
Regional

Study abroad scholarships a good use of taxes

There is little doubt that an international experience is one of the most life-changing events for a college student. That is what one hears from students when they return, particularly from those who have never even been abroad in their lives. Cost is usually mentioned as the major barrier for Americans to have such an experience. And this barrier can be particularly high for minority and first-generation college students.

Yet, there is a little known but very successful federal program known as The Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program that serves to help U.S. college students interested in going abroad.

Named after the former Republican U.S. Representative from New York, the program was established in 2001 and is administered by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Gilman, who retired in 2002 after serving in the House for 30 years and chairing the House Foreign Relations Committee, commented, "Study abroad is a special experience for every student who participates. Living and learning in a vastly different environment of another nation not only exposes our students to alternate views, but also adds an enriching social and cultural experience. It also provides our students with the opportunity to return home with a deeper understanding of their place in the world, encouraging them to be a contributor, rather than a spectator in the international community."

The aim of this initiative is to offer grants for undergraduate students who are U.S. citizens and have limited financial means to participate in study and internship programs abroad. Award recipients are chosen through a competitive selection process and must use the award to defray eligible study or intern abroad costs, such as program tuition, room and board, books, local trans-

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portation, insurance and international airfare. Since its inception the program has awarded more than 22,000 scholarships.

Last April the program published a report full of good news, the kind one rarely sees publicized about higher education anymore. The report was the result of a study of the medium- and longer-term outcomes for recipients of the Gilman scholarship between the years 2003 and 2010. It also considered the impact of the scholarships on U.S. higher education institutions and on the families and communities of scholarship recipients.

The data collected showed that representation of minorities among Gilman scholarship recipients well exceeds that of the U.S. study abroad population as a whole. For example, the participation in the Gilman program from African-American, Latino and Asian communities was two to three times greater than their participation in U.S. study abroad overall. Furthermore, about half of Gilman scholars in the cohort examined were part of the first generation in their families to enroll in higher education.

The study also showed that there was a significant impact on the way these students saw the world and that they expressed an increased interest in working on global issues while improving their foreign language skills.

For example, 66 percent of Gilman scholar survey respondents found opportunities to serve as a bridge between Americans and people from different countries

and cultures when they returned to the United States.

While 52 percent of the survey respondents said that they had had concerns about living in a foreign country prior to participation in the program, 79 percent continued to follow media coverage of the country or geopolitical region where they studied and 74 percent kept up an active interest in the culture of the country where they studied following their return to the U.S.

Of the 1,441 survey respondents who returned to undergraduate studies after their Gilman scholarship, 87 percent reported taking a greater interest in international or cross-cultural topics, and more than one-third indicated that they had chosen an academic major or minor field of concentration with an international or cross-cultural focus.

Seventy-nine percent of survey respondents studied a foreign language while on their academic study abroad program. And among those, 82 percent sought opportunities to speak the language they had studied when they returned home.

Of the 819 survey respondents who were attending or already completed graduate or professional school at the time of the evaluation, 48 percent had chosen a concentration with an international or cross-cultural focus, and 36 percent had studied abroad again or pursued international field research.

Eighty-three percent of survey respondents indicated that the Gilman scholarship had enabled them to undertake academic activities overseas that they could not have taken at their home institutions. Eighty-three percent of survey respondents found jobs where they could interact with people from different backgrounds or nationalities, and 54 percent reported working in a field that includes an international or cross-cultural

component.

Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of survey respondents reported that the Gilman scholarship experience caused them to broaden the geographic range of locations where they were willing to work in the future.

One-third of university representatives interviewed, across all types of institutions, credited the Gilman scholarship directly for changes in their school's study abroad program offerings and for contributing to their internationalization efforts. Many stated that the Gilman scholarship had allowed them to expand their study abroad programs to more diverse, non-traditional locations, including Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

Several study abroad representatives, primarily at minority serving institutions, reported using the Gilman scholarship parameters as a model for revising their study abroad programs. Other effects included adaptation of campus study abroad programs to meet Gilman scholarship parameters, attracting new sources of funding for study abroad in general, expanding course offerings to help students prepare for a wider array of study abroad opportunities and promoting professional development of study abroad professionals.

In a globalized world where we need more U.S. citizens versed in the ways of dealing with international affairs, the Gilman scholarship program is an excellent example of your tax money put to good use.

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