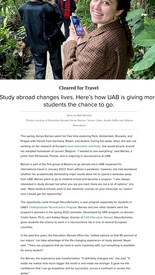

Cleared for Travel

Study abroad changes lives. Here's how UAB is giving more students the chance to go.

Story by Beth Bittner
Photos courtesy of Elizabeth Ahnefeld, Kenya Barnes, Tanner Cassens, Arielle Griffin and Gilbrance Rosendorf

This spring, Kenya Barnes spent her free time exploring Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Prague with friends from Germany, Britain, and Austria. During the week, when she was not working on her research at Europe's most memorable university, she would find herself her adopted hometown of Springfield, Illinois. "I wanted to see everything," said Barnes, a senior at the University of Illinois at Springfield (UAB) majoring in sociology.

Barnes is part of the first group of Illinois to go abroad since UAB suspended its international travel in January 2020. Each without a pandemic, however, she had wondered whether her academically demanding major would allow her to spend a semester abroad. Her UAB Barnes plan to go to a research school and become a surgeon. "I thought, maybe I could do it if I could find a program that was short," she said. Her study abroad in Paris was "Black Institute schools were to be extremely concerned on your research and I wasn't overall get the opportunity."

The opportunity came through Rosendorfstudies, a new program especially for students in UAB's Undergraduate Recruitment Initiative. Barnes and other students in the program spent two weeks in Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Prague, visiting universities in the United States. Rich, and Kenya Hanson, director of UAB Education Abroad Kenya Barnes Hanson, said the program was a chance to introduce students to an array of European countries.

In the year-long series, the Education Abroad office has "added options so that 90 percent of students can find something that fits their academic and personal needs," Hanson said. "There are programs that are hard to score institutions with, but nonetheless, students can find something that fits."

For Barnes, the experience was transformative. "It definitely changed me," she said. "It made me realize how much bigger the world is and made me stronger. It gave me the confidence that I can go anywhere and be successful, across a continent or across the globe."

Major growth, pre- and post-pandemic

In the four years before the pandemic, Indian international travel in spring 2020, Education Abroad had increased the annual number of participants from 20 students in the 2016-2017 academic year to 252 in 2019-2020. During the pandemic, "we did not international activities, especially in the spring," said Hanson. "We had to pause." Instead, "we are really proud to report," she said, "We are sending more students than we have ever had. And we are focusing on growth post-Covid."

Growth means both increasing the overall number of students and making the program more accessible and increasing participation from underrepresented groups. Nationally, Black students make up 15.3 percent of the undergraduate population, but only 6.5 percent of US students studying abroad. At UAB, where Black students made up 19 percent of the undergraduate population, the percentage of Black students studying abroad

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