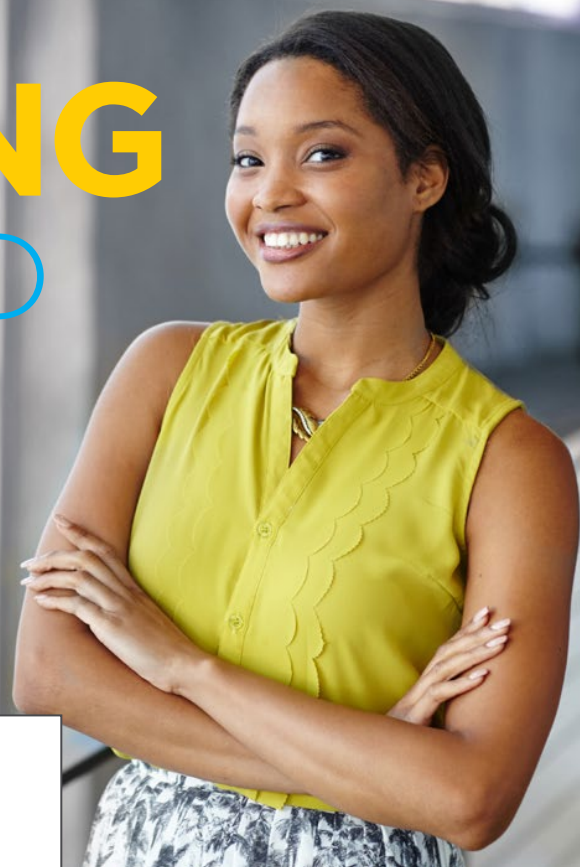


# CONNECTING STUDY ABROAD TO CAREER DEVELOPMENT



**W**hile education abroad professionals love to share stories about the transformative experiences of program participants, they know that sometimes numbers speak louder than words. “In study abroad, we intuitively know the benefits of an international experience,” says Lisa Loberg, Ed.D., Director of Study Abroad at California Lutheran University. “But the more concrete data we have, the better the case we can make to stakeholders and decision-makers.”

Earlier this year, the American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) published results from an expansive survey that provides exactly that kind of data. The second phase of its “Study Abroad Alumni Outcomes Survey” is a longitudinal study combining information provided by more than 1,000 AIFS program alumni from the past five years with information published in 2012 from nearly 1,600 alumni who participated in programs between 1990 and 2010. The report also includes follow-up answers from 414 second-time respondents.

The survey provides insight into personal, intercultural and career development of study abroad alumni. Though the study breaks down results in all three areas, what’s most interesting to note is the interconnection between personal and intercultural growth and professional development.

“There’s a really important overlap between the skills that define intercultural competence and the skills that employers consider the most valued transferable skills,” says Ann Hubbard, a contributing author of the alumni outcomes survey and Vice President and Director of University Relations for Customized Programs and Academic Assessment at AIFS Study Abroad. “However, if you look at employer surveys that rate the importance of various student experiences, study abroad doesn’t always rate very high. We need to close that divide to make certain we are all speaking the same language.”



A NEW STUDY  
SUPPORTS THE  
TIE BETWEEN  
INTERNATIONAL  
EXPERIENCES  
AND  
EMPLOYMENT.



TERRADOTTA

# CONNECTING THE DOTS FOR STUDENTS

The top reason that most students choose to study abroad may not be to enhance their careers. However, results from the alumni outcomes survey indicate that international experiences had a positive impact on the respondents' professional lives.

## Consider some of these results:



85%

85 percent of respondents said that participating in a study abroad program broadened the range of sectors in which they were interested in working.



58%

58 percent agreed that studying abroad helped them develop skills and intercultural competencies that contributed to obtaining their first job after graduation.



86%

86 percent indicated that education abroad programs aided their ability to formulate career goals and clarify professional aspirations.

“Study abroad has the potential to make a positive impact and make a student much more competitive when they graduate,” says Gary Rhodes, Ph.D., Associate Dean of International Education and Senior International Officer at California State University, Dominguez Hills. “But there’s not necessarily consistent intentionality in terms of what universities do before, during and after study abroad programs to enhance that impact.”

California State University, Dominguez Hills tries to help its students—many of whom are first-generation students, commute to school and hold down jobs—make the connection between international experience and career development. During spring break this year, 10 students from the university traveled to Mexico City. “For these students, that week or so away can make a world of difference,” says Rhodes.

But the trip was about more than simply learning about Mexico’s history and culture: The students were encouraged to develop an elevator speech about their experience that

they can use in interviews and add the program to their resumes. “We want them to think about what’s next,” says Rhodes.

Cal Lutheran also helps students decipher their study abroad experiences. “We have a comprehensive pre-departure orientation where we plant the seeds for students that their time abroad can help distinguish them later on in job interviews and their career,” says Loberg. Students also participate in a welcome back banquet when they return, and the university sends a group of students to the Lessons from Abroad returnee conference, where they have opportunities to further process their experience and learn how to incorporate it in a resume, cover letter and job interview.

“These types of reflection don’t happen automatically,” says Loberg. “We have to help students consider the skills they developed as a result of studying abroad. We need to teach them how to talk about their experience in ways that potential employers will find compelling.”

# BRIDGING THE GAP TO EMPLOYMENT

Universities also need to help employers and others involved in helping students obtain jobs understand the value in study abroad. Reports such as the “Study Abroad Alumni Outcomes” from AIFS can help. “This study creates the foundation for connecting a study abroad experience with employability and career readiness,” says Loberg. “But we need to do even more to convey the study abroad advantage to our career services colleagues and recruiters.”



Rhodes heads up the Center for Global Education at California State University, Dominguez Hills, which maintains a database of statements and reference materials that provide insight on the impact of study abroad on career development. Included in the database are examples of career-related programming at several universities. For instance, at the University of South Dakota, a career advisor attends a re-entry workshop with study abroad returnees to facilitate a discussion about transferable skills. Michigan State University’s re-entry programming is created by its Office for Education Abroad in conjunction with the Career Services Network and a student organization.

Universities such as these have figured out what Hubbard knows: “Statistics are the start of the process,” she says. “Outcomes data is key for AIFS with regard to our program development. It is important to know the reported impact of various program features.” For example, AIFS continually seeks to expand its international internship sites because data indicates they have high impact.



## Working Out the Numbers

The second volume of “AIFS Study Abroad Alumni Outcomes” provides compelling statistics on the positive impact of international educational experiences and career development. In addition to those highlighted in the article, here are a few more:



**44%**

of respondents said study abroad contributed to their choice of field of employment.



**48%**

said they sought a job with an international or intercultural aspect as a result of studying abroad.



**66%**

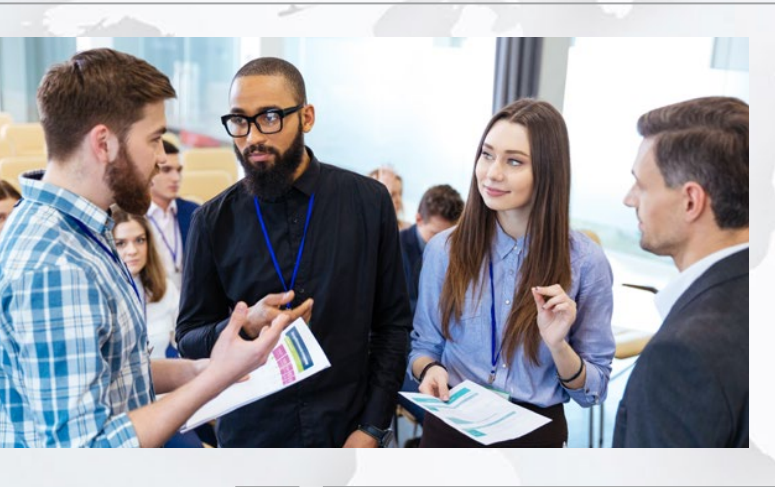
indicated they were asked to speak about their study abroad experience in a job interview.



**86%**

said participation in a study abroad program influenced their ability to adapt to diverse workplace environments.





## ENHANCING THE PROFESSIONALISM OF STUDY ABROAD



While the “AIFS Study Abroad Alumni Outcomes” report can aid universities in planning programs and advocating for resources, it also helps raise the collective image of the study abroad field. “I think that research studies like this one are critical as we continue to enhance the professionalism in the field,” says Gary Rhodes, Ph.D., Associate Dean of International Education and Senior International Officer at California State University, Dominguez Hills. “We have an increasing number of practitioners in the study abroad field who are also researchers. We see a growing amount of data and research that continues to help inform faculty and staff, as well as enhance the impact of study abroad on students. This study is one that makes an important impact.”



Study abroad offices can take the data from the alumni outcomes survey and other reports and educate employers. One idea is to host a lunch-and-learn for large companies that recruit on campus and talk about the benefits of study abroad. Another strategy is to meet with employers at job fairs held on campus and share your elevator speech on skills developed while abroad that transfer to the workplace.

Loberg has considered approaching employers from the deficit model: “Ask them what’s missing in their recent hires. Is it cross-cultural communication skills, innovative problem-solving, teamwork?” she says. “Study abroad outcomes are often the exact qualities employers say they want. We just need stories and data that highlight that connection.”

The message about the impact of study abroad programs on career development needs to be spread far and wide. “It’s important that [the message] is included from a policy perspective when engaging leadership on campus and within the community at large,” says Rhodes. “But we also need to make sure there’s pre-departure, onsite and post-program support to maximize the potential for making that impact. We need to get the word out.”



TERRADOTTA

### ABOUT TERRA DOTTA

Our mission at Terra Dotta is to offer the very best products and services in higher education software. We are committed to delivering a user-experience that transforms the way our clients operate and engage with their constituents. We accomplish this through the continual deployment of best-in-class technology, and the focus we place on mutual trust in each and every one of our business relationships. These values form the Terra Dotta difference.

For additional information please visit [www.terradotta.com](http://www.terradotta.com)