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U.S. Students in China: Meeting the Goals of the 100,000 Strong Initiative

A Pilot Study on U.S. Student Participation in Education Abroad Activities in China

Executive Summary

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January 2013**

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The 100,000 Strong Initiative, announced in November 2009 by President Obama, aims to increase to 100,000 the cumulative number of Americans studying in China over a four-year period. While the number of American students studying abroad for credit in China has increased nearly fivefold in the last decade, the types of educational experiences undertaken by American students going abroad have changed as well. More than ever before, American students are going abroad on shorter, not-for-credit programs such as study tours, internships, and volunteering abroad. The 100,000 Strong Initiative encourages all types of educational experiences for students in U.S. high schools, colleges, and universities.

Despite the numerical goal of the initiative, little was known about how many Americans were in fact participating in a full range of educational activities in China. To address this gap, the new IIE study sought to enumerate Americans participating in all types of for-credit and not-for-credit educational activities in China, while also gathering information on U.S. institutions' perspectives on whether China-bound mobility was likely to increase in the near future. It was envisioned that the findings would provide a baseline against which to assess the progress of the 100,000 Strong Initiative. Additionally, the research also set out to discover the extent to which higher education institutions are able to measure and report the full range of education abroad activities undertaken by their students.

For the past decade, the number of U.S. students studying in China for academic credit from their U.S. home institution has risen at an average of 18 percent per year, from 3,291 students in 2000 to 15,647¹ in 2010/11, according to the latest *Open Doors* Report, published annually by the Institute of International Education in partnership with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Since 2007, China has been the most popular study abroad destination outside of Western Europe, and one of the top five destinations for U.S. students studying abroad for academic credit from their college or university in the United States.

The new report is based on a study conducted by IIE from October 2011 to September 2012 with support from the Ford Foundation. The survey of U.S. higher education institutions was sent to 1,680 accredited U.S. colleges and universities and 563 valid responses were received, yielding a response rate of 34 percent. All types of institutions responded to the survey, ranging from doctoral level universities to specialized institutions of higher education. Data was also gathered from the China Scholarship Council and education provider institutions.

Findings from the report reveal that there were over 11,000 additional students engaged in education-related activities in China, beyond those normally counted in the *Open Doors* study abroad survey. The current study indicates that the kind of for-credit study that has been reported by the U.S. campuses now represents about 59 percent of all U.S. students in China, while another 41 percent of students are undertaking other types of educational activities. As this is a pilot study, including responses from over 500 U.S. campuses, these numbers are almost certainly an undercount. It is likely that there are many more U.S. students who go to China on their own, often over school breaks, who are not being tracked or reported by higher education institutions at this time.

¹ The 100,000 Strong Initiative includes Hong Kong and Macau; the 15,647 total includes data reported in the *Open Doors* Report for China, Hong Kong and Macau.

Key Findings

- In 2011, there were at least 26,686 participating in educational activities in China (including mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau). Based on these findings, the 100,000 Strong Initiative is likely to meet the goal of sending 100,000 American students to China over a four year period, assuming a sustained or increased interest in studying in China.
- The majority of U.S. post-secondary students participating in education abroad activities are undergraduates, making up more than 76 percent of all U.S. students in China pursuing for-credit and not-for-credit education abroad. Twenty one percent of the American students in China were graduate students, and just over three percent were associates degree and non-degree students.
- *For-credit* study abroad programs continue to be the most popular among students going to China. Study tours were the second most popular way to get an educational experience in China. Slightly over 4,000 students took part in study tours to China led by faculty or facilitated by outside organizations. Educators commented that these types of study tours were likely to become increasing popular in the future, as there is often no prerequisite language requirement and these programs generally occur in summer or academic breaks in midwinter or spring so they do not interfere with the students' academic coursework.
- Several thousand students took part in more extended academic and language coursework in China. Nearly 2,200 U.S. students were enrolled in full degree programs in Chinese higher education institutions in 2011, an increase of 23 percent from the previous year. These students were not enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, and were thus not reported as study abroad students in the annual *Open Doors* Report. The number of Americans working toward full degrees from Chinese institutions includes 1,028 students in undergraduate programs and 1,156 students in graduate programs, primarily at the Master's degree level. Given the sharp increase from 2010 to 2011, it is likely that the number of American students pursuing degrees in China will continue to rise, particularly as English-taught courses and full degrees offered in English become more prevalent in China.
- The study also found at least 1,500 students enrolled in Chinese language programs in China beyond those who were already reported by U.S. colleges and universities as studying language as part of their *for-credit* study abroad programs and more than 750 students in reciprocal exchange programs, such as direct exchanges of students between American and Chinese universities. Additionally, more than 250 students, including 78 U.S. Fulbrighters conducting research in China, were categorized as not enrolled in formal courses of study.
- One area that has garnered substantial media attention has been the increase in the number of students doing internships abroad to gain practical work experience, and *Open Doors* reported that in 2010/11 U.S. colleges awarded credit to more than 16,000 students for internships abroad worldwide. This new study finds that 670 students went to China in 2011 for internships or work for which they did not receive college credit.
- Two additional categories of education abroad activities were reported in relatively low numbers by the study's 500 responding U.S. campuses: volunteering or service-learning projects (almost 200 students were reported); stand-alone teaching abroad programs (80 students were reported). It is likely that many more students are actually taking part in these

kinds of activities, but neither going through or reporting to their colleges. These numbers may rise as students become more interested in service-learning or teaching abroad and as U.S. campuses decide to track more effectively the full range of learning experiences undertaken abroad by their students.

- International volunteering and service learning projects, independent student research projects abroad, and stand-alone teaching programs in China are the most challenging education abroad activities for higher education institutions to track. Less than 40 percent of responding institutions reported data for these categories, whereas data on study abroad for-credit was reported by more than 80 percent of these institutions. Despite the low student participation reported in some of the activities that take place outside of the classroom, institutions foresee an increase in joint research programs, internships, service learning projects and volunteering. The projected increase in these activities was attributed to the growing desire of students to have better career prospects after graduation, especially for students who are studying business. These types of activities abroad enable students to enhance their language skills and get first-hand experience of different cultures, making them more marketable for jobs in the global economy.
- Ninety two percent of responding institutions predict an increase in U.S. student participation in educational programs in China in the next five years, particularly in short-term study abroad, internships, and language programs.
- U.S. higher education institutions reported the following biggest challenges to increasing the number of Americans studying in China:
 - *Financial constraints*: reported by over 43 percent of respondents
 - *Language barriers*: reported by 42 percent of respondents
 - *Lack of options in course of study and transferability of credit*: reported by over 16 percent of respondents.

Recommendations for Educators and Policy Makers

Based on the findings of the pilot study, the following are recommendations to be considered by higher education institutions, education abroad providers and policy makers:

- There is considerable interest and room for growth in expanding U.S. student engagement in China. With over 90 percent of responding institutions reporting a projected increase in U.S. education abroad activity in China, the number of Americans going to China will continue to increase. As this unfolds, possibly in higher numbers than seen before, sending institutions in the U.S. and receiving institutions in China should be prepared to meet the academic, administrative, and financial challenges that this may entail. More cooperation is needed among institutions in the U.S. as well as between institutions in China and the U.S. to ensure a steady growth of education mobility to China with a sustainable quality of education, resources and support provided for students.
- This study reveals that a significantly higher number of American students participate in education abroad activities in China than previously known, and also confirms that institutions are not able to measure the full extent of the international activities of their students. In addition to incomplete data on outbound mobility of American students, this undercount has other implications for U.S. campuses. As student security becomes a bigger institutional

priority, accurately tracking students abroad serves the dual purpose of fully capturing the breadth of international activities of the institution's students, as well as mitigating the security risks associated with not knowing where students are going.

- The study found that financial constraints are the biggest barriers precluding more American students from pursuing education abroad programs in China. While funding for study abroad is a longstanding challenge, many opportunities for American students have been created to facilitate more outbound mobility to China. Scholarships from private companies and foundations, solicited through the 100,000 Strong Initiative, have supplemented scholarships from U.S. colleges and universities and the U.S. government that have been in place for many years. This has enabled Americans to pursue study abroad in China and around the world. And as part of its commitment to the 100,000 Strong Initiative, the Chinese government announced that as many as 20,000 scholarships will be available for American students to study in China. Over 6,500 of these scholarships have already been awarded to US students, according to Chinese government sources. It is vital that information about funding for study in China reach interested students. Broad involvement at the institutional level and through the advocacy of policy makers and various stakeholders is needed to accomplish the goals set out by the 100,000 Strong Initiative, and to ensure that U.S. students are able to fully access the opportunities provided by the Initiative.
- The findings also reveal that community college students are underrepresented in education abroad activities in China. While community college students represent 34 percent of all undergraduate students in the U.S.,² only two percent of students studying in China in 2011 were community college students. This small proportion of community college students in China reflects the participation rate of community college students that study abroad in general, regardless of destination (*Open Doors*, 2012). More efforts are needed to increase the number of community college students participating in education abroad, especially given that they represent more than a third of all students pursuing undergraduate education in the U.S. and have a diverse profile.

Recommendations for Further Research

- *Conduct a sustained survey over time:* This study was a first attempt to count the total number of U.S. students going to China. It aimed to provide a baseline against which the 100,000 Strong Initiative can be benchmarked and progress can be tracked over the coming years. A sustained survey over the next several years would allow for a comprehensive enumeration of U.S. students going to China for the duration of the 100,000 Strong Initiative. A four-to-five year data collection effort would allow for tracking the trends over time and for a better understanding of the challenges and successes of higher education institutions in increasing the number of Americans going to China. Expanding participation by community college students would be one way to address this issue.
- *Expand research on additional education abroad destinations:* One of the contributions of the current study was the compilation of a comprehensive list of education abroad activities that encompass the full range of educational activities students can undertake abroad (See Appendix A). This list can be used in future surveys to validate the accuracy of these categories, and to continue to track U.S. student participation in education abroad activities in China and around

² <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72>

the world. It is worthwhile to gather similar data for countries such as India and Brazil, which are non-traditional destinations that are beginning to attract an increasing number of American students, and that have also been the focus of various government-level initiatives (such as the U.S. Department of State's "Passport to India initiative" and its 100,000 Strong in the Americas Initiative).

- *Better understand diversity challenges in education abroad*: Increasing the number of American students studying in China is only one part of the mandate of the 100,000 Strong Initiative. The Initiative also aims to increase the diversity of Americans studying in China. As a follow up to this study, further in-depth research should be conducted to better understand how the current population of students in education abroad programs in China reflects the diversity of the U.S. student population and what steps are needed to help address the number of underrepresented students participating in education abroad activities in China.
- *Explore funding sources and financial challenges to education abroad*: Because financial constraints are reported as the biggest challenge to education abroad in China, more research can be conducted to understand the current funding sources of U.S. students who study in China and the extent to which students are aware of and able to attain funding for study in China. It will be important going forward to know how many Americans engaging in educational experiences in China receive funding from their home institution (i.e. university scholarships), the Chinese government (e.g. Chinese Bridge Program), the U.S. government (e.g. Fulbright Fellowships, Gilman Scholarships), private donors (e.g. Rotary International) and how many fund their own educational experiences abroad. Future research can also explore the capacity of U.S. and Chinese institutions to expand their educational offerings in China, to attract a larger and more diverse representation of American participants. Through *Open Doors*, we know that minority students are significantly underrepresented in U.S. study abroad. But we also know that through targeted outreach and financial support such as with Gilman Scholarships and institutional funds, the number of minority students and other under-represented groups in study abroad can increase.
- *Research impact of education abroad*: The newly launched 100,000 Strong Foundation (see Appendix E) includes in its mandate the conducting of "independent studies to survey the impact of study abroad in China on US competitiveness and US-China relations." Such studies could provide a methodology that universities could use to encourage more corporate and public support for study abroad scholarships to other key countries as well.

Even though this study found that for-credit study abroad continues to be the most popular activity through which American students study in China, it is evident that the landscape of education abroad is becoming more diverse, affording students opportunities to participate in education programs that best suit their timeframes, interests, and academic and career goals. The study also highlights the challenges to increasing the number of Americans studying in China and the challenges to collecting data on the full range of education abroad. This study is designed to assist policy makers and education institutions in the United States and in China, researchers in the field of higher education, and students interested in studying in China. We hope it will inspire further research in this field and will encourage ongoing and expanded data collection by home and host institutions, to facilitate expanded planning and activity.