



# **INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AS A CAREER ASSET:**

Exploring the Earnings Impact  
of Education Abroad Participation



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# Executive Summary

The personal, professional, and academic benefits of education abroad are widely touted, but in a competitive job market sometimes what students, parents, and institutions really want to know is how it influences the bottom line. To find out, The Forum on Education Abroad collaborated with business schools across the U.S. to compare starting salaries after graduation for undergraduate business majors that studied abroad with the starting salaries of their counterparts who did not.

The findings: Students who study abroad earn higher starting salaries after graduation. When raises, bonuses, retirement contributions, and salary offers for future jobs all use current salary as their baseline, the compounding effects of a higher starting salary after college can mean millions more in earnings over the course of a career.

## Key Insights

-  **Higher Starting Salaries:** Students who studied abroad earn on average \$4,159 more in their first job after graduation than those who did not.
-  **Benefits for Students Across the Achievement Spectrum:** Education abroad participation isn't just for the straight A students—and the salary bump that comes with leveraging an international experience in one's career is observed among B and C-average students, as well.
-  **Finding the Education Abroad Program That Makes Sense:** Starting salary differentials for education abroad are observed among students who participate in all kinds of program formats in countries across the globe.

## Why This Matters:

**For Employers:** Education abroad alumni in your candidate pools are demonstrating competencies you value enough to pay them more. Investing in education abroad can be a strategy to close the skills gaps in your recruitment pipeline.

**For Colleges and Universities:** Making education abroad available to your students pays dividends after graduation. Increasing access can increase the number of students who yield a strong ROI on the education you've given them.

**For Students and their Families:** Studying abroad is worth the investment. Choose an education abroad program that fits your needs and interests. Learn all you can while you're abroad. Reflect and prepare to articulate what skills you've developed through the experience. That way, you, too, can reap the salary benefits when you go to the job market.



## Education Abroad & Undergraduate Business Studies

Since at least the 1980s, business schools at U.S. colleges and universities have been engaging their students in education abroad, international internships, and other international experiential learning formats in order to build international understanding among U.S. graduates so that they can be prepared to be competitive in a global workforce.<sup>1</sup> Then as now, they understood that education abroad is an effective way<sup>2</sup> to develop the skills and competencies that employers rank as essential for job success, including: creative/critical thinking, problem-solving, resiliency/adaptability, communication, and teamwork as top skills for job success.<sup>3,4</sup> For more than 25 years, business and management consistently ranks among the top majors for education abroad participation nationally.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centers for International Business Education and Research. (2020). *About CIBER Program*. <https://us-ciberweb.org/about/>

<sup>2</sup> Wiers-Jensen, J., Tillman, M. & Matherly, C. (2021). "How education abroad impacts the transition to graduate employment," in Ogden, A.C., Streitwieser, B., & Van Mol, C., eds. *Education Abroad Bridging Scholarship and Practice*. Routledge. 135-149.

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum (2025). *The Future of Jobs Report 2025*. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/digest/>

<sup>4</sup> Gray, K. (2024). "What Are Employers Looking For When Reviewing Students' Resumes?" *NACE National Association of Colleges and Employers*. <https://naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/what-are-employers-looking-for-when-reviewing-college-students-resumes>

<sup>5</sup> Institute of International Education. (2024). "Fields of Study of U.S. Study Abroad Students, 2000/01-2022/23." *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. <https://www.opendoorsdata.org>

Business schools also consistently track their alumni's first employment after graduation and the compensation they are offered for that role by keeping in touch with alums and asking them to self-report. They do this because a number of important business school rankings<sup>6</sup> factor the return on investment (ROI) into their scoring system. The combination of these two well-established processes at business schools makes them a great source of information to explore the ROI of education abroad, as well.

## Methods

Four business schools at large, public universities in four different states across the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Southeast, and West Coast regions of the United States participated in this study. Each school offers a portfolio of education abroad programs that vary in length, location, and format—from two-week, faculty-led experiences to summer-long internships to a year abroad on exchange. Participants who studied abroad in all world regions are represented in the dataset, with the most common region being Europe, in keeping with national trends.

Participating institutions worked across their colleges to combine data collected by the education abroad office with data collected by career services and provide The Forum with anonymized answers about their recent undergraduate business alumni:

- How much did the student earn as their starting salary in their first job after graduation? Calculate this based on starting base salary.
- What year did the student graduate?
- What was the student's grade point average (GPA)?
- Did the student study abroad? If so, how many times?

A subset of partner institutions (two each per question) were able to share additional information about their students' post-grad employment and education abroad experience(s), including:

- What year did they study abroad?
- What type of education abroad program did they participate in?
- Where did they study abroad?
- How long did they study abroad?

The 7,487 students in our sample graduated between the years 2021 - 2025. 1,651 participated in education abroad prior to graduating. 5,836 did not.

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<sup>6</sup> Including: [Bloomberg](#), [Financial Times](#), [U.S. News and World Report](#)



Descriptive statistics are provided for the starting salaries of students who studied abroad and those that did not. These averages were submitted to an independent two-tailed t-test to test for a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Descriptive statistics are also provided for each of the supplemental program categories.

## Starting Salary Differentials

Alumni who studied abroad on average earn \$4,159 more as their starting annual base salary compared to those who did not. This represents a 6.3% earnings differential for education abroad participants.

**Table: Alumni Starting Salaries, Education Abroad vs. Did Not Study Abroad**

Alumni Group	Average	Range	Standard Deviation	n
Education Abroad	\$70,224*	\$12,868 - 150,000	\$17,166	1,651
Did Not Study Abroad	\$65,986	\$24,000 - 976,667	\$21,692	5,833

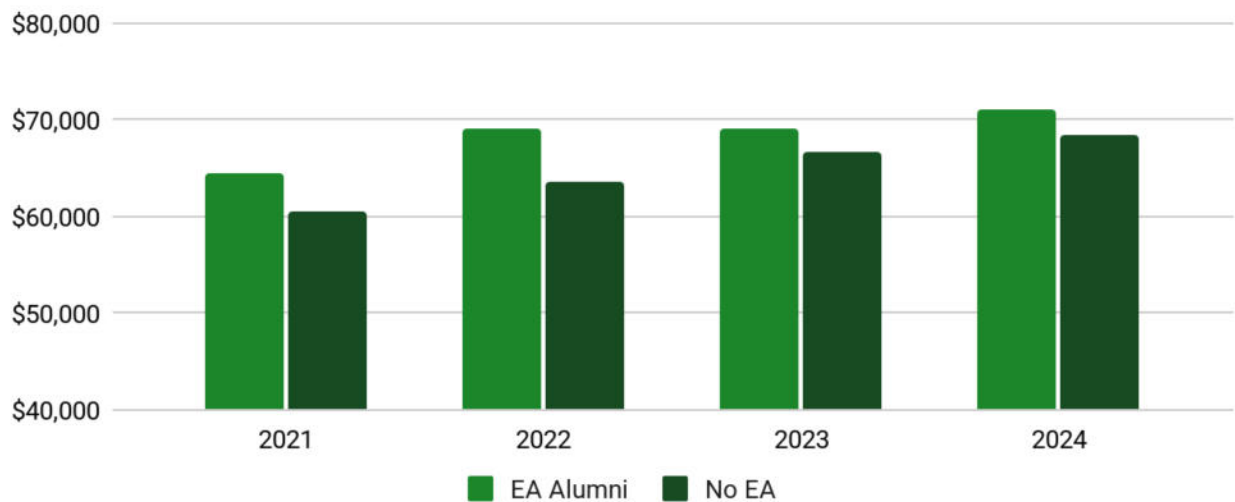
\* The difference between Average Starting Salary of Education Abroad Participants and Alumni Who Did Not Study Abroad is statistically significant,  $t(7482)=7.3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

To ensure that these differences were not driven by economic shifts or anomalies in a given graduation year, we can look at the year-by-year comparison for graduates over the last five years. Here, we observe that the trend in higher earnings for education abroad participants is consistent across 2021 through 2024.<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that both groups, and especially the education abroad alumni, outperform projections for average salary for undergraduate business majors in 2024.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Participating institutions shared the data available to them on August 15, 2025. At that time, career services centers were still gathering first destinations data from 2025 graduates. Two institutions provided their year-to-date data for 2025, the other two were unable able to share data for any 2025 graduates. Bearing this in mind, we chose to include the available 2025 graduate data in the 5-year dataset to ensure that we are drawing conclusions based on the largest and most current dataset available. However, we do not present 2025 data as a standalone measurement of alumni outcomes for the year in this report.

<sup>8</sup> Gray, K. (2025). "Class of 2025 Salary Projects Mixed." National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). <https://www.nacweb.org/job-market/compensation/class-of-2025-salary-projections-mixed>

**Chart: Average Starting Salaries of Alumni by Graduation Year**



## An Advantage at All Achievement Levels

There persists among many the false impression that only the “best” or highest achieving students study abroad, which may lead some to interpret the differences in starting salaries can be attributed to the general predisposition towards excellence among the education abroad alumni group. To test that hypothesis, our participating institutions provided GPA information to accompany the starting salary data in our dataset. Each of these institutions place grades on a four-point scale.

Actual student GPAs were coded into discrete categories using a typical letter grading scale common among U.S. institutions:

A = 3.85 - 4.0

B = 3.3 - 3.5

C = 2.3 - 2.7

A- = 3.7 - 3.85

B- = 3.0 - 3.3

C- = 2.0 - 2.3

B+ = 3.5 - 3.7

C+ = 2.7 - 3.0

D/F < 2.0

Starting salary data were then compared between education abroad alumni and non-education abroad alumni at each GPA level. The results show that:

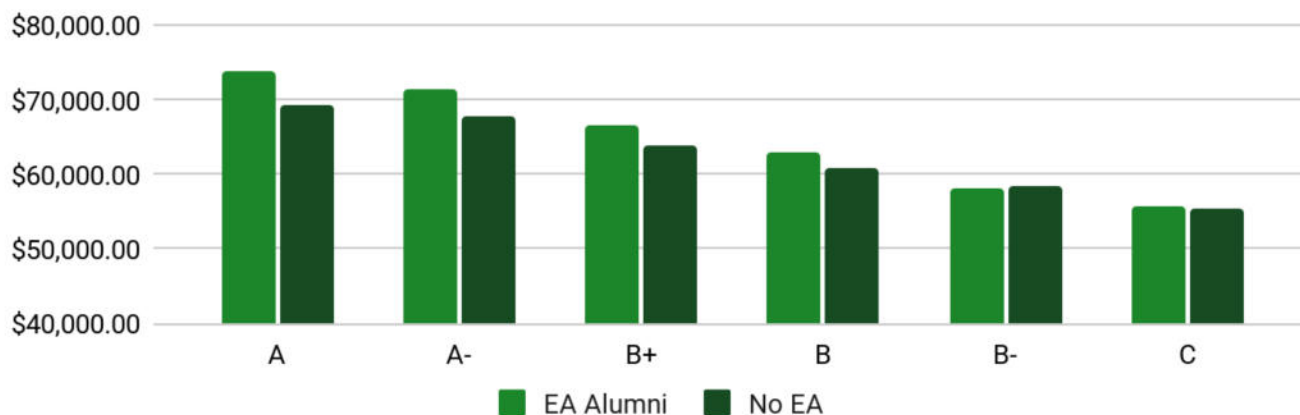
- Students study abroad across a wide range of GPA achievement levels, with only students who are failing or at risk of failing (GPA of 2.3 or less) not appearing in our dataset.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Many institutions either prohibit or strongly discourage students from participating in education abroad at the lowest GPA levels.



- The starting salary differential shows up even for education abroad alumni on the low (C) and average (B) positions on the achievement scale.<sup>10</sup>

**Chart: Average Starting Salaries of Alumni by GPA**



## Choosing the Right Education Abroad Program

Students and their families make so many choices during their higher education about which opportunities to pursue and invest in. They ask themselves questions like *Will this help me get a job after graduation? How will it set me up for success in my career and to build the life I want?* Study abroad comes with its own set of choices. *Where? When? What kind of program? For how long?*

When all these questions collide, it can be overwhelming to students who are trying to make the right choice and hard to find evidence to inform them. We used the information we were given about the education programs our alumni participated in to explore whether the salary ROI might help elucidate these tough choices.

What we learned: Among the alumni in this dataset, the benefits of choosing to study abroad over not studying abroad are observed regardless of program location, format, duration, how many times the student studied abroad, or when the student participates in education abroad during the course of their undergraduate education. Moreover, the difference between time to employment for alumni who did study abroad (79 days) and those who did not (81 days) is not significant  $t(2769)=0.49$ ,  $p = 0.6$ . Studying abroad doesn't mean having to forego or delay success on the job market.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Due to small n among EA alumni in the C range, alumni with C+, C, and C- GPAs were analyzed together (n = 51). All other groups have >100 students.

<sup>11</sup> See *Appendix for Practitioners* at the end of this report for more details.

## The Takeaways

**Education abroad is a worthy investment for students and their schools.** In the last five years, alumni who studied abroad earned more than those who didn't in their first job after graduation.


**Employers are willing to invest in students who have had education abroad experiences because they bring valuable skills and experiences to the workforce.** Whether or not they are consciously hiring and negotiating salaries with awareness of a candidate's education abroad participation, the fact that students with this experience earn more suggests that something resulting from the experience is making a lasting impression. Employers who are more aware of the connection between education abroad participation and the skills they need on their team can be more effective in their recruitment.

**It doesn't have to be a hard choice.** Studying abroad yields benefits no matter how you slice it. There's no evidence of a magic formula for choosing an education abroad program that pays off more or less in future, so students should be encouraged to pick a program that works for them and go out and make the most of it.

## Contact Us



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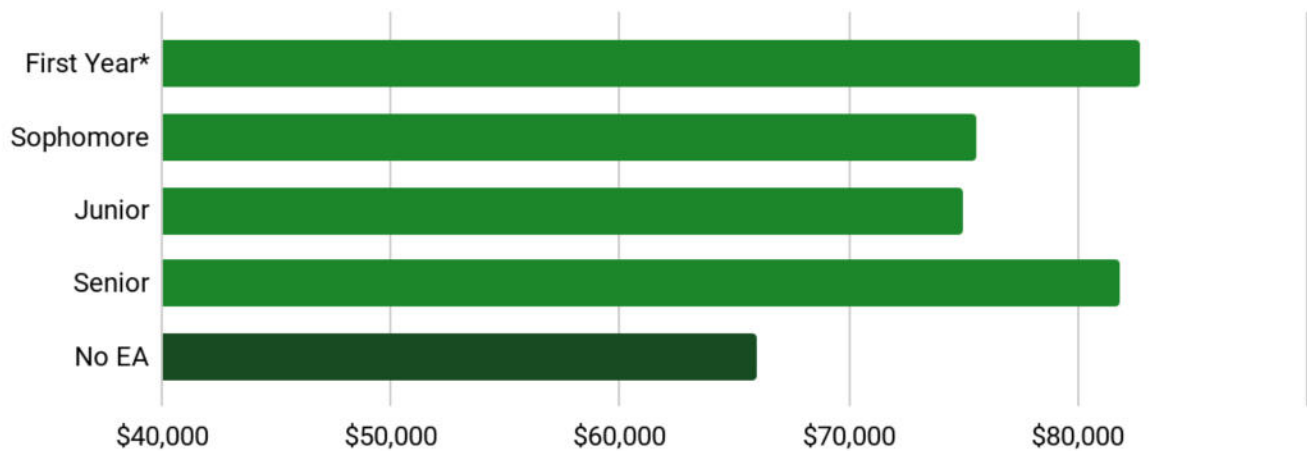
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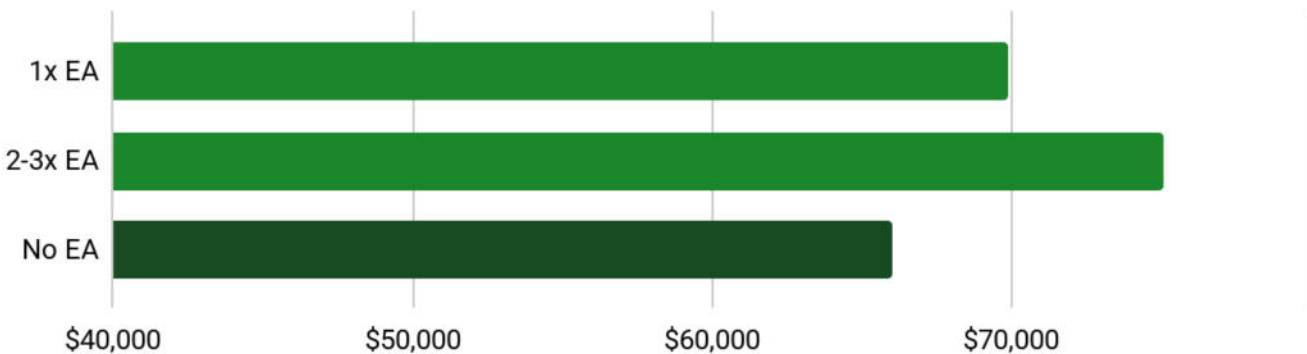
# Appendix for Practitioners: Exploratory Data by Program Design Elements

**Chart: Starting Salary by Year in School of Education Abroad Participation**

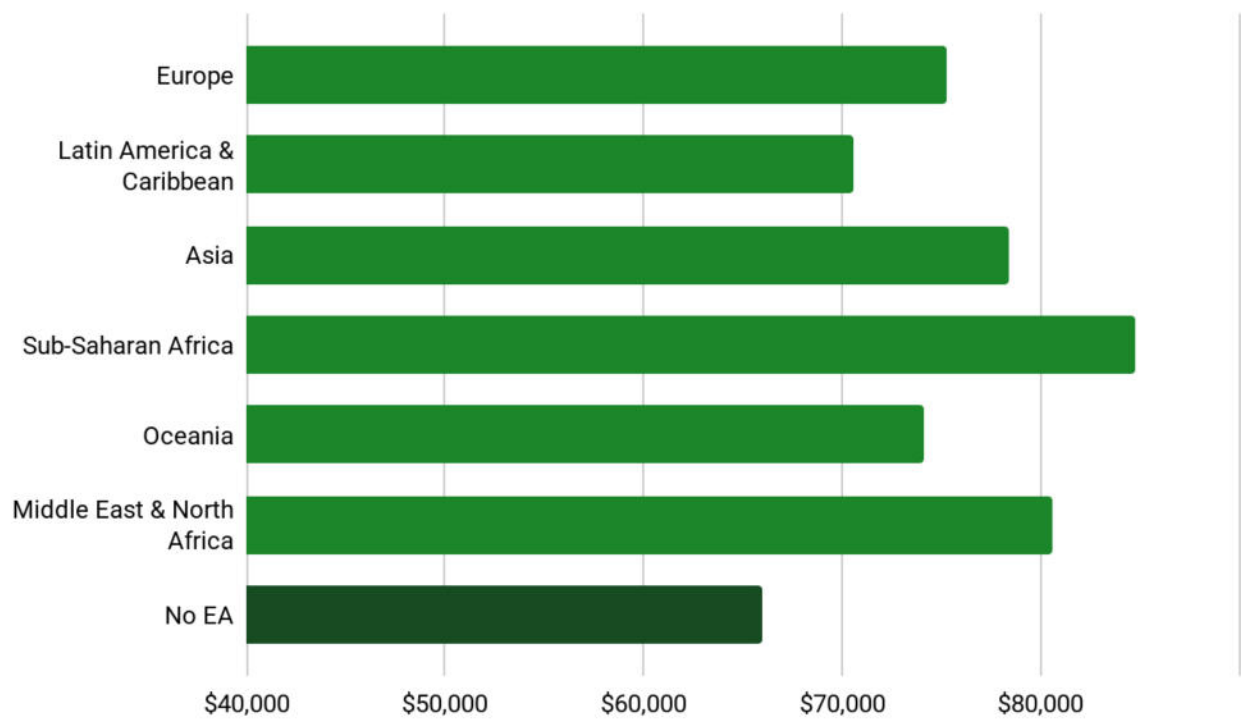


\*Only 8 alumni in this dataset participated in first-year programs. All other categories contain 50 alumni or more.

**Chart: Starting Salary by Number of Education Abroad Programs**



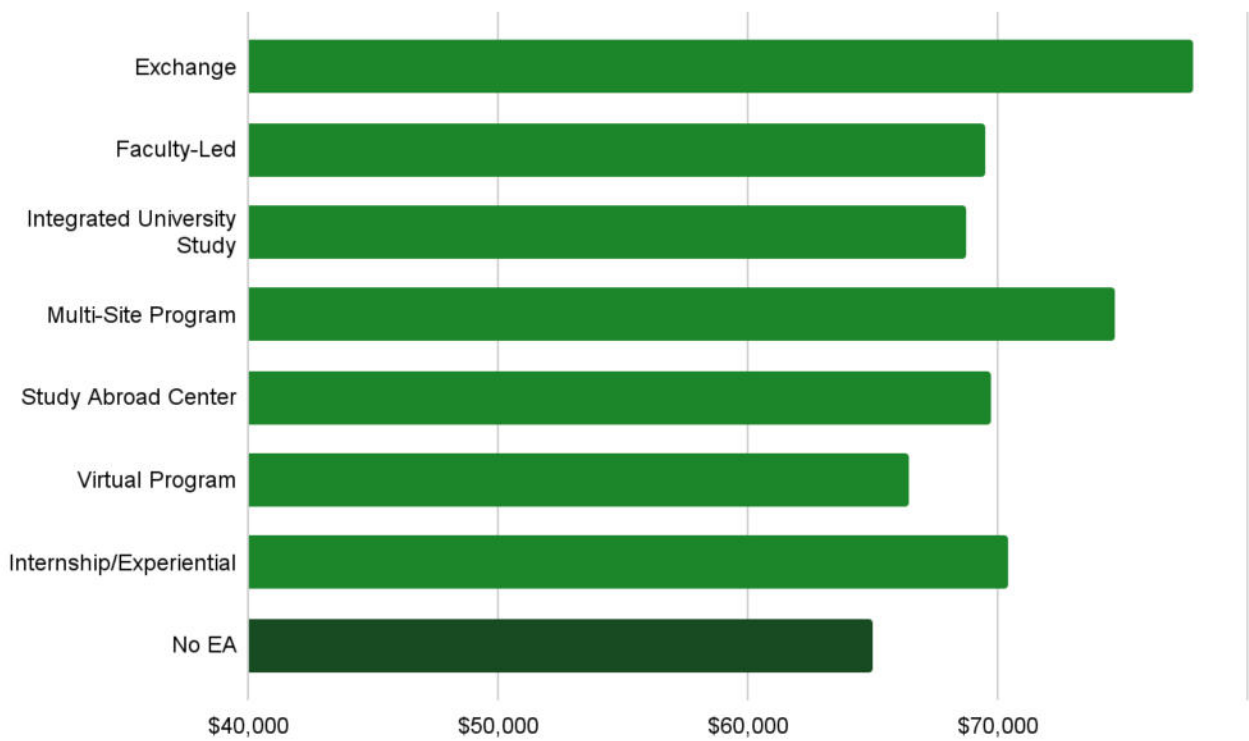
**Chart: Starting Salary by Program Location (World Region)**



**Chart: Starting Salary by Program Duration**



**Chart: Starting Salary by Program Format**



## Thanks to Our Participating Institutions



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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**W** UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

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