- **More attention to the quality of study abroad programs.** Leaders in the field should develop standards and continually assess programmatic impact to make sure we are getting it right. There is too much at stake to fall back on “in my heart, I know it is working.” Multi-level, multi-method assessment techniques should be carefully explored.

- **A commitment to developing programs in less-traveled destinations with experiential pedagogies and language acquisition.** The programs with the most impact are constructed with keen attention to the value of active learning

techniques, the importance of language for understanding culture, and the need to get students to travel to places where they have not already been and to study themes they have not encountered.

Furthermore, study abroad need not be restricted to a student’s junior year. The impact on intellectual engagement is large. Maybe we need more study abroad in high school—or between high school and college. Or perhaps, we need to get students abroad during their sophomore year in college—which is too often a lost year in higher education.

These are among the important issues we are talking about at World Learning and SIT. We invite others to join us in this conversation to find ways of expanding study abroad to more students in more places, as a way to ensure that our campuses are places where students develop the capacities to be citizens of a globalizing world.

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Foreign Exposure

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The admirable ideal of “total” immersion in a foreign culture privileges students who plan early on for foreign study, establish early language fluency and elect majors and activities that make it easier to leave campus. But other students often find that they lack the language skills to qualify for many foreign programs or are unable to reconcile time abroad with curricular requirements at home. Especially at more self-important schools, faculties further complicate the problem by insisting that “if you haven’t taken the course with us, you haven’t really taken it.”

Less affluent students, moreover, often rule out foreign study from the start—as do many athletes, performers and campus activists who fear losing a competitive edge if they take time away from the local scene.

And yet those who miss out on foreign exposure are often those who need it most. Fostering a globally sensitive public (and electorate!) requires not so much that French-lit majors spend a year in Paris but that pre-med, pre-law and pre-business students are

exposed to the sudden jolt of seeing their home culture in a new perspective, of encountering a different, wider world which stretches the mind and soul. And this can begin to happen in just a few days—whetting young appetites forevermore!

For a dozen years, I have organized an intensive media seminar through Northwestern University, which brings several dozen students to Paris during each spring break—a cheaper project these days than traveling to Florida beaches—and more likely to garner parental support. Similar programs can thrive during colleges’ inter-sessions or summer breaks. At the same time, committed institutions are finding ways to more flexibly grant credit for courses taken abroad—including courses offered in English, albeit in non-English-speaking settings.

“When we got back from our week in Paris,” one student recently wrote, “my roommates and I decided that, from here on in, we’re going global!” The challenge for American educators in the 21st century will be to make that happen for an ever-wider range of students.

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