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# Study Abroad for High School

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*Poised to compete in an increasingly globalized world*

**M**oving to Portugal as a high school student in the 1960s jarred me to the bone. The differences between the United States and my new country leapt out at me almost immediately. Who among my former classmates in New Jersey could understand why Antonio Salazar's Secret Police kept a dossier on me—and all the other foreigners in Portugal? Which of my old friends in America saw classmates jailed simply for possessing a political pamphlet? While different from anything else I had ever known, my experience in Portugal was a seminal event in my life. I quickly learned Portuguese, as I needed the language to navigate my daily adventures. In addition, I acquired all the valuable lessons that anyone who studies outside her or his country should learn. Immersion in the Portuguese lifestyle gave me invaluable perspective on my own American way of life, and exposure to my international classmates instilled in me a lifelong appreciation for the diversity of the human psyche. Similarly, mastering the difficulties of living in a completely foreign environment instilled increased self-confidence and maturity. I gained an invaluable perspective on how, in many ways, the United States was isolated from the rest of the world. Of course, we were the leaders of the free world, and powerful in ways that had been unthinkable for the previous generation. Despite our status, we knew very little about the people we led. For all our accomplishments, the United States now appeared, to me, remote and uninformed.

This did not necessarily prove a pleasant discovery, but it was a discovery I took to heart. My Portuguese sojourn led directly to my selection by the U.S. State Department as one of eight students selected by New York University to inaugurate a study abroad program in Brazil, one of the first programs of its kind. My participation in this program came about only because of the linguistic competency I had developed in Portugal. After college, I returned to Portugal to teach at my old school. Finally, I returned to the US and chose to work in international education, where I have thrived for the

past three decades. My life's mission has been to impart to young men and women the lessons I learned so long ago as a teenager in Portugal.

In the 1960s, my international experience, especially for high school students, was rare. I only studied abroad due to the relocation of my family. If a high school student during this period studied outside the United States, it was almost always because his or family resided abroad. Elite Swiss boarding schools provided an option for the most privileged Americans. A few elite liberal arts colleges encouraged their students to study abroad, but it was an adventure reserved for only a few American college students.

Thankfully, this has begun to change. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, 68 colleges and universities sent 50% or more of their 2009 graduates to study abroad. Underscoring that study abroad is fast becoming a hallmark of an elite education, 12 of those institutions ranked among the top 25 liberal arts colleges in the nation, including Williams, Middlebury, and Wellesley. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Education, the number of American college students studying abroad

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quadrupled from 1987-8 to 2007-8 (although as a percentage of American college students, the level only rose to an anemic 15%). At the high school level, many more options presently exist for students wishing to study abroad. American high school students can study culinary arts in France, investigate the robust ecosystem of the Costa Rican rainforest, immerse themselves in the Chinese language, or participate in an archaeological dig in Italy. Unfortunately, this explosion of diversity may not have resulted in a significant increase in the number of high school students availing themselves of study abroad programs. According to the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel (CSIET), the number of American high school students studying abroad has actually declined by 10% over the past seven years. John Hishmeh, the Executive Director of CSIET, is concerned about this development. "International exchange student activity in American high schools can be very hard to find," he said. Acknowledging that high school study abroad lags behind college study abroad, he argues that students should not necessarily wait until college to go abroad. "High school is a time when teenagers haven't yet fully formed their value systems or stereotypes, which allows them to be more open to the experience than they might be if they were older. Also, the international experience may just provide the edge they need during their college application process."

That so few American high school students go abroad raises alarm. The radical imbalance between the number of international high school students welcomed to the United States and American high school students leaving the country warrants even greater concern. The CIETS numbers demonstrate a vast disparity: of the 123 countries included in the survey, 116 sent more students to the United States than they received. This has contributed to a structural problem in American foreign policy, namely, that other nations know far more about us than we about them. Among other things, the lack of high school study abroad contributes significantly to the deficiencies in America's critical languages capabilities. According to an article in *International Educator* by Karen Jenkins and John Meyers, the American educational system even at the tertiary level does not produce enough foreign language speakers to meet the critical language needs of the American military and intelligence bureaucracies. It is a well-established fact of language learning that the earlier one begins study of a new language, the faster one will master it. Moreover, as most language learners can attest, the surest way to learn a language is

not by studying a few hours a week in an American classroom, but by speaking the language all day, every day—total immersion. Thus, American high school students—whose brains are more receptive to foreign language mastery than their counterparts in colleges—stand uniquely poised to master the foreign languages vital to America's foreign policy interests. America will never meet the challenges of an increasingly globalized world if the vast majority of its citizens have no meaningful international interactions during their formative years.

Although American high school students do not often study outside the United States, when they do, the positive effects can endure for a lifetime. Frank Brightwell, an independent college counselor, founded the "Somos Amigos" program for high school students more than twenty years ago. This program connected students at a suburban private school with impoverished residents of the Dominican-Haitian border. (While the program has since evolved into a medical and dental mission, it continues to welcome high school students.) "We built schools and water systems and one road," said Brightwell, of the early service trips. "They [the students] say that their five and a half weeks in the D.R. remain one of the most significant experiences of their lives." Eamon Nolan, a recent graduate of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, spent many of his high school years in the Philippines. "Studying outside the United States gave me a strategic advantage when I entered college," he said. "Many of my classmates had never left the U.S. for more than a week or two, and as a result, I had invaluable insights into the day-to-day realities that define politics in developing nations that my classmates simply did not have." Caroline Symons, a sophomore at Vassar University who spent a summer after her junior year in high school studying in Paris, concurred with Nolan's assessment: "Going abroad was one of the best supplements to my high school education," she said. "I came back with a much firmer grasp of French than I could have gotten from studying in the classroom alone."

As these stories demonstrate, studying outside the United States during high school can yield life-changing results. High schools across the United States should embrace study abroad programs. The goal of continuing and deepening high school study abroad should be shared by parents, educators, and policymakers alike. The more globalized our education becomes, the more our students will be poised to compete in the increasingly globalized world of the future.

