

# GLOBAL EDUCATION RESEARCH REPORTS



## Passport to Leadership

The Influence of Education Abroad on Career Pathways  
and Leadership Development Across Industries

Julie Baer and Bethany Wentz, PhD

## **Passport to Leadership:**

### The Influence of Education Abroad on Career Pathways and Leadership Development Across Industries

#### **About IIE**

As an independent, 501(c)(3) not-for-profit founded in 1919, the mission of the Institute of International Education (IIE) is to help people and organizations leverage the power of international education to thrive in today's interconnected world. IIE's work focuses on advancing scholarship, building economies, and promoting access to opportunity. IIE publications and white papers are available at <https://www.iie.org/research>.

#### **About AIFS Foundation**

The AIFS Foundation, an independent, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt public charity, was established in 1967 with the assistance of the late Senator Robert Kennedy to help young people from many nations and diverse cultures understand each other better. The AIFS Foundation, in partnership with corporations and foundations, provides grants and scholarships to students for participation in study abroad programs and offers grants to high schools and institutions of higher education to encourage international education and travel. AIFS Foundation publications and research papers can be found at <https://www.aifsfoundation.org/publications.asp#recent>

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AIFS Abroad is a program of The American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS), a charity-owned organization that has been a leader in cultural exchange and education for over 60 years. Since 1964, AIFS has provided students with challenging educational programs in culturally diverse locations around the world. Participants gain independence and valuable experience by immersing in the art, history, and business environment of a culture different from their own. Partnered with over 400 U.S. colleges and universities, AIFS Abroad offers study, internship, and customized faculty-led programs. <https://www.aifsabroad.com/>

***We would like to thank the individuals and organizations who generously contributed to this report by sharing their time, expertise, and perspectives through surveys and interviews.***

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#### **Suggested Citation**

Baer, J. & Wentz, B. (2026). *Passport to leadership: The influence of education abroad on career pathways and leadership development across industries*. Institute of International Education.

## AIFS Foreword



It was the summer of 1973.

I had recently graduated from Binghamton University, and I had no job set up. I was an average student but a pretty good writer. So, it was time for a challenge.

Little did I know that a three-month backpacking adventure across Europe would change my life.

For the next five decades, I would dedicate myself to world peace, public diplomacy, travel, and international education. I started at CIEE in NYC and later became a marketing consultant for tourist boards. I found my home at AIFS in 1985, rising to become CEO in 2005 and Chairman in 2018.

I owe everything to that first international experience when I was 21. I backpacked, hitchhiked, stayed in hostels, and slept on trains. I was alternatively happy and sad as I learned to navigate challenges too numerous to list here.

Most importantly, I gained sophistication, confidence, and a passion for adventure-- all important leadership qualities.

I strongly believe that a period of work, study, or travel abroad can make you a successful leader in whatever field your students select. For there is no place for narrow-mindedness or xenophobia in our world. You need a worldview to succeed.

Future leaders need to embrace this.

What you learn and experience abroad is critical. Meeting people from different backgrounds and cultures teaches you important lessons. The "soft skills" necessary to become a strong leader -- empathy, understanding and passion -- is more important than any degree or technical skill.

So, my advice is to go abroad --the longer the better--but even a short stay can have immeasurable benefits.

And put down your phone and open your eyes wide.



William L Gertz  
Chairman, American Institute For Foreign Study (AIFS)

## IIE Foreword

My first academic experience abroad was on a Rotary scholarship studying as an international student in France, where I spent my senior year of high school living with homestay families and attending a French public high school. Although I did not view it as a bonus at the time, my first host family lived in a small village a good distance outside of Toulouse. The long-term upside was that I had to become fluent in French for all my coursework, while also fulfilling a foreign language requirement – I chose Russian.

This first immersion experience ignited a lasting interest in languages and an appreciation for how language deepens understanding of different cultures. Upon my return to the United States, I continued to study Russian. I then spent a semester at a university in Krasnodar as a junior in college and went to Moscow during the winter break of my senior year to conduct research in the archives.

To this day, I am grateful for these immersive experiences at the onset of my professional life because they equipped me with advanced language skills, a willingness to work anywhere in the world, and the ability to conduct business overseas with a nuanced cultural understanding of my counterparts. This perspective has been integral to my career progression and often distinguished me within the organizations where I worked. These experiences created opportunities that ultimately led to my leadership of such a tremendously impactful organization as IIE.

As IIE's seventh president, I would like to see more Americans have a truly immersive overseas experience. For those concerned about the affordability of education abroad experiences, opportunities do exist. My family did not have the means to pay for either of my international experiences, but support from Rotary and from my college covered the bulk of the costs. As a first-generation college student, my parents and I were very much concerned with how these experiences would help my career prospects. While that connection may not have been immediately recognizable, I am very grateful to everyone who took a chance on me.

An international experience does a tremendous amount to develop a person's leadership ability. As this report highlights, whether you work in technology, finance, education, or public service, the ability to collaborate across cultures and understand global systems is no longer optional.

Jason Czyz  
President and CEO, Institute of International Education (IIE)



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# Introduction

Decades of research on education abroad demonstrate that study abroad offers a powerful set of academic, personal, and professional benefits that extend well beyond the time spent overseas. Data have shown that study abroad is a high-impact practice, with benefits for academic outcomes, such as time to degree and GPA upon graduation ([Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.](#); [CASSIE, n.d.](#)). Several large-scale studies of study-abroad alumni have highlighted the long-term benefits, including the development of core competencies such as intercultural competence, adaptability, communication skills, and flexibility ([Farrugia & Sanger, 2017](#); [The Forum on Education Abroad, 2025](#), [Mason & Monroe, 2024](#)).

Despite this extensive body of research, U.S. study abroad participation has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, with only approximately 298,000 students going abroad in the 2023/24 academic year ([IIE, 2025d](#)). Moreover, it is estimated that only one in ten undergraduate students will study abroad at any point during their academic careers ([IIE, 2025a](#)).

There are several widely cited reasons for low participation in U.S. study abroad, including costs, academic barriers, and parental concerns. In addition to these, there may be an asymmetry of information related to how education abroad is beneficial to workforce readiness. If the connection between global experiences and employability, leadership development, or career advancement is indirect or not well communicated, the benefits may feel abstract for students.

While prior research has established links between study abroad and general career readiness, a significant gap remains in understanding the relationship between leadership development and experiences abroad. This report seeks to address this gap through exploring three areas of insight based on the reflections of 44 leaders across industries.

First, the report begins with developing a baseline understanding of the connection between global experiences and leaders' professional growth. Here, the report builds on prior research to confirm the ways leaders have leveraged their experiences abroad throughout their career trajectories.

The second section advances the field's knowledge by highlighting how leaders perceived the impact of international experiences on their leadership development. The findings highlight the influence of education abroad on leaders' ability to navigate complexity and ambiguity, building of cross-cultural communication, adaptation of perspectives, and how leadership identity is formed over time. In the words of one respondent: "Don't just go abroad to see the sights; go to see yourself through a different lens."

The third section builds on this leadership framework to demonstrate how leaders across diverse industries and sectors recognized the benefits of studying abroad, and the last section summarizes leaders' advice to students.

By generating insights directly from leaders across sectors, this research seeks to expand the field's knowledge base and strengthen the case for education abroad as an accelerator for leadership and employability that can be used by students, international education practitioners, funders of abroad programs, and businesses seeking to identify future leaders.

## Key Findings

As part of the AIFS Foundation-IIE Global Education Research Reports series, this study draws on survey responses from 44 leaders, along with 5 follow-up interviews, to examine how international educational experiences shape career pathways. The research offers new insights into how studying abroad serves as an accelerator for leadership development over time across sectors and industries.

**Career Trajectory Key Finding:** All 44 leaders reported personal or professional benefits from educational experiences abroad, and the vast majority (98%) cited impacts on their professional growth, career trajectories, and skill development.

- ❖ **Leaders leverage known benefits of education abroad for career advancement.** Leaders acknowledged actively using their international experiences throughout their careers. They reported that their experiences studying abroad opened doors to early-career pathways and helped establish networks that sustained long-term professional relationships. Leaders also returned to their experiences studying abroad as compelling resume highlights and conversation starters throughout their careers.

**Leadership Development Key Finding:** Leaders reported that international experiences were foundational to developing their leadership approach.

- ❖ **Education abroad transformed leaders' identities.** Leaders reported that their experiences abroad led to growth in self-awareness, confidence, and identity formation. Furthermore, leaders' perspectives on how their education abroad experiences impacted their leadership approach evolved over time with reflection.
- ❖ **Education abroad experiences pushed leaders to be comfortable with the uncomfortable.** Experiences abroad that challenged leaders helped them grow and realize greater capacity to navigate ambiguity, deal with complexity, and challenge assumptions.
- ❖ **Education abroad expanded leaders' worldviews.** 96% of leaders mentioned that going overseas was influential in widening mindsets and developing cross-cultural communication skills that carried over into how they lead teams.

**Value of International Experiences Across Industries and Roles Key Finding:** Leaders highlighted the importance of international exposure for success across more than 20 industries, including science and tech, medical, arts, sports, business, law, military, and social sectors.

Their responses indicated the following areas as pivotal:

- ❖ **Leaders develop global systems thinking.** The majority of leaders (78%) explicitly reported that their international academic experience helped them develop a global, systems-level perspective that broadened strategic thinking across more of the sectors surveyed. Leaders note that the ability to understand and trace cascading impacts of cause and effect across global systems can unlock new strategies and opportunities.
- ❖ **Leaders are prepared to advance business interests worldwide.** Leaders identified how their international experiences better positioned them to operate strategically in organizations with an international footprint through their understanding of global markets and customer expectations. Leaders noted that the leadership competencies gained abroad can support

business growth and market expansion. This included adapting strategy across different markets, assessing product–market fit by region, and navigating local policy environments.

- ❖ **Leaders collaborate globally.** Leaders across industries emphasized that success in today’s workplace depends on the ability to collaborate with global teams and how international experiences enable their success to operate in this environment. Their experiences abroad prepared them for success in working with international colleagues and influenced their hiring practices to recognize the competencies that such experience signals.

**Advice to Students Key Finding:** All responding leaders overwhelmingly recommended that students should study abroad. Leaders’ advice to students frequently focused on the elements of the experience that helped them develop as leaders.

Leaders recommend that:

- ❖ **Students should seek immersion.** 93% of leaders indicated that the value of international experience can depend on the depth of engagement, with deep immersion described as most impactful.
- ❖ **Students should embrace discomfort.** Leaders acknowledged that going abroad can be challenging, but encouraged students to embrace the discomfort as it can lead to personal and professional growth.
- ❖ **Students should connect their global experiences to career development.** Leaders recommended intentionally reflecting on their international experiences and integrating their study abroad into their professional narratives to highlight the skills and leadership they developed.

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine how international experiences shape leadership development, career trajectories, and workforce readiness. While the survey collected structured descriptive data on respondents' backgrounds and global experiences, the primary analytic emphasis was placed on open-ended responses that captured meaning-making, professional impact, and leadership development over time.

### Data Collection & Analytic Approach

The AIFS Foundation and the Institute of International Education (IIE) jointly collected data for this study through an online survey. The survey targeted individuals with professional leadership roles across sectors who have previously participated in international or global educational experiences.

The survey instrument captured both structured and open-ended data related to respondents' international experiences, career trajectories, and leadership perspectives. Individuals responded to questions about whether they had participated in any international academic experiences, including study abroad programs, full-degree programs abroad, international internships or employment, and scholarship- or fellowship-supported global experiences. For each experience, respondents provided details on the type of experience, geographic location, duration, and student or career level at the time of participation. In addition to descriptive information about their experience abroad, the survey included open-ended questions focused on career and leadership outcomes.

The AIFS Foundation and IIE distributed the survey electronically via institutional networks and professional contacts in April and May of 2026. Participation was voluntary, and respondents provided informed consent for their responses to be analyzed for research purposes. The final dataset consists of responses from 44 leaders representing a range of entities, including education, government, nonprofit organizations, private companies, and publicly traded corporations, and reflects an array of international experiences across geographic regions and life stages. Open-ended survey responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses related to career impact, leadership development, industry relevance, and student advice were reviewed to identify recurring patterns and frame the study's findings.

Findings from the survey analysis informed the design of follow-up interviews with a subset of five respondents representing different industries, entity types, genders, and destinations. These semi-structured interviews were used to deepen understanding of selected themes, particularly those related to leadership development processes, workforce preparation, and hiring practices. Interview data provided narrative depth and were used to contextualize and elaborate on themes identified in the survey, supporting a more nuanced and integrated interpretation of leadership development through international experiences.

## Respondent Profile

Respondents represented a range of organizational contexts, including private companies, nonprofit and foundation organizations, public corporations, educational institutions, and government agencies (Figure 1). This distribution reflects engagement across public, private, nonprofit, and academic sectors, providing multiple perspectives on international experience and its perceived impacts.

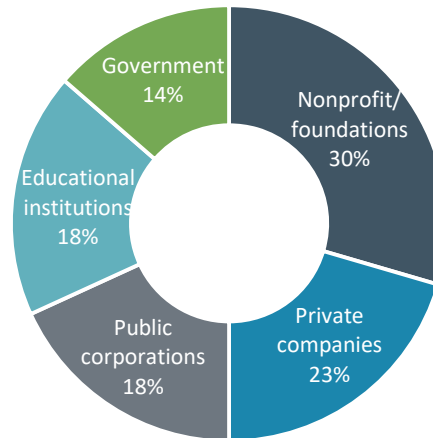
Respondents represented a wide array of professional sectors (Figure 2). The most frequently represented fields were education (18%); arts, entertainment, and media (14%); social services (14%); computer science (11%); healthcare (10%); and business (9%).

The sample represented leaders from 19 U.S. states and territories. Respondents were from California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Kansas, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Washington, DC. Additionally, one leader noted that they were living abroad at the time of data collection.

Survey respondents were evenly divided between male and female participants. This balanced distribution contrasts with the most recent *Open Doors* data, in which 34% of U.S. study abroad participants were men and 66% were female (IIE, 2025b). While the sample does not mirror national participation patterns, the even distribution allows analyses that are not disproportionately weighted toward men or women.

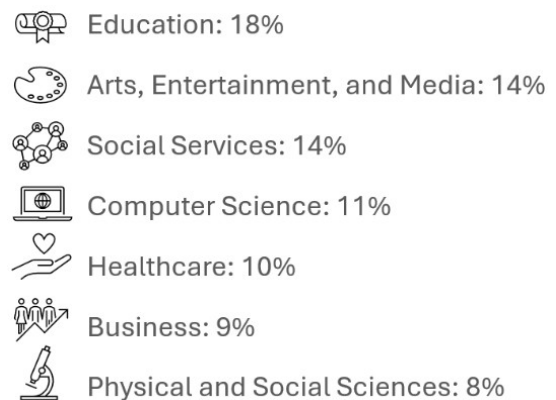
Study abroad was the most common experience, reported by 77% of respondents. Many participants also took part in multiple types of international experiences over time. Other commonly reported forms of international experience included scholarships or fellowships abroad (20%), employment abroad (18%), and research experience abroad (16%). Smaller proportions of respondents reported participating in internships, full-degree programs, and volunteer experiences abroad. Study abroad overwhelmingly served as respondents' initial mode of international engagement, while subsequent experiences increasingly

**Figure 1**  
*Organizational Affiliation*



Note. Respondent percentage distribution across organizational affiliations.

**Figure 2**  
*Leading Professional Sectors*



Note. Respondent percentage distribution across professional sectors.

diversified into employment, research, degree programs, fellowships, internships, and volunteer activities.

Respondents reported international experiences across 35 countries spanning Europe, Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, and Oceania (Figure 3). To contextualize this distribution, national *Open Doors* data indicate that nearly half of U.S. study abroad participation is concentrated in a small number of destinations, most notably Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, France, and Japan (IIE, [2025c](#)). While several of these countries also appear in the present sample, respondents

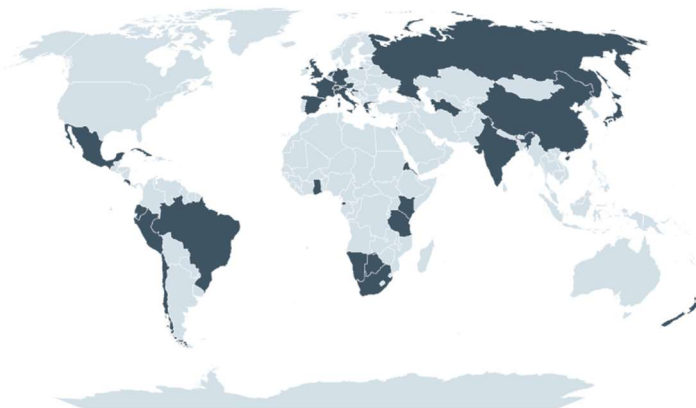
additionally reported experiences in several less frequently represented destinations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa. This broader geographic spread reflects engagement beyond the dominant study abroad destinations.

Across all reported international experiences, respondents participated in programs of varying lengths, with long-term engagement most prevalent overall (36%). Mid-length experiences (semester or quarter) and summer programs were reported by 22% and 21% of respondents, respectively. Full-degree programs completed abroad represented 11%, while short-term experiences of eight weeks or fewer accounted for 9% of reported participation.

Considering all international experiences together, respondents participated at a range of educational levels, with undergraduate study the most common (45%). Additional participation occurred at the master's level (15%) and at the doctoral or professional level (12%). High school participation accounted for 12% of reported experiences. A portion of experiences (15%) were reported without an applicable student-level designation, typically reflecting post-degree employment or non-enrolled contexts.

Roughly half (52%) of respondents received at least one scholarship or fellowship supporting their international experience. The most frequently cited funding sources included the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship, institution-specific scholarships, AFS Intercultural Programs, and the Fulbright Program. In total, respondents reported participation in more than 15 distinct scholarship or fellowship programs, reflecting a wide range of funding pathways.

**Figure 3**  
Countries Represented in Respondents' International Experiences



Note. Shaded countries indicate locations where respondents reported international study.

## Career Trajectory

All leaders responding to the survey noted personal growth while pursuing education abroad. In addition, 98% of the leaders indicated that their international academic experiences played a meaningful role in shaping their professional growth, career trajectories, and skills development. These underscore the formative influence of studying abroad across multiple stages of their career development. Leaders described these experiences as pivotal moments that catalyzed the definition of academic and career goals, guided decisions about further study, early-career pathways, leadership development, and long-term professional growth.



“Taken together, my three international experiences had a defining influence on my choices of academic institutions and career pathways--and accounted for my interest and longevity in the international field.”



### Peter Robinson

President Emeritus  
United States Council for  
International Business

*Left: Peter (middle) with Austrian AFS  
family, 1972*

*Right: Peter with UN Secretary-General  
Ban Ki-moon, 2009*

To make these experiences a reality, just over half (52%) of the leaders surveyed reported receiving outside funding to make studying abroad feasible. This funding can be the critical jumping-off point for leaders to gain these global experiences, particularly since current research shows that costs are a considerable barrier to studying abroad ([Terra Dotta, 2025](#)).

Several of the leaders used funds available directly from their college or university, either by applying existing academic scholarships to study abroad experiences or by receiving a scholarship dedicated to study abroad. Beyond college and university funding, external scholarships supported by the U.S. government, foreign governments, private foundations, and corporations also enabled surveyed leaders to study abroad.

One of the largest and most well-known U.S. government exchange programs is the U.S. Fulbright Program. Several of the leaders reported receiving Fulbright scholarships across award types, including English Teaching Assistantships (ETAs), Research Awards, and Scholar Programs. In addition, the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship was cited as influential for several younger leaders. This scholarship program provides merit-based scholarships to outstanding

American undergraduate students with high financial need to pursue credit-bearing academic studies and career-oriented internships abroad. Leaders also cited U.S. government programs, including the National Security Education Programs (NSEP), the Foreign Language and Area Studies Program (FLAS), and Partners of America. Additionally, one leader noted participation in the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange (CBYX), which is jointly funded by the U.S. Congress and the German Bundestag.

Leaders also participated in prestigious scholarship programs directly related to bringing in global leaders to a specific university or country, such as the Marshall Scholarship and Gates Cambridge Scholarship in the United Kingdom, the Schwarzman Scholars in China, Freeman-ASIA in East or Southeast Asia, and the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program in Japan. There are also frequent opportunities to apply for scholarships directly through study abroad providers, with one leader noting that they took advantage of an AFS scholarship for their study abroad experience in high school. Outside of these, leaders took advantage of funding by corporate or foundation scholarships, such as the Rotary Scholarship, Whitaker International Fellowship, Explorers Club, and the Christina Hixon Scholarship.

## Early Career Pathways

Leaders across industries as varied as science, conservation, education, and military service described education abroad as either sparking or validating career interests and shaping the direction of their early professional pathways. Roughly one-third of leaders volunteered insights into how their international academic experience directly influenced their next professional steps. This aligns with data from the Forum on Education Abroad (2025), which found that most study abroad alumni reported that their experience had a very or extremely important influence on their career paths. These immersive international experiences helped to clarify values, deepen academic and professional interests, and introduce students to careers they had not previously considered.



“ My study abroad experience in Namibia confirmed my desired career pathway to work on conservation in Sub-Saharan Africa, which eventually led to my working for one of the oldest international conservation organizations in Nairobi on continent-wide elephant conservation.”

### **Tara Daniel**

Associate Director, Policy  
Women's Environment and Development Organization

Leaders noted that studying abroad can directly open doors to opportunities early in their careers by providing access to networks, credentials, and specialized skills. Furthermore, international programs can facilitate mentorship, professional introductions, and institutional credibility, which lead to their first jobs, particularly in competitive fields.

Several leaders reported that their experiences studying abroad served as a catalyst for continued academic study by introducing new ideas and developing the skills, confidence, and intellectual curiosity necessary for advanced research or graduate education. The independent and applied nature of certain types of undergraduate study abroad experiences can mirror the activities of graduate-level scholarship and help students envision themselves pursuing further academic study. For example, one interviewee described how their experiences abroad provided the clarity for what they would go on to study at the graduate level. As such, education abroad not only enriches undergraduate learning but can also

“ I have found that my study abroad experience, while sometimes cliché, is consistently a talking point in interviews and career conversations. My approach is typically to talk about my entire experience abroad, and not just the experience on campus. I share stories about traveling internationally solo for the first time and how that had a unique set of challenges and lessons to navigate. Sharing stories about communicating when there was no shared language and adjusting to different cultural norms are all things that stand out in career conversations.”

### **Stephanie Grammel**

Director Integrations & Solutions  
Grubhub



“My international experience with the Benjamin Gilman Scholarship carved out my decision to become a scientist. Because the Peruvian Amazon study abroad program was a research-based program, I needed to implement, design, and execute my own experiment. This planning was extremely useful during my PhD graduate program when I needed to implement my own dissertation, independent work.”

### **Silvina Analía Di Pietro**

Research Scientist  
Lawrence Livermore  
National Laboratory



encourage degree continuation by clarifying academic goals and strengthening pathways to graduate education.

Reflecting on their transition from student to professional, leaders also noted how their experiences abroad served as compelling resume and interview conversation starters. This is a noted practice in the field, with 85% of interns who go abroad including it on their professional profiles ([Mason & Monroe, 2024](#)). The surveyed leaders noted that they used their experience studying abroad to demonstrate, through the power of stories, their ability to navigate unfamiliar environments, communicate across barriers, and problem-solve under stress.

The skills that leaders cited as gaining while studying abroad are often directly tied to the core competencies for career readiness identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (n.d.). Furthermore, the leaders noted how the depth and personal meaning of these experiences helped them stand out, giving them an edge in highly competitive, early-career job markets.

## Career Progression

Leaders reported that international education experiences were not only an entry point into their first job but also an enduring asset throughout their careers. Leaders describe how global experiences broadened their professional options over time, making them more competitive for growth opportunities and equipping them with skills that continue to distinguish them from colleagues across a variety of organizational contexts.

“It has often broadened my career/professional options, made my candidacy for positions more competitive and afforded me the comparative reasoning skills that have set me apart from other colleagues within the organizations where I have worked.”

### Anthony Pinder

Vice Provost of Global Engagement & Programs, Emerson College

## Leadership Development

This study extends existing research by moving beyond the well-documented professional and career benefits of international experiences to examine their role in lifelong leadership development. This section of the report bridges leadership development frameworks with leaders' reflections on how education abroad has shaped their leadership approaches. This approach offers new insights about how education abroad could be understood as a meaningful leadership development opportunity.

When leaders described how international experiences shaped their leadership, they often focused on how they developed their ways of thinking, relating, and responding to complexity. Across sectors and career stages, respondents emphasized the importance of navigating ambiguity, communicating across differences, and reflecting on their own identities and growth over time. International experiences, particularly immersive study abroad, work, and research, were consistently described by respondents as formative contexts in which these capacities were developed and tested and later carried into their professional leadership roles.

These respondent descriptions align closely with developmental theories of leadership that emphasize shifts in meaning-making, perspective-taking, and relational orientation rather than the accumulation of discrete skills. Day and Dannhäuser (2024) conceptualize leadership development as a long-term process in which experience reshapes how individuals understand

themselves, others, and the situations they lead within. From this perspective, leadership growth is evident in shifts in interpretation and identity rather than in the mastery of predefined skills. Kjellström et al. (2020) extend this view by showing that individuals come to understand leadership in qualitatively different ways over time, moving from individual- and task-oriented views towards more relational and context-driven approaches.

“ Don't just go abroad to see the sights; go to see yourself through a different lens.”

**Leticia Nortey**

Executive Director  
Expanding Boundaries  
International, Inc.

*Top: China, 2008  
Bottom: Maryland, 2026*



Adaptive leadership scholarship similarly distinguishes between technical problems and adaptive challenges that require learning, reflection, and judgment rather than expertise alone (Hubbard et al., 2025; Jones et al., 2020; Schummer et al., 2024). The Center for Creative Leadership’s (2025) vertical leadership framework offers another approach to understanding how leaders broaden their perspectives and develop the strategic thinking needed in complex or uncertain situations. This framework emphasizes the role of challenging or “heat experiences”, exposure to different or “colliding perspectives,” and deeper reflection or “elevated sensemaking” (Petrie, 2015). Using these leadership development frameworks, this section examines how leaders who participated in education abroad reflect on their experiences and how these reflections shape their current leadership approaches (Table 1).

**Table 1. Leadership Capacities Developed Through International Experience and Their Alignment with Vertical Leadership Framework**

Leadership Capacity	How the capacity appeared in respondents’ accounts	Alignment with Vertical Leadership Conditions (Petrie, 2015)
Navigating ambiguity and complexity	Learning to operate without clear answers and to question assumptions	Heat experiences
Cross-cultural communication and relational capacity	Listening, adapting communication styles, and building trust across difference	Colliding perspectives
Perspective-taking and meaning-making	Shifts in interpretation, humility, and reassessment of assumptions	Elevated sensemaking

## Navigating Ambiguity and Complexity

Leaders responding to the survey and interviews consistently described leadership as the ability to function effectively in situations characterized by uncertainty, incomplete information, and competing demands. Rather than focusing only on technical expertise, participating leaders highlighted learning to operate without clear answers as a central outcome of their international experiences.

The responding leaders often attributed their ability to operate in this ambiguity to their time abroad. Many noted challenging and uncomfortable moments during their experiences abroad. Several leaders noted moments abroad when familiar assumptions no longer held true, requiring greater attentiveness and flexibility. Interview data suggest that these moments of discomfort were not merely incidental, but often necessary and immersive, particularly in contexts where participants could not rely on familiar systems. One leader described situations in which adaptation was required to meet basic, day-to-day needs in another language, which intensified the developmental impact of the experience. Another leader commented that having experienced a crisis abroad, whether large or small, forced them to navigate the unfamiliar context on their own.

“ I prioritize a risk-taker’s mindset, viewing uncertainty not as a threat but as a developmental opportunity. By embracing a spectrum of working styles, I foster more resilient, innovative teams capable of navigating the constant flux of the modern global economy.”

### John Loyack

VP of Economic Development  
NC Community College System



“It may be challenging to leave your friends, parents, comforts of what you know...but you grow the most when you are outside of your comfort zone. ... Perhaps the biggest thing those experiences taught me is what it means to be a responsible participant in public and global health work: less about having answers to bring, and more about listening, learning, and building relationships.”

### Caitlin Anderson

Chief Scientific Officer  
Ireti Biosciences

*Left: Moshi, Tanzania  
Right: Washington, 2026*



It was through these moments that leaders noted an expanding ability to engage with complexity, work in uncertainty, and respond to crises. Leaders described how international experience reshaped their approach to leadership in global contexts and how uncertainty became a productive element of their leadership practice. For others, ambiguity was tied to ethical responsibility and learning how to lead without assuming authority or expertise.

These accounts illustrate how international experiences can create conditions in which learning is not optional. These reflections align with the Center for Creative Leadership’s (2025) concept of a “heat experience,” which is a situation that disorients, challenges existing assumptions, broadens perspectives, and prompts new approaches to action and decision-making.

## Cross-Cultural Communication and Relational Capacity

Across sectors, leaders consistently emphasized cross-cultural communication as a core leadership capacity developed through international experience. They framed cross-cultural communication as a relational practice that required listening, humility, and adaptation to different cultural norms and power dynamics. Leaders highlighted how international experiences shaped their ability to communicate and collaborate with global teams, particularly in understanding context and building trust. In addition, several described how living abroad and navigating linguistic and cultural barriers deepened their empathy. Others also noted that effective cross-cultural communication required a shift away from directive leadership toward listening and consensus building.

Interviews further highlight that cross-cultural communication often develops through reliance on others, rather than through abstract skill-building alone. Leaders described how immersive environments, particularly homestays or community-based experiences, required them to rely on host communities for everyday interactions, fostering a form of relational humility. This dependence reinforced a shift away from viewing leadership as individual expertise toward understanding it as a relational and collaborative process grounded in mutual learning.

“My leadership style emphasizes active listening and the ability to find consensus across diverse teams, ensuring that my work remains as adaptable and nuanced as the international environments that shaped my professional foundation.”

**Brittany Hardy**

Monetized Policy Lead  
Google



“All my international experiences helped connect me with a wider world and with the understanding that we are all part of a wider family. This may well be one of the reasons that my leadership approach has always been one of seeing myself as the leader of teams that must work together to be successful--thus as a "We" rather than "I" person.”

**Peter M. Robinson**

President Emeritus  
United States Council for  
International Business

Leaders’ responses illustrate the importance of how their leadership has been shaped by exposure to difference through their time abroad. Leadership development scholarship supports this relational framing.

Developmental approaches emphasize that leadership capacity expands as individuals encounter and engage with perspectives that challenge their existing assumptions, requiring greater awareness and flexibility over time (Day & Dannhäuser, 2024; Kjellström et al., 2020; Schummer et al., 2024). Petrie (2015) similarly argues that exposure to colliding perspectives supports leadership development by increasing the range of viewpoints through which individuals interpret situations.

### Perspective-Taking and Meaning-Making

Leaders also described international experiences as important in reshaping how they perceived, interpreted, and made sense of complex challenges and decisions. Exposure abroad to different cultural, political, and institutional contexts prompted participants to reconsider assumptions and recognize that leadership practices can be shaped by context rather than being universally applicable. These international education experiences reshaped their understanding of social systems and values and cultivated an awareness of multiple ways of thinking and doing. For some leaders, meaning-making also involved recognizing the limits of their own perspective and learning that leadership approaches may need to shift depending on the setting. Interview findings suggest that this shift extends beyond perspective-taking to a broader process of decentering, in which individuals begin to question the universality of their own assumptions and frameworks. In several cases, this included recognizing leadership in contexts and individuals not traditionally framed as leaders within dominant paradigms. Exposure to these alternative models prompted participants to expand their understanding of leadership and, in some cases, to actively emulate these approaches in their own practice. These experiences were also frequently associated with increased confidence, as navigating unfamiliar environments required participants to rely on their own judgment and capabilities. Over time,

“Exposure and personal experience in other countries' education systems helped me understand the way that a society's values and socio-political priorities show up in the structural organization of schooling.”

**Stephanie Rae Wu**

Chief Transformation  
Officer  
City Year



“My experience gave me the confidence to be fearless in the world.”

**Tim McNeal**

Senior Vice President  
The Walt Disney Company

this confidence translated into a greater willingness to take risks, engage across differences, and assume leadership roles in complex or uncertain settings.

Scholars of leadership development emphasize the importance of reflection as a driver of long-term growth (Loci & Peterlin, 2023; Kjellström et al., 2020). Kjellström et al. (2020) show that leadership is understood differently as individuals develop, with more advanced understandings

emphasizing context, plurality, and relationships. Additionally, development accelerates when individuals reflect deeply on their experiences and their impact on their worldview (Center for Creative Leadership, 2025). The international experiences described by leaders in this study frequently created these conditions, exposing participants to new perspectives and prompting them to reexamine and expand their understanding of the world.

### Leadership Development Over Time

Across these three areas, leaders also described international experiences as the impetus for ongoing development that is revisited over time. Respondents emphasized gradual shifts in how they understood themselves, related to others, and approached leadership in increasingly complex contexts. In interviews, leaders noted that the impact was not always clear at the time but became more meaningful as they encountered new challenges and reflected on those experiences. This suggests that international experiences contribute to leadership development not only in the moment, but also through how they are applied, interpreted, and reinforced across a leader’s career.

“I would also emphasize that the impact of these experiences is not always immediate. In my own case, studying abroad early in my academic career shaped decisions that unfolded over decades, and returning later in life reinforced that global learning is an ongoing process rather than a single event. Even if the long-term path is not yet clear, the ability to understand different perspectives, adapt to new environments, and engage across cultures will remain valuable in ways that extend well beyond any one experience.”

**Clark Egnor**

Director, Office of International Programs  
West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission

## Value of International Experiences Across Industries & Roles

Leaders across industries, sectors, and roles agree that their international experiences benefit the field and industries where they work. Leaders from more than 20 sectors surveyed and interviewed described working in a global context, whether collaborating with international teams and colleagues, engaging with global partners, or working within international markets. As a result, they found that international exposure, particularly through their experiences abroad, was influential in their roles and the industries where they work. Several common themes emerged from the variety of leaders' responses.

**Global Systems Thinking:** The majority (78%) of leaders explicitly noted that their international academic experience helped them develop a global systems-level perspective that broadened strategic thinking. The leaders who had the opportunity to study and operate in international settings cited how additional perspectives enabled them to understand a broader strategic picture, expanding their thinking to a global context. This broadened systems-thinking view helped them to see the interconnections, dependencies, and patterns in a global context, especially in terms of international organizational success and effective team collaboration, noted below.

**Entering and Adapting to Global Markets:** Leaders who frequently engage in the buying or selling of products or services globally noted that their global exposure benefited their companies or organizations. This was cited across companies of different sizes and stages of development, from strategy development to expansion into new markets. Leaders recognized that success in one market does not automatically translate to success in another. International experience also helped leaders ask better questions about product-market fit, user needs, communication strategies, and local expectations before scaling into new markets.

**Working with Global Teams:** Leaders across the profiled industries and sectors reported that success in today's workplace depends on the ability to collaborate with global teams. Given the recognition in the prior section of how international experiences prepared them for cross-cultural communication, leaders credit this as critical to success in their globally connected fields. Leaders described a range of ways in which their industry or role requires them to engage with individuals worldwide, and how their experience studying abroad prepared them. This includes collaborating with international colleagues, working for companies or subsidiaries owned by foreign firms, and contributing to organizations with a global footprint. Beyond working on global teams, leaders also cited considering international experience on resumes when hiring, noting it as a proxy for the leadership skills discussed in the prior section.

The next page outlines more than 20 industries, fields, or roles, and how leaders directly cite the importance of international experience within their work.

# Value of International Experiences Across Industries & Roles

## Sciences & Tech



AI

“I hire specifically for it, international business and communication is important.”

**Joseph Hackman**, CEO, Permanence



Biomedical

“In fields like biomedical research and higher education, the work itself is inherently global. Scientific discovery, public health challenges, and innovation ecosystems do not operate within national boundaries. Leaders who lack global exposure risk approaching these challenges with a limited lens.”

**Imara Dawson**, Managing Director M-PACT, University of Michigan



Data analytics

“I learn so much about data visualization – my professional area of focus – from individuals worldwide. I'm part of an international Slack group on data viz, and I love the global perspective.”

**Andy Krackov**, President, Hillcrest Advisory



Engineering

“As an engineering student, I understood the laws of nature, and how to build some really amazing things following its rules. But I was far less versed in people: how others think, how they act, and what they deeply value. In that one year abroad, I learned firsthand that the things people care about, fight for, and organize their lives around vary enormously from one culture to the next. I also became fluent in German, one of the most valuable skills I have.”

**Adam Siegel**, Managing Director, Kitten Labs



Research & national laboratories

“Within my organization, we are encouraged collaborate with scientists for potential publications. In fact, I am currently discussing an experimental plan with a national laboratory in the UK.”

**Silvina Analía Di Pietro**, Research Scientist, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory



Restaurant technology

“For a short time, my current organization was owned by a European company. While my direct dealings were still in the United States, I was able to connect with team members in the UK and connect on a personal level with my past travels in the UK and my study abroad experience. Connection is such an underrated skill in the workplace and leveraging my prior study abroad experience helped me find connection points.”

**Stephanie Grammel**, Director, Integrations & Solutions, Grubhub



## Value of International Experiences Across Industries & Roles (cont.)



### Software development

“Software is uniquely global compared to almost any other industry. It is substantially easier for a software company to enter the international market than just about any other type of company. International experiences can be the breaking point between knowing that product-market fit in one country doesn’t necessarily guarantee product-market fit in another.”

**Brock Klein**, Founder, Circumference



### Technology

“International experience is a fundamental necessity for success in the tech industry. ... In this industry, a leader who has navigated foreign environments is better equipped to anticipate how a global policy might land differently in various markets, ensuring that products remain safe and relevant for everyone. This mindset allows a professional to move from simply executing tasks to providing the strategic, inclusive leadership required to manage a worldwide user base.”

**Brittany Hardy**, Monetized Policy Lead, Google



### Health



### Medical

“Fulbright provided an incredible opportunity for me to understand the world beyond the United States, and witness what it takes to move lifesaving medicines from scientific breakthrough to real-world impact. In the process of launching one of the region’s first pediatric HIV treatment programs, I saw that, in addition to efficacious drugs, a health system needs infrastructure, data systems, community trust, and a coordinated network of stakeholders aligned around a shared mission.”

**Anand Reddi**, Global Head of Digital Health, BeOne Medicines



### Pharmaceuticals

“Since pharmaceutical R&D is truly a global enterprise, I consider international experiences to be a critical success factor within my industry.”

**Steve Ketchum**, PhD, Senior Pharmaceutical R&D Executive



### Arts



### Music

“Music--especially classical music, which is the field I work in now--is a highly international world. ... Many of my commissions come from non-US ensembles, and much of my work is performed internationally. Having been able to launch my career with connections in both the US and UK helped me build my profile in two major markets simultaneously, which immediately made me an international talent, as opposed to a regional one.”

**Christopher Tin**, Composer



## Value of International Experiences Across Industries & Roles (cont.)

### Business & Management



#### Business

“My career was largely spent with an organization that represents business views to governments and multilateral institutions around the world: in other words, global business diplomacy. The more one can see and understand the world and one's own country through someone else's eyes, the more successful an international diplomat can be.”

**Peter M. Robinson**, President Emeritus, United States Council for International Business



#### Consulting

“As an organization development consultant who works with multinational companies holding a broad perspective on how social culture impacts organizational cultures and therefore how change and leadership shows up is vital to my ability to engage and provide successful consulting services.”

**Laura Gramling**, President, EnSpark Consulting



#### Finance

“Studying abroad will give you access to language and culture that is not only rewarding personally but can be deeply rewarding professionally. You cannot go wrong learning another language and culture.”

**Anthony Latta**, Chief Financial Officer, Evidence Action



#### Economic development

“International experiences are foundational for success in the NC Community College System and the broader workforce industry. They cultivate cultural intelligence and global competence, enabling leaders to navigate diverse supply chains and implement international best practices. By understanding global regulatory environments and best practices, our system can better support foreign direct investment and multicultural teams. Ultimately, these experiences foster the agility and resilience required to lead in an interconnected economy, ensuring North Carolina's workforce remains a "global first" engine for economic growth and innovation.”

**John Loyack**, VP of Economic Development, NC Community College System



#### Production

“The world is becoming smaller and it is more critical than ever to be able to communicate and connect with people regardless of different backgrounds. All the companies I have worked for have international sales, people, contractors, projects etc. Having global experiences and relationships enable fast paced career growth.”

**Erica Jensen**, Director Maintenance & Reliability, Del Monte Fresh Produce



## Value of International Experiences Across Industries & Roles (cont.)

### Sports



#### Sports

“I work with soccer players and their families from across the globe. We try to hire those who are bilingual, to coach and to work in the office, to support our multilingual community.”

**Wendy Calhoun**, Director of Administration, Montgomery Soccer, Inc.

### Law & Military



#### Law

“I think an understanding of global cultures and international relations is highly important in my sector. For example, our clients hail from all over the world and speak dozens of different languages. I frequently present to groups of very diverse and international audiences. First-hand knowledge of other countries really helps my ability to connect with and understand people.”

**Sietse Goffard**, Senior Program Coordinator, Asian Law Caucus



#### Military

“I was inspired by my experience, applying to join the Air Force while still abroad. Since then, I have continued to broaden my global perspective, pursuing a second master’s degree in International Relations with a focus on the Middle East.”

**Zeeshu Braslawscu**, U.S. Air Force



### Public & Social Sectors



#### Education

“More broadly, [international students] contribute to economic and community development by strengthening connections between institutions, industries, and international partners. In my work at the state level, I see international education not only as an academic opportunity, but as part of a larger strategy to expand workforce capacity, attract and retain talent, and position institutions and communities to participate more fully in a global economy.”

**Clark Egnor**, Director, Office of International Programs, West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission



## Value of International Experiences Across Industries & Roles (cont.)



“Now working as a civil society observer in various multilateral spaces, experience in and knowledge of different countries is expected.”

**Tara Daniel**, Associate Director, Policy, Women’s Environment and Development Organization



“In the non-profit and social service sector, international experience is no longer "extra" it is essential. To solve local problems, we must understand global contexts. Within my organization, global experience allows our team to design programs that are culturally sensitive and ambitious. For our industry at large, these experiences break down provincial thinking and foster the innovative problem-solving needed to tackle systemic inequalities. Leaders with global backgrounds are better equipped to manage diverse teams and build the international partnerships necessary for modern social impact.”

**Leticia Nortey**, Executive Director, Expanding Boundaries International, Inc.



## Advice to Students

Across sectors, leaders also offered guidance to students considering international education, emphasizing that the value of global experiences lies not only in where one goes, but in how deeply one engages. Much of their guidance aligned directly with the leadership development findings above.

### Seek Immersion

93% of leaders emphasized the value of immersive experiences over brief or surface-level exposure. Longer programs, including semester- or year-long study abroad, full degrees, and high school exchange, were seen as especially impactful because they allow time to adjust, build relationships, and move beyond initial disorientation. High school participants noted that early immersion fostered independence and adaptability at a formative stage. Across all experiences, leaders stressed that meaningful growth comes from engaging with everyday life in the host community through living arrangements, work, service, or local relationships, rather than staying within a student or expatriate bubble.

### Embrace Discomfort

A central recommendation emerging from the data was the value of discomfort as a driver of growth, which also aligns with the concept of “heat experiences” (Petrie, [2015](#)). Respondents described how navigating unfamiliar cultural norms, languages, and systems required adaptability, humility, and reflection. Many noted how struggling with a crisis or uncertainty helped them develop empathy, resilience, and an ability to listen before acting. Respondents encouraged students to view moments of discomfort not as setbacks but as opportunities to develop self-awareness and learn to operate effectively in different contexts.

### Develop Communication Skills

Leaders emphasized that one of the most enduring outcomes of international experience was the ability to communicate across differences. Leaders also described developing the ability to adjust communication styles across different institutional and relational settings, including navigating power dynamics and unspoken norms, with skills directly transferable to working across teams, partnerships, and global environments.

### Connect Global Experiences to Career Development

Many respondents advised students to intentionally integrate international experiences into their professional narratives, highlighting how these experiences strengthened their problem-solving, communication, and leadership skills in interviews and early-career roles. At the same time, respondents also cited that the impacts of international experiences are not always immediate. Students are encouraged to trust the developmental value of the experience, even if its relevance is not immediately apparent.

## Conclusion

This report set out to examine if and how international academic experiences shape career trajectories, leadership development, and long-term professional outcomes of leaders across sectors and industries. The findings clearly and consistently demonstrate that these experiences are not isolated moments but formative contexts that shape how leaders think, act, and lead throughout their careers. Importantly, by linking leadership development frameworks to leaders' reflections on their experiences abroad, this analysis offers a clearer understanding of how international experiences can drive leadership development.

These findings carry several important implications:

**Students:** The overwhelming consensus among leaders is that students should pursue international experiences as early and often as possible. From their perspective, the experience of studying abroad is not just transactional; it is transformational, with long-term personal and professional benefits. Early exposure through high school exchange can spark a broader international engagement that continues to develop through later academic and professional experiences.

**Higher Education:** For colleges and universities, the findings reinforce the role of international education not only as a high-impact practice that contributes to academic enrichment and career readiness, but also as an accelerator of leadership development. Designing programs that build in leadership development, prioritize immersion, create opportunities for meaningful engagement abroad, and encourage reflection upon return will be critical to maximizing these outcomes.

**Employers:** In an effort to compete for top talent, employers should recognize international experience as a meaningful indicator of both career-readiness skills and leadership potential. Organizations that intentionally value and leverage these experiences are likely to benefit from individuals who bring global leadership skills, including the ability to navigate ambiguity and complexity, communicate cross-culturally, and demonstrate confidence.

**Policymakers:** Government-funded scholarship programs, which provide critical pathways for students and professionals to study and work abroad, serve not only important cultural and public diplomacy missions but also play a significant role in expanding career pathways and launching opportunities for emerging leaders.

**Abroad Alumni:** The leaders who responded to this survey offered a wealth of information and perspectives on the benefits of studying abroad. We encourage alumni of international academic experiences to share these stories with the next generation of students. One of the challenges in identifying leaders who studied abroad is that it is not often included in bios or LinkedIn profiles. As such, we urge alumni to highlight study abroad on professional platforms, such as LinkedIn or in their biographies.

The leaders represented in this study demonstrate that education abroad can influence career trajectories and shape leadership perspectives. Study abroad is not just where you go – it is how you grow into a leader.

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