

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA: AN ASSESSMENT OF INTERNATIONAL AND STUDY ABROAD EDUCATION WITH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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This report is the result of a request from key administrators at the University of South Alabama to assess and provide guidance for its study abroad enterprise. In addition to background and secondary source research, the authors visited the campus for three days in late September, 2006, and conducted numerous interviews with stakeholders, students, faculty, administrators, and staff.

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Executive Summary

Significant national attention has been focused recently on the importance of study abroad in this era of global literacy and interdependence. In November, 2005, for instance, the U.S. Congress declared 2006 as the Year of Study Abroad.

Moreover, an American Council on Education poll found that almost 80 percent of Americans believe that students should have a study abroad experience sometime during their college years and more than 50 percent of college-bound high school students have expressed an interest in participating in some form of study abroad program.

With a long history of engagement in international and study broad education, the increasingly international profile of its regional business community and its one of kind port location, University of South Alabama is poised to become a leader in international and study abroad education. Pending faculty/staff turnover (retirements) and growing interest in international education among faculty, staff and students, makes the present a window of opportunity for development and change. USA can claim study abroad and international education as a part of its continually emerging brand identity.

To achieve leadership in this highly valued and increasingly important aspect of contemporary higher education, the following recommendations are forwarded.

Include international and study abroad education as an institutional priority, both by words and by actions. The USA mission statement and those unit statements cascading from the mission harmonize with this priority. Top administrators should articulate transformative power and importance of study abroad on all affected parties.

Establish The Office of Study Abroad and International Initiatives, absorbing most of the functions of the current Office of International Programs, and headed by an individual with terminal qualifications who will serve as a strong advocate for study abroad and international education both within and without the university.

Transparently incorporate engagement in international and study abroad programs and related initiatives into the faculty evaluation and reward system.

Utilize study abroad as a tool for faculty recruitment, retention and development.

Offer a variety of study abroad programs to accommodate student characteristics and faculty interests. Programs should be offered of varying lengths and in multiple disciplines; some USA “owned” and others as a consortium member.

Establish clear accountability for programs and measurable deliverables including resource development and the strengthening of ties between the university and the local business community.

Act now. This window of opportunity is open and local and national attention to the issue is at an all time high.

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“What nations don't know can hurt them. The stakes involved in study abroad are that simple, that straightforward, and that important. For their own future and that of the nation, college graduates today must be internationally competent.”

- The Lincoln Commission

BACKGROUND

In late November, 2005, the 109th Congress of the United States declared, by unanimous vote, 2006 as the *Year of Study Abroad*.

In doing so, Congress recognized the importance of study abroad in increasing global literacy, cultural understanding, and foreign language skills of U.S. students. These competences are viewed as especially critical during this era of global trade, global interdependence, and (unfortunately) growing global terror. In making this proclamation, they also acknowledged the relevance of international experience on sustained and responsible U.S. leadership, competitiveness, and security.

Specifically, the U.S. Congress acknowledged that:

Living in a foreign country helps students understand other cultures, as well as their own;

Studying abroad improves foreign language skills

cannot find Israel on a map of the Middle East, 65 percent cannot locate Great Britain, and 58 percent cannot find Japan. Of even greater concern is that 50 percent cannot locate New York on

Research has indicated that students who participate in study abroad programs perform academically equivalent to their performance on the home campus (Ransburgh-Hudson 2001). Such information further negates the view that study abroad is only for the “best and brightest”

Table 1: Percent of U.S. Study Abroad Students

(Source: Open Doors 2005a)

	1994/95	1995/96	2001/02
Female	65.6	65.6	65.6
Male	34.4	34.4	34.4

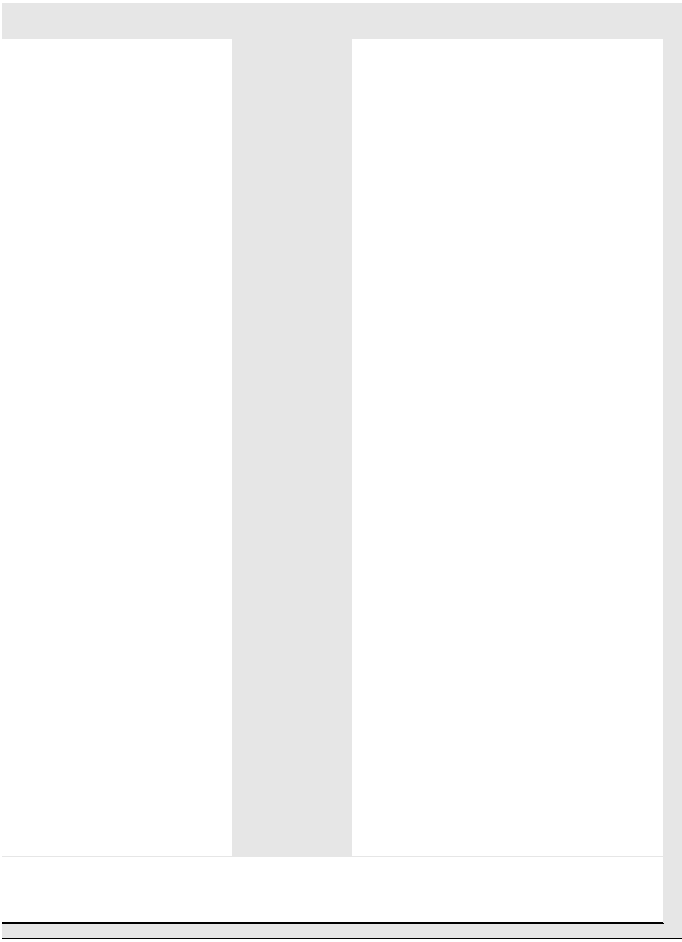
of students. Such knowledge assists in overcoming the sometimes held belief (or “fear”) that the average student will be a problem student on study abroad programs.

From an historical perspective, females have been more inclined to participate in a study abroad program than their male counterparts. Currently, approximately two-thirds (65.6 percent) of those who study abroad

are female and one-third (34.4 percent) is male. As a point of comparison, the total undergraduate population is 56.4 percent female and 43.6 percent male. (Refer to Table 1.)

African-Americans and Hispanics each represent around 12 percent of the total U.S. undergraduate population. However, only about 3.8 percent of those who study abroad are black and 5 percent are Hispanic. Historically, these traditionally under-served populations have been under-represented in study abroad.

Humanities/Social Sciences majors (14.6 percent of total undergraduate enrollments) comprise 30 percent of all students who study abroad. Associatively, Business students make up the second largest student group studying abroad, comprising 17.5 percent of all study abroad students. Foreign language majors account for approximately 7.5 percent of study abroad students, while Education majors consistently make up a little over 4 percent of the total. The fields of study supplying the least percentage of students for study abroad are Engineering (3 percent) and Math or Computer Sciences (1.7 percent).





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This branding, this promise of international activity can be a potent part of the package used in recruitment of highly desirable and coveted students to USA and its Honors program. These may be students that otherwise may not choose to select USA as their university of first choice.

Likewise, a strong brand identity that includes this “promise” of study abroad may be used as a powerful tool in the recruitment of the best possible faculty, in the development of that faculty, and in the long-term retention of that faculty. Strong faculty members are a product in demand. Many of these individuals want exposure to the international arena or, having had some form of prior exposure, they are looking to expand their world view. Offering them the availability of study abroad experiences is one significant way to assist them in pursuing their individual research agendas and individual growth.

We urge the University of South Alabama to include international and study abroad education as an institutional priority. Anything valued by the university and overtly expressed as important by the university should be manifested in all university documents, starting with its

The success of international and study abroad programs require emphatic, repeated and programmatic support from the highest levels of administration. The Director should have the active support of the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and work closely with the

term programs. However, exchange-type programs of semester length may be the most appropriate for the sciences and professional disciplines. Such programs may be arranged at the college level using the model of “swapping” students with vetted foreign partners. This activity alone can lead to considerable faculty development as colleagues reach across boundaries to find other colleagues.

Study abroad courses must be structured in a manner so that they may easily substitute for major core courses. A student interested in furthering their international exposure should not be penalized by having the course count only as an elective in their program. Doing so would significantly limit those willing to study abroad. What are the basic learning outcomes for a term-length course? If a study abroad course can accomplish those basic outcomes in a 3 week period of time, there should be no concern with substituting it for the term course.

USA should consider “pre-professional” study abroad courses. These would be courses that may substitute for university core requirements (e.g., World Civilizations). The introduction of such pre-professional courses would open study abroad to a much wider range of students, much earlier in their academic careers. Research has shown that students who study abroad earlier in their university experience are more likely to take another study abroad later in their program.

Consideration should be given to developing a number of “owned” programs – those programs where USA has the in-house interest and ability to make it happen (the Spanish language program in Xalapa is an excellent example). The institutional payoff for developing and managing your own programs would be significant. Home grown programs would allow USA to retain the SCHs generated and could act as a vehicle for faculty development and involvement. Inevitably institutions developing and owning their own programs exhibit greater levels of enthusiasm for those programs, which translates and trickles down to increased faculty and student interest. USA may well be in a position to lead consortia of universities or even community colleges on some of its more robust “owned” programs.

Conversely, for those programs of interest where USA does not have the in-house ability or interest, alignment with other key schools or consortia would be a usable alternative. Keep in mind that the institutional payoff under such an arrangement would be limited. USA would forfeit revenue, much faculty involvement, and ownership. However, the students could still be afforded a quality educational product and this could be consequential in branding USA as a “go to” place for study abroad.

USA’s English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Program: A Report to the Board of Regents (2011)

Additionally, these students could be utilized as “guest” speakers in classes and/or pre-departure seminars. The knowledge and insights they have to offer of their home countries to USA students is irreplaceable and under tapped.

more students to the table. Another significant outcome of expanding the international experience to key players is an improved study abroad product. It is inevitable that the insights and observations of these constituents would lead to useful program modifications with the beneficiary being the student.

Attention should be directed to further strengthening the ties between USA and the local Chamber of Commerce and other economic development entities.

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Appendix

Partial Listing of Contacted Individuals and Groups*

Mohammad Alam - Electrical & Computer Engineering