



CREATING GLOBAL CITIZENS: THE AFS EFFECT

The Impact of an AFS Exchange on Life and Career
A Report on a Global AFS Alumni Survey - November 2019





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AFS MISSION & ACTIVITY

AFS Intercultural Programs is an international, voluntary, non-governmental, non-profit organization that provides intercultural learning opportunities to help people develop the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to create a more just and peaceful world. As a core program, AFS offers secondary school exchanges through a global network of organizations located in 60 countries.

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INTRODUCTION

The AFS global community has countless testimonials of how our alumni, students, volunteers, families, and others are making a positive change in their communities. These stories are a true inspiration and a testament to the important impact our organization is creating worldwide. Our hope is that our exchange students become changemakers through their study abroad experience with significant contributions to the global corporate and non-profit sectors, while benefiting from the intercultural learnings and meaningful connections long after they return home. All AFS participants are active global citizens in the making, representing their countries as cultural ambassadors, each helping drive the AFS mission forward - the mission of building a more just and peaceful world.

While the impact of AFS and studying abroad in general have been examined in the past through various research projects, this report is the first large-scale, global survey of the AFS alumni community based on responses from over 10,500 former AFS participants. It aims to explore the effect an AFS experience can have on the lives and careers of our alumni while investigating the impact of secondary school mobility globally. The study also includes real-life examples from our former participants of changes alumni can bring to their local communities thereby furthering the AFS mission worldwide. The results of this global survey demonstrate that AFS alumni are making an impact across industries, working on social causes, and contributing to their home and host countries alike. That is what we call the #AFSEffect.

KEY FINDINGS



According to 87% of alumni, their AFS program helped them become active global citizens. Additionally, 88% of respondents said their exchange helped them connect with people from different backgrounds long after returning home. 83% also indicated that their study abroad experience motivated them to better understand challenges and issues facing the world.



AFS alumni are highly likely to volunteer after their exchange program. Overall, 60% of AFS alumni report that they volunteer for AFS or for another organization. The most common types of organizations former participants volunteer for include youth, cultural, sport, educational organizations and churches.



AFS helps participants be prepared to work in a global environment. 90% of respondents indicated that their exchange program helped them better communicate and collaborate with people from different cultures and backgrounds, while 84% said AFS helped them develop the ability to adapt in a diverse workplace environment.

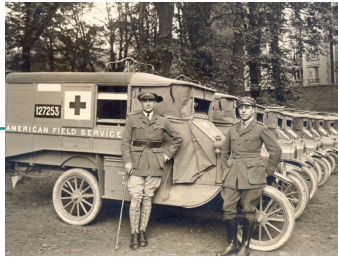


AFS alumni demonstrate fast progress in their professional lives. While the responses came from a relatively young group of alumni (67% are 40 years old or younger), 79% of all respondents have already filled a mid-level or higher position in their respective field of work, with 26% of alumni reaching senior and 20% executive status.

100+ YEARS OF AFS

1915

A. Piatt Andrew volunteered as an ambulance driver for the American Ambulance Hospital. At the time of Andrew's arrival, the ambulance drivers at the Hospital ferried patients from the train stations in Paris to hospitals around the city. In March, Andrew successfully negotiated with the French Army to have some ambulance sections of the Hospital work closer to the front lines of battle. These ambulance sections came to be known as the "American Ambulance Field Service."



1917

The Réserve Mallet was the collective name for the truck units engaged in the transportation of supplies for the French during World War I. Volunteers were recruited for the units beginning in April 1917, the same month the United States entered the war. Shortly after establishing the truck units, the organization changed its name from the American Ambulance Field Service to the American Field Service (AFS.)

1939

AFS was reactivated as a volunteer ambulance corps shortly after the start of World War II in 1939 under the leadership of Director General Stephen Galatti. The first unit of Americans sailed from New York on March 23, 1940, and joined men who had already volunteered in Europe. After the German invasion and the establishment of Vichy France in June 1940, AFS halted service in France.



1941

AFS officially aligned with the British military and Free French forces in 1941. As World War II progressed, the AFS volunteer ambulance drivers served alongside French, British, Polish, Australian, New Zealand, Indian, and South African troops in the Middle East, North Africa, Italy, Germany, India, and Burma, and again in France with the First French Army. By the end of the war, the 2,196 ambulance drivers had carried more than 700,000 wounded.

1946

AFS Director General Stephen Galatti and AFS Drivers from both World Wars founded a secondary school student exchange program to perpetuate international friendships in peacetime. The following year, the first group of secondary school AFS Participants from France, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Norway, England, and Syria arrived in the United States on a scholarship program.



1948

29 AFSers embarked on the first, 24-day bus trip through 22 states across the United States. Participants included students from the new secondary school exchange program, in addition to those on the university fellowship program. One of the purposes of the bus trip, which continued in following years, was to interest Americans in providing scholarships and hospitality for future AFS Participants.

1950

The Americans Abroad (AA) Summer Program was initiated, thanks to the work of AFS alumni helping develop new programs in their home countries. The first nine students from the United States spent a few months living with families in France, which had the largest number of AFS Returnees at the time. By 1951, the AA Summer Program had expanded into seven countries in Europe; and in 1957, AA Participants had the option to spend several months abroad and attend foreign schools in a wide variety of countries.



1960-70

Throughout the 1960s the AFS participants continued to meet with U.S. presidents in Washington, D.C., before heading back to their home countries at the end of their stay abroad. The presidents lauded the organization for its contributions to U.S. public diplomacy efforts, and often directly addressed the role of AFS Participants in promoting a more peaceful world. In 1971 the AFS Multinational Program began, allowing students to travel to and from countries other than the United States.

1989

Four national organizations (Australia, Denmark, Italy, and Switzerland) became the first AFS Partners to become separate legal entities from the AFS headquarters in the United States. The “Articles of Partnership” were approved by the AFS International Board in 1990 and stated that each AFS Partner is bound by a separate agreement with AFS International. In 1993, the partnership structure was officially established in all national units, including the United States.



2004

The AFS Foundation was established in Zurich. It endeavors to preserve the AFS legacy and holds the AFS name and logo. AFS World War II Driver and Life Trustee Ward Chamberlin, Jr. noted that the founding date was the 40th anniversary of the death of Stephen Galatti, founder of the post-war student exchange programs. The AFS Foundation was dedicated to the memory of Galatti and “the worldwide struggle for peace to which he devoted his life.”

2014-2015

AFS commemorated its centennial. From the founding of the American Ambulance Field Service in April 1915 to more than 450,000 former AFS Participants in its centennial year, AFS celebrated its continuation as a volunteer organization daring to create change and dedicated to building an inclusive community of global citizens determined to build bridges among cultures.



TODAY

As an international, voluntary, non-governmental, nonprofit organization AFS provides intercultural learning opportunities to help people develop the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to create a more just and peaceful world. By linking our “learning to live together” philosophy to the defining global issues of the 21st century, AFS is dedicated to building an inclusive community of active global citizens.

DATA & METHODOLOGY

Data for the alumni study was collected between November 2018 and March 2019 via an online survey consisting of 52 questions around demographic information, academic and professional life, outlook on the world and respondents' current connection with AFS Intercultural Programs. For data collection the method of convenience sampling was used. "A convenience sample is a type of non-probability sampling method where the sample is taken from a group of people easy to contact or to reach. This type of sampling is also known as grab sampling or availability sampling. There are no other criteria to the sampling method except that people be available and willing to participate" (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012).

For the distribution of the alumni questionnaires, we relied heavily on the national AFS organizations who utilized their local alumni network connections, as well as their local social media presence. The surveys were also shared via email with an existing list of alumni and posted on different AFS social media platforms. Facebook has proven to be especially useful during the data collection process. We gathered over 10,500 responses, the majority of which (71%) were collected through social media posts, while email invitations resulted in 29% of responses.

ALUMNI RESPONDENT PROFILE

In terms of gender, the sample is generally reflective of our overall participant composition with 68% of responses coming from female alumni, 29% from male respondents, with an additional 0.4% indicating "other" as their gender and 2% expressing their preference not to select a gender category for themselves. While respondents have participated in an AFS exchange anytime between 1947 and 2018, our sample is relatively young, with 67% of all respondents 40 years old or younger.

The majority (85%) of respondents participated in an AFS high school year or semester abroad program, our most popular core program offering across the AFS Network where students are hosted by volunteer families, they attend a local public school, participate in orientations and intercultural trainings. Furthermore, the national AFS organizations with the largest operations (in terms of participants) received the highest number of responses, including AFS Intercultura in Italy (1,145 responses), AFS-USA with 837, AFS France with 493, and AFS Thailand collecting feedback from 444 former participants. Former participants from over 80 countries responded to our survey accounting for 89% of the countries where AFS has program activity.



"AFS was a defining experience for me. During my year I came to understand who I was and what I stood for. That couldn't have happened without the support from my host family and school friends, many of whom I still have contact with 45 years later. It changed my life and opened my eyes."

- Diana Desmond,
New Zealand to USA



"My AFS experience never ended. An amazing year gave me lifetime personal and professional friendships across the globe. It gave me the social skills and, more importantly, the cross-cultural openness to be an accepted and effective leader, mentor and team player in international health programming."

- Louis Niessen,
Netherlands to USA



10,500
AFS ALUMNI
RESPONSES

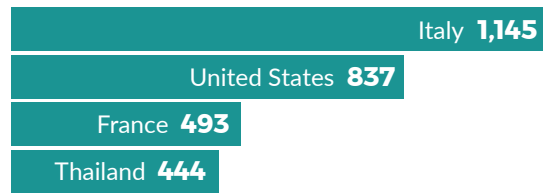
80
COUNTRIES
WORLDWIDE



GENDER



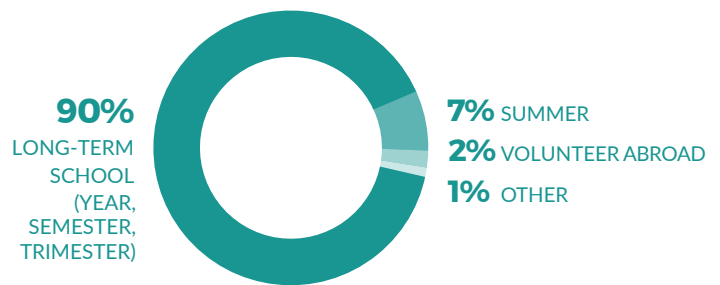
TOP NATIONALITIES



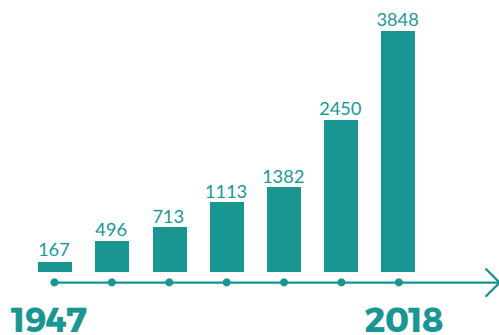
AGE



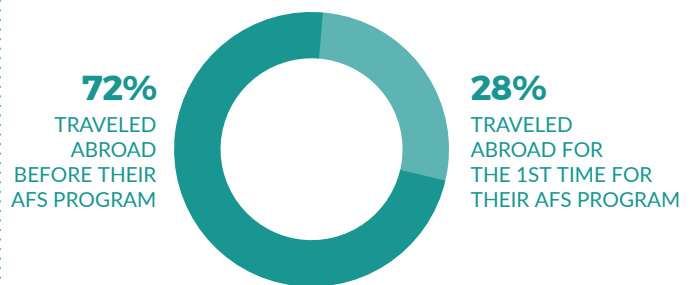
PROGRAM TYPE



SURVEY RESPONDENTS



TRAVEL EXPERIENCE



ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE & TRAJECTORY

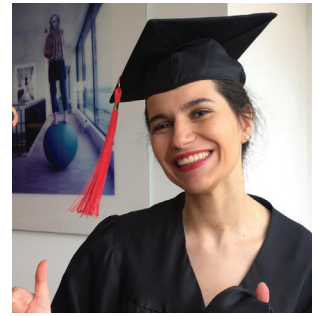
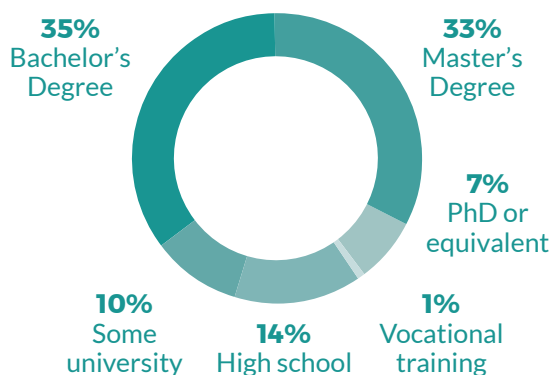
AFS programs provide young people with immersive international experiences while supporting them with structured and facilitated intercultural learning journeys that lead to global competence. This educational component of our programs reinforces several 21st century education goals, including building critical thinking and problem-solving skills. AFS programs also encourage students to learn and respect differences and to find strength in diversity, while gaining experience in communicating across cultures in a mindful way. All of these program aspects can help students excel academically from a young age.

AFS alumni are part of a highly educated community. As shown in the “Highest level of education” chart below, 75% of all respondents have completed (57%) or are on their way to complete (18%) a Bachelor’s, Master’s or PhD program. By contrast, the share of young adults with a tertiary education in OECD and G20 countries stood at 22% in 2015 (OECD, 2018).

24% of respondents have received a Bachelor’s degree while 11% are currently working towards earning one. A slightly larger percentage of AFS alumni (28%) have earned their Master’s degree while around 5% are currently enrolled in a Master’s program. Finally, 5.5% of AFS alumni hold a PhD or equivalent diploma with 1.5% still working to receive one.

Due to the relatively young sample of alumni, almost 5% of respondents were enrolled in a high school program at the time of providing feedback to our questionnaire.

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION

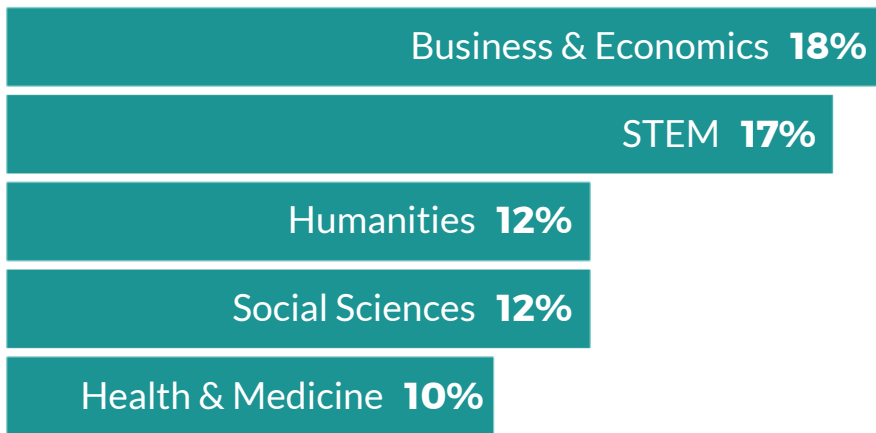


“The year I won my scholarship to study for a year in South Africa, my life changed. I decided to study and work in the Netherlands to pursue an LLB and an honors degree there. I just graduated in July 2019. Currently, I am working on a government project in Indonesia.”
 - Elena Carrieri, Italy to South Africa



“I am a young journalist, educationalist and motivational speaker from Kwale, Kenya. Alumnus of the YES Program. I am passionate about servant leadership and change-making. I have unending enthusiasm about inclusive and participatory learning and education reforms in the school system.”
 - Amani Nuri, Kenya to USA

TOP 5 FIELDS OF STUDY



LANGUAGE LEARNING ABROAD

Traditionally, language learning has been a significant driver of students pursuing a study abroad experience. A study published by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) supported this notion by emphasizing that majority of their student respondents (70%) indicated they would select a country for their exchange “where their primary language (...) is not widely spoken” (CBIE, 2016, p. 44). The same study also quoted 74% of students saying their study abroad program helped them acquire foreign language skills (CBIE, 2016). Our global alumni study has found an even higher percentage of respondents - 82% - indicating that their exchange experience helped them become fluent in a foreign language. Interestingly, age does not seem to have an effect on respondents’ perception around language acquisition abroad, the percentage of former students expressing that their exchange was helpful in becoming fluent in a foreign language stays consistent across age groups.

AWARDS & SCHOLARSHIPS



AFTER THEIR AFS EXPERIENCE, **31%** OF ALUMNI RECEIVED AN ACADEMIC OR PROFESSIONAL AWARD OR SCHOLARSHIP

Top awards and scholarships:

1. Merit-based university scholarships
2. Erasmus scholarships
3. Government-sponsored scholarships
4. Fulbright Student Program scholarship

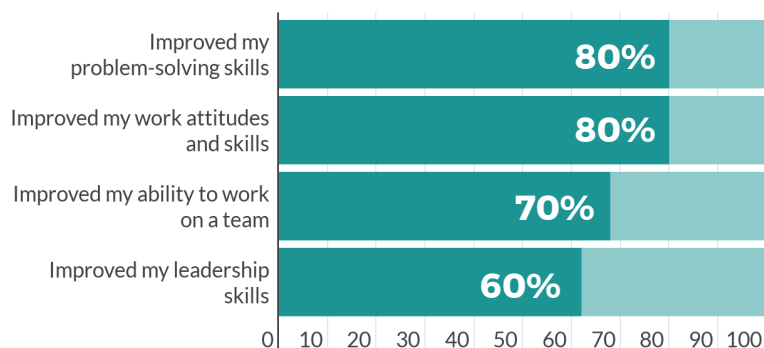
IMPACT ON PROFESSIONAL LIFE

It has been widely recognized that study abroad experiences help students develop a wide range of skills, including intercultural & communication skills, being open to new challenges, problem-solving skills, and improved decision-making. In 2017 the Institute of International Education published a research report demonstrating that “studying abroad gave [students] both a broader understanding of career possibilities, and the confidence to pursue these career paths. The survey data and the information (...) suggest that studying abroad had unintended benefits in terms of not only developing skills and shifting attitudes, but also opening career pathways and opportunities that had been either previously unknown or simply unconsidered. It also helped participants feel more ambitious and less tentative in their careers” (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017, p. 5-6). The same study has also showcased the positive impact exchange experiences have on developing a wide range of 21st century professional skills, including “intercultural skills, curiosity, flexibility & adaptability, confidence, self-awareness, interpersonal skills, communication, problem solving, language, and tolerance for ambiguity” (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017, p. 5).

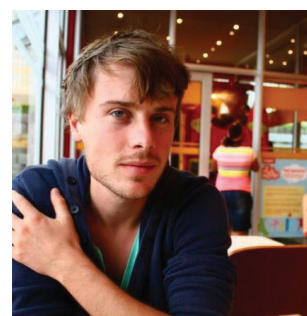
In designing our AFS alumni survey tool, we followed the 21st century skills outlined by Farrugia and Sanger (2017) measuring the impact of a secondary exchange experience on communication & collaboration, adaptability, problem-solving skills, teamwork, leadership skills, and work ethic or attitude.

Around 80% of respondents indicated that their experience helped them improve their problem-solving skills and work attitudes. Close to 70% of alumni agreed or strongly agreed that their exchange program made them a better team player, while more than 60% said that their AFS exchange program improved their leadership skills.

GAINING 21st CENTURY SKILLS



“I am a world citizen, passionate about different cultures with the AFS mission at heart. Since graduating I worked with NGOs, governments and intergovernmental organizations helping them to achieve their vision of youth development in more than four countries.”
- Rita Saias, Portugal to Norway



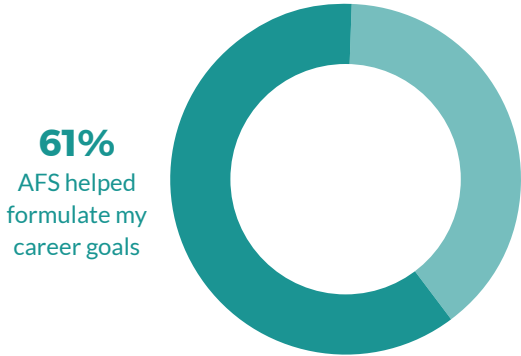
“AFS was my gateway to the world. As a teenager I had rarely left my hometown. Motivated by my AFS transformation I pursued a degree that would show me more of the world. After living in Portugal, South Africa and the Netherlands, I am now living in Tanzania. Thanks to AFS, I could build a career in international development cooperation.”
- Felix Braeckman, Belgium to Bolivia

The vast majority of respondents credited their AFS experience for helping them become ready to work in a global environment. Better communication and collaboration with people from different cultures and backgrounds was the top-rated professional benefit of an AFS program (90%), followed by the ability to adapt in a diverse workplace environment (84%). 62% of respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that their AFS program helped them understand their workplace culture.

PREPARATION FOR A DIVERSE WORKPLACE



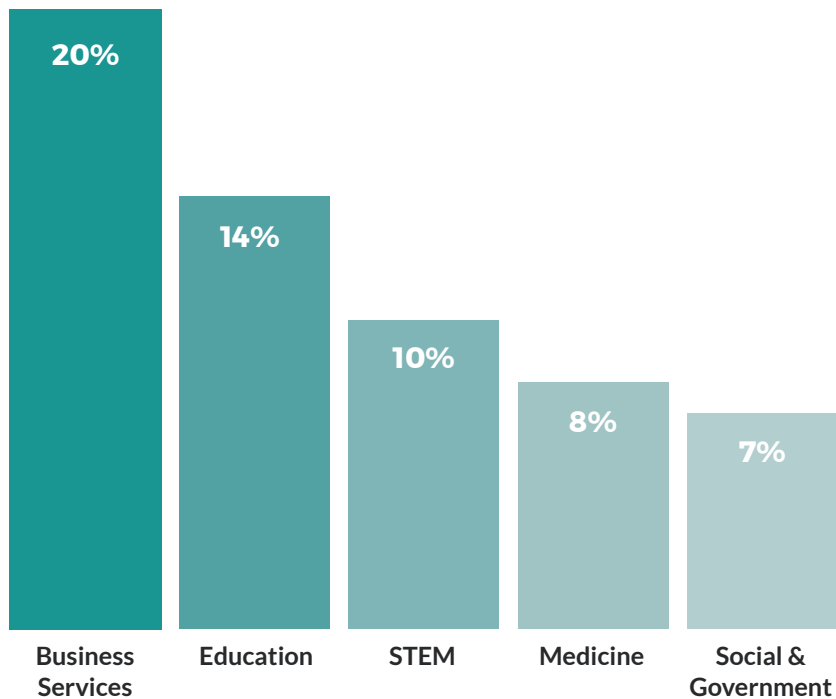
A majority of the alumni respondents (61%) agreed or strongly agreed that their AFS abroad program played an important role in helping them formulate their career goals.



20% of responding AFS alumni work or worked in business services (including finance, law, marketing, etc.), while a relatively high percentage (14%) dedicated their life to education. 10% of respondents are part of the STEM industry (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), followed by medical professionals (8%) and social and government employees (7%).

To broaden the access to intercultural learning opportunities for students interested in STEM fields - and hopefully increase the percentage of future AFS alumni in STEM - AFS has been partnering with BP, a global energy company, to offer scholarship opportunities for secondary school students with demonstrated interest in STEM fields and making a global impact. Interestingly, studies have demonstrated that STEM students value study abroad experiences as an opportunity to gain “soft” skills that others in their field lack (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017).

TOP 5 FIELDS OF EMPLOYMENT



“I am still enjoying my Latin American adventure that began with AFS in Ecuador in 1972. I have spent most of my career in Mexico and Nicaragua, and even now, back in the United States I work predominantly with Latino families as a school psychologist.”

- Kim Freidah, PhD,
USA to Ecuador

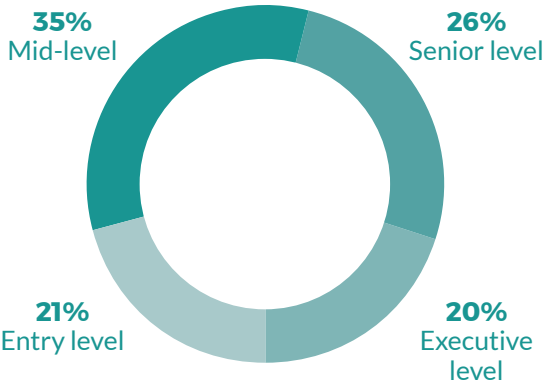


“I currently serve on the Board of Experts at an Indonesian foundation for intercultural learning. The international exposure has led me back to the US later for further studies. During my career that spans over 25 years, I’ve worked with people from all walks of life and diverse backgrounds. Thanks to AFS, I’m now a global citizen.”

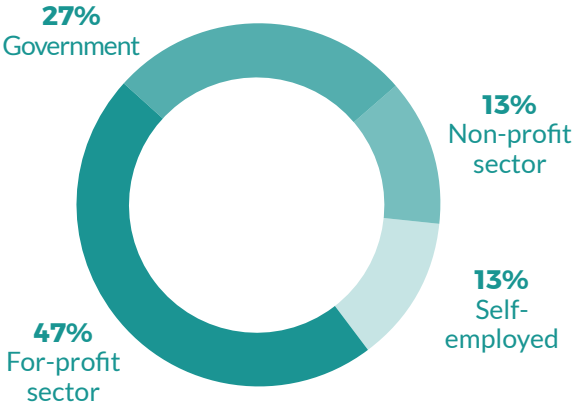
- Andries Sibarani,
Indonesia to USA

AFS alumni demonstrate fast progress in their professional lives. While the responses came from a relatively young group of alumni (67% are 40 years old or younger), 79% of all respondents have filled a mid-level or higher position at work with 26% of alumni reaching senior and 20% executive levels at work. Out of the alumni respondents in executive level positions, 52% serve or served in CEO roles.

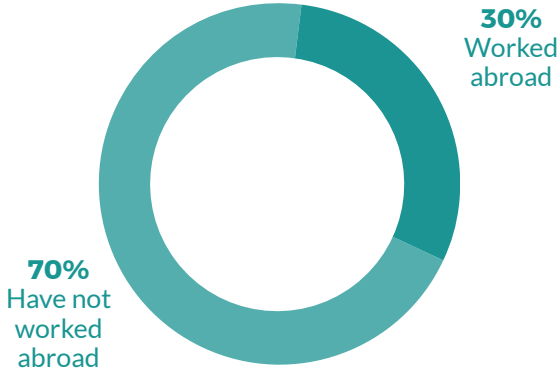
HIGHEST POSITION



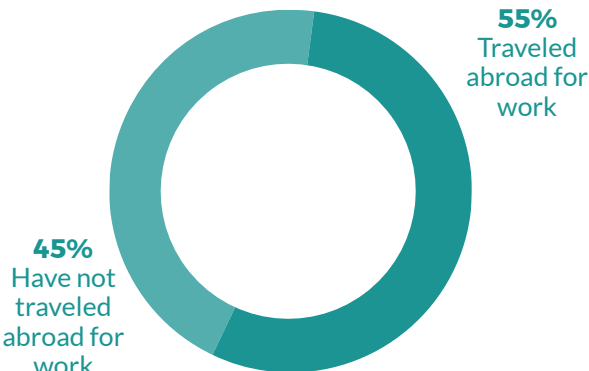
EMPLOYMENT SECTORS



WORKED ABROAD



TRAVELED FOR WORK



OUTLOOK ON THE WORLD

According to Clarke et al. (2009) “students who study abroad may have greater intercultural proficiency, increased openness to cultural diversity, and become more globally minded than those students remaining in a traditional campus setting” (p. 173).

AFS aims to foster a similar impact by encouraging everyone in our global community - from students & host families to staff & volunteers - to promote intercultural understanding. AFS programs are specifically designed to include an intentional intercultural learning component to help AFSers learn firsthand about the impact of culture on values and the decisions they make, to help them gain the ability to better see themselves through the eyes of others, to challenge assumptions, and broaden views on stereotypes and global issues.

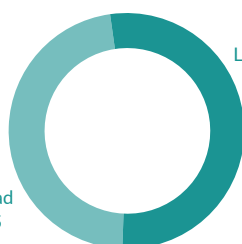
87% of respondents say that their AFS experience helped them become a global citizen, to have the capacity to examine and understand local, global, and intercultural issues. More than half (53%) of alumni respondents have also lived abroad after their AFS experience.

GLOBAL CITIZENS



87%
AFS helped me become a global citizen

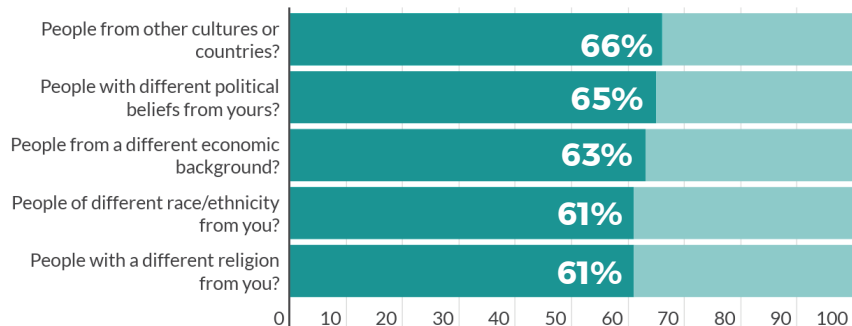
LIVED ABROAD



53%
Lived abroad after AFS

The majority of AFS alumni said that they interact with diverse groups of people often or very often, both at work and in their personal lives. Over 60% of alumni interact with people different from them in terms of culture, political beliefs, economic standing, race/ethnicity, and religion.

CONNECTING WITH OTHERS



“As I always say, I was a nobody before my AFS year and became somebody after. AFS showed me the diverse and beautiful cultures of the world. It opened my eyes to new and wider perspectives.

AFS is the best! Social Worker. Advocate. Brother.”
- Abdul Rahman Alongan, Philippines to USA

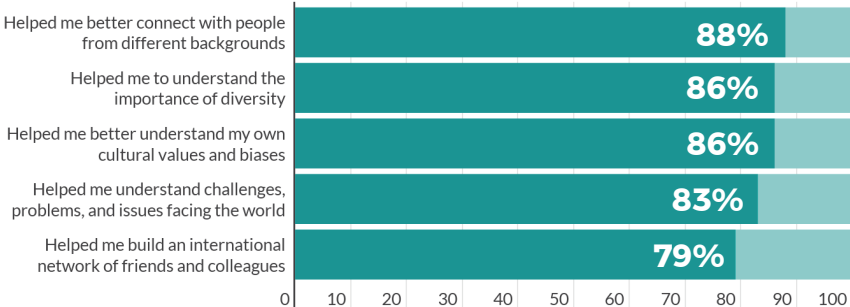


“I am forever grateful for the experience of living in and getting to know a family in a society so different from my country’s since it has given me an understanding of peoples’ differences and similarities that I wouldn’t have otherwise. It’s given me a helpful perspective of diversity to keep in mind at work and in my everyday life.”

- Nina Rosenlund, Norway to Guatemala

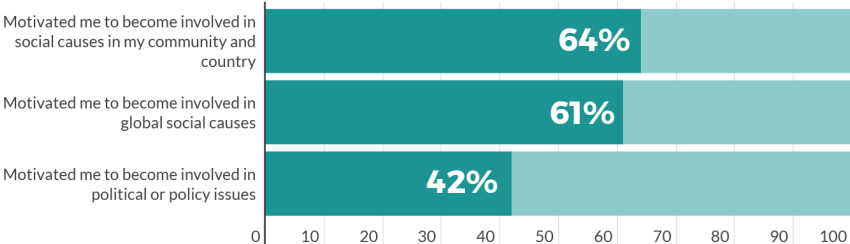
According to the data collected via our alumni survey, the majority of our former participants were able to benefit from and enjoy the long-term impact of this intercultural learning component of our programs. For example, similarly to the professional impact outlined before, a majority of AFS alumni (88%) say their study abroad experience helped them achieve better connections with people from different backgrounds in their social life. Through their study abroad programs, alumni gained a high level of understanding of the importance of diversity or different people living and working together (86%) and of their own cultural values and biases (86%). A high percentage of alumni respondents (83%) indicated that their AFS experience helped them become more aware of challenges and issues facing the world. The majority of our alumni (79%) also built an international network of friends and colleagues through AFS.

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCES & CHALLENGES



Furthermore, more than half of the respondents said their exchange experience motivated them to become more involved in social causes on the local (64%) and global level (61%). Finally, 42% indicated that their AFS program motivated them to become involved in political or policy issues.

INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL ISSUES



At its core, AFS aims to build long-standing relationships that foster peace and understanding. This is why, in 1946, AFS Director General Stephen Galatti and AFS volunteer ambulance drivers from both World Wars founded a secondary school student exchange program intended to perpetuate international friendships in peacetime. The following year, the first group of secondary school AFS participants from France, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Norway, England, and Syria arrived in the United States on a scholarship program. In our alumni research, we wanted to evaluate if and how AFS experiences helped build long-term connections.

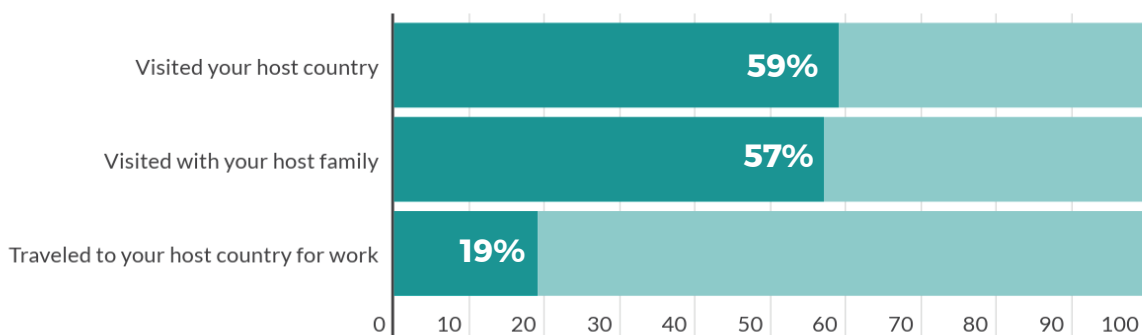
59% of respondents said they have visited their host country after their exchange experience, while 57% noted to have kept in touch with their host families after they returned home. This result underlines the crucial role host families play in helping AFS drive its mission forward by creating unique experiences and long-term connections. Interestingly, a significantly lower percentage (19%) of respondents returned to their host countries for professional reasons. This percentage might seem insignificant compared to international graduate retention figures on the post-secondary level. However, when we consider that secondary exchange students are in some cases as young as 15-16 years old at the time of their program, this figure becomes more remarkable. It shows that close to one out of five students return to their host country to work after their study abroad experience.



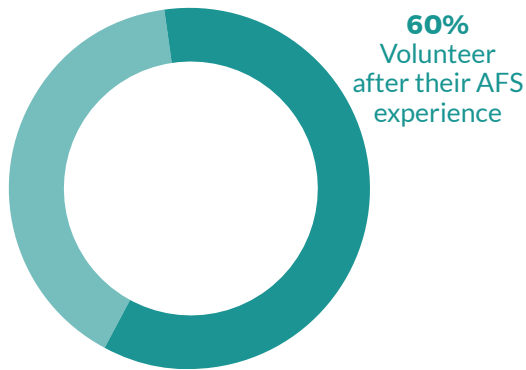
"AFS changed my life (...) I met people from all over the world, I gained another family and we are still in touch after 39 years. I married an AFSer and my three children followed in our footsteps crossing the ocean to live their own AFS experiences. The challenge of living in another culture teaches you to accept others, to understand that humankind is diversely beautiful!"

- Bibiana Neves,
Portugal to USA

HOST COUNTRY CONNECTIONS



VOLUNTEERING



As a volunteer-based organization, it is a pivotal part of our mission to pass down the spirit of volunteerism to our participants. Overall, 60% of AFS alumni report that they volunteer for either AFS or for another organization, or both. The most common types of organizations our alumni volunteer for include youth, cultural, sport, educational or religious organizations. The most frequently mentioned organizations respondents volunteer for include AFS (35%), the Red Cross, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, AIESEC, Rotary, and local university associations.

20% of our alumni respondents also provided crucial volunteer service to AFS by becoming host families for AFS participants, making volunteer-based homestay exchanges possible.

When looking at volunteer trends by country, India, France, Indonesia, the United States, and Canada showed the highest percentage of volunteers among their respondents volunteering with either AFS or another organization, or both.

CONCLUSIONS

American Field Service ambulance drivers founded AFS secondary school student exchange program in 1946 with the aim to build bridges across cultures through international experiences at a young age. Their mission was “to foster intercultural understanding to help create a more just and peaceful world.” This report demonstrates how AFS alumni continue to honor the legacy of our drivers by connecting with others across differences and volunteering to do social good. Inspired by the work of our alumni, AFS is adding new elements to our program to ensure more of our participants realize their social impact ambitions and support our mission. To guide our work, we recently formed the “AFS Theory of Change.” According to this theory, providing young people with immersive intercultural experiences, supporting them with structured and facilitated intercultural learning journeys, and giving them real-world social impact and changemaking exposure through activities will help AFS empower more active global citizens.

Examining the impact of our study abroad programs beyond the academic, professional and social aspects outlined before, there are certain themes that were frequently expressed by our respondents around the long-term impact of participating in an AFS program. The top three areas of impact mentioned by AFS alumni were:

1. Becoming more open-minded
2. Gaining new perspectives in foreign situations and environments
3. Building new, long-lasting friendships while abroad.

When asked about the most beneficial part of their AFS exchange experience, the overwhelming majority of our respondents cited gaining new friendships and confidence while on the program. These benefits are why, we believe, 98% of our alumni would recommend an AFS exchange programs to students in their local communities.

“Having grown up in a village in the Swiss Alps the step to move to Tokyo for one year took a lot of courage. Not only did the AFS experience open a door to a new culture, but it also widened my outlook on my own culture. It improved my self-confidence and made me more open-minded”

- Seraina Ungricht, Switzerland to Japan

“My AFS experience was a mark on my life, to live two different realities made me think and realize that the perspectives we have from different places and cultures are totally different once you really interact with them. To be able to see what do we have to change to be better human beings is what I value the most from my AFS journey.”

- Sergio Prudencio, Bolivia to Germany

“AFS has taught me how strong I am. I believe my time on exchange prepared me for life, more than any school could. I’ve made life-long friendships and now have multiple families across the world. My children have lots of aunts and uncles from different cultural backgrounds that enrich their lives”

- Frances Deacon, Australia to Czech Republic

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Sheryl Hilliard Tucker & Andrea Kammerer

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All other photographs are courtesy of the Archives of the American Field Service and AFS Intercultural Programs.

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