

Developing a Globally Competitive Workforce Through Study Abroad: The Value of Study Abroad Skills in the U.S. Job Market

Executive Summary for International Educators

The United States is experiencing unprecedented challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In higher education, we have seen institutions work diligently to keep students safe while continuing to provide the quality education students have come to expect. This has been especially true with international education and study abroad, even as student mobility has been severely limited during the pandemic. Study abroad professionals and their institutional colleagues will need to reassess health and safety protocols in light of recent lessons learned. In addition to reassuring students and parents of robust safety measures, study abroad professionals will need to redouble their efforts in describing the employment value of study abroad to prospective parents and students, who may be concerned about the return on their investment.

To explore this link between study abroad and the job market, prior to the pandemic, NAFSA: Association of International Educators partnered with Emsi, a U.S.-based economic modeling firm, to analyze hundreds of millions of U.S. job postings and professional profiles to determine the connection between study abroad and employer-desired skills. The new report, [*Developing a Globally Competitive Workforce Through Study Abroad: The Value of Study Abroad Skills in the U.S. Job Market*](#), found that in 2019:

- More than 31 million job openings required skills that a student acquires while studying abroad;
- Employers spent more time seeking qualified applicants for these positions vs. the average job opening;
- Employers and job seekers recognize that skills developed during study abroad are essential for management and leadership positions; and
- Professional profiles that highlight the key study abroad soft skills included a higher number of people holding positions as presidents and CEOs than those without those skills.

The report builds upon previous studies in skills development and study abroad. It reiterates that students acquire and develop skills during their study abroad

experiences that are valued by employers. Students develop communication, leadership, problem solving, and time management skills during study abroad. These so-called “soft skills” are necessary in many industries and occupations.

The skills acquired through study abroad and the evidence of their value to employers further reinforce the benefits of study abroad for U.S. students. Unfortunately, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, far too few students participated in study abroad. Only 10% of undergraduate students study abroad, meaning that 90% of college graduates are entering the workforce without the global skills, knowledge, and experiences necessary to position them for success in the global economy.

Recommendations

International educators can help students recognize and articulate the value of study abroad and the impact that it has on the workforce and the economy. U.S. international educators should:

- Promote and maintain high quality study abroad programs to enhance students’ future *employability*, in addition to the academic and personal value gained from the experience.
- Guide students to *highlight specific study abroad experiences*, along with the soft and global skills acquired through these experiences, in online job profiles and resumes. These skills are highly valued in the labor market, particularly for management positions.
- Integrate international and cross-cultural topics *across all curricula* to better prepare all students to enter a diverse, globally aware working environment.
- Ensure programs and course offerings align with the shifting demands of employers recruiting a global workforce.
- Advocate for the [Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act](#). Passing the Simon Act would allow U.S. colleges and universities to increase the number and diversity of students who complete a study abroad experience prior to graduation and enhance their future employability.

