

Trends

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Reporting Study Abroad Statistics: The Institutional Researcher as Decision-Maker

Institutional researchers are commonly understood as “fact people.” Interested parties pose questions, and the institutional researcher gives precise answers.

But “facts” are not provided without subjectivity and discretion. To any one question, there are often multiple correct answers. Consider, for example, a commonly asked question at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University: What percentage of CSB/SJU students study internationally?

Because those posing the question often do not consider the complexity of a perhaps simple query, the institutional researcher must decide which figure is most appropriate to report in each situation. This particular question about study abroad participation rates has at least four correct answers:

Answer 1: 57% of CSB seniors and 53% of SJU seniors report that they studied abroad while in college.

On the annual *CSB/SJU Senior Survey*, senior students are asked whether they had studied abroad or planned to study abroad for a semester or summer term before graduation. In fall 2006, 57% of CSB seniors and 53% SJU seniors indicated that they had studied internationally. While one would expect students to be able answer this question, between 4% and 5% of students indicated that they were “undecided” about whether they would study or had already studied internationally. In addition, the *Senior Survey* was completed by only a sample of students, about 72% of the class. So, although these percentages are accurate as self-reported by students, they may not be the *most* factual answer to the question.

This fact is useful, however, because it allows institutional researchers to compare the self-reported participation rates of CSB/SJU seniors to rates self-reported by seniors at other similar institutions. The self-reported rates at CSB and SJU are much higher than the rates reported by seniors at baccalaureate liberal arts colleges nationally (37%).

Answer 2: According the Institute of International Education, 59% of CSB/SJU students study abroad.

The Institute of International Education ranks the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University second in the country among liberal arts colleges for the number of students studying abroad. IIE is more interested in the *number* of students studying internationally each year than the *percentage* of students. Therefore, IIE uses a proxy for the percentage of students studying abroad which divides the number of students studying internationally each year by the number of graduates in the previous year. This method is particularly kind to institutions with

Reporting study abroad statistics requires the institutional researcher to use subjective judgment informed by the missions and aspirations of the colleges.

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growing enrollments and more accurate for institutions with very stable enrollments and high retention rates. Fifty-nine percent, therefore, is not an accurate representation of each student's chance of studying abroad. It also does not discern the difference in participation rates between men and women.

Answer 3: Of all new students, 55% of CSB students and 45% of SJU students study abroad.

Many statistics in higher education are calculated using cohorts, that is, a group of students who entered college for the first time in a selected semester and year. The cohort rate is the most accurate way to calculate graduation rates and retention rates but is not particularly useful for study abroad data. Many students who enter college as first year students subsequently choose to discontinue or transfer, most often after the first year. At baccalaureate liberal arts colleges nationally, about 20% of students who enter in a particular cohort do not return the following year. Using a strict cohort study abroad rate adversely affects study abroad rates because most students who discontinue attendance before the third or fourth year have not yet had the chance to study internationally. Rates calculated in this way are nearly always the lowest.

Answer 4: Of all new students who graduate or remain enrolled for four years, 62% of CSB students and 55% of SJU students study abroad.

These percentages represent a variation of the cohort rate and measure the study abroad participation of students entering in fall 2003 who graduated or remained enrolled for four years. This rate does not consider transfer students or students who leave CSB/SJU prior to graduating. For 2007, this is the highest of the reported study abroad rates, though that may not always be the case. For example, a large percentage of transfer students could come to CSB/SJU and study abroad. These students would not be included in this study abroad rate, while they would be included in other calculations.

We prefer to report these percentages internally (within the campus community) because we believe they most accurately capture the experiences of Saint Benedict and Saint John's graduates. These are also the figures we report externally (to guidebooks like *U.S. News and World Report*), unless the question is specified differently.

The calculations of all four of these responses are complicated by additional questions, including:

- Under what circumstances should we report the international education rate for CSB and SJU separately or together? Historically, women have been more likely than men to study abroad. IIE reports combined study abroad data; *U.S. News* reports it separately.
- Under what circumstances should non-credit-bearing study travel trips (like a European choir tour) be counted as a study abroad experience? Currently, we consider only credit-bearing trips in our official rate.
- How should we treat students who study abroad more than once during their time at CSB/SJU? Of the fall 2003 cohort at CSB/SJU, 27 women (7%) and 13 men (3%) studied abroad more than once. This happens most often among students who participate in summer term trips and is a complication for most colleges.

The researcher must choose only one rate to report to internal and external audiences; she is responsible for accuracy and consistency. The researcher must also be able to explain and defend her decision-making process to interested parties.

For additional information about study abroad rates at CSB/SJU, please contact Kathryn Enger at 320-363-5452 or kenger@csbsju.edu. The Office of Institutional Planning and Research can help you develop your question, find an answer and understand the methodology.

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