

BRANDON ERNST

TECHNOLOGY FOUNDER WORKING ON AI POLICY AND DIGITAL FINANCE

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SUMMARY

I have built software businesses since 2011: Brand on Fire LLC, a web and digital-strategy agency, and Gaucho Plugins, whose Stripe-based WordPress payment tools serve 10,000+ active users. Before that I worked in USAID's Asia Bureau and served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Senegal. I am now an MBA/MPP dual-degree candidate at the University of Maryland, working on the governance of AI systems and digital payments; Graduate Assistant at the School of Public Policy from Fall 2026.

EXPERIENCE

Brand on Fire LLC | Founder | Dec 2011 – present | Remote

- Manage 60+ websites for small and midsize enterprises worldwide and build seven WordPress plugins serving 10,000+ active users.
- Lead digital strategy and web development for clients in the United States, China, Germany, and other markets across technology, services, and infrastructure; translate client priorities into scalable technical roadmaps and develop WordPress ecosystem partnerships.

Freemius | Head of Marketing | Feb 2019 – Mar 2021 | Remote

- Led a six-person cross-functional team during 30–40% year-over-year growth in revenue and client acquisition; built partner and affiliate programs and negotiated WordPress ecosystem partnerships.
- Published 17 articles for plugin and theme businesses on pricing, payments regulation (SCA/PSD2), onboarding, and distribution.

SCHORISCH Gruppe | Consultant | Apr 2018 – Dec 2019 | Hamburg, Germany

- Advised executive leadership on digital outreach to policymakers and waterway-infrastructure decision makers; applied 360-degree virtual reality, drone imagery, and 3D mapping to infrastructure visualization and project monitoring.

U.S. Peace Corps | Volunteer | Feb 2016 – Jul 2017 | Senegal

- Coordinated community economic development, agriculture, and public health initiatives for a 14-volunteer cohort; designed digital-literacy curricula for local government officials.
- Organized and led a summer leadership camp, in partnership with other volunteers, for young women focused on professional development and gender equity.

Education First | Head English Teacher | Jun 2015 – Jan 2016 | Ningbo, China

- Engaged with the sales team, teachers, parents, and students to facilitate group learning activities.
- Improved a wide array of lesson planning and classroom management resources for other teachers.
- Facilitated feedback discussions between staff and teachers to improve learning outcomes.

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) | Program Assistant, Asia Bureau | Dec 2013 – Dec 2014 | Washington, DC

- Supported the Assistant Administrator and Asia Bureau in overseeing \$1.2B+ in U.S. humanitarian and development programs across 20+ countries; produced executive briefings and decision memos.
- Coordinated with the White House, the State Department, Congress, interagency partners, and global development stakeholders; prepared senior leaders for Congressional testimony, speeches, media engagements, and high-level meetings.

EDUCATION

University of Maryland | MBA/MPP Candidate (dual degree) | Expected 2029 | College Park, MD

- Graduate Assistant, School of Public Policy, from Fall 2026.

Dominican University of California | B.A., Political Science (International Political Economy); B.A., Business Administration (Management) | 2008 – 2012 | San Rafael, CA

- Graduated cum laude with Honors distinction.
- President, Leadership Fellows Program.

FELLOWSHIPS & PROGRAMS

Institute for International Public Policy (PIIA) | Fellow | 2010 – 2012 | Washington, DC

- Nationally competitive fellowship preparing students for international careers through exposure to international organizations, intensive language study, and public policy education.
- 2011 Maryland Leadership Institute, University of Maryland School of Public Policy: seven-week immersion in economics, statistics, policy analysis, and leadership.
- 2010 Junior Summer Policy Institute, Howard University: seven-week immersion in economics, public policy, and national security, with site visits to 20+ Washington organizations.

Middlebury College Summer Intensive Language Program | Mandarin Chinese (2013, Kathryn Davis Fellow for Peace); German (2025) | 2013, 2025 | Middlebury, VT

- Intensive Chinese Language School, 2013, as a Kathryn Davis Fellow for Peace.
- Intensive German Language School, 2025.

United Nations Intensive Summer Study Program | Participant | 2012 | Seton Hall University, NJ

- Week-long program on the political dynamics of the United Nations, with sessions led by practitioners in multilateral diplomacy.

ESCEM School of Business & Management | Semester study abroad | 2010 | Poitiers, France

- Fully funded by the Institute for International Public Policy; continuation of business studies at the École Supérieure de Commerce et de Management.

PUBLICATION

Ernst, B., Sooreea, R., Gokcek, G., & Spain, D. (2014). The economic impacts of United Nations peacekeeping operations: growth versus level effects. *International Journal of Public Policy*, 10(1/2/3), 100–117.

<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJPP.2014.059564>

Lead author; presented at the International Studies Association 54th Annual Convention, 2013.

LANGUAGES

English (native); **Spanish** (professional working proficiency); **German** (limited working proficiency; Middlebury intensive study, 2025); **Mandarin Chinese** (elementary proficiency; Middlebury intensive study, 2013); **French** (elementary proficiency); **Wolof** (elementary proficiency).