

Innovating to Expand Student International Experiences

More than 90 percent of college students never study abroad. Some innovative colleges and universities are developing programs to help those students gain international experiences.

While study abroad rates have risen steadily over the past two decades, only a fraction of U.S. undergraduates—fewer than 10 percent—currently participate, despite growing general awareness of how important it is that individuals develop skills and experience in global engagement. Students fail to study abroad for a number of reasons. For the student, cost is obviously a major hurdle. Poor planning, fear, and lack of information are also barriers. In some cases, students come from backgrounds where study abroad is simply not on their radar as an option. Limits placed on course requirements by the student’s home institution and the lack of recognition of international experience by prospective employers also play a role in limiting undergraduate participation.

GLOBALLY NETWORKED LEARNING

Study abroad is of course just one tool that universities use to help students deepen their global engagement. The [Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement](#) (CIGE) at ACE believes that effective internationalization requires a comprehensive institutional commitment delivered through the curriculum, research, faculty development, and active strategies for institutional engagement.

In that spirit, a number of colleges and universities are developing innovative approaches to broadening students’ access to international experience. Many such programs target low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students.

Working with the State University of New York (SUNY) institutions and increasingly with universities around the world, for example, the [SUNY Center for Collaborative Online International Learning](#) (COIL) has developed successful models in globally networked learning that use technology in classrooms to link U.S. faculty and students with their counterparts abroad.

- SUNY Cortland and Belarusian State University (Belarus). A sample COIL course is a distance-learning course on social control. Taught in English on the SUNY Learning Network, an asynchronous, web-based platform, the course was first offered in 2002 to seven students at Cortland and five English-proficient students from Belarusian State University. It was offered again in 2004 and 2006 to significantly larger enrollments that also included students from Moscow State University in Russia and Griffith University in Australia. Among other findings, the course’s professors noted that “while

hardly a perfect analog to the full immersion experience of a more usual semester abroad, [the course] does offer students an opportunity to interact intensively with students from another country over an entire semester at virtually no additional costs beyond those of a typical online course.”

Based on experience in scores of courses, COIL Director Jon Rubin says that one lesson learned is that models of exchanges that are established based on professor-to-professor relationships tend to be less sustainable than partnerships between institutions that involve administrators. Other insights can be found on the COIL website, through the center’s conferences and consulting services, and in the COIL Faculty Guide for Course Development. (The guide can be ordered at <http://coil.suny.edu>).

HELPING UNDERSERVED STUDENTS

ACE and the SUNY COIL Center have partnered to support select colleges and universities that are using technology to bring the wider world into the classroom, including two that focus primarily on underserved populations:

- **[Glennville State College](#)** (WV) draws its students from one of the most rural corners of Appalachian West Virginia. Approximately 70 percent of its students come from low- to moderate-income families, and many are first-generation students. The college counts students who study abroad on one hand. To help internationalize its curriculum, Glennville State capitalized on an important local connection. During the early twentieth century, several families immigrated to West Virginia from the Asturias region of Spain, and an Asturian community still exists in the state. Building on those roots, Glennville State is piloting two collaborative online experiences—a Spanish-language course and one in West Virginia history—with the University of Oviedo in Asturias, Spain. Through technology, students from both institutions will collaborate in multicultural groups. “We are hoping that by virtue of students having conversations with their peers in Spain, seeing pictures of them and where they are from, and getting a sense of the community they come from” will result in a positive cultural exchange, says Megan E. Gibbons, an assistant professor of Spanish at Glennville State. The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission views Glennville’s initiative as a potential model for spreading internationalization across the state system.
- **[Fayetteville State University](#)** (NC) (FSU) is a public, regional, historically black university. Most of its students come from low-income families in small rural towns, and their participation in study abroad is minimal. “We have an obligation to help broaden students’ horizons and give them global experiences, so we established that as a general learning outcome,” says Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Jon Young. Capitalizing on existing relationships with two universities in China, Fayetteville State is working to refine and expand opportunities for its students to gain wider



internationalization experience in general education global literacy core courses. The university has successfully piloted several courses—in subjects as disparate as English as a second language, psychology, and business administration—in which faculty from Fayetteville and from its Chinese partner institutions team-teach using interactive television. Bridging a 12-hour time difference—13 during Daylight Savings Time—classes meet together twice a week and separately for a third weekly class. One of the most popular of these courses, Young says, is one in world religions. “From our perspective, these courses give students a global experience,” he says. “It enables them to interact with students from another country, but it is a lot less expensive than a study abroad experience and not as intimidating as the thought of going abroad for a semester.” FSU is expanding its reach to include a partnership with a university in India, and Young hopes FSU can also expand to Europe and Africa.

Echoing what Rubin found, Young says, “I think the challenge is that establishing relationships that are strong enough so that the faculty can work together takes institutional commitment. Both institutions must be committed to providing the technology resources needed to make this work. Establishing the partnership and getting the faculty members together to develop the courses can create some logistical challenges. But for us, it is a real priority. I don’t imagine hundreds of students doing this in the near future, but right now we have two or three courses going, so we probably have close to 100 students involved per semester. I hope to see that grow.”

BRIDGING DIVERSITY AND INTERNATIONALIZATION

In a related trend, some colleges and universities are seeking ways to bridge their international efforts with their initiatives in diversity. Glenville State, for example, includes its partnership with the University of Oviedo under a broad umbrella that is exemplified in the college’s decision to bring both internationalization and diversity efforts under the aegis of one college committee.

Recognizing that cultural competency has become imperative as the job market globalizes and as the workforce continues to diversify, ACE’s Inclusive Excellence Group and CIGE collaborated on another initiative, At Home in the World: Educating for Global Connections and Local Commitments. That program engaged higher education institutions in examining the collaboration potential between diversity/multicultural education and internationalization.

- [Alliant International University](#) (CA) is a private institution that prepares students for professional careers in psychology, education, business, law, and forensics. Alliant’s project for the At Home in the World initiative integrated multicultural and international competency training into the curricula in master’s programs in business and psychology offered at its San Francisco, San Diego, and Mexico City campus locations. The Alliant team worked

strategically to identify new intercultural competencies for student learning, create a curricular strategy that infused courses with blended international and multicultural components, and design an assessment plan.

The [At Home in the World Toolkit](#), launched in January 2014, details the initiative and offers practical advice for institutions seeking to work at this intersection.

Other institutions also work toward similar goals:

- In 2008, the [Division of Equity, Diversity and Global Outreach](#) was established at North Dakota State University (NDSU), bringing together international and multicultural offices, staff, and resources. The division envisions an NDSU community “where all members are full partners in an environment that promotes a commitment to diversity and global citizenship.”
- At [Hampshire College](#) (MA), international student support and advising are a part of the Cultural Center, which also houses the college’s office of multicultural and international student services. That’s intentional, says Dean of Students Byron P. McCrae, to help ensure that “there are structural connections between multicultural affairs and international student services, which lead to organic programming and support.”

Colleges and universities are pursuing countless other tacks in their efforts to help students gain global perspectives. There is, of course, ongoing work to increase the presence on U.S. campuses of students, faculty, and scholars from abroad. Leveraging the curriculum, institutions have developed degree programs in such areas as global studies, global business, global finance, and global public health. Similarly, colleges and universities might leverage co-curricular activities through partnerships with international organizations and by housing students in international living/learning communities. Some institutions are working intentionally to make study abroad more affordable by increasing scholarships and changing policies to make student aid more readily available for international study, for example, and by targeting study abroad experiences in countries such as Mexico that may be more accessible to U.S. students. Another approach capitalizes on community resources—for instance, local immigrant populations—to bolster student exposure to other cultures. The breadth of such initiatives is virtually limitless.

In the report [Strength Through Global Leadership and Engagement: U.S. Higher Education in the 21st Century](#) (2011), ACE’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Global Engagement made this observation:

It is the obligation of colleges and universities to prepare people for a globalized world, including developing the ability to compete economically, to operate effectively in other cultures and settings, to use knowledge to improve their own lives and their communities, and to better comprehend the realities of the contemporary world so that they can better meet their responsibilities as citizens.

As colleges and universities institutionalize this charge, it is clear that they are both developing innovative ideas and implementing solutions tailored to their unique circumstances. Those strategies hold promise as means to find meaningful channels for all students—including those who might not be able to study abroad—to learn ways to become globally engaged.

RESOURCES

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