

Study Abroad Is Necessity, Not Luxury

by Rick Steves

Even in challenging economic times, making sure that study abroad is part of our college students' education is a vital investment. If we want a new generation of leaders and innovators who can be effective in an ever more globalized world, sending our students overseas is not a luxury. It's a necessity.

I believe that our national security rests upon the foundation of a well-educated electorate with a broad and sophisticated worldview. Ninety-six percent of humanity lives outside our borders — and we risk being left in the dust if we don't know how to effectively engage the world. It's critical to deal smartly with the emerging economic and military powers of China and India, and we must better understand the intricacies of Islam. While Germany is increasingly going wind-powered, the Dutch are building up their dikes and Africa is fighting a growing desert, we need policies more insightful than "drill, baby, drill."

There's a lot of fear in our society today. Students who travel learn that fear is for people who don't get out much. And they learn that the flip side of fear is understanding. Travelers learn to celebrate, rather than fear, the diversity on our planet. Learning in a different culture and place allows us to see our own challenges in sharp contrast, and with more clarity, as we observe smart people in other lands dealing with similar issues.

American college students understand the value of study abroad. Four out of every five first-year students aspire to study overseas. But at any given time, only about 2% of students are able to. Educators are particularly concerned that the lack of opportunity for students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds will cause a "global divide" between students who've benefited from a global education ... and those who haven't. And students for whom foreign travel is not easily affordable are the ones who benefit most from the experience. As a society, we can help enrich the education of our younger generation, and brighten their futures, by making this experience more accessible. The Paul Simon Study Abroad Act, currently being considered in Congress, would dedicate \$80 million annually to incentivize study abroad, with the goal of encouraging a million American students from a wide range of backgrounds to study abroad each year.

Is now the time to be devoting precious public funds to sending college kids overseas? Absolutely. Our world is one big, rapidly evolving marketplace. Employers crave graduates who are flexible, multilingual and comfortable in multicultural settings. Study abroad sharpens these skills and helps keep American workers competitive.