

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.

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## 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

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## 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.

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