

# AIFS Study Abroad **OUTCOMES**

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A VIEW FROM OUR ALUMNI  
1990 – 2010



AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR FOREIGN STUDY®



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# Introduction

“It’s critical that all graduates of American high schools and colleges have certain ‘21st-century skills’ that will enable them to compete in a worldwide marketplace, such as understanding international perspectives and being able to work collaboratively with peers from different cultures and backgrounds.” (August, 2011)

—Maureen McLaughlin  
U.S. Department of Education  
Director of International Affairs

As AIFS approaches its 50-year anniversary in 2014, having alumni of our college study abroad programs reflect on their international experience and its impact on their lives is a fitting way to evaluate the influence of our programs.

This report describes and analyzes how alumni regard the impact of their study abroad experience on their personal and professional lives and documents program participation trends between 1990 and 2010. We last surveyed our alumni in 1988 and found that their program’s impact on both

personal and professional issues was significant. Understanding how our alumni view the impact of their study abroad experience is essential as we strive to uphold our long-standing leadership role in the international education field. The findings of this most recent survey clearly convey the strength and sustainable impact of our program model. Our intention is to conduct impact surveys on a more regular basis as part of our continuous assessment plan, which provides an avenue for dialogue with alumni and enables us to make necessary adjustments to strengthen our programs.

Especially because of the economic downturn in the past five years, increased attention has been paid to the impact of an international experience—whether through a period of study, service, or volunteering—upon a student’s career development and success in advancing prospects for employment after graduation. In the twenty-year period for which we conducted our survey, a growing body of research has emerged that supports such a connection and also points to the importance of campus efforts to internationalize students’ curricula and diversify opportunities for them to gain international experience. This research comes from industry, nonprofit organizations such as ours, and academic institutions. The thrust of these reports, surveys, and research studies is that international educational experiences unquestionably have the capacity to influence student career development on many levels.

As more and more campuses seek to align the required outcomes of student learning with the goals of study abroad programs, business and industry have also re-aligned their approach to hiring talent to meet the demands of the global marketplace. AIFS has developed new program models and new campus partnerships to widen our reach to students and faculty. We know that the complex requirements of our global economy, together with the increased mobility of students after they graduate, combine to create a new value added to studying abroad as an undergraduate.

According to Laurette Bennhold-Samaan, Managing Director at Aperian Global, companies are searching for global talent with the unique skills sets that students can acquire through their study abroad program experience with AIFS:

“In today’s global economy, where complexity and change are the norm, attracting and retaining culturally competent talent will continue to be a challenge for companies globally. International experience has become a critical asset for all global organizations and will continue to create a competitive advantage—both for the individuals and for the companies that hire them.” (personal correspondence with Martin Tillman, June 14, 2011)

The changes in the global marketplace over the past twenty years will only accelerate trends such as the following:

- > Given the impact of globalization in the workplace, it is advantageous for a student to consider the career implications of what may be a once-in-a-lifetime educational experience. This means that they ought to engage with both study abroad and career service advisors to assess the right fit of a particular program with their career aspirations and academic interests.
- > Success in today's global marketplace demands increased adaptability, cross-cultural sensitivity, political awareness, and intellectual flexibility. Program providers must take such skills into account as they design programs and advise students throughout their period of study abroad.
- > Employers are taking a more proactive interest in the outcomes of education abroad experiences as they struggle to find a globally competent workforce that meets their needs.
- > Employers, especially those doing business internationally, are interested in whether or not a job applicant demonstrates that as a result of his or her international experience, he or she has developed the requisite skills and sensitivity that make him or her stand out as the strongest candidate for a particular job.

The reality for businesses or organizations in any sector is that they must hire talent with a global perspective and who are, by any definition, "global-ready." How will a college student meet that requirement? We believe that our programs can provide a roadmap to achieving the kind of knowledge and broader worldview that is strategically essential in the workplace students will enter as they launch their careers in coming decades.

Alumni whom we surveyed are now in their late 20s to late 30s; their career paths have unquestionably been greatly influenced by globalization of the marketplace since they graduated. Their job searches may have led them to explore fields and locales which may not have been open to them during their undergraduate years. The demands of their workplaces have required them to learn new skills and new languages and adapt to complex problems in their relationships with their clients.

The results of this alumni survey demonstrate that our programs have made a significant contribution to the personal and professional development of past program participants. We believe our holistic approach to the design of our programs has sustained the high quality of the experiences

we have provided students in the past two decades. And we're confident that the challenges students face when studying abroad, when tied to their academic learning goals and career aspirations, will help them develop the flexibility, curiosity, and self-confidence that are the foundation for personal and professional success throughout their lives.

Our challenge is to innovate in such a way as to offer students a study abroad program experience equal to their expectations and those of their parents. Our goal is to foster a level of academic excellence that sets AIFS programs apart from the programs study abroad advisors bring to the attention of their students.



# Executive Summary

Working in a broad range of fields since their undergraduate studies, AIFS alumni report that their study abroad experience resulted in significant impact in several key areas of personal and professional development. Eighty-five percent of our respondents report that studying abroad with AIFS was “the most meaningful experience of my undergraduate education.” Given how many extra-curricular and off-campus activities are available to undergraduates, we’re pleased to learn that, over time, studying abroad on one of our programs has remained such an important aspect of their collegiate experience.

With nearly 1,600 responses from alumni who participated since 1990, this pool provides a set of leading indicators in viewing the long-term and sustaining impact that AIFS has made in the lives of its 140,000 college program participants since it was founded in 1964.

While a number of standardized instruments can be used to measure intercultural development, we chose to collaborate with academic partners to design a multi-faceted survey that captures self-reports on the impact of the AIFS experience on Cultural Understanding & World View, Professional & Career Development, and Personal Growth & Values. We would like to make this survey of program outcomes and impact a longitudinal study, seeking

input from respondents at regular intervals over time to track changes and trends and monitor the impact of their program experience using the same set of questions.

**Key outcomes of the survey include:**

- > Just over 85% of all respondents agreed that “studying abroad with AIFS was the most meaningful experience of my undergraduate education.”

“[Study abroad] is without a doubt a key experience that informed many goals, decisions and career steps I have made since then.”

—Kelly Holland, Granada

- > 92% of respondents reported that AIFS coursework helped them learn about their host country, and 98% report the program as a whole “impacted my knowledge about another culture.”
- > Nearly one-third of respondents reported that they considered study abroad options as a factor in choosing their college. These students had a significantly more positive experience abroad; they reported greater impact on nearly every developmental factor used in the survey. While it is likely that these students are pre-disposed to making the most of their experience, we think it challenges us as international educators to help all students think more intentionally about their goals and objectives in studying abroad.
- > 56% of respondents agreed that studying abroad contributed to “developing skills and intercultural competencies which contributed to obtaining my first job after graduation,” and 80% reported that it contributed to “my ability to adapt in diverse workplace environments.”

**Survey Highlights**

**Academic Impact:**

- > While only 32% of respondents reported that their “desire to study abroad influenced my selection of undergraduate college,” those students who did so reported a greater impact on nearly every developmental factor. In fact, these students reported having a significantly more positive experience abroad. This is an interesting correlation that may point to the need to

strengthen our outreach to high school advisors. It also points to the predisposition for study abroad of students who already are thinking about international experience in their high school years and who have already traveled outside the United States with their families.

- > Studying in an English- vs. non-English-speaking country did not differently impact the reported quality of the study abroad experience, with the exception of non-English-speaking countries facilitating greater language development, knowledge of culture, and learning about one's host country. As cited in previous research by international education colleagues, those students opting for homestays and who had a high school foreign language experience abroad reported greater foreign language development.

### **Career Impact**

- > Studying abroad makes a positive impact on skill acquisition for a diverse workplace. Over half (56%) of the respondents agreed that studying abroad “contributed to developing skills and intercultural competencies which contributed to obtaining my first job after graduation,” and a vast majority (80%) reported that it contributed to their “ability to adapt in diverse workplace environments.”

“My French was really perfected at the Cours de Civilisation Française de la Sorbonne....French continues to be an important part of my life today. I recently wrapped up an internship at the French Embassy in Washington...and I am currently an adjunct professor of French at the Community College of Denver.”

—Kelly Rogers, Paris

- > Studying abroad also has some impact on career choice and related considerations. Over one-third (34%) of alumni reported that studying abroad contributed to their choice of field of employment; two-thirds (65%) reported that it contributed to “the importance they place on working in a field that they find interesting”; and 70% reported that it was a factor contributing to “the importance placed on having personal fulfillment in my work.”
- > There is no doubt that students have felt and will continue to feel that both domestic and international off-campus experiences will

help develop skills and core competencies that will provide an important foundation in their job searches and overall career development. Regardless of whether they find employment in the United States or overseas, students who choose to study abroad will benefit from doing so with the foreknowledge of its significant potential to play a key role in strengthening their résumé and influencing their career path.

“Without this [study abroad] experience, I never would have had the connections, motivation, confidence or qualifications to take my next step and spend two years doing development work in Honduras....None of this would have been possible without spending the year in Spain.”

—Adam Wozniak, Granada

# Program Impact

While the reported impacts in our survey are overwhelmingly positive, the fact is that U.S. undergraduates who study abroad remain a small minority among their peers. With only 1.3% of U.S. undergraduates studying abroad in 2010–2011 (the most recent year of available statistics: Open Doors Survey, 2012), study abroad alumni with this first-hand international experience are well-positioned to play a significant leadership role in their local communities and beyond over the course of their lifetimes.

Study abroad will always have intrinsic value in opening a window on the wider world for all students. However, colleges and universities in the U.S. and around the world are increasingly focused on how to purposefully prepare their graduates for the demands of the “global workplace.” This means that our educational institutions must continue to re-think how all aspects of off-campus experiences—both domestic and international—can better prepare students to enter the workforce.

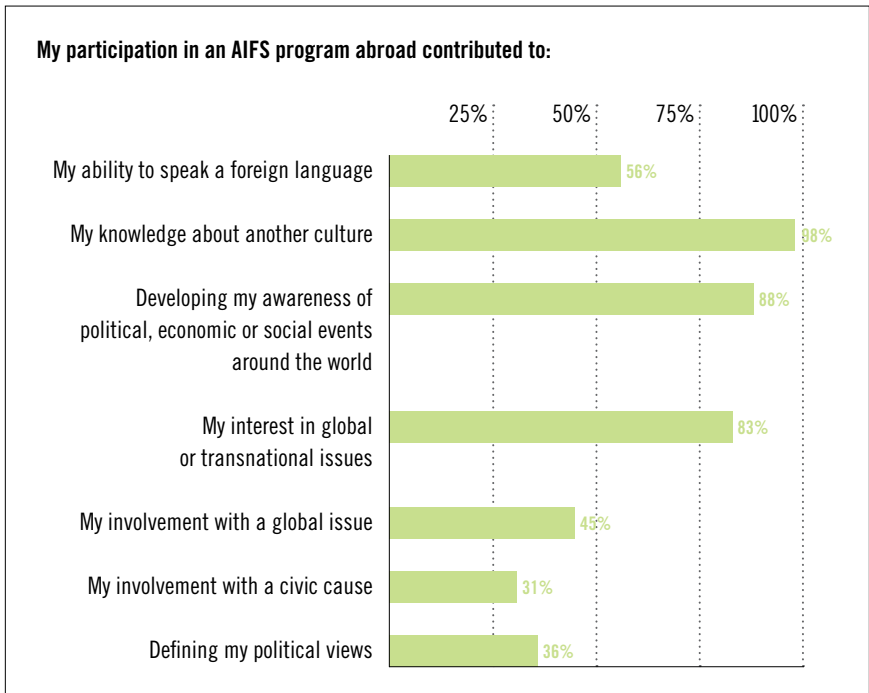
A report issued by the consulting firm McKinsey & Co. identified globalization as a key challenge affecting the preparation of new professionals entering the workforce:

“To address the long term challenges to U.S. employment...it is important to lay the groundwork for an innovation-driven, adaptive economy that will thrive on the talent of a globally competitive workforce.” (Lund, Auguste, Mendonca, Welsh, Ramaswamy, & Manyika, 2011)

Whether or not students need to develop their technical skills as opposed to their broader intercultural competencies and cross-cultural skills is not an either/or proposition. Multinational companies, international NGOs, and U.S. firms doing business overseas actively seek candidates who can succeed in workplaces that transcend national borders and manage interactions with individuals from different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds.

## Outcomes

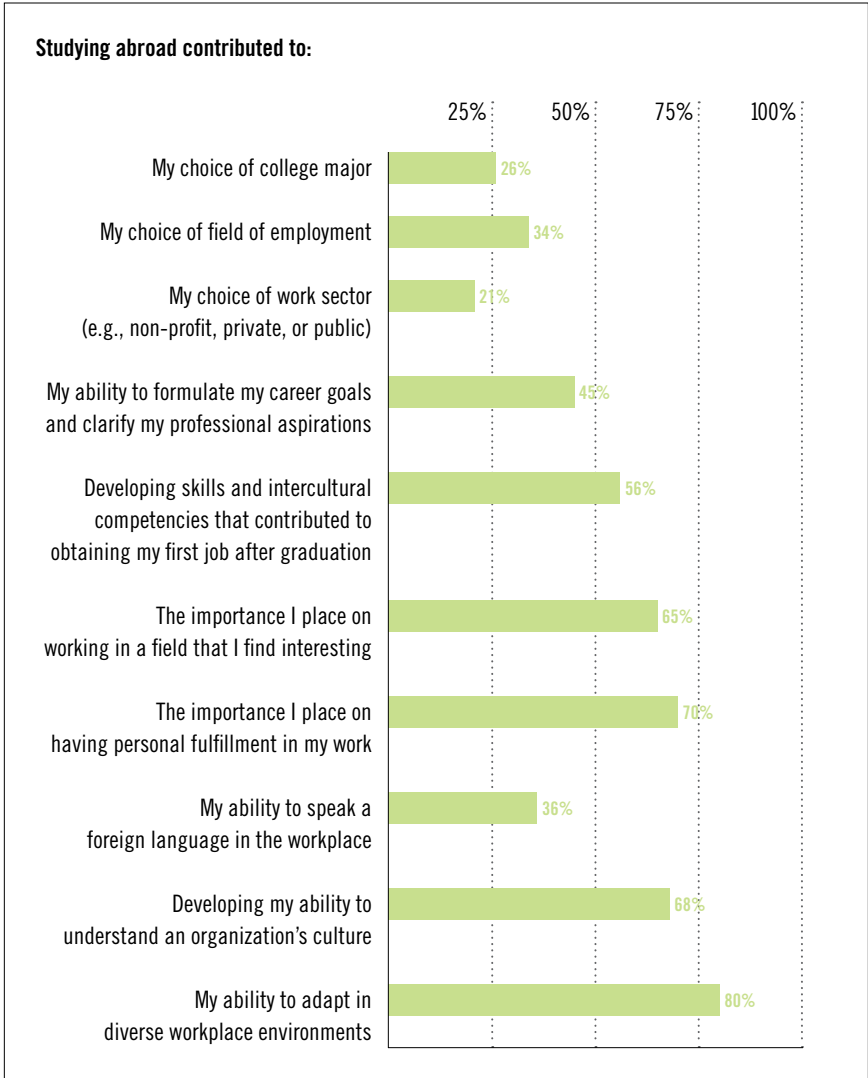
### Impact on Cultural Understanding and World View



*Percentages shown combine "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" responses*

Our findings demonstrate that alumni have retained significant increased knowledge of another culture; awareness of political, social, and economic events in the world; and increased interest in transnational issues. These are all invaluable characteristics of individuals engaged in their communities at home and in the world—as well as in the workplace.

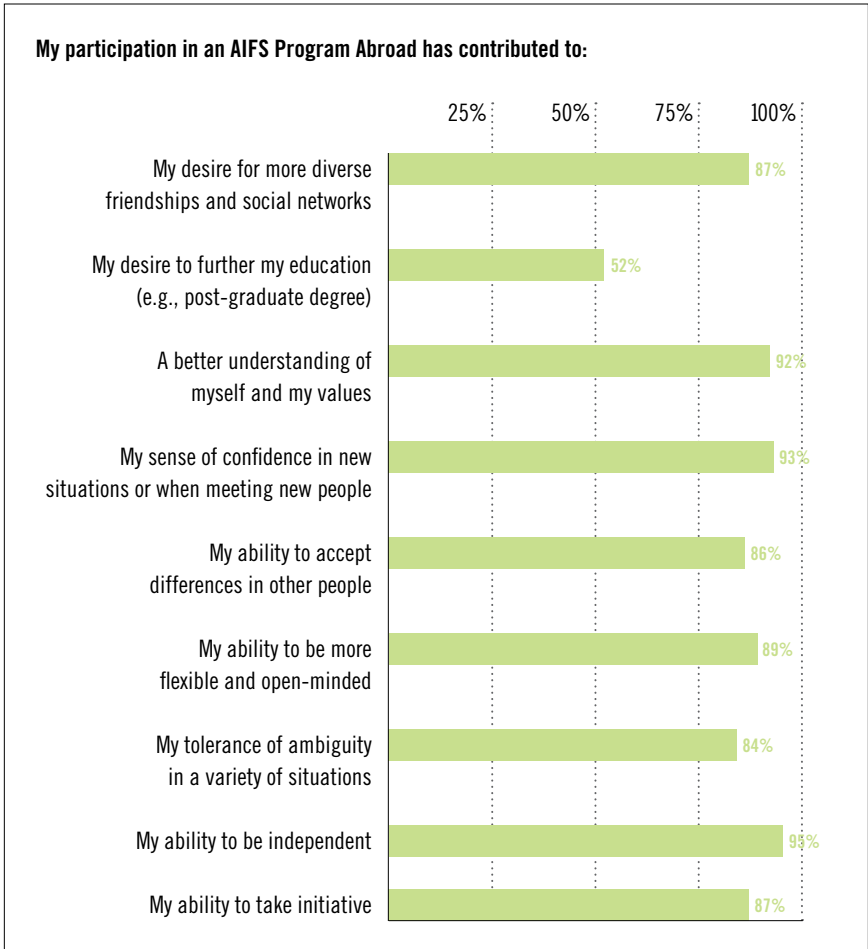
### Professional & Career Development



Percentages shown combine "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" responses

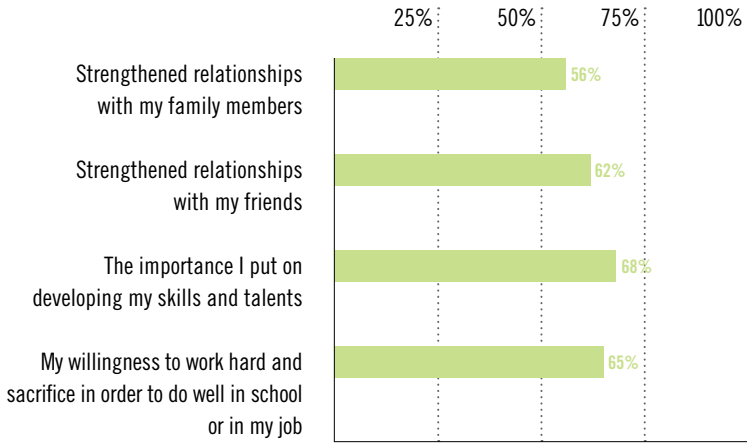
Alumni reported sustainable outcomes as a result of their study abroad that have had a positive impact on their professional and career development. Recent research on employer preferences of desirable skills and competencies in their search for talent match the areas in which AIFS alums reported sustainable impacts, e.g.: ability to adapt in diverse workplace environments, understanding of organizational cultures, flexibility, and foreign language competency.

## Personal Growth & Values





**My participation in an AIFS Program Abroad has contributed to (continued):**

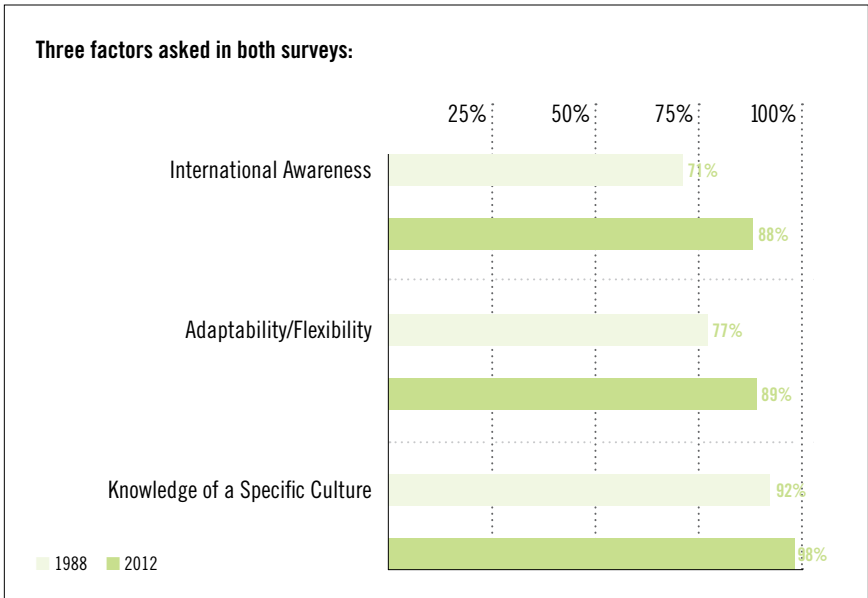


*Percentages shown combine "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" responses*

Alumni reported significant impact in many important aspects of their personal values and self-development—all of which point to the sustaining impact of having studied abroad. Traits identified are important in terms of strengthening interpersonal relationships both in general and, more specifically, in the workplace. These include acceptance of difference in others, tolerance of ambiguity, self awareness, confidence in meeting new people, and greater independence and self confidence.

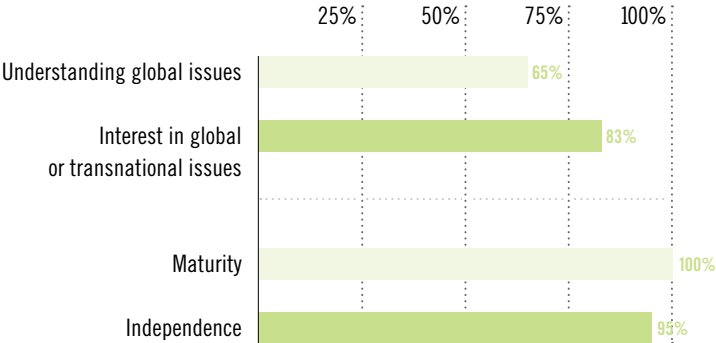
## 25 Years Later...

While our 2012 survey questions were not identical to those of an AIFS survey of alumni conducted in 1988, there are some sections that provide related comparisons. We found some interesting parallels that we think are worth sharing:



*Percentages shown combine "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" responses*

**Factors worded slightly differently in each survey, but offered for comparison:**



*This comparison is indicative of the change over time from the almost unique focus on language to a much greater breadth of disciplines represented in study abroad:*



1988 2012

Percentages shown combine "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" responses



# Next Steps: Innovating for the Future

AIFS is continually engaged with its educational partners in the process of aligning the needs of students to prepare them to enter the global workforce—and to interpret the value of their study abroad experience in terms of both their personal and professional development.

Here are some of the possible new directions or areas for program innovation that we have identified and will be exploring:

- > Given that AIFS programs have sustainable impact in critical areas in graduates' personal and professional life, we will explore ways to have education abroad offices, college admissions offices, school guidance counselors, and families work together in helping students think seriously about studying abroad as an integral part of the undergraduate experience. Because of the multiple ways that study abroad has had a positive impact on the career outcomes of our program alumni, we want to actively encourage students to purposefully consider study abroad as an option early in their college years.

- > In order to communicate to students and their families the “return on investment” in affording a college degree and the specific workplace skills that result from studying abroad, we will seek to use a variety of media to feature alumni profiles. Alumni who reflect on the benefits of their experience a few years—or even a few decades—later demonstrate the transformative nature of studying abroad. They can help AIFS play a role in supporting undergraduates to study abroad as we all collectively work toward the U.S. Lincoln Commission’s goal to increase the number of students studying abroad to one million by 2017, including a demographic proportionate to that of the U.S. undergraduate population, and to more diverse destinations.
- > Explore the creation of a pilot program to link, perhaps on selected campuses, the career and study abroad advising processes. We could consider using some of our existing career publications with the collaborative development of additional materials for both advisors and students to identify the most appropriate programs (or program features) that will help them achieve their desired skill set.
- > Create a model “exit” workshop in several countries for students to better prepare themselves on how to interpret the value of their time abroad, how to incorporate new skills/competencies on their résumés, and how to explain the benefits of the experience to employers with whom they interview.
- > Our findings show that our programs have a significant impact on the intercultural development of our alumni. Our attention to this aspect of students’ personal and professional growth will continue to become more and more intentional as part of our continuous assessment process.
- > Citing what Janet Bennett (2008) calls a trend in international education, that “campuses are recognizing that a bridge can be built between domestic diversity and global learning,” we aim to contribute to this linkage by supporting institutions to help students to explicitly recognize the transference of knowledge and skills from one setting in their lives to the next.

# Appendices

## Response Results – Demographics, etc.

### Alumni Responding by Breakdown of Time Period:

|           |             |
|-----------|-------------|
| Pre–2000  | 7.1% (113)  |
| 2001–2005 | 36.0% (569) |
| 2006–2010 | 54.0% (855) |
| 2011      | 2.8% (45)   |

## Gender Split

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|          |       |
|----------|-------|
|          | 2012  |
| Males:   | 21.3% |
| Females: | 78.7% |

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## Class Year Abroad

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|              |             |
|--------------|-------------|
|              | 2012        |
| Freshman:    | 1.9% (30)   |
| Sophomore:   | 16.2% (257) |
| Junior:      | 55.9% (886) |
| Senior:      | 20.2% (320) |
| High School: | 1.9% (30)   |
| PostGrad:    | 1.8% (29)   |

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*Note: There were 6 respondents (2%) who wrote in "Faculty" and 26 who wrote in "other"*

## Term Abroad

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|               |             |
|---------------|-------------|
| Fall          | 27.9% (364) |
| Spring        | 39.6% (516) |
| Summer        | 30.5% (398) |
| Academic Year | 1.6% (25)   |
| No response   | (281)       |

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## Race/Ethnicity

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|                                     |              |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| White                               | 82.6% (1309) |
| Multiracial                         | 3.1% (49)    |
| Black or African-American           | 2.4% (38)    |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | 0.3% (5)     |
| Asian                               | 2.8% (44)    |
| Hispanic/Latino                     | 3.0% (47)    |
| Native American                     | 0.4% (6)     |

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## Travel-Related Questions

### Had You Traveled Abroad Prior to Your AIFS Program?

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|     |             |
|-----|-------------|
| No  | 25.8% (391) |
| Yes | 74.2%       |

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### Breakdown by YES response type:

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|  |             |
|--|-------------|
| With family on trips or vacations                          | 42.0% (677) |
| With a school group  | 12.0% (186) |
| Gap year after high school                                 | 1.4% (24)   |
| Short-term study abroad while in college                   | 4.5% (68)   |
| Semester (or longer) study abroad program while in college | 1.6% (24)   |

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|                                   |            |
|-----------------------------------|------------|
| Other (e.g., lived, worked, born) | 9.8% (145) |
| No response                       | (69)       |

**Traveled Within Host Country While Abroad:**

|     |                |
|-----|----------------|
| YES | 88.4% (1401)   |
|     | Summer 80.7%   |
|     | Semester 90.8% |

**Traveled Outside Host Country While Abroad:**

|     |                |
|-----|----------------|
| YES | 80.5% (1275)   |
|     | Summer 57.0%   |
|     | Semester 89.8% |

**Foreign Language Study**

57% of survey respondents studied in a non-English-speaking country

**Of these students:**

45% reported having studied their host country language prior to traveling abroad

18% of these students were majors/minors in the host country language

25% responded that as a result of studying the language of the host country while abroad, they continued studying that language upon their return home

8% reported that as a result of studying a foreign language while abroad, they chose to study a third language upon their return home

## Programs Represented in the Survey Responses



### **Argentina**

Buenos Aires

### **Australia**

Cairns

Sydney

### **Austria**

Salzburg

### **Canada**

Montreal

### **China**

Nanjing

Traveling

### **Costa Rica**

San Jose

### **Czech Republic**

Prague

### **England**

Cambridge

London

Oxford

### **Europe**

Traveling

### **France**

Cannes

Grenoble

Paris

### **Germany**

Berlin

Frankfurt

### **Hungary**

Budapest

### **India**

Hyderabad

### **Ireland**

Dublin

Limerick

Shannon

### **Italy**

Florence

Perugia

Rome

Traveling

### **Mexico**

Guanajuato

Playa del

Carmen

### **Netherlands**

Amsterdam

### **Peru**

Cusco

Lima

### **Puerto Rico**

San Juan

### **Poland**

Krakow

### **Russia**

St Petersburg

### **South Africa**

Stellenbosch

### **Spain**

Barcelona

Granada

Salamanca

Santander

## Survey Background

In May 2012, AIFS Study Abroad sought to survey its alumni across all countries and program lengths. Since the AIFS system had a data break-point of 1990 (with prior records being much less accessible), we used 1990 as the “starting” year for alumni surveyed. The survey was first emailed to 16,076 alumni, which produced 641 responses within a two-week period. Those 641 alumni were then removed from the address list before the survey was mailed to 19,048 alumni. The mailing included a paper survey with reply envelope, as well as a web link and unique code alumni could use to complete the survey online. The final response count was 764 from the emailed survey, and 862 from the paper mailing (of which some used the web link to complete it online). With 1,584 total responses (out of 19,689 alumni), this reflects an 8% return rate.

The 5-page instrument contained questions to establish year abroad, program location, length, class year, accommodation type, academics including language study, internship or service activity, and prior travel and language study. Optional biographic information was requested, including race/ethnicity, highest level of education attained, and current field of work. The survey was sent to some participants who, given their participation from only a year prior, may still have been college students (and thus may not have yet entered the workforce or started their career).

The sections on impact posed questions in the areas of Cultural Understanding & World View (7), Professional & Career Development (10), and Personal Growth & Values (13) on a 5-point Lickert Scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree [see appendix for full set of questions].

## Survey Design Weaknesses

There are some points that should be noted as possible biases or weaknesses to this study. Since the research studied AIFS college alumni, it is important to note that the findings pertain only to this population, and those who respond to this type of survey may also have a bias in their affinity for the program. The survey cover letter was sent from the Executive Director of AIFS Study Abroad—who is unknown to students—and this fact might have affected the response rate. Another point is that fewer alumni from before 2000 responded to the survey than we had hoped. While the mechanics of collecting a high volume of “comments” can be challenging, we will seek to include more such qualitative information in future surveys.

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