

Integrating Study Abroad into Geography Higher Education

There is now widespread recognition that study abroad has a critical role to play in the education of U.S. students. Recent years have seen a flurry of articles and reports on the topic, most prominently those emerging from a far-reaching examination of study abroad and international education conducted by a U.S. Senate appointed bipartisan Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship (see www.lincolncommission.org/). Indeed, in late 2005 the U.S. Congress declared 2006 as the Year of Study Abroad. This is, therefore, an opportune time to reflect on the role of study abroad in geography higher education and the significant contributions that we, as geographers, can make to international education.

Few of us need to be convinced about the value of studying abroad. In the most practical sense, study abroad experiences increase the global competence of our students, make them more adept at working in multicultural settings, and ultimately make them more competitive with counterparts in other countries. Equally, or more importantly, study abroad broadens the imagination of our students, stimulates greater creativity, and expands and enriches their lives. Yet it is clear from the statistics reported by *Open Doors* that the role of study abroad in U.S. higher education needs much improvement. Consider the following:

In 2003-04, the number of U.S. students studying overseas was 190,000 which represented less than two percent of enrolled students;

Over two-thirds of students chose destinations in Europe and Australia, while less than 10% traveled to Asia and Africa;

In terms of fields of study, 21% of study abroad offerings were in the social sciences; the physical sciences accounted for less than 8%.

The Lincoln Commission identified a number of barriers preventing U.S. students from engaging in study abroad. Not surprisingly at the very top was the high cost of

study abroad, both the cost associated with the programs themselves as well as the "opportunity cost" of traveling overseas for students that work. Toward this end, the commission report recommended that the federal government provide \$125 million per year in funding with the aim of increasing the number of U.S. students studying abroad to as many as one million in a year.

Cost, however, was just one of the reasons for the low participation in study abroad programs. Also very significant were curricular barriers to study abroad. For example, the programs of study in many majors—often in the sciences, engineering, and arts—are highly structured and do not give students the flexibility to engage in a semester of study abroad. In cases where there is flexibility, students may have difficulties determining what study abroad courses fulfill major requirements. The bottom line is that, in most fields, study abroad programs are seen as tangential to, rather than an integral part of a student's academic program

Turning to our own discipline, it is clear from my travels across the country that many geographers are actively engaged in offering study abroad courses. It seems to me, however, that as a discipline we still have not embraced study abroad as a key component of geography undergraduate education. Yet there are compelling reasons for us to do so, not the least of which is that study abroad vitally connects to two long-standing traditions in geography: area studies and field work.

In the first case, study abroad can be a powerful experience to energize our regional geography curriculum and provide students with a sophisticated understanding of world regions. In recent years, more and more departments have begun reintroducing regional geography

courses. Imagine the richness of student experience if they were to take a regional geography course in the setting of that very region! Another opportunity is to offer abbreviated regional geography "service courses" designed as orientations for all university students prior to their embarking on study abroad.

This would go a long way in getting geography recognized on campus as a central discipline in international education.

Study abroad can also develop in students the excitement of field work which has drawn so many of us to geography. It provides faculty members conducting international research to take

students to their field sites and to share the details of their work with students. There are also ample opportunities to engage study abroad students in local research projects and in global service learning projects. Study abroad programs can, therefore, reconnect geographers with our field-based tradition and help students to develop into truly well-rounded geographical scholars.

As a first step then, let's take a careful look at the place of study abroad in the curriculum of our departments and programs. Does the program of study for the geography degree have the flexibility to incorporate study abroad courses? Have we identified a set of study abroad courses that meet the requirements of the major? If we are not able to offer "home grown" study abroad courses, have we identified courses offered by other units on campus or by other institutions that would be appropriate for our students? Is it possible to establish institutional partnerships with other geography programs outside of the country to facilitate curricular flexibility and enrich



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our own programs? Do we routinely advise our undergraduate students about study abroad options?

The recommendations of the Abraham Lincoln commission report have now been introduced as a Senate bill (S. 3744) which, hopefully, will come up for vote

next year. If this legislation passes through Congress, it will result in an extraordinary expansion of opportunities for study abroad participation by U.S. undergraduates. When it does, I hope that we as geographers are poised with a major curriculum that is rich with study abroad

options. We owe it to our discipline, and more importantly, to our students.

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scores were sent to 871 institutions with the University of Florida (249) and University of Texas at Austin (160) receiving the most geography scores (see map). In 2006, preliminary figures show that 7,423 scores were sent to 984 colleges and universities. As might be expected, post-secondary schools in states with the highest numbers of high school AP Human Geography students received the most scores. Three-hundred-sixty-one scores were sent to the University of Florida, and 230 scores were sent to the University of Texas at Austin. An increase in the number of scores sent to colleges has also led to an increased number of schools and universities that allow credit or placement for geography scores of three or higher. The goal, however, is to increase the profile for geography, and show post-secondary institutions that AP Human Geography is fostering a renewed interest in geography in general.

How do the statistics of scores sent translate into students in departments? As yet, we have no hard data on numbers of students taking geography courses in colleges that have completed the AP Human Geography course. We do, however, have comments from geography professors at Oregon State, Clark University, Macalester College, Dartmouth University, and Texas A&M to name but a few, who have commented on students in their classes that are well-versed in geography from their AP class. High school teachers also report on their students who are taking geography courses in colleges around the country because they want to continue to learn more about geography. In other instances,

students have reported that their AP Human Geography course has been of great help to them as they pursue degrees in political science and government.

Do all of the students who have passed through the AP Human Geography program take another course in college, or consider majoring in geography? Of course not, but consistently from 2001 through 2006 over 20% of the students taking the exam indicated that they would consider geography as a major field in college (AP Human Geography Background Questions, 2001-06).

AP Human Geography has opened up a new world for over 50,000 students in the past six years, and we expect this trend to continue as more schools offer the program to increasing numbers of students. We also expect an increasing number of these students to continue their geography education in college. But most importantly, students are exposed to the world of geography, increasing their knowledge of other places and cultures, and elevating their awareness of and responsibility to the new processes of globalization.

Members of the geography community can support this growth by applying to be readers for the exam (join colleagues for a week in June to score the essay questions on the exam) or volunteering to write multiple-choice questions. Interested individuals may also agree to test questions in their college classes (to help ensure that the questions on each AP Human Geography exam are appropriate to the course) and encourage their institution to accept student scores of three, four, or five for credit or placement.



Colleges that received APHG scores in 2005.

Stop by the College Board Booth at the AAG Annual Meeting in San Francisco this spring to talk to committee members and test developers about the test and join with your colleagues at the College Board's reception for AP Human Geography. The continuing growth of the APHG course will provide more students for geography departments—students with geographic knowledge and a desire to set a career path toward geography.

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References:

- Gober, P. (2005) "AP Human Geography: Trickle-Up Effects on Collegiate Geography" *AAG Newsletter*, Vol. 40 (1).