

Study-Abroad Officials Consider New Approaches for Tough Times

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American colleges should use the current financial crisis as an opportunity to develop more creative and cost-effective approaches to education abroad and to the recruitment of foreign students.

That was the message delivered Thursday during the annual meeting here of Nafsa: Association of International Educators.

"When you're fat and sassy, why waste your time on change?" asked John K. Hudzik, vice president for global engagement at Michigan State University and president of the international-educators group. "But when you're under challenge, why not think about it?"

Mr. Hudzik spoke as part of a panel on the impact of the recession on international education. It may be too soon to quantify the downturn's effect on global student mobility, although Mr. Hudzik and other speakers said that anecdotal evidence led them to expect that the financial crisis would slightly depress the numbers of American students studying overseas, while increasing the rolls of incoming foreign students.

Hans de Witt, an international-education consultant who was also on the panel, said every American college leader he had spoken with had seen an increase in foreign-student applications, in some cases by as much as 30 percent. The question, he said, was whether the students would enroll. "Maybe there's more shopping around," he said.

Meanwhile, a survey of study-abroad directors and outside overseas-education providers found an uptick in American students withdrawing from summer programs. About 40 percent of the respondents said they had seen a slight increase or more in the number of summer-program withdrawals because of financial concerns. Another 40 percent said applications for fall-semester programs had also dipped.

Some 153 colleges and outside providers participated in the survey, which was conducted in May by Chris Musick, director of international academic services at the University of Mary Washington and leader of the network for developing and managing programs abroad at Nafsa. The figures on program withdrawals and declining applications are roughly on a par with those from [a poll](#) Mr. Musick conducted earlier this spring.

Mr. Musick says his colleagues tell him they are adopting new strategies to help forestall further enrollment drops and to ensure that education abroad remains affordable. Some colleges have become more aggressive about raising funds to support scholarships for overseas study, he says. Others are negotiating agreements with foreign universities to exchange students or to permit their students to directly enroll at the overseas campus. Such arrangements can often be less expensive than independent or college-run study-abroad programs.

In his role at Mary Washington, Mr. Musick is discussing the possibility of sharing overseas-programming costs with other small study-abroad offices. "I'm trying not to focus on the numbers," he said, referencing the application declines and withdrawals. "I'm excited by the inventive things that colleges are doing."

At the same time, Mr. Hudzik and Mr. de Witt said the recession meant that colleges needed to think more strategically about the countries in which they are engaged and about the means by which they deliver education. For example, colleges could seek to provide students who cannot study overseas with a more robust international experience locally. Or they could experiment with ways of providing an American education overseas, such as offering U.S. degrees at offshore sites or online.

"The crisis forces us to think differently, to make new choices," Mr. de Witt said, noting that both American and international students are likely to become more cost conscious.

Mr. Hudzik says the worldwide nature of the current economic decline only highlights the need for colleges to be globally engaged. "This is the time to be proactive in international education," he said, "not fall back on our heels."