

# GETTING MORE MALES TO STUDY ABROAD

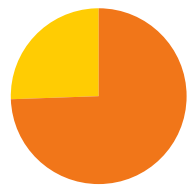
## **M**ore than two times the number of women study abroad than men. What can we do?

Women make up 56 percent of the undergraduates enrolled at U.S. institutions, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. But when it comes to study abroad, they represent an even larger percentage of students. In 2016-17, more than 67 percent of study abroad participants were female, according to the Institute of International Education’s (IIE) Open Doors® report. And that figure has remained fairly steady for more than a decade, with women accounting for more than two-thirds of American students studying abroad.

It’s a conundrum for many international education offices as they grapple to attract more students overall—only 10.9 percent study abroad as undergraduates—as well as underrepresented groups. So why aren’t more males packing their bags for a semester in London or a short-term program in Shanghai?

“In many years of advising students, I have observed some trends with male participation in study abroad. It varies with personality, preferences, personal strengths and priorities, but male students often end up limiting themselves,” says Lisa Loberg, Ed.D., Director of Study Abroad at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. “But it’s not everyone. I’ve also seen many male students decide to go on immersive, year-long, language-based programs.”

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# WHY IS THERE A GENDER GAP?

Loberg's addendum to her observation that "it's not everyone" is typical of conversations about the skewed demographics of study abroad participants. Industry professionals are hesitant to speculate on why fewer men study abroad over concern of espousing stereotypes or,

even worse, sounding sexist. But before international education professionals can tackle the issue, they must at least consider the reasons why it exists—even if that consideration consists largely of supposition. "We are speaking about bigger trends and how to address them," says Loberg.



One reason may be historical. In its early years, study abroad was seen as part of a liberal arts education. For instance, many students at the "Seven Sisters"—historically all women's colleges in the eastern United States—spent their junior year abroad. "On the other side, male students were directed to finish





are in different places in terms of their priorities. I hesitate to say maturity. But somebody really needs to want to study abroad and have the patience and maturity to work their way through the process.” Loberg echoes this sentiment: “There’s an element of grit that is needed to follow through with studying abroad,” she says.

That “stick-with-it-ness” may not seem worth it for some, particularly if they are lukewarm on the idea of an international adventure. “Women seem to be more comfortable with ambiguity and the adventure that comes with studying abroad,” posits Loberg. “Participants have to be open to new experiences and willing to figure things out.”

Meanwhile, men may want to stay on campus with their friends and in their comfort zone. There is some research to back up this notion. A study of 2,800 students at two-year and four-year colleges published in 2010 in the journal “Research in Higher Education” found that the more time male students spent interacting with peers, the less likely they were to study abroad. The same did not hold true for female students.

their degrees, get started on their careers and move into the workforce,” says Paul Watson, Executive Director of AIFS Study Abroad, a provider of cultural exchange and educational opportunities. “Study abroad wasn’t something that they or their parents thought was important or necessary.” Today, women are equally committed to pursuing careers—and active in business and STEM fields once dominated by men—but perhaps some residual biases about study abroad still exist.

***“There’s an element of grit that is needed to follow through with studying abroad.”***

Another possible factor may be related to the detailed process required to study abroad. “There is a lot of planning in terms of finding the right academic program and handling all of the logistical details, like getting a travel visa, completing paperwork and budgeting,” says Watson. “I tend to think that twenty-something year-old men and women



During her career, Loberg says she’s often seen groups of men visit the study abroad office together and sign up for the same programs. “Male students often want to go abroad as a group,” she says. “Or maybe a roommate is going, and others will then consider the same location. They usually request to live together.”

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## TIPS

### FOR ATTRACTING MORE MEN—AND WOMEN

So what can universities and study abroad providers do with all these hypotheses? After the debate about why more men aren't studying abroad, the next step is to consider how to get them to participate in international education programs.



*As a side note, many of the ideas apply equally to men and women, so implementing them may provide a boost to overall participation.*

#### **Make sure your marketing materials match your desire for inclusivity.**

Do most of the photos on your website or print materials show smiling women in front of the Trevi Fountain in Rome or atop Machu Picchu in Peru? “We as a field are looking at how to make sure that all students are represented in marketing materials and can see themselves in a study abroad experience,” says Loberg. “For some male students, however, the concept may already be out of the question. Study abroad doesn’t fit anywhere with the goals they think they have to accomplish, so they’re not even looking at the website.”

#### **Build study abroad planning into academic advising.**

“Studies show that about 70 percent of high school students say they are going to or are considering study abroad in college, but something significant happens because in the end roughly 10 percent of college students graduate having had a study abroad experience,” says Watson. “I think it’s partially because of the need for planning—for students

sitting down with advisors and planning their courses so they can fit in study abroad.” Academic advisors can help students find times, particularly within structured majors, where they can study abroad while still staying on pace to graduate in four years.

#### **Provide additional administrative support to keep students in the pipeline.**

Students may need extra hand-holding through the process of completing paperwork, getting passports, arranging air travel and so on. “I know for some male students, if I wasn’t there guiding them through the technical steps or visa paperwork, they would’ve given up,” says Loberg. “All I did was check in more often, help them navigate the process and encourage them to keep going. I didn’t do it for them, but I was a constant, helping guide and eventually got them to the next step.” She adds that the field of international education as a whole needs to recognize and better understand various student populations and position itself to offer extra support where it is most helpful.



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### Streamline the process.

Perhaps all those details we've alluded to aren't essential. "Revisiting the process and removing unnecessary barriers can help increase access for everyone," says Loberg. "We want to diversify participation among all students going abroad, so take a step back and look at ways to streamline the entire process."

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### Stress the connection between study abroad and employability.

Having international experience helps students better understand the world they will work in once they graduate. IIE's 2017 report "Gaining an Employment Edge" indicates that study abroad leads to significant gains in 11 of 15 critical workplace skills. "We've done a lot of work in the area of career development, putting the information out about the importance and value of study abroad to planning for a career," says Watson. "And that's equally relevant to male and female students."



**Study abroad leads to significant gains in 11 of 15 critical workplace skills.**



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### Reach out to cohorts of students.

"If study abroad offices can target cohorts, such as student clubs and organizations, affinity groups, fraternities and athletic teams, in an effort to create a study abroad culture among those groups, then we avoid the 'I don't want to be the only one doing this' attitude," says Loberg. Most campuses have dozens of student organizations—if not hundreds. Consider including these groups in your marketing and outreach strategy.

Women and men alike can benefit from international education. It's long past time to figure out how to break the trend and create a more equal balance of males and females participating in study abroad.



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