

Demographic Factors Redefining Education Abroad

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There is no blueprint for predicting success in education abroad programming. How can an administrator plan for future sites, for example, when a report issued in November, 2000 by the American Council on Education noted that while 48% of high school students said they planned to study abroad, only 1% of college students do so annually? What to make of the fact (according to *Open Doors 2000*) that education abroad stays are getting shorter – one semester or less—and access to education abroad programs by minorities remains very low? What are the implications—for education abroad program development—of the growing partnerships between the private sector and U.S. colleges and universities, and the resulting increase in development funds from corporations who want institutions to target certain countries and/or fields of study as terms of their support?

Analysis of trends and factors affecting study abroad in the future indicate that a redefinition of education abroad is just beginning. A study in June 2000 by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, points to changes in the population of students likely to participate in study abroad. Certainly enrollment trends and changes in demographics of the U.S. population will impact study abroad program planning. The NAFSA study highlights the following trends:

- The rise in the overall number of school-age children in the United States, and the resulting baby boomlet, is expected to continue over the next decade. More students are coming through the pipeline to higher education. The U.S. is also experiencing growth in the traditional college age population over the next seven years. This growth insures that a pool of students in colleges and universities can be recruited for study abroad. Minorities will account for the most population growth according to the Minority Business Development Agency. From 1995-2050, for example, minority population growth will account for nearly 90% of the total growth in the U.S. population.

- Incoming freshmen are better prepared in a number of ways for higher education. Entering classes, for example, are diverse in language studies, computer literate, comfortable with taking part in com-

munity service and volunteer projects and have some experience working while in high school.

- More students enroll directly into higher education upon graduation from high school. At the same time, however, students are taking longer to complete their B.A. degree. In 1995-96, four out of five undergraduates worked while enrolled, and one half of these students reported that the primary reason for working was to help pay for their education.

- Students are used to matriculating at more than one institution over the course of their undergraduate years. To the extent that the home institution allows it, students will pick up courses at more than one institution and location. Students are used to travel to different institutions. They are also becoming used to participate in distance education programs.

- Adults in the United States are more educated and are active participants in continuing education programs. While the latter is usually related to work, adults are also participating in short-term study abroad experiences through social institutions, such as museums, alumni organizations and groups such as Elderhostel.

- Paying for higher education continues to be a serious consideration for most students, and the number of students receiving some form of financial aid has grown. This support has come mainly from federal loan programs, supplemented by federal grants, and state and institutional loans. Fortunately, it has become a more prevalent practice in recent years for students to apply their federal aid to study abroad, as long as they are being awarded credit by their home institution for the course work taken abroad.

- Along with demography, occupational trends and educational choices of higher education students are changing, reflecting employer needs in a global society. For example, according to projections by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, from 1998-2008, some of the fastest-growing occupations will be computer-related. Other fast growing areas include legal assistants, medical and health aides, social and human service personnel. At this time, the proportion of U.S. students studying abroad who are majoring in lan-

guages, social sciences and humanities has been dropping, while the proportion majoring in business and management and technical fields has been rising.

- Enrollments in foreign language classes show a decrease in registrations for French classes, and a substantial increase in student registrations for Spanish classes. If students are increasingly motivated to 'learn to earn,' as noted above, Spanish is the 'career' language for an increasing number of students.

The demographic shifts and occupational forecasts have already been incorporated by some administrators in their education abroad program planning. For example, study abroad for high school – and even middle school – students have increased in popularity. These students will participate in college and university study abroad programs, and are increasingly the target of higher education's study abroad recruiters. The study abroad community has already diversified the kinds and duration of programs, offering students an array of short-term practical training opportunities and internships as part of their study abroad program.

The development of short-term programs (i.e., one month) lends itself to more faculty involvement for some institutions. The timing is good for faculty and there are incentives to participate, such as the opportunity to travel, conduct research, receive a stipend and renew academic networks abroad. Developing faculty support outside of the traditional language areas is critical to the sustainability of most study abroad programs. Faculty members can be the greatest asset a school has for developing or expanding programs abroad, or they can be a stumbling block in the process.

Study abroad program administrators are also working with alumni organizations on campuses to develop programs that can be marketed to the aging baby boom generation. Retirees tend to travel, often look to venture off the beaten tourist paths abroad and seek to incorporate a learning facet into their travel programs.

With more students taking Spanish as undergraduates, there is an expected increase in students looking to study Spanish abroad, and thus an increase in interest in programs in Spanish-speaking countries. However, students without language capability are also looking for programs abroad and locations where some course work – if not all – is conducted in English.

Study abroad has entered the radar screen of national and international organizations, with groups calling for greater growth in the numbers of students

studying abroad. The first national International Education Week took place November 13-17, 2000; focused support on U.S. campuses and communities increased the visibility of international education and exchange. NAFSA has recently established a national Task Force on Study Abroad to examine barriers to access to study abroad, and the legislative and programmatic implications for overcoming the barriers. There is also a number of college and university mandates to increase overall study abroad significantly.

The Association for International Practical Training (AIPT), committed to improving international understanding through on-the-job practical training experiences, has recently cited a large imbalance in the composition of their training exchanges: 90% of their program participants are foreign nationals coming into the United States, while only 10% of their participants are Americans going abroad. An "Americans Abroad Campaign" launched in Spring 2001, will examine long and short-term strategies to increase the number of U.S. students in the organizations' experiential programs.

And then there is the mid-West liberal arts institution which proposes to eliminate all classroom instruction in foreign languages. This radical plan would send students abroad to learn a foreign language. The idea is both a reaction to decreasing enrollments in their foreign language programs, and an acknowledgment that learning a language is best accomplished via immersion in the host country. The plan by this college is certainly not a trend, but an example of how institutions are examining demographic shifts and occupational forecasts, and also re-examining accepted curricular practices.

So what does the immediate future of educating U.S. students abroad look like? It seems clear that participants' numbers will increase, in real terms and in the capacity of institutions to better document student participation. Education abroad programs will continue to be developed for a student population that is increasingly varied—by age, background and ethnicity. Programs will be shorter in length, to accommodate the needs of students who work and/or have family obligations and who, therefore, cannot afford to be away for a semester or academic year. There will be efforts to diversify the curriculum for education abroad to attract students interested in education for careers in the new economy. And along with these efforts, program administrators will also look to diversify program locations to better attract older students with the interest, income and flexibility to travel abroad.