

The Lincoln Commission and the Future of Study Abroad

“TODAY’S REALITIES, which are not all that pleasant, we can tolerate, but the fear of the unknown casts a shadow over today’s certainties. We sense a need to move beyond bandaging to healing our wounds. Is there a way for us as a people to bring more stability, peace, and harmony to our world?”

My dear friend, the late Senator Paul Simon, pondered this question in the aftermath of the tragic events on September 11, 2001 that shook our nation and brought to the forefront our lack of knowledge of the rest of the world. Paul was not only my dear

role, he developed a passion for instilling in the next generation of Americans a broad international understanding. His vision was to help prepare a generation with greater cultural competence and real life experience in societies unlike our own.

“Recharging our civic batteries is no simple task, but studying abroad gives students and faculty a chance to learn more about the rest of the world, and almost inevitably, that stimulates interest in our own government and its policies.”



—Senator Paul Simon

friend, but also my mentor. I was fortunate enough to be elected to his seat in the Senate and to have worked closely with him and to have witnessed his commitment to bettering our world through education.

Paul was a man with an intrinsic sense of justice and a passion for the public good. His deep convictions were matched by a genuine zeal for the work he did—in Washington, D.C., and in Illinois. After he retired from the Senate, Paul Simon carried his vision and energy into his leadership with the Southern Illinois University Public Policy Institute in Carbondale, Illinois. In that

Simon’s Vision: The Lincoln Commission

In his last months, Senator Simon came back to Washington to talk to his former colleagues about the need to strengthen this country’s international understanding. As a direct result of his work, Congress established the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Commission to develop the framework for an international study abroad program for college students.

I am honored to have served on this bipartisan Lincoln Commission. Paul Simon, like so many committed to advancing our nation’s ability to lead by investing in the education of our young people, struggled with the question of how America could lead while so few of our citizens have an appropriate knowledge and understanding of the world outside our borders.

The United States is a military and economic giant, yet it is continuously threatened by a serious lack of international competence in an age of growing globalization. Our world ignorance is now seen as a national liability. In the words of the great American President, Abraham Lincoln, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and

U.S. Leaders Who Have Studied Abroad

Many people who went on to assume leadership roles in the arts and letters, science, medicine, education, business, communications, and government studied abroad. Here are some of them:

Carl Albert, Speaker,
U.S. House of Representatives

Maya Angelou, Poet

Curtis Barnette,
Chairman, Bethlehem Steel

James Billington, Librarian of Congress

Derek Bok, President, Harvard University

John Brademas,
President, New York University

Hal Bruno, Political Director, ABC News

Max Burns, U.S. Representative

Ben “Nighthorse” Campbell, U.S. Senator

Wesley Clark, General, USA (Ret’d)

Bill Clinton, 42nd President

Thad Cochran, U.S. Senator

Rosa DeLauro, U.S. Representative

Rita Dove, U.S. Poet Laureate

W.E.B. Dubois, Author/Educator

Paul Farmer, Medical Anthropologist

Renee Fleming, Soprano

Milton Friedman,
Nobel Prize Winning Economist

Theodore Seuss Geisel, Author

Margaret Greenfield, Washington Post

Joseph Heller, Author

John Hersey, Author

John Irving, Author

Stacey Keach, Actor

Anthony Kennedy,
U.S. Supreme Court Justice

John Lithgow, Actor

Richard Lugar, U.S. Senator

Daniel P. Moynihan,
Diplomat & U.S. Senator

Leo J. O’Donovan, S.J.,
President, Georgetown University

Alfred Partoll, Senior Vice President, AT&T

Philip Pearlstein, Painter

Thomas Pickering,
Diplomat and Business Leader

Sylvia Plath, Author

Theodore Roosevelt, 26th President

Dean Rusk, Secretary of State

John Tower, U.S. Senator

David Souter, U.S. Supreme Court Justice

Admiral Stansfield Turner, Director, CIA

Katherine Harris, U.S. Representative

James Oberstar,
U.S. House of Representatives

J. Robert Oppenheimer, Physicist

Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State

Walt Rostow, Presidential Adviser

Paul Sarbanes, U.S. Senator

David Vitter, U.S. Senator

James Watson,
Nobel Prize Winning Biochemist

Gene Wilder, Actor

George Will, Syndicated Columnist

Heather Wilson, U.S. Representative

then we shall save our country.”

The challenges we face as Americans are increasingly global in nature, and our youth must be well prepared for its future. Our national security, international economic competitiveness, and diplomatic efforts in working towards a peaceful society rest on our global competence and ability to appreciate languages and cultures throughout the world. The United States’ capacity to lead in the twenty-first century demands that we school new generations of students in cultural and social realities beyond what they may have grown up with in the United States.

Senator Simon understood this. He perceived the United States as a large community, part of an even larger world family. When he saw signs that read, “God Bless America,” he wished they would read, “God Bless America and the Rest of the World.”

America can do its part to bring more peace, stability and harmony to our world. We can start by building on the recently

released report of the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Commission. The program the Commission recommends would encourage and support the experience of studying abroad, particularly in developing countries—in countries whose people, culture, language, government, and religion might be very different from ours. As we become a nation whose citizens have studied in other countries, we will become more understanding of the rest of the world and less likely to minimize the perspectives of people in other countries. We will become a nation whose base of public knowledge and experience would enrich our participation in the international arena.

The Need for Greater Access to Education Abroad

Many of us are struck by Americans’ general lack of knowledge about the rest of the world, but few realize how very few American students participate in study abroad programs—

less than one percent of the overall undergraduate population. Despite our strong position in the global market and our efforts to promote peace and democracy around the world, the United States lags woefully behind many countries in the number of students that study abroad each year.

My home state of Illinois ranks as one of the largest export states in the nation, with one in every five manufacturing jobs tied to exports and the international marketplace. Illinois also ranks first in the Midwest as a destination for foreign investment, housing more than six thousand foreign firms, which employ 340,000 residents. We boast a state-wide international education initiative with goals to make language skills and international studies a priority in our schools and to establish partnerships abroad that promote international teacher and learning for teachers, students, and administrators. However, in Illinois during the 2003–2004 academic year only 6,395 students chose to study

abroad. Compare that to the nearly 26,000 students who chose to come to the United States to study in Illinois in the same year. Clearly, we can do a better job of opening the rest of the world to American students.

This trend holds nationwide. In the 2003–04 academic year, 572,509 international students were on U.S. campuses while just 191,321 American students studied abroad. That's one percent of all enrolled undergraduate students. Only one third of those students chose to study in locations outside of Western Europe. Yet, an estimated 95 percent of the world's population growth will occur outside of that area in the next 50 years. How does that prepare our next generation of leaders? A small fraction of a percent of American students have spent any time immersed in those many and varied cultures and languages critical to the United States, including Russia, China, India, Africa, Central and South America, and the Middle East.

Is this tolerable in today's global society? Given these figures, can we say with confidence that our nation is prepared to grow in the world market, fight terrorism or promote peaceful societies abroad? The fear of the unknown still cripples our nation and jeopardizes our future in the globalized twenty-first century. Americans need to know more about the world. It is the responsibility of the American educational system to engage students in a global education. We owe it to the future of our country—we owe it to our students. Study abroad should be an integral part of the education of all students.

Senator Simon saw an opportunity to open the doors of study abroad to the average undergraduate student in the twenty-first century in the same way that the Morrill Act (The Land Grant College Act) signed by President Lincoln opened the doors to a higher education to the average American

in the nineteenth century, believing that each student, regardless of race, socio-economic background, or field of study should have the opportunity to understand world cultures through study abroad.

The Lincoln Commission, guided by Senator Simon's vision, has stated bold goals for democratizing study abroad by 2017.

- At least one million U.S. undergraduate students will study abroad each year.
- The demographics of the study abroad population will be similar to that of the general U.S. undergraduate population.
- A substantial number of Lincoln Fellows will study abroad in non-traditional countries.

To reach these goals, however, the commitment and active engagement of the higher education community will be crucial. The program proposed by the Lincoln Study Abroad Commission could well internationalize post-secondary education in the United States.

Making the Vision a Reality

Now that the Commission's report is complete, the next step is up to us, those of us who share Paul Simon's conviction that the United States has everything to gain by increasing study abroad for undergraduates. We must work together to create national interest in the Commission's recommendations. If we can meet the goals the Commission has laid out, we will change the meaning of higher education in the United States.

As Senator Simon stated, "A nation cannot drift into greatness. We must dream and we must be willing to make small sacrifices to achieve those dreams. If I want to improve my home, I must sacrifice a little. If we want to improve our nation and the world, we must be willing to sacrifice a little. This major national initiative ... can lift our vision and responsiveness to the rest of the world. Those who read these lines need to do more than nod in agreement. This is a battle for understanding that you must help wage."

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RICHARD J. DURBIN is a U.S. senator representing the state of Illinois.



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