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The Seven Habits for Sustainable Education Abroad Growth

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INTRODUCTION

At a time when political rhetoric begins to favor isolationism and American exceptionalism, that challenge for senior international officers to maintain momentum in favor of campus internationalization is no doubt intensifying. In this Issue Brief, the authors encourage SIOs to consider strategies for education abroad beyond enrollment numbers. They offer seven habits for sustainable education abroad enrollment growth for SIOs to consider and also provide thoughtful corresponding questions that may prove useful in maintaining and boosting the proportion of students that participate in education abroad programming.



As political rhetoric appears to be moving in the direction of creating more boundaries and breaking down longstanding alliances, senior international officers (SIOs) and other institutional leaders in U.S. higher education are faced with the challenge of articulating a different, more compelling message about the value of international student mobility. Coupled with declining support of higher education, institutional leaders, especially those at public institutions, are aggressively exploring new strategies to diversify their campuses and revenue streams. This has been particularly evident in the pursuit of more vigorous efforts with international student recruitment. Similarly, many SIOs are being urged to maintain, if not boost even the proportion of students that participate in education abroad programming. Increasingly, U.S. institutions are also explicitly leveraging education abroad programming in domestic recruitment and admissions efforts as a strategy to demonstrate the global reach of their institutions and as a nod to national and international rankings that increasingly utilize student mobility metrics in their calculations. At a time when political rhetoric begins to favor isolationism and American exceptionalism, that challenge for senior international officers to maintain momentum in favor of campus internationalization is no doubt intensifying.

It is not unusual for beleaguered SIOs to respond to such political, budgetary, and reputational pressures by focusing on overall enrollment growth as something tangible and measurable. “How can I get more of my students to study abroad” is, for example, an all too often asked question among SIOs at international education conferences, especially as growth in education abroad enrollment seems to be plateauing. It is similarly common to hear education abroad professionals lamenting over pressures for continued enrollment growth, often calling on arguments that pit quality against quantity. Although growth is important, the problem of overly concentrating on it is two-fold. First, institutions can confuse education abroad as a goal in of itself rather than as a means to achieving predetermined educational outcomes. In other words, might the goal be to leverage education abroad programming as a high-impact educational practice to realize intentional outcomes for students vis-à-vis metrics of student success? Secondly, the prioritization of enrollment growth accepts implicitly that merely getting students abroad creates a transferrable positive outcome in terms of intercultural learning or global competency, for example, without necessarily working intentionally toward realizing such goals. Positioning education abroad as a means to an end is key and doing so does not diminish program quality but rather reorients education abroad with intentionality and purpose.

A further concern of many is that the predominant focus on enrollment growth often sidelines the fundamental rationale for education abroad. Although some students do want to see more of the world through international travel, international educators are less concerned with tourism or travel than with partnering with senior



leadership and faculty to further the education of students. To be fair, the fundamental rationales for education abroad are changing. For decades, institutions have leveraged education abroad programming with the goal to enhance student learning in the areas of language acquisition, cultural knowledge and intercultural competency development. As short-term and faculty-directed programming has increased in popularity, the rationales have expanded to include an emphasis on discipline-specific learning. Short-term education abroad programs have also presented a means through which to involve students in other forms of engaged learning, such as international internships, global service-learning, and undergraduate research. Simply, the purpose of education abroad is not to prioritize international travel or tourism. SIOs should not simply aim to just send students abroad, but rather encourage education abroad programming to be used as a means to enable students to complement and expand upon on-campus learning. After all, the fundamental rationale for education abroad should be no different to that of higher education.

Faced with the reality of a cultural moment in which our long-standing message of building bridges across cultures just does not cut it, and nor, arguably, should it, many international educators are finding it more challenging to talk with students and other key stakeholders about why they should invest further in education abroad. And while there are any number of new and innovative approaches being used to generate enrollment growth, it is arguably more important to ensure sustainable enrollment growth over time by crafting a clear and transparent education abroad enrollment strategy that has broad institutional support, is tightly coupled with the mission and strategic plan of the home institution, and one that can withstand shifting political rhetoric. What follow are seven habits for effective, sustainable, and sensible education abroad enrollment growth. Although not exhaustive, the following considerations can provide a solid foundation upon which the direction and further momentum of education abroad programming can be shaped.

1. Emphasize the value proposition of education abroad.

International educators have long advocated for education abroad as a public good in terms of national security and competitiveness and as a private good to advance language learning, intercultural competency development, and intellectual growth. If the national conversation is indeed changing, then obviously, so too must our message. Just as our higher education institutions, public and private, large and small, can no longer rely on a cultural and generational acceptance of the value of a liberal education, and higher education generally is having to reframe and reemphasize its value across the board, we can no longer presuppose that our



students and their families value internationalization per se. Instead we should emphasize in very real terms the value of investing in international education and learning. It is important to employ a compelling message that resonates with policymakers, donors, institutional leadership, faculty, parents, and students - for why they should invest in education abroad. While it will remain important to stress the value of internationalizing one's education, it will be similarly important to emphasize that education abroad, in all its forms, represents a solid investment in student learning, career development, institutional prestige, and social mobility.

2. Shift the emphasis from “where” to “what.”

Students often come to education abroad with their sights set on where they want to go, thinking of it more akin to international travel than as an educational investment. Fortunately, the curriculum integration initiatives in the past decade have brought attention to this concept. A central purpose of curriculum integration is to develop major-specific advising resources to assist undergraduate students in program selection and faculty and staff with advising and guiding students interested in pursuing education abroad within their disciplines. An intended outcome is for education abroad programming to be an academic endeavor that is integral to undergraduate education. By developing advising resources in cooperation with academic units, institutions foster a system in which faculty, advisors, and staff are promoting an agreed-upon set of programs tailored to individual academic disciplines. Thus, the conversation gradually shifts away from language that emphasizes trips and travel to the more appropriate language of discipline-specific education. While some students may always be swayed by the allure of visiting specific locations or by other personal curiosities, curriculum integration initiatives very rightly reorient education abroad to what one can learn and achieve through international study. A concomitant benefit of meaningful curricular integration is that institutional faculty and senior academic administrators see education abroad as central to the core teaching mission of the institution. With such buy-in, the enterprise of education abroad shifts from a marginal opportunity that some might avail of to the very center of what the academic unit deems important for each of its students, which in turn will stimulate enrollment growth.

3. Ensure scholarly research informs professional practice.

Given that more and more colleges and universities are integrating education abroad programming into the undergraduate curriculum, attention is turning to the



role that education abroad, as a much touted high-impact educational experience, can have in enhancing student success and producing global-ready graduates. This attention has sparked increasing scholarly interest in understanding and documenting the various outcomes associated with education abroad programming. Scholars and practitioners alike are now jointly pursuing rigorous research agendas with the aim of providing a clearer understanding of the totality of the education abroad experience.¹ Leveraging the existing research to make stronger claims about the benefits of education abroad, especially within one's specific institutional context, is increasingly essential to advancing further enrollment growth. As such, it is critically important that SIOs use their positions to advocate for resources for research around such outcomes and to tailor education abroad offerings based on systematic utilization of empirical evidence that can inform best practices and new directions in programming.

4. Effectively utilize data in planning and advocacy.

Data collection is not new to U.S. higher education and in the era of increasing standardization and accountability, it is strategically important that international educators be able to produce data, often on demand, that reinforce the importance of international education and demonstrate how education abroad programming, in particular, potentially enhances and extends institutional missions, values, and priorities. In daily practice, education abroad practitioners most often rely on existing national and institutional datasets to assess enrollment trends and make informed decisions about new programming directions. SIOs should partner with education abroad professionals to produce campus-specific enrollment data and related datasets that can be used effectively in strategic planning efforts, campus advocacy, effective enrollment management, benchmarking initiatives, and assessing student success outcomes. In particular, education abroad opportunities can be leveraged effectively to mitigate high demand majors or first-year capacity issues. Without actively and effectively engaging with data, SIOs cannot hope to ensure sustainable and sensible growth aligned with institutional priorities.

5. Remember, one size doesn't fit all.

Many institutions prioritize the number of programs offered and corresponding countries where students can study, as if volume and broad geographical coverage

¹ See *AIEA Research Agendas for the Internationalization of Higher Education*, <http://www.aieaworld.org/research-agenda>



are the primary hallmarks of a robust and enviable portfolio. When considering sustainable enrollment growth, however, it is arguably more important to develop and maintain a portfolio responsive to the diversity of the student body beyond just the mainstream or traditional populations (*i.e.*, female, high SES, white, *etc.*). Working in partnership with and through the institution's academic units, the portfolio should also respond to the broad academic needs of students, whether that be through complementing or supplementing the home institution's curriculum. Given that short-term programs dominate program portfolios these days, maintaining a responsive portfolio may require that institutions pursue a deliberate strategy of complementing short-term programs with select bilateral and multilateral exchanges, consortia, direct enrollment, and provider programming. To be sure, short-term programs can provide a quick fillip to enrollment numbers but such programs are often not ultimately sustainable on account of faculty turnover, the staff time taken to support them, and, frequently, the added cost to students. Faculty-directed programs, however, can be more effective by being anchored in a curricular strategy. Department or college-based programs that engage multiple faculty have the potential to be resilient to changes in curricula, faculty departures, and become self-sustaining over time. Just as all students are not interested solely in short-term programs, not all students are interested in *study abroad*. Rather, enrollment growth may necessitate maintaining a portfolio with a better balance of other education abroad program types, such as *undergraduate research abroad*, *international internships*, *global service-learning*, *etc.*

6. Engage the faculty.

It is well understood in U.S. higher education that for comprehensive internationalization to be successful and sustainable the institution's faculty must be engaged and empowered as stakeholders. SIOs understand the importance of working with and through the faculty to develop and sustain institutional momentum with education abroad programming. As education abroad is first and foremost an academic enterprise, international educators must acknowledge that the faculty own and control the curriculum and thus, fostering a culture wherein the faculty are and engaged in determining the direction and scope of education abroad programming is essential. Common approaches to faculty engagement have focused on involving faculty in policy or advisory committees, portfolio development opportunities, inviting them to lead short-term programs, *etc.* Other strategies that focus directly on faculty members and their professional objectives may include assisting faculty members with securing international fellowships and grants, inviting faculty on international site visits, facilitating short-term teaching abroad opportunities, initiating conferences and speaker series, making formal introductions with disciplinary counterparts, and offering ongoing faculty training



and support with curriculum development. Whereas education abroad professionals generally direct their efforts at boosting direct promotion and student outreach efforts, truly sustainable and effective enrollment growth requires a long-term commitment to providing consistent and effective measures to ensure faculty engagement. After all, students generally stay at an institution for four years, whereas faculty can stay for forty. Engaging faculty is obviously the better long-term investment.

7. Control the Message.

While we may never get all students to see education abroad as more than the chance to travel, if we are serious about asking policymakers, donors, institutional leadership, faculty, and parents to invest in education abroad, oughtn't we be asking the same of students? In other words, it is important to utilize marketing, advertising, and communication resources to explicitly convey the institution's goals for education abroad. As international travel and tourism are likely not stated goals, then it makes little sense to use ubiquitous photos of student groups jumping in unison in front of international landmarks or showing students in international tourism settings. Rather, it may be more appropriate to use images and communication strategies that demonstrate how students can leverage international learning toward realizing their long-term educational and career aspirations. Images and testimonies from successful education abroad alumni can demonstrate an overt link between education abroad as a means to achieve one's educational goals and career aspirations. SIOs are well positioned to demonstrate the connection between education abroad participation and local workforce development or other economic development goals.

In conclusion, it is important to note that short-term and immediate enrollment growth is realizable at most any institution, albeit not without some sacrifices. Sustainable, sensible growth, however, requires making strategic decisions that are in alignment with the mission and strategic plan of the home institution. For SIOs, it is important to not be readily swayed by pressures for short-term enrollment growth or be confused by the allure of international travel and tourism, but rather to seize the opportunity to serve as a campus leader in championing education abroad as a means to realize intentional outcomes that align with the overall educational goals of their institutions. The seven habits for sustainable education abroad enrollment growth explained briefly here, and the corresponding questions for consideration below, may prove useful in maintaining and even boosting the proportion of students that participate in education abroad programming.



1. How do you currently discuss the value of education abroad to students, parents, senior leaders, and others? Is education abroad perceived as an investment in student learning, career development, institutional prestige, and social mobility?
2. Is your programming and organizational structure oriented around destinations or location-based advising? To what extent are you pursuing curriculum integration initiatives?
3. How do you see your role as SIO in contributing to scholarship and in guiding the direction of forthcoming research? How does research inform practice at your institution?
4. How does data inform your programming and decision making? What data do you need for campus advocacy?
5. How do you know that your education abroad portfolio responds to the diverse backgrounds, interests and needs of your student body? What would be an ideal balance of differing program type to create a robust and responsive portfolio?
6. How are your faculty engaged in determining the direction and scope of education abroad programming at your institution? Who are your faculty champions?
7. How do your promotion and outreach strategies represent the rationale or purpose for education abroad at your institution? Do your communication efforts align with the predetermined intentions of your institution?



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- Provide an effective voice on significant issues within international education at all levels,
- Improve and promote international education programming and administration within institutions of higher education,
- Establish and maintain a professional network among international education institutional leaders,
- Cooperate in appropriate ways with other national and international groups having similar interests.

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