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I've spent the last month or so swimming in data describing the higher education landscape. Now that I can come up for air, I have planned a series of posts to share the numbers from a view you may not have previously considered.

The higher education “international exchange rate” is unfavorable and improving at an alarmingly slow rate, given our need for graduates prepared for success in our contemporary global economy. There are basically two problems: not enough U.S. students are studying abroad and the opportunity to study abroad is disproportionately available to traditional students enrolled at private institutions.

According to the 2012 [Open Doors Report](#) recently released by the [Institute of International Education](#), the number of international students studying in the US increased by 5.7% last year to a record high of 764,495. In contrast, the number of US students studying abroad increased by only 1.3%, from 270,604 to 273,996.

The IIE reports that although the rate of US students studying abroad has more than tripled over the last 20 years, only about 14% of U.S. bachelor's degree students studied abroad before they graduated. This percentage is woefully low if we are to produce an educated workforce with the capacity to compete in and contribute to the global economy or graduate students with a high level of intercultural sensitivity.

And, of course, the aggregate finding that 14% of US undergraduates study abroad does not mean that 14% of students at each college and university in America have a study abroad experience. In fact, students at different institutions experience very different levels of encouragement and support for study abroad.

The 2013 U.S. News and World Report College Rankings report lists the [100 U.S. colleges and universities](#) that had the highest percentage of graduating seniors who participated in study abroad programs in the 2011-2012 academic year. Even for the Top 100 institutions on this list, the percentage of students studying abroad ranges from 100% at Goucher College to 31% at both Brandeis University and College of the Holy Cross.

Clearly, these top 100 institutions should be congratulated for encouraging and supporting study abroad for their students at a rate much higher than the national average. As I have argued in a [previous post](#), any college or university degree that does not include a substantive global component shortchanges students in ways that run counter to our national aspirations for attainment of quality higher education.

Although study abroad is not the only way to infuse global awareness and cultural sensitivity into the curriculum, it certainly is a high impact practice known to produce the deepest level of learning in these essential areas.

So what's the problem? The data show that our pace of improvement is slow, but we are moving in the right direction—participation in study abroad is increasing and some institutions have a very impressive record in this regard.

The problem is that a closer look at the US News list shows that all of the institutions on the Top 100 list are highly regarded private colleges or universities that are simply not accessible to all students due to price and admission selectivity. Study abroad rates are much lower for most public institutions and for schools serving large populations of post-traditional students. Certainly, some students attending these institutions would choose not to study abroad for personal reasons. However, students at these institutions that do want to study abroad often encounter barriers such as a lack of flexibility in curriculum options and, especially, lack of financial support for study abroad experiences.

If we are to improve the higher education “international exchange rate”, senior leaders in higher education, corporate partners, and government agencies must work together to find ways to make study abroad accessible to more U.S. students, regardless of what institution they attend and whether or not they are traditional or post-traditional students. Otherwise, we are leaving to much of our intellectual capital behind.