

119TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. 4541

To ensure that significantly more students graduate college with the international knowledge and experience essential for success in today’s global economy through the establishment of the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program in the Department of State.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MAY 14, 2026

Mr. DURBIN (for himself and Mr. WICKER) introduced the following bill;
which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations

A BILL

To ensure that significantly more students graduate college with the international knowledge and experience essential for success in today’s global economy through the establishment of the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program in the Department of State.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Senator Paul Simon
5 Study Abroad Program Act of 2026”.

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 Congress makes the following findings:

1 (1) To prepare students for success in the mod-
2 ern global economy, opportunities for study abroad
3 should be included as part of a well-rounded edu-
4 cation.

5 (2) Study abroad programs provide students
6 with unparalleled access to international knowledge,
7 an unmatched opportunity to learn world languages,
8 and a unique environment for developing cultural
9 understanding, all of which are knowledge and skills
10 needed in today’s global economy.

11 (3) Only 10 percent of United States college
12 students study abroad before they graduate, leaving
13 90 percent of graduates entering the workforce with-
14 out the global skills, knowledge, and experiences af-
15 forded by study abroad programs that will position
16 them for success in the global economy. Minority
17 students, first-generation college students, commu-
18 nity college students, and students with disabilities
19 are also significantly underrepresented in study
20 abroad participation.

21 (4) Congress authorized the establishment of
22 the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study
23 Abroad Fellowship Program (referred to in this sec-
24 tion as the “Lincoln Commission”) under section
25 104 of the Miscellaneous Appropriations and Offsets

1 Act, 2004 (division H of Public Law 108–199). Pur-
2 suant to its mandate, the Lincoln Commission sub-
3 mitted a report to Congress and to the President
4 containing its recommendations for greatly expand-
5 ing the opportunity for students at institutions of
6 higher education in the United States to study
7 abroad, with special emphasis on studying in devel-
8 oping nations.

9 (5) According to the Lincoln Commission,
10 “[e]xperience shows that leadership from adminis-
11 trators and faculty will drive the number of study
12 abroad participants higher and improve the quality
13 of programs. Such leadership is the only way that
14 study abroad will become an integral part of the un-
15 dergraduate experience.” A competitive grant pro-
16 gram is necessary to encourage and support such
17 leadership.

18 (6) Student health, safety, and security while
19 studying abroad is, and must continue to be, a pri-
20 ority for institutions of higher education and study
21 abroad programs.

22 (7) According to Open Doors 2022, published
23 by the Institute of International Education in part-
24 nership with the Department of State, study abroad
25 participation at colleges and universities in the

1 United States plummeted by 91 percent during the
2 2020–2021 academic year. While study abroad num-
3 bers have rebounded, according to Open Doors
4 2025, participation remains 14 percent below pre-
5 pandemic levels. In today’s global society, increasing
6 access to study abroad for students at institutions of
7 higher education across the United States is critical
8 to ensuring that those students gain the skills,
9 knowledge, and experiences necessary to maintain
10 the leadership and security of the United States in
11 tackling global challenges that affect the people of
12 the United States and succeeding in a global econ-
13 omy.

14 **SEC. 3. PURPOSES.**

15 The purposes of this Act are—

16 (1) to ensure that significantly more students
17 have access to quality study abroad opportunities,
18 especially among low-income students and students
19 of color;

20 (2) to ensure that the diversity of students
21 studying abroad reflects the diversity of students
22 and institutions of higher education in the United
23 States;

24 (3) to encourage greater diversity in study
25 abroad destinations by increasing the portion of

1 study abroad that takes place in nontraditional
2 study abroad destinations, especially in developing
3 countries; and

4 (4) to encourage a greater commitment by
5 United States institutions of higher education to ex-
6 pand study abroad opportunities.

7 **SEC. 4. SENATOR PAUL SIMON STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM.**

8 (a) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

9 (1) CONSORTIUM.—The term “consortium”
10 means a group that—

11 (A) includes at least 1 institution of higher
12 education; and

13 (B) may include nongovernmental organi-
14 zations that provide and promote study abroad
15 opportunities for students.

16 (2) INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION.—The
17 term “institution of higher education” has the
18 meaning given such term in section 101(a) of the
19 Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1001(a)).

20 (3) NONTRADITIONAL STUDY ABROAD DESTINA-
21 TION.—The term “nontraditional study abroad des-
22 tination” means a location that is determined by the
23 Secretary of State to be a less common destination
24 for students who study abroad.

1 (4) PROGRAM.—The term “Program” means
2 the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program, as
3 renamed pursuant to subsection (b)(1)(A).

4 (5) STUDENT.—The term “student” means—

5 (A) an alien lawfully admitted for perma-
6 nent residence in the United States or a na-
7 tional of the United States (as such terms are
8 defined in paragraphs (20) and (22) of section
9 101(a) of the Immigration and Nationality Act
10 of 1965 (8 U.S.C. 1101(a))) who is enrolled at
11 an institution of higher education located within
12 the United States; or

13 (B) an individual who is an eligible noncit-
14 izen for Federal student aid, as determined by
15 the Secretary of Education for purposes of the
16 Federal student loan program under title IV of
17 the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C.
18 1070 et seq.).

19 (6) STUDY ABROAD.—The term “study abroad”
20 means an educational program of study, work, serv-
21 ice learning, research, internship, or combination of
22 such activities that—

23 (A) is conducted outside of the United
24 States; and

25 (B) carries academic credit.

1 (7) WORLD LANGUAGE.—The term “world lan-
2 guage” means any natural language other than
3 English, including—

4 (A) languages determined by the Secretary
5 of State to be critical to the national security
6 interests of the United States;

7 (B) classical languages;

8 (C) American sign language; and

9 (D) Native American languages.

10 (b) SENATOR PAUL SIMON STUDY ABROAD PRO-
11 GRAM.—

12 (1) ESTABLISHMENT.—Subject to the avail-
13 ability of appropriations and under the authority of
14 the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act
15 of 1961 (22 U.S.C. 2451 et seq.), the Secretary of
16 State shall—

17 (A) rename the IDEAS Program, or any
18 successor program, as the “Senator Paul Simon
19 Study Abroad Program”; and

20 (B) enhance the Program in accordance
21 with this section.

22 (2) OBJECTIVES.—The objectives of the Pro-
23 gram are that not later than 10 years after the date
24 of enactment of this Act—

1 (A) not fewer than 1,000,000 under-
 2 graduate students from the United States will
 3 study abroad annually;

4 (B) the demographics of study abroad par-
 5 ticipation will reflect the demographics of the
 6 United States undergraduate population by in-
 7 creasing the participation rate of underrep-
 8 resented groups; and

9 (C) an increasing portion of study abroad
 10 will take place in nontraditional study abroad
 11 destinations, with a substantial portion of such
 12 increases in developing countries.

13 (3) COMPETITIVE GRANTS TO INSTITUTIONS OF
 14 HIGHER EDUCATION.—

15 (A) IN GENERAL.—In order to accomplish
 16 the objectives described in paragraph (2), the
 17 Secretary of State shall award grants, on a
 18 competitive basis, to institutions of higher edu-
 19 cation, either individually or as part of a con-
 20 sortium, based on applications by such institu-
 21 tions that—

22 (i) set forth detailed plans for using
 23 grant funds to further such objectives;

24 (ii) include an institutional commit-
 25 ment to expanding access to study abroad;

1 (iii) include plans for evaluating
2 progress made in increasing access to
3 study abroad;

4 (iv) describe how increases in study
5 abroad participation achieved through the
6 grant will be sustained in subsequent
7 years; and

8 (v) demonstrate that the study abroad
9 programs have established health, safety,
10 and security guidelines and procedures, in-
11 formed by Department of State travel
12 advisories and other appropriate Federal
13 agencies and resources, including the Over-
14 seas Security Advisory Council and the
15 Centers for Disease Control and Preven-
16 tion.

17 (B) PRIORITY.—In awarding grants under
18 subparagraph (A), the Secretary may give pri-
19 ority to—

20 (i) minority-serving institutions listed
21 under section 371(a) of the Higher Edu-
22 cation Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1067q(a));

23 (ii) eligible institutions (as defined in
24 section 312(b) of the Higher Education
25 Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1058(b))) that

1 qualify for the Strengthening Institutions
 2 Program of the Department of Education;
 3 and

4 (iii) institutions that offer study
 5 abroad programs with a significant world
 6 language learning component, as applica-
 7 ble.

8 (4) IMPLEMENTATION OF LINCOLN COMMISSION
 9 RECOMMENDATIONS.—In administering the Pro-
 10 gram, the Secretary of State shall take fully into ac-
 11 count the recommendations of the Lincoln Commis-
 12 sion, including—

13 (A) institutions of higher education apply-
 14 ing for grants described in paragraph (3) shall
 15 use Program funds to support direct student
 16 costs;

17 (B) diversity shall be a defining char-
 18 acteristic of the Program; and

19 (C) quality control shall be a defining
 20 characteristic of the Program.

21 (5) CONSULTATION.—In carrying out this sub-
 22 section, the Secretary of State shall consult with
 23 representatives of diverse institutions of higher edu-
 24 cation and educational policy organizations and
 25 other individuals with appropriate expertise.

1 (c) ANNUAL REPORT.—Not later than December 31
2 of each year, the Secretary of State shall submit an annual
3 report to the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Sen-
4 ate and the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House
5 of Representatives that details the implementation of the
6 Program during the most recently concluded fiscal year.

7 (d) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There
8 are authorized to be appropriated, for fiscal year 2027 and
9 for each subsequent fiscal year, such sums as may be nec-
10 essary to carry out the Program.

