



# Survey of Sustainability in Education Abroad

2023





# Executive summary

In addition to a “code red for humanity” issued by the U.N. Secretary General in 2021 along with the warning that Global Warming is dangerously close to spiraling out of control, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) recently stated that global temperatures are likely to surge to record levels in the next five years, fueled, in part, by heat-trapping greenhouse gases. This is in addition to the fact that twenty-one of the hottest years on record on the Earth have occurred since 2002 and anywhere from 25-30% of global GHG emissions come from the transportation sector. Every sector of society must respond and adapt to this existential crisis, and this includes academia and education abroad (also known as student mobility or study abroad).

As colleges and universities are increasingly embracing sustainable practices and policies, study abroad offices and programs are left struggling to address or keep pace with necessary changes, including being invited to take part in institutional strategies and reporting on the issues pertaining to sustainability.

## Demographics

Of the 76 completed responses that we received for the 2023 Survey of Sustainability in Education Abroad, thirty-three were from public universities, twenty-four were from private universities, nine were from community colleges, nine were from third-party provider organizations and one was from a technical college. Seventeen countries were represented with the majority (56) from the United States. A majority of survey respondents were sending under 1,000 students abroad per year, regardless of program duration. Most respondents managed some or all education abroad programs at an institution of higher education, followed by those who managed all international affairs at an institution or higher education.

## Management and Operations

While most respondents are embedding environmental sustainability into their administrative goals and

policies, only one-third of them feel as though they are achieving these goals.

Regarding travel emissions, only about one-quarter of respondents are tracking flight emissions for either students, faculty or staff and 66% of respondents do not track flight emissions for any traveling population. Even fewer respondents are tracking ground emissions (e.g. car, train). Only eight respondents are utilizing some type of carbon tax and most take advantage of carbon offsets (versus charges or credits). All but one retain the fees that are collected based on emissions rather than direct to an outside investment. Only 14% have travel-related emissions being tracked by the education abroad office and/or in partnership with the sustainability office, while more than half indicate that no one is responsible for this. The lack of emission tracking overall is problematic because this is the most common form of quantified data regarding the impact of travel and it is critical to measurement, targeting and accountability.

## Program Design

A majority of respondents are not engaged in intentional, sustainable design for their education abroad programs, whether it is selecting sites, vendors, food choices, accommodations or flight paths that are more sustainable, or infusing sustainability into the curriculum. For example, only 16% of respondents are choosing travel destinations based on sustainable practices and lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and 80% of respondents or more indicate that 25% or less of their education abroad programs include themes such as “Environmental Sustainability”, “Social Sustainability”, “Climate Change” or the “U.N. Sustainable Development Goals”. For those that are mapping their education abroad curriculum to the SDGs, most are mapping to Goal #4 (Quality Education) and Goal #13 (Climate Action).

Co-curricular programming is also underperforming regarding the implementation of sustainable practices. Only 22% of respondents address the SDGs in pre-departure orientations or materials and only 37%



address the climate crisis or carbon emissions. While most respondents advocate for sustainable travel choices while abroad by their institutions or organizations, most of them (57%) do not actively incentivize students to be eco-friendly travelers. Once students return home, most are not provided or directed towards events or opportunities to engage in sustainability-oriented dialogue or programming. This may be due, in part, to the fact that many institutions and organizations struggle to execute effective re-entry programs in general.

While most respondents (61%) utilize local faculty at sites abroad to teach students and 79% indicate that they co-design their programs with locally-based partners and vendors, most are not engaged with communities abroad in other ways. For example, only 37% of respondents utilize goods and services that are locally-sourced or eco-friendly and only 38% are contributing to local assets (schools, health programs, conservation projects, etc.) via their programs.

The biggest perceived barriers to implementing sustainability within education abroad programming, according to respondents, are Staff Time (54% state it is "Very Much" or "Much" of a barrier) and Funding (47%) while the lowest perceived barriers are Supervisor/Boss interest/commitment (14%) and Institutional/Organizational interest/commitment (21%). This is similar to perceived barriers reflected in the 2021 survey results.

## Institutional Comparisons

Public and private 4-year universities are generally performing higher than community or 2-year colleges regarding sustainability performance and inclusion. They are also performing at similar rates with each other, though a slightly greater proportion of private organizations (universities and third-party provider organizations) are more active in general, similar to results from the 2021 survey. While not for certain, this may be because private organizations may have more freedom to allocate internal resources. Short-term programs (<9 weeks) are promoted more frequently by community colleges, private universities and third-party program providers and this may reflect a stronger tradition of semester exchange programs at public universities. Public universities

are offering more sustainability-oriented curriculum on their education abroad programs by having a higher proportion (50%-75%) of these themed programs versus other institutions. However, community colleges show stronger performance in areas pertaining to reducing global inequalities (e.g. SDG Goal #10 in the curriculum, 56% are offering virtual exchanges to compensate for lack of travel by students, and 56% are conducting pre-departure programming that includes topics about local and global social and environmental impacts of program participation and cultural tourism and educational colonialism).

## Longitudinal Data

There are not any significant performance indicators from 2021 to 2023 that are unique to a certain institutional or organizational type overall. A community college located in New York, U.S.A. demonstrated the most progress regarding sustainability performance between 2021 and 2023 while a public university in California, U.S.A. demonstrated the most regression. The largest variance, including the range of scores, in progress vs. regression (i.e. the most amount of change) is with regards to perceived barriers to implementing sustainability into programming and the smallest variance (i.e. the least amount of change) are efforts to track both flight and ground emissions by students, faculty and staff. Sustainability performance increased, but by less than 10% overall, amongst repeat respondents from 2021 to 2023.

## Conclusions

There are significant variations in sustainability performance by institutions of higher education and third-party provider organizations that facilitate study abroad opportunities for college and university students. There are also variations in performance by these institutions and organizations over time, with both progress and regression taking place in individualized ways for specific activities. By most measures within this report, institutions of higher education and third-party program providers of study abroad programs are under-performing, but showing signs of improvement. It is critical that the field of international higher education, and its allies, continue to prioritize a sustainability ethos within programs and the profession.

