

# RESEARCH REPORT CONNECTS STUDY ABROAD AND EMPLOYABILITY



**W**hen Dylan, an accounting major at Wake Forest University, returned from a faculty-led study abroad program in France, he participated in a half-semester, one-credit course to help him unpack the experience. As part of that course, a representative from the Office of Career and Professional Development talked to Dylan and his peers about the skills they gained abroad that would benefit employers and how to discuss their international experiences during interviews.

Soon after, Dylan interviewed for a summer internship. “He talked about his study abroad experience just like we prompted him to, and he got the internship,” says Steven Duke, who worked for Wake Forest for seven years prior to joining the University of Nebraska as Assistant Vice President for Global Strategy and International Initiatives. “As we work with students, if we’re not helping them recognize the relation between study abroad and their career potential, then we are missing a great opportunity to help them connect the dots.”

Making the connection between international experiences and employability is becoming increasingly important for universities that want to expand study abroad programs. “It’s become more expensive for students to go to college, and many incur debt just to make it through,” says Marty Tillman, President of Global Career Compass, a consulting practice focused on global workforce trends and the impact of education abroad on career development.

UNIVERSITIES CAN USE  
DATA FROM A NEW  
IIE REPORT TO HELP  
MARKET PROGRAMS  
AND INCREASE  
PARTICIPATION IN  
STUDY ABROAD.



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“When you talk about the value of going outside of the institution for any experience, such as study abroad, it’s a big ask. You need to make a case to students and their parents that the experience is valuable. And one of the first things they will ask is ‘Will it help me (or my kid) land a job?’”

While there is no direct cause-and-effect link between study abroad and employment, many of the soft skills that companies desire in employees can be gained or improved through international experiences. These include communication skills, intercultural skills, flexibility, teamwork, language skills and problem-solving skills. And as universities try to make the case that study abroad can give students an edge during their career search, more studies are being published to back up the claim.

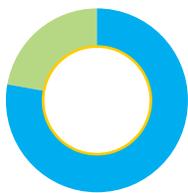
## USING DATA TO PROMOTE YOUR CAUSE

“There is a lot of research that’s come out in the last 10 to 15 years that’s clear about the personal and career impacts of study abroad in helping students to develop a variety of skills and awareness, including intercultural competency skills,” says Duke. The most recent is the Institute of International Education’s report *“Gaining an Employment Edge: The Impact of Study Abroad on 21st Century Skills & Career Prospects in the United States,”* published in October 2017. The national study surveyed 4,500 college alumni who participated in study abroad between 1999 and 2017 to investigate the connection between study abroad

programs and the development of skills that contribute to employment and career development.

“The survey is of great value to institutions that have been struggling to increase the number of students who study abroad or struggling to make a case hierarchically at their institution to the president, board members or other decision-makers that having international experience is important,” says Tillman. “If study abroad programs are structured properly and students are advised holistically, then international experiences could very well be helpful to them as seniors when they start having job interviews.”

**Some interesting findings from the IIE report include the following:**



**78 percent** of respondents discussed study abroad in a job interview.



**More than half** of respondents said they believe their study abroad experience contributed to a job offer.



**Study participants** reported using skills developed during study abroad in their current work environments.

# SPREADING THE MESSAGE TO STAKEHOLDERS

While the data itself is useful, perhaps more valuable is the broader message relayed in “Gaining an Employment Edge.” The report asserts, “Among those who intentionally sought to develop work-related skills through study abroad, they reported more positive employment outcomes, suggesting that intentional goal setting and reflection on skill development contributes to a higher impact of study abroad experiences on subsequent employment.”

Tillman and Duke offer the following advice to help foster a stronger connection between skill development and employability:

- **Promote the data.** “The basics of the IIE report—the numbers and the outcomes—have to be put forth in a very obvious way,” says Tillman. Use them on your study abroad program website, at international career fairs, in student orientations and so on.
- **Team with your career services department.** “We need to help career services professionals learn not only about the research, but also about the practical aspects of how to make the connection between study abroad and employability,” says Duke. Encourage career services staff to make it part of their job to help students capitalize on study abroad experiences during job searches.
- **Teach students how to relay their experiences.** In its post-study abroad class, Wake Forest shows students a two-part video, entitled *Study Abroad: Make It Work for You*, that provides practical advice for imparting the skills students developed abroad during job interviews. One of the tips is to use the STAR method for sharing international experiences: Talk about a Situation or Task you faced abroad, describe the Action you took, then share the positive Result from that action in three minutes or less.
- **Create messaging for parents.** “The IIE report can help campuses in talking to families about the benefits of study abroad,” says Tillman. “Universities often promote study abroad to students, then they are left to defend their interest in having an international experience to their parents.” Schools can lay the ground work for the value of study abroad—and its potential to help a student’s career—as early as freshman orientations or even campus tours for prospective students.



■ **Enlist the help of experts.** The University of Nebraska contracted with Tillman to give presentations on study abroad and employability to career services staff, faculty, study abroad professionals and students at all four of its campuses. “Having a specialist talk about it made a big difference,” says Duke. “Now we need to keep the conversation going.”



Keeping the conversation going—repeating the message about the link between study abroad and careers—is key. “There has to be an organized, integrated message on campus from faculty, staff and senior administrators so students get the message from lots of different places,” says Tillman. “The days of simply saying, ‘Go abroad; it will be great for you!’ are over. Campuses need to be careful and purposeful about how they discuss the value of leaving the U.S.”





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