



# OPENING DOORS

## *Increasing Study Abroad Accessibility and Participation Among Underrepresented Cohorts of Your Student Body*

Study abroad is not just for the wealthy. It is not just for “traditional” students. It is for everyone.

True as this may be, there are many students who, for a variety of reasons, just don’t see study abroad as an option for “people like them.” If the goal is to increase access for all students—and most schools say it is—then this idea, embraced by colleges, universities, and industry professionals, needs to be embraced by the students too. It is up to each institution to educate students on their options and create an environment that fosters accessibility.

This article highlights ways in which three very different institutions are helping four distinct subsets of the student body understand that the benefits of a study abroad experience are within their reach, and no matter what their difference, be it socioeconomic or sexual preference, they will, in fact “fit in.” Although the tactics from school to school and demographic to demographic are slightly different, the strategy is surprisingly the same: increase campus-wide collaboration and foster a culture of inclusion.

### **Open More Doors Through Focused Outreach**

- Clearly communicate the net cost comparisons between home campus and study abroad opportunities.
- Explore and promote more affordable programs.
- Sponsor financial aid, budgeting and cost analysis workshops.
- Enlist the aid of peer advisors.



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### *Students With High Financial Need*

One of the largest cohorts of students nationwide that is traditionally less inclined to study abroad is students with high financial need. Many in this category are the first in their family to attend college and do not have the financial literacy or familial support system to fully understand their options. Through education and outreach, however, schools such as the University of California, Merced are moving the participation needle in the right direction.

Addressing financial need is of particular significance at UC Merced where, according to Craig Harmelin, Assistant Director of Study Abroad, 62% of the undergraduate student body is first generation, and 60.3% receive Pell Grants.

According to their most recent Open Doors report, out of a student body population of 5,431 only 116 studied abroad. Increasing those numbers is a matter of making students more aware of their options.

“For those who are Pell Grant recipients, in many cases they don’t realize that their net cost doesn’t change when it comes to studying abroad on a semester or year long institutional program. The loan amount is the same

whether they stay here or go abroad. And, at UC, to even the playing field for the neediest students, we increase the institutional aid to match any difference in cost between what they would pay to study on campus and what they would pay to study abroad,” said Harmelin.

**The biggest push, therefore, is to make sure financially needy students are fully aware of their options.**

At UC Merced, getting the word out takes on a number of forms, from handouts and digital signage, to scholarship and financial planning workshops, to peer advisors spreading the word around campus. From Harmelin’s viewpoint, the most successful of these is the work of the peer advisors because of the one on one connections they are able to make with the students.

“Students just can’t make the same connection with us as they can to a 21-22-year old student that has recently returned with stories to tell,” Harmelin said.



## Students With Disabilities

**Another segment of the student body for which study abroad access has traditionally been difficult is students with disabilities.**

Many schools, however, are committed to increasing accessibility for this demographic. One such institution is Western Washington University (WWU).

“We have seen an increasing number of students with disabilities interested in studying abroad, and we want to be sure they have the information they need to start exploring their options,” said Liz Partolan-Fray, Director, International Programs and Exchanges at WWU. “It is important to provide an environment of inclusion and communication.”

Students with disabilities are not required to disclose their disability for study abroad programs, but they are more likely to disclose within an environment where they know they are welcome. The benefits of disclosing early include time for planning and arranging any needed accommodations. The other major challenge is the cost of program accommodations and this will take time to ensure that funds are available.

In order to make this happen at WWU, the International Programs and Exchanges office is collaborating with the campus disAbility Resources for Students office. Together,

they are working to develop a web page that will serve the dual purpose of demonstrating their commitment to serving the disabled student population and providing information that will help students with disabilities best consider their options when selecting a study abroad program.

Partolan-Fray cites two websites, [University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center](#) and [University of California Education Abroad Program page for students with disabilities](#) as models for what she would like to achieve at WWU. The idea is to provide students with information on disclosure and accessibility, quick tips, and—just as importantly—to offer up a list of questions students and parents should consider, the answers to which will help ensure accommodations can be met.

Asked if she had advice for others looking to expand study abroad participation for students with disabilities, Partolan-Fray replied,

**“Study abroad professionals can best address the needs of persons with disabilities by beginning with communication which means being direct, asking questions, and using disability-positive language. I would also suggest creating a culture of inclusion in the study abroad office (website, advising, outreach materials) by working in partnership with the disability services office.”**





## Minorities & LGBTQ

**Two other cohorts of students that are perceived to be under-represented in study abroad programs include ethnic minorities and LGBTQ students.** At the University of Virginia they have determined that the best way to reach these populations is to meet them in their own space—working with them through networks that are already established and plugging into streams of communication that already exist. For the LGBTQ students, for example, there is the campus LGBTQ Center. For African Americans it is the Office of African American Affairs.

“We are partnering with established networks and organizations to synergize efforts and time and reach people more effectively,” said Senior Education Abroad Advisor & Operations Coordinator, Stacey Hansen. “Because they have already built relationships with the students, we can start building ours at a higher level—on top of that foundation of trust and belonging.”

Cross campus communication and collaboration is important in more ways than furthering the study abroad office’s relationships with students and educating others about the benefits of study abroad. Working with other organizations and visiting students where they are comfortable creates an environment of inclusion and trust, helps students realize that there are others like them who are interested in study abroad, and provides a deeper level of understanding of the needs of that particular demographic.

“We don’t just want to assume something is right. In order to serve them best, we need to listen to them and understand their needs and priorities from their perspective,” said Hanson. “We need to know where that population is at a baseline so we can work together appropriately and are not at cross-purposes.”



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Although each of the above stories is different, the thing that ties them all together is the concerted effort these institutions are making to reach out to under-represented groups. Instead of sitting back and hoping overall participation numbers get better, they have identified these groups as areas of opportunity, leveraged existing university resources and organizations with ties to those particular groups, and built specific programs to reach out to them.

That is what it is going to take to change student perceptions—to make first generation students and ethnic minorities feel empowered to expand their horizons beyond the home campus; to make it easier for a disabled student to disclose his or her disability; and to help LGBTQ students understand they are welcome. It is about making them feel like they belong, and making them feel comfortable because study abroad may not even be on their radar.



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