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Popularity of international study programs levels off after dramatic increase last year

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Yale is not alone in catching the “global university” bug.

Student enrollment in study abroad programs has risen steadily rising since 2000, despite a slight drop this semester, according to the International Education and Fellowship Programs office. In the 2005-2006 academic year, 8.5 percent more American students studied abroad than in the previous year, according to an Institute of International Education report released Monday.

The number of Yalies studying abroad this fall decreased by nine students compared to last fall, bucking recent trends both at Yale and nationwide, Director of Study Abroad Karyn Jones said. But this term's minor decline, from 69 to 60 students, follows a 40 percent surge in last year's study abroad enrollment. Overall, twice as many students are abroad this fall than were abroad in the fall of 2005.

Brian Whalen — president of the Forum on Education Abroad, an organization that develops standards of good practice for study abroad programs — said overseas programs are playing an increasing role in schools' efforts to integrate global education into their curricula.

“The message is getting out among colleges and universities that they need to educate students to participate in global society,” Whalen said. “Students realize that in a global society, in order to participate, they need to educate themselves globally.”

Increasing cultural and economic interdependence is driving the swelling interest in overseas opportunities, said Daniel Obst, director of membership and higher education services for IIE. He predicted that the appeal of studying abroad will continue to rise as globalization advances.

As interest expands, so do study abroad program offerings, Obst said, explaining that IIE's original pamphlet on study abroad opportunities has evolved into a “phonebook” listing over 7,000 programs.

The explosion of offerings allows students to find programs specific to their academic concentrations and to travel to “non-traditional locations” such as Africa and South America, Whalen said.

“Students realize the need to communicate with all parts of world, with cultures and societies outside of Western Europe,” he said.

But many Yale students who have taken semesters abroad said while their experiences were invaluable, the logistics were hardly so smooth.

Annie Heller '08, who spent last spring at the University of Granada in Spain, said that to study abroad and still meet Yale's distribution and major requirements requires advance planning.

Frances Hickox '08, who studied last fall at La Sorbonne in Paris, said Yale could do more to help students incorporate studying abroad into their four-year academic plans.

“The language departments push for it, but other departments don't,” she said. “I don't know why the student body feels like it's too difficult, but there are ways the administration can facilitate it and they haven't really done that thus far.”

Because only about 5 percent of Yale's juniors study abroad, Heller said Yale has a well-established culture of spending junior year in New Haven.

“It's self-perpetuating because not than many people go so people feel like they'll miss a lot by not being here,” she said.

Sixty percent of Dartmouth students and 30 percent of Princeton students study abroad, according to the IIE report.

But Heller said she does not think she missed out and would recommend studying abroad to other students.

“Seeing another culture that's so different is eye-opening,” she said. “I was pushed outside my comfort zone, which Yale doesn't really do.”

To match the increasingly diverse array of destinations, the pool of students pursuing international programs has also diversified thanks to financial aid opportunities, Obst said. For example, he said, the Gilman International Scholarship Program subsidizes the experiences of students receiving federal Pell Grants who might not otherwise be able to afford to study abroad.

Whalen said Congress is currently considering legislation that would charter a foundation to provide scholarships and promote access to study abroad programs, with the goal of sending one million students abroad annually by 2016.

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