

Study abroad to get ahead in the U.S. [Commentary]

International education experience prepares students for today's academic and professional workplace

By Ann Kirschner

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As we enter graduation season, students across the country will be worrying less about final exams and more about jobs. What will make them stand out to employers? advertisement

Working, studying or volunteering away from the United States is one key strategy. Ask a recent graduate about the best experience they had in college, and I bet that you will hear "study abroad" as often as any other answer. It is ironic, but not surprising, that the most transformative college experience is often the one that happened far away from college.

Global studies are already a hot topic in corporate circles and in the White House. Now it is time for colleges and universities to strengthen their investment in the competitive currency of their degrees. They must integrate study abroad fully into the curriculum, and they must provide financial aid to expand the number of participating students.

In March, during her recent trip to China, Michelle Obama extolled the benefits of studying abroad, citing marketability in the workplace. "More and more companies are realizing that they need people with experiences around the world, who can speak different languages, who can transition easily into other cultures and people who bring to their jobs a sensibility and a sensitivity for other people," the first lady said.

Also last month, the Institute for International Education launched "Generation Study Abroad," a program to double the number of American students studying abroad to 600,000 by the end of the decade. Currently, approximately 14 percent of U.S. students in four-year undergraduate programs nationwide study abroad, and only 1.4 percent of students at the graduate level and in community colleges or vocational schools study abroad. The IIE initiative will bring together employers, governments, associations and other partners to find new ways to increase study abroad opportunities for more students.

In January, Secretary of State John Kerry announced the 100,000 Strong in the Americas Innovation Fund, which builds on President Barack Obama's 100,000 Strong campaign to increase the number of U.S. students studying in Latin America and the Caribbean. The president said the emphasis on studying abroad in those areas is to create more collaboration to address common challenges facing the Western Hemisphere from security to environmental sustainability.

Initial donors to the 100,000 Strong in Americas Innovation Fund include some of the most widely recognized multinational companies, including: ExxonMobil, Santander Bank, The Coca-Cola Foundation and The Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Foundation. This roster says a lot about the corporate

investment and interest in building the international acumen of American students. The fund will provide grants to higher education institutions that demonstrate the best case for their college's efforts to increase study abroad on campus.

Study abroad is no frill. Colleges and universities should not give up on traditional approaches to critical thinking and communication skills, but they also must add new approaches that integrate the global perspective through technology and teamwork. When students apply for competitive postgraduate fellowships, graduate schools or jobs, their experiences studying in other countries — interacting with different cultures, learning new languages and understanding international economic and political systems — are major advantages in the academic and professional workplace.

All colleges should build on these national efforts by removing barriers to study abroad, asserting leadership and seeking private funding to increase scholarship opportunities. Scholarships, rather than loans, are especially critical at a time of escalating college costs and intractable student debt.

In fact, the investment from private contributions is pivotal for creating greater access to these programs, since most study abroad programs are beyond the reach of the majority of American college students. And while study abroad has tripled in the last two decades, participation continues to lag among students of color, lower socio-economic groups, and those who attend public institutions.

It is essential that public institutions in particular broaden access to study abroad opportunities without creating more strain on tax dollars or family finances. Scholarships funded by philanthropic contributions can open the world to all college students, rather than international study remaining the dominion of the privileged. Cultural competency shouldn't come at such a high price.

No country has a broader array of colleges and universities than ours. Working together to provide new opportunities is a wise investment that needs the joint efforts of the private and public sectors.

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