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Study Abroad Advocates Highlight Economic Benefits

The Forum on Education Abroad presented the findings of several reports about the career outcomes associated with studying abroad, including higher starting salaries and, in some fields, a higher chance of promotion to management.

By [Johanna Alonso](#)



Melissa Torres (right) discusses the results of the Forum on Education Abroad's research.

Johanna Alonso

Study abroad isn't just an opportunity for college students to explore different countries and culture—it can have a significant impact on their future careers.

That's the lesson the Forum on Education Abroad is hoping to impart on government leaders and the business community as part of a new campaign entitled Education Abroad: The Career Catalyst. The forum kicked off the campaign with a presentation into the economic impacts of U.S. students studying abroad to colleagues and legislative staffers at a breakfast on Capitol Hill last week. (The term "education abroad" encapsulates traditional study abroad experiences, as well as other educational opportunities outside of one's home country, like service learning and internships.)

Historically, proponents have not emphasized the career impacts of education abroad, thinking of it instead as for national security and soft diplomacy. But according to the forum, going abroad can provide a strong economic boost for individual participants, local communities and the country at large.

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Melissa Torres, the forum's president and CEO, hopes the campaign will encourage states, institutions and the federal government to continue investing in—or growing their investment in—education abroad, which has been struggling as a field since the pandemic stopped international travel in 2020. Although study abroad has been back on the rise since then, it hasn't reached pre-pandemic levels. Further, the locations students are choosing to travel to are also less diverse than they were pre-pandemic, centralized primarily in a handful of Western European countries.

More recently, a multiweek funding pause in spring 2025 led to uncertainty about the future of the Fulbright program, the State Department's flagship educational exchange initiative, though the funding eventually came through. Three Fulbright-Hays grant programs, which are housed in the Department of Education, were canceled for the year after already receiving over 400 applications.

Ultimately, Congress funded State's education abroad programs, but the total amount of money allocated to international exchange shrank by \$74 million from the previous year's budget.

If study abroad programs and their students don't receive more support, experts on Thursday's panel warned, the U.S. could "fall behind" other countries when it comes to global exchange.

"We've got to get out there and we've got to engage," said Fanta Aw, the executive director of NAFSA, an association of international educators. "From where I sit, we can't do that from a screen. We can't do that with AI. There's no substitute for sitting across the room, sitting across the table and having those very key learning moments that are going to be an advantage for us."

Study Abroad Salary Premium?

The studies presented by the forum were conducted in 2025 and highlight the career benefits correlated with studying abroad. A review of alumni salaries across four major business schools showed that students who had studied abroad made, on average, over \$4,100 more annually in their first job than their peers who hadn't. That was true not just for high-performing students; even those with lower grade point averages saw higher pay.

Another study surveyed over 8,800 study abroad students and alumni to understand their own perceptions of how their study abroad experiences impacted their careers. The majority (90 percent) said education abroad was an important asset for career success broadly, while 57 percent said it was "very" or "extremely important" to their own career path. (Fewer than 5 percent said it was not

important at all.) Almost a quarter said studying abroad “definitely” helped them get their first job.

The respondents also highlighted the skills they gained during their study abroad experiences, with many of the top answers aligning with job skills employers often highlight as important, including adaptability, interpersonal skills, intercultural communication and navigating difference.

“The data clearly demonstrate that the more students we send abroad, the more quickly we can develop the workforce companies are demanding,” Torres said.

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The third study looked at a collection of students' blogs about their study abroad experiences to understand how they gained new skills during their time abroad, highlighting

the important role connections with peers, mentors, and locals can have in cementing those competencies.

Finally, the forum partnered with Lightcast, a labor market analytics firm, to analyze the labor market value of U.S. students studying abroad. The research, which relied on online profiles of individuals who had studied abroad, found that the net impact of study abroad alumni in the country in 2024 amounted to \$1.8 billion in additional income. It also showed that, in some fields, study abroad alumni have higher rates of promotion to management roles and higher rates of retention at the same company than those who did not study abroad.

“This study shows that education abroad is more than a formative academic experience—it is also a strategic workforce development tool. Graduates who study abroad gain measurable advantages in the job market,” the report reads.

Aw said that it’s clear from the research that study abroad produces alumni that fit the profile of what employers are looking for in their workers. But companies may not be aware that education abroad alumni are so well suited for those roles.

“We need to be able to create that match and be much more intentional about that,” she said.

The forum’s next step in its Career Catalyst campaign is to make those connections. Torres said the organization plans

to visit different states and speak to employers, business associations, state governments and institutions about how to expand study abroad on a state level.

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