

# TACKLING THE GENDER GAP

## IN STUDY ABROAD

**A**pproximately 5,000 students attend St. Edward's University, a Catholic liberal arts university in Austin, Texas. During the 2013-2014 academic year, nearly 40 percent of the school's undergraduate students studied abroad. Their experiences varied. Some immersed themselves in the French culture in Angers, France, while others studied social justice in Bangladesh or natural sciences in South Korea. St. Edward's offers more than 1,000 study abroad options in 90 countries.

Despite the wide range of choices, one lopsided statistic stands out: More than twice as many women from St. Edward's study abroad than men. But it's not the only university where females outnumber males in this area. In 2012-2013, 65.3 percent of the 289,408 U.S. students who studied abroad were women, according to the Institute for International Education's 2014 Open Doors research data. In addition, the Open Doors report shows that the 65/35 split between women and men has held steady for more than a decade.

The disparity is a puzzle and a challenge for Bill Clabby, Associate Vice President for Global Initiatives at St. Edward's University. "There has been a large difference in participation between men and women in study abroad for such a long time," he says. "Our values as a society should be to encourage all people to live their dreams and contribute to society in a positive way. Given that, we should be encouraging both women and men to experience this transformational opportunity."

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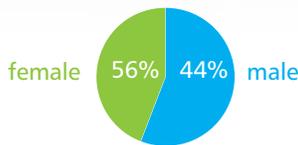
# WHY THE DISPARITY?

“There is no easy answer,” says Clabby. “This question has been batted around for as long as people have been in the study abroad field,” he says. “I haven’t seen any significant large-sample research that gives clear answers as to why more females than males study abroad. But I do know some of the reasons postulated.”

## HERE ARE FOUR THEORIES:

### 1 IT’S A MATTER OF SIMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS.

In the fall of 2012, females represented 56 percent of the total population of undergraduates at post-secondary institutions, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. “So if students are participating in study abroad rates consistent with their enrollment in college, you would expect to have a 56/44 percent split,” says Clabby. “However, while the actual split is larger, it’s not as skewed as it would initially appear given that college enrollment is not evenly divided between men and women,” he adds.



### 3 THE PERCEPTION THAT STUDY ABROAD OFFERS NO TANGIBLE CAREER ADVANTAGES.

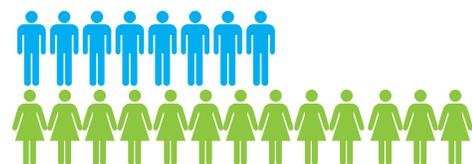
“One of the anecdotal reasons that men participate in fewer numbers is that they may tend to be more career focused and therefore likely to make decisions based on what the value will be for them financially and career wise,” says Clabby. “If they can’t draw a link between studying abroad and career opportunities, they are less likely to pursue a program. Men also may think they can go abroad later when they have jobs and employers will pay for travel.” While Clabby cautions against stereotyping based on sex, these reasons likely come into play in some situations.

### 2 MAJORS INFLUENCE THE DECISION.

“Majors that participate in higher rates of study abroad tend to be female dominated, while ones that participate in lower rates are male dominated,” says Clabby. Two female-dominated fields of study, social sciences and humanities, accounted for 32 percent of study abroad participants, according to the *2014 Open Doors* report. Conversely, traditionally male-dominated STEM fields—science, technology, engineering and math—attracted a combined 23 percent of study abroad students.

### 4 IT’S A MATURATION PROCESS.

Clabby calls this reason “another delicate one,” yet concedes that some men may not feel study abroad is valuable because they don’t yet appreciate the lofty benefits of gaining a global perspective. “They may not be thinking as circumspectly as some students would,” says Clabby. “To the extent that women are more mature than men at that age, it may affect their participation rate.”



# WAYS TO BOOST MALE PARTICIPATION

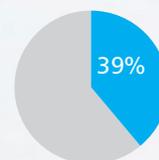
"We tell our students they will never be as free as they are right now as a college student, so they should take advantage of the opportunity to study abroad," says Clabby. That applies to both male and female undergraduates. But how do you get more men to jump at the chance to study abroad? While there's no quick fix, these ideas may help:

- **Create** more programs in STEM fields. The 2014 Open Doors report revealed that participation by U.S. students in study abroad programs related to science, technology, engineering or math increased 9 percent from the previous year. Anecdotal evidence shows that increase may correlate to more men in study abroad programs. The 2012-2013 International Activity Report published by Georgia Tech indicates that engineering majors from the university make up the largest group of students studying abroad (57 percent). And among those 850-plus engineers, approximately 63 percent were men.
- **Educate** major employers on the value of studying abroad. Companies seek employees who can solve problems, work in teams and communicate well. These skills—and more—can be honed in study abroad programs. If more companies recognized the benefits, they might seek employees who had participated in programs, which in turn would attract students. "If you create the carrot—the dynamic that says this is valuable—and it helps students reach specific goals, then you would have a higher participation rate," says Clabby.
- **Recruit** male students as peer advisors. Men who have had rewarding study abroad experiences can advise those who are considering programs. In tandem with study abroad offices, they could make presentations tailored to male-dominated social groups on campus, such as fraternities.
- **Feature** more men in promotions. If most of the photos and testimonials on your website and in other promotions show women in foreign countries, you may be inadvertently sending a subtle message that study abroad programs are for females.
- **Offer** scholarships for male participants to study abroad. Men are underrepresented in study abroad, and as such it makes sense to incentivize their participation as we would with any other underrepresented group.

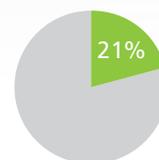


## Are Men More Adventurous?

Although fewer males study abroad than females, men lean toward more exotic locations, according to a 2013 study by Dr. Dimitris Kavakas, Executive Director for Enrollment Management at the American College of Thessaloniki. Here are a few interesting figures from his report, *"Students as Consumers: Identifying Study Abroad Destination Choice Influences for Marketing Purposes"*:



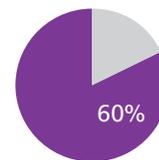
39% of male students consider destinations in east Asia compared to 19% of female students.



21% of males contemplate heading to the Middle East compared to 14% of females.



Conversely, 27% of female students preferred the westernized country of Australia as opposed to 18% of men.



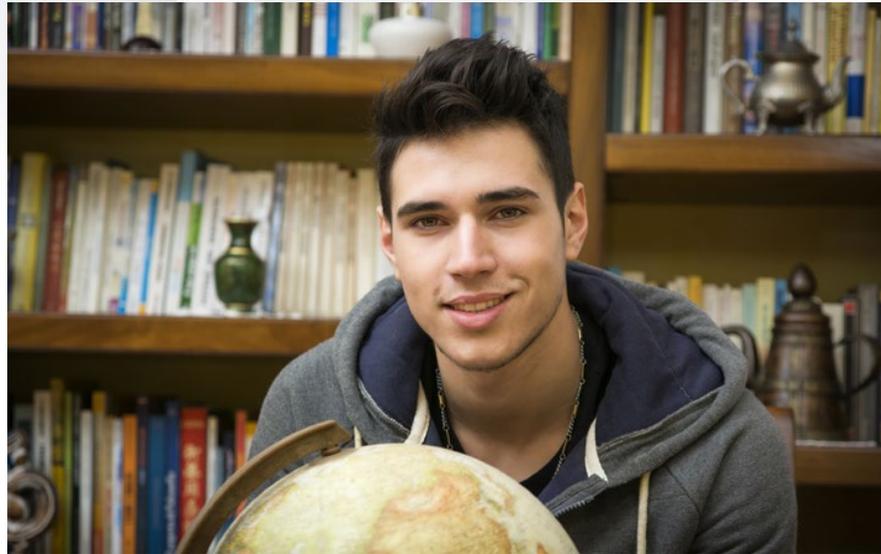
While numerous factors affect country choices, one may be related to perceived security: In Dr. Kavakas' study, 60% of male students said they were not concerned about security in the host country compared to only 18% of female students.



Although no single strategy is likely to increase male participation overnight, universities should ponder ways to attract more men to study abroad programs.

“If the data shows that men aren’t going abroad as much as women, why aren’t we taking steps to specifically support males in study abroad?”

-Bill Clabby



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