

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

Executive Summary for U.S. Policymakers

The United States is experiencing unprecedented challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In education, we have seen schools struggle with how to keep students and their families safe while continuing to provide the same quality education students have come to expect at U.S. institutions. This has been especially true with international education and study abroad, as international travel has been severely limited. Students, families, faculty, and administrators will need to consider new health and safety concerns related to the pandemic even after international travel returns around the world. Even as we grapple with the pandemic, we must help students gain access to skills important to their careers and our economy.

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 those holding positions as presidents and CEOs than those without those skills.

These findings are further evidence of the incredible value of an international education and why every U.S. student should have the opportunity to study abroad. Unfortunately, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, far too few students participated in study abroad. Only 10% of students study abroad before they graduate, meaning that 90% of graduates are entering the workforce without the

global skills, knowledge, and experiences that will position them for success in the global economy.

As policymakers work to address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, they must recognize the value of international education and the impact that it has on the workforce and the economy. It is also important that policymakers address long-standing inequities and ensure every student has access to a quality education that will prepare them for the global workforce into which they will graduate.

Policy Recommendations

- **Congress must ensure the survival of U.S. study abroad programs impacted by COVID-19**

The 2020-2021 academic year could quickly become the year without study abroad. Congress must ensure that study abroad programs survive the COVID-19 pandemic and come out stronger and more capable of serving all students across U.S. higher education. [NAFSA urges increased funding](#) to support virtual exchanges as well as to sustain study abroad programs overall through the current emergency.

- **Congress must pass the [Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act](#)**

Study abroad is not a luxury for American students. As the report shows, employers increasingly seek job applicants with skills that come from studying abroad. U.S. students need it to have a competitive edge in today's global workforce. 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.

