Program Outcomes Assessment

A View from our Alumni (2003-2012)

AIFS Foundation
Academic Year in America
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Foreword

International education is a fundamental pillar of U.S. foreign policy and critical to advancing U.S. strategic interests. It has been that way since 1961 when the Fulbright-Hays Act enabled cultural and educational relations as a vehicle for mutual understanding for people of the U.S. with people around the world. Thus, the U.S. Department of State has had a mandate for more than 60 years to encourage and support international education programs. As a career diplomat, I have observed personally how these programs foster not only ties of friendship and understanding, but also promote economic and diplomatic engagement between countries, even as they help to prepare the future workforce to meet global challenges.

Programs developed by the U.S. Department of State under the Fulbright-Hays mandate include not only the flagship Fulbright Program, which provides opportunities for Americans and citizens of over 155 other countries to study, teach, and conduct research abroad, but also youth exchanges such as the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study Program (YES) and the Future Leaders Exchange program (FLEX). These programs welcome high school students to the U.S. from Eurasia and predominantly Muslim countries and were developed in response to major world events: the collapse of the Soviet Union and the events of Sept. 11, 2001. In addition, private sector high school exchange programs bring approximately 26,000 students to the U.S. annually.

A leading private sector provider of international youth exchange programs, the AIFS Foundation is an administrator of these two U.S. State Department sponsored high school exchanges. Similar to AIFS Foundation’s Academic Year in America (AYA) program, students live with American host families, attend high school, engage in activities to learn about American society and values, and help educate Americans about their countries and cultures. Program alumni return home to share their experiences and new insights, helping to promote better understanding, as well as international engagement in their societies and communities.

The work of NGOs such as the AIFS Foundation to provide high quality international education programs for both American students and international students is key to exposing as many youth as possible to universal values and new perspectives, as well as to encouraging long-term international interests and engagement. That they are having an important, positive impact on participants, their families and communities is evidenced by the results of the AIFS Foundation outcomes study described in the following pages, studies conducted by the Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Office of Policy and Evaluation, as well as a large body of research gathered over time.

I commend the exemplary efforts of the AIFS Foundation Academic Year in America team and extend my appreciation for your many valuable contributions to field of international educational exchange.

Best wishes for many more years of success.

Ambassador Adam Ereli
Former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs
Introduction

As the AIFS Foundation nears its 50th anniversary in 2017, it decided to commission a program outcomes study of the AIFS Foundation's flagship program, Academic Year in America (AYA), to gather alumni reflections on how the program has influenced their lives. This report describes and analyzes how alumni regard the impact of their AYA program on their personal development and the lasting connections that continue to enrich their lives today. It seeks to verify the common understanding that youth exchange programs that include living with a volunteer host family and attending a U.S. high school for a semester or a year have a profound and lasting impact on their participants.

International student exchange programs emerged more than 70 years ago as a way to spread good will and peaceful relations, particularly following World War II. Programs enabled secondary school students from different nations to share their cultural heritage, language, and perspectives with one another. Some of the earliest established high school exchanges were bilateral programs between the U.S. and Germany, the U.S. and Japan, and France and Germany. Today, student exchange is a worldwide, multilateral phenomenon. Each year thousands of high school students participate in exchange programs, living and learning in countries all over the world, returning home with important new insights into themselves, their host countries, and their home communities.

Per an independent research study of the AFS high school exchange program, the impact of these programs is a stable one, remaining with the students long after they return home. In addition, by tracking a control group, the study showed that these impacts are not found in the ordinary educational experience of secondary students in their home countries. (Hammer Consulting: an "Educational Results Impact Study" [2005] and a "Long-Term Impact Study" [2008]).

As a result of participating in exchange programs, students commonly express a desire to continue learning about the world at large with a new appreciation for the complexity of society, including their own. Their exchange programs have not only provided them with broader global perspectives, but also strengthened personal qualities and skills important to leaders, such as self-confidence, tolerance, and communication skills. Thus, it is not surprising that many prominent individuals in government, business, industry, NGOs, international organizations, and judiciaries all over the world participated in student exchange programs at some point during their lives.1


“The shape of the world a generation from now will be influenced far more by how well we communicate the values of our society to others than by our military or diplomatic superiority.”

Senator J. William Fulbright, 1964
International education contributes to stronger diplomatic and economic relations.

Student exchange organizations are admired for the role they play in public diplomacy, also called “soft diplomacy,” and for their technical expertise in delivering international education to secondary students. Via public-private partnerships, their experience and know-how are accessed by government agencies interested in sponsoring programs. For example, the U.S. Department of State funds several notable exchange programs for secondary students, among them the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange Program, the YES program, and the FLEX program. The programs are administered by reputable student exchange organizations, including the AIFS Foundation, and allow large numbers of students to benefit from the experience of cultural immersion programs on full scholarships. Similarly, the core programs of AIFS Foundation and its NGO peers bring thousands of privately funded students to the U.S. annually. All of these students, whether funded by scholarships or privately, serve as youth ambassadors of their countries and cultures, enhancing and deepening mutual understanding across international borders.

The scholarship programs were established based on the premise that grass-roots interaction, established via educational exchange programs, provides important and lasting opportunities for connection, dialogue and mutual understanding. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Fulbright Program in Russia, US Department of State Undersecretary Tara Sonenshine stated, “By helping us all achieve our God-given potential, and by doing things like sending American students abroad or bringing international students to the United States to study or share information about their culture, we hope we develop a deeper understanding of one another’s values and principles. We call these activities public diplomacy because it’s about people understanding and connecting with people.”

These exchanges are valued as a means to create a foundation of trust with other people, which policy makers can build on to reach political and economic agreements. As the following pages will confirm, they demonstrate shared common values across international boundaries. They affirm that Americans care about such things as family, faith and education just as much as people in other countries and societies. The relationships created are lasting, endure beyond changes in government, and include influential members of foreign societies who are not necessarily reached through traditional diplomacy. Programs reach young people, elites and non-elites, educate Americans on the values and sensitivities of other countries, and prepare a new generation for an interconnected and global economy.

As the role of soft diplomacy in an increasingly interconnected world becomes more significant, keeping a record of qualitative and anecdotal information of program outcomes will continue to have great value because it provides perspective on how programs affect lives. This evidence reinforces what most experts believe intuitively to be true: International learning opportunities, in whichever form and at whatever stage in life, have transformational effects on individuals and communities.

While exchange programs encompass all ages, teenagers are ideally suited to living and studying overseas.

- The earlier in life a second language is acquired through cultural immersion, the quicker fluency is achieved and with a less noticeable accent.
- During teenage years, learning a new language is accelerated by unique social networks and close bonds that are frequently established among peers in a short amount of time.
- Teenagers usually have the flexibility and adaptability needed to live within a second culture but also the maturity to be away from home for a prolonged period of time.
- Teenagers are young enough to become active members of a new family and are expected to assume this role by their program organizers and host families.
- The intensive, multi-faceted learning and confidence building that takes place during an exchange encourages youth to broaden their thinking about the world and the opportunities it holds.
Eight years have gone by since my high school experience in the US. This experience really shaped me as a person and almost all my decisions afterwards have in one way or another been influenced by this experience. I have gone on to do many other great things which have affected me profoundly and define my personality today. However, I wouldn’t have done any of them without the initial decision to leave home for the US that year. In a way, it has become the origin of who I am today.

Kerstin Bickelmann, 24, Germany
Executive Summary

In July 2013 a survey was sent electronically to 5,550 Academic Year in America (AYA) core program alumni and State Department funded grant program alumni in 20 different countries that included alumni from program years 2003-2012. The survey was designed to assess the impact of the AYA high school exchange program on students, families, and communities in the United States and at home and to evaluate how well the AYA program enriched personal growth and learning. In addition, it gathered data on the achievement of cross-cultural goals for students such as: learning about U.S. society and culture; sharing their own culture, traditions and views with Americans; developing a more nuanced understanding of the U.S. and of their own societies; strengthening leadership skills and community engagement; increasing their tolerance of and respect for differences; and establishing lasting bonds of friendship and mutual understanding. Based on the 839 completed surveys, which represent a 15 percent response rate, the program has had a significant impact on students in these areas. These results are comparable to those found in studies commissioned by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the FLEX and YES programs available here: http://eca.state.gov/impact/evaluation-eca/evaluation-initiative/completed-evaluations

This report describes and analyzes what alumni report regarding the impact of their AYA experience on their personal development, their growing understanding of the complexities of U.S. society, politics and culture, as well as that of their home countries, their choice of academic study and profession, and the lasting connections that continue to enrich not only their lives but also that of their families, friends and communities.

This report shares information about the AYA core program students, those students who come from the private sector to participate in the program. These observations have been compared to responses from 114 State Department funded grant program participants to show that the benefits of the program are similar for core program participants and grant program participants.
Survey Highlights

The major findings from the study clearly demonstrate the highly positive impact of the AYA program on the vast majority of its participants.

**Overall, AYA core students significantly:**

- Deepened their understanding of American people, values, and culture
- Shared new insights with their families, friends, and home communities
- Increased their appreciation for U.S. society and people
- Increased Americans’ understanding about other countries
- Enhanced their potential to assume leadership roles and increased their engagement in extra-curricular activities at home
- Increased their English language fluency, among other new skills
- Achieved greater comfort with diverse cultures and people
- Increased their friendships with people from other cultures
- Enjoy greater and more lasting intercultural networks

The long-term effects of a high school homestay experience was validated in a study of German and American students who participated in the Youth For Understanding (YFU) program in the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. The findings clearly support the premise that youth exchange experiences contribute to positive and long-lasting attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive changes in the majority of individual participants. Key findings include:

- An exchange experience enhances one’s international perspective.
- The effects of the experience include greater tolerance for diversity and appreciation for other cultures, supporting prospects for international peace and cooperation.
- Former exchange students apply what they learn and influence others.

Academic Year in America
Program Overview

To put this study into context, this section describes the Academic Year in America (AYA) program, goals, and applicant requirements.

Since 1981, each year on average 800 students from more than 40 countries have experienced America as AYA students. Like the federally funded YES and FLEX programs (see Appendix), AYA brings international high school students to the U.S. to live with American host families for a semester or academic year while attending high school. While improving their English, these young people share a cross-cultural exchange with their host families, schools and communities.

Students take a variety of courses in language, history, geography, mathematics, literature, and science. Extracurricular activities are also considered core to the learning process, and students are encouraged to participate in these. AYA monitors school performance and quarterly grades, and students are subject to the same academic and social rules as any other student in school. To remain in good standing with the program, a student must enroll in an appropriate English language or literature course and an American Studies course, and maintain a C+ or better average in all classes.

To qualify for the AYA program, students must be 15-18 years of age, have studied English for at least three years, have solid academic records, demonstrate maturity and adaptability to a new cultural environment, as well as the motivation to succeed in a U.S. high school environment. AYA students arrive in August for the 10-month academic year or for the 5-month fall semester program; or in January for the 5-month spring semester program. Grant funded students are required to have similar qualifications and, in addition, often come from underprivileged communities in their countries.

The goals of the AYA program are to:

- Encourage the education of young people about foreign cultures and languages by arranging for qualified individuals to live and study in countries different from their own.
- Encourage Americans to learn more about foreign countries, cultures, and languages.
- Create opportunities for cross-cultural friendships.
- Increase understanding of the United States, its people, culture and history among young people all over the world.
- Provide a solid educational experience for all participants in the program.
- Make participants better citizens of their countries through cross-cultural exchange of ideas.
- Continue to offer programs that are superior from both experiential and administrative perspectives.

AYA students come from more than 35 countries, including:

- Armenia
- Austria
- Azerbaijan
- Brazil
- Chile
- China
- Colombia
- Egypt
- France
- Georgia
- Germany
- Ghana
- Guatemala
- Hungary
- India
- Indonesia
- Italy
- Kazakhstan
- Kenya
- Kyrgyzstan
- Luxembourg
- Malaysia
- Mexico
- Moldova
- Mozambique
- Philippines
- Poland
- Russia
- Saudi Arabia
- South Korea
- Spain
- Switzerland
- Tajikistan
- Thailand
- Turkey
- Turkmenistan
- Ukraine
- Uzbekistan
There’s no “stereotypical American.” All Americans I got to know differed from each other. And that again is the most magnificent thing about the United States and its people. That by being all unique individuals they form a nation, that is different than any other country in the world. The USA really is the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Lisa-Marie Schmidt, 18, Germany
AYA Program Outcomes

Deepened Understanding

*Of American people, values, and culture*

Almost all of both grant and core program participants (98 percent) surveyed said their experience as an AYA high school exchange student provided them with a deeper understanding of American politics, society, and culture. To remain in good standing in the program, AYA requires students to take at least four academic subjects, including an American history/government course, possibly contributing to the high percentage of students who report significant learning in this area.

Students reported Americans were friendly, patriotic, optimistic, kind, helpful, open-minded, and tolerant. The majority of both grant and core (more than 75 percent) students said learning about American culture and lifestyle was one of their favorite parts of their study abroad program.

In addition, living in the United States dispelled many of the negative stereotypes of Americans and U.S. society that participants had before their exchange experience. Participants were impressed by the diversity of the American people, as well as the importance of family, friends, and religion. On the other hand, many were surprised by Americans’ limited knowledge of and interest in the world, their pride in their country, and their resistance to criticism about the United States. While many were impressed with the functioning of democracy and the level of freedom and equality in the United States, they also gained an appreciation of the challenges of a diverse and complex society.

Many students mentioned that the experience taught them that portrayals of American life on television and in movies is not an accurate representation of life in the U.S. Rather, American society was more complex than the common stereotypes. In general, a far more nuanced understanding of American society and people emerged as a result of the exchange experience. Many comments expressed a new sense of understanding that Americans as a people cannot be generalized.

*The U.S. is more complex than most Germans think. My high school year [abroad] still has a huge impact on my life. I couldn't go back to perceiving my world as I did before, I gained perspective."

Lavinia Reimann, 20, Germany

*The United States is really diverse, and cannot be judged merely by what we've seen in American movies or even only by what I've experienced in my exchange year."

Yueqi Zhu, 18, China

98% of both grant and core program participants surveyed said their experience as an AYA high school exchange student provided them with a deeper understanding of American politics, society, and culture.
Sharing New Knowledge and Insights

One of the goals of the AYA program is that international youths not only develop a greater sensitivity to and appreciation for American life, but they also stimulate Americans’ interest in other cultures and languages.

The survey data indicates that the vast majority of AYA students share their customs and cultures with their American host families and new American friends. In return, they gain a special understanding of America, its social and cultural diversity, the English language, and many other skills and insights which they bring home to their families, friends and communities.

“Everybody was really friendly with me and were very curious about Brazil and our culture. It was amazing having the opportunity to share more about my country with my friends and host family.”

Eduardo Henrique Azevedo, 18, Brazil

“This experience did not only affect me, but everyone I came in touch with. They learned from me almost as much as I learned from them. This was my way of paying back for everything I was able to experience. It was not always easy, but a year abroad is not about easy; it’s about understanding other cultures and making a difference in other peoples life.”

Marisa Timm, 20, Germany
Bringing the World to the U.S.

As a host country, communities in the U.S. are enriched by the new cultures and ideas AYA students carry with them. Almost all students surveyed said they had opportunities to share information and stories about life in their home countries with Americans while in the U.S. Although the evaluation did not involve data collection among Americans in the AYA students’ host communities, it is evident from participants’ responses that their frequent interactions, discussions, and other modes of sharing information about their home countries and cultures left a lasting impact on their American counterparts. Teaching Americans about their home countries is one way AYA students begin a dialogue with their American friends, and this dialogue increases understanding on both sides.

Exchange students are usually very active members of their new communities, engaging in activities that also provide them with many outlets to share their own cultures. Most AYA students participated in volunteer activities, attended sports or cultural events, and celebrated holidays with their American hosts. In its program pre-departure materials, as well as program orientation, AYA emphasizes the importance of extra-curricular activities as a core part of the learning process and encourages students to participate. Like their American peers, AYA students choose from a wide variety of sports, recreation and club activities. Options range from sports teams to cheerleading, bands, choral groups, school newspapers, yearbooks and community service organizations. Special interest clubs allow students to expand on studies in areas such as drama, science, debate and music.

In American high School you can take very interesting classes and participate in many school activities. The school spirit is completely different from German school spirit. You’re a part of something and the most important thing is: no one can ever take these moments away from you!”

Sonja Baulecke, 20, Germany
**Bringing the U.S. Home**

The knowledge and insights a student gains upon completing their study abroad program are vast and worth sharing with their friends, family and home community. And share they do – 98 percent of core students said they have shared their new understanding of the U.S. and its people with friends, family, and community back home. The majority of both core and grant students said they had more than 10 discussions with family and friends, hundreds of respondents reported giving at least one presentation at school, and many others gave presentations at community events and/or gave at least one media interview.

While it might be expected that a study abroad program would deepen a student’s understanding of their host country, the majority of both grant and core students (more than 72 percent) find the experience has a profound effect on their perception of home. The exchange experience provided them with deeper insights into their home country’s history, society, and culture. Some reported having a greater sense of pride in their countries and cultures, but also a greater awareness of their societies' complexities.

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**Enhancing home community understanding of the United States**

**After returning home, AYA Core students had...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At least one media interview</td>
<td>4.46%</td>
<td>57 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one presentation at a community event</td>
<td>5.71%</td>
<td>73 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one presentation at a school</td>
<td>27.68%</td>
<td>345 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 10 discussions with family/friends</td>
<td>62.16%</td>
<td>795 students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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“My high school exchange experience meant a lot to me, some people that I met in the U.S. are until this day very close to my heart. And after I came back to Brazil I was able to appreciate a lot more my country, my family and my friends.”

Juliana Agapito, 19, Brazil
98% of core students said they have shared their new understanding of the U.S. and its people with friends, family, and community back home.

"The most important thing I learned is to be an open person, tolerate different opinions and beliefs, but specially to appreciate my roots."

Andrea Gonzalez Aleman, 20, Mexico
Increased Appreciation for U.S. Society and People

Many students were surprised to find how much they enjoyed living in the U.S. and getting to know Americans. Some said they now realize that fully immersing themselves in another country’s culture was the only way to truly learn about it – and the experience yielded positive results.

Upon completing the program and a year after returning home, a large majority of both grant and core participants (more than 78 percent) had a “more favorable” view of Americans as a result of their AYA experience.

The graph below reflects how core students’ perceptions of Americans changed on specific topics after their study abroad program.

### Changing perceptions of Americans

#### AYA core students agreed strongly that:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Pre-program</th>
<th>Post-program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Americans are friendly and open</td>
<td>298 students</td>
<td>35.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americans have friends and acquaintances from different backgrounds</td>
<td>181 students</td>
<td>21.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americans express their personal opinions, even if they contradict those of authorities</td>
<td>182 students</td>
<td>21.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>268 students</td>
<td>31.94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures saw similar trends among grant program participants, with strong majorities agreeing that Americans are friendly and open, have friends from different backgrounds, believe they can make a difference in their society, and express their opinions. Each opinion saw a marked increase post experience.

A study abroad experience affects many more than just the student who lives it. They have the opportunity to bring home new insights, opinions, and perceptions to their friends and family in their home country. Students reported these new ideas encouraged a more positive outlook on the U.S.

In addition, participants have used their improved communication skills to inform friends, family, and community members about the United States and its people. The great majority of respondents believed these efforts have been successful, in that the people around them now have more positive and nuanced views of the United States and of Americans.
It's a great country, with great people who are always open-minded and pleased that they can help you.”
Agata Nowakowska, 20, Poland

There is always someone there for you when you need help. Americans are lovable and proud people who will always stand up for their country!”
Ann Preikschat, 19, Germany

I learned that Americans are not only really friendly, but also they would open their door to anyone in need and they would do anything for that person, with out expecting anything in return.”
Luise Kerzel, 19, Germany

My friends and family in my home country now feel that...

75%
(627 Students)
Understand the U.S. better

70%
(590 Students)
Now have a more positive opinion of Americans

55%
(463 Students)
Now have a more positive opinion of the U.S.
Personal Growth

Some of the most impactful effects of the study abroad experience are intangible, but that does not make them any less valuable. Almost every core student surveyed (more than 91 percent) said self-growth was what they liked best about their study abroad experience. Students commented they learned to be self-reliant, to become more organized, and gained in self-confidence. They learned to get along with and work with people different from themselves, to affirm their own identity while also appreciating team spirit.

“I learned that the U.S. is truly a land of opportunities. It offers students so many chances to be active, especially in high school. They can volunteer, participate in sports arts, etc. and plan projects! I really admire that and used this opportunity during my stay. Who thought that one year could be so full of special memories!? I don’t only speak fluently now, but I also found a best friend, great people, a new lifestyle, a new home and not to forget… I found myself.”

Greta-Christiana Zoehner, 17, Germany

“I am sure that my experience abroad helped with my future. Thanks to my exchange program I decided what degree I wanted to get at the university and today I am in my first year of courses in International Relations.”

Devlin Biezus, 19, Brazil
**Influence on Career, Studies and Activities**

An international exchange program can have a lasting influence on a student’s career, path of study, and activities. Following their AYA program, many alumni are choosing ambitious fields of study and careers, with the most popular being business/finance, engineering, education, medicine, hard sciences, and government/politics. Indeed, practically all survey respondents are either students or have finished their studies and are employed. About half are currently in college.

The exchange program somewhat or greatly influenced core students’

![Graph showing percentages of students influenced by the exchange program](image)

AYA core students continued their engagement in a variety of community activities upon their return home. These activities included:

- Participated in community service/volunteer charitable work: 263 students (31.35%)
- Culture: 410 students (48.87%)
- Other Activities (work, scouts, etc): 43 students (5.13%)
- Took part in political/social activism: 81 students (9.65%)
- Joined school organizations/clubs: 276 students (32.90%)
- Participated in sports: 587 students (69.96%)
- Became involved in their student government: 68 students (8.10%)
Leadership

Throughout their year in the United States, AYA participants acquired new skills and knowledge that they have been able to apply in their home countries, including skills that are important to good leaders. In particular, participants cited better communication skills as among the most important of those that they acquired during the program. Nearly all survey respondents reported an increase in their self-confidence during their year in the United States.

Many of the students said they were even more likely to help plan activities, lead events or train others after completing the program. Eager to put their new skills to good use, some followed through by performing community service in their home countries, helping to organize events and raise funds for good causes.

### Abilities strengthened during experience as an exchange student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>78.07%</td>
<td>655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reliance</td>
<td>70.68%</td>
<td>593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to Implement Change</td>
<td>35.64%</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing Beliefs</td>
<td>49.34%</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance</td>
<td>71.63%</td>
<td>601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>63.29%</td>
<td>531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to Others</td>
<td>40.05%</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing Ideas</td>
<td>41.84%</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significantly, 79 percent of core alumni surveyed state that the experience as an exchange student increased their interest in taking a leadership role in school or community activities, with 26 percent currently in leadership roles and 49 percent active in planning activities, events and projects. A majority of both grant and core program participants reported their experience influenced their leadership abilities and extracurricular activities.

Working well with others is a key to effective leadership. Core students also gained these skills during their abroad experience. About 76 percent said they improved their ability to lead a team by taking charge (explaining tasks and motivating others). Even more reported increased tolerance and flexibility, as well as the ability to listen to others and express their own ideas.

Across the board, a majority of both grant and core program participants reported increases in every skill about which they were surveyed, including leadership skills.

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“I learned how to solve problems on my own and take better care of myself.”

Carolina Barbosa, 17, Brazil

“This exchange experience made me learn a lot. I’m more confident and self-dependent now. I can’t wait to explore the world by myself! And this is a good sign. I’d like to thank Academic Year in America for this experience.”

Xiaonan Wang, 16, China
Skills

Students reported gains and improvements of many important skills. Nearly all core students (99 percent) said they improved their English language skills. More than 94 percent of students saw improved problem solving skills and an increased ability to work closely with others who are different.

The majority of both grant and core students appreciate these improved skills: About 84 percent of core participants said improving their skills and knowledge was what they liked best about their U.S. program.

“After your return back home everything that involves English seems so much easier. You understand songs, movies and even books and quotations.”

Anja Borejdo, 21, Germany

Skills improved by U.S. program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English language</td>
<td>763</td>
<td>90.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>57.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public speaking</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>41.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgeting</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>32.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team leadership</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>22.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with people different from you</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>55.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing time</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>44.70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“...My exchange year in the US was the best experience in my life so far. It changed my life in a major way. I am able to speak in front of people, make new friends easily and speak English almost fluently. I made a lot of new friends for a lifetime and I’m extremely proud of myself, that I left everything behind and started a different, but also beautiful new part of my life.

My exchange year was the best decision I could have made! “

Lea Gueron, 18, Germany
Making strong, lasting personal ties is invaluable to a young person’s development, growth, and overall enjoyment of the exchange experience. Forming meaningful relationships also strengthens a student’s potential to gain a deeper understanding of U.S. society and culture.

Nearly 90 percent of core respondents have stayed in touch with their host families and American friends after their exchange experience, as well as kept up with fellow AYA students, teachers, and other foreign students they met in the United States. Furthermore, nearly 40 percent of core respondents have had someone from their AYA experience—host families, American friends, or other people they met—visit them since the end of the program.

Most of the core students surveyed (86 percent) said meeting people and making friends was one of their favorite parts of their study abroad program, while 71 percent said their host family was one aspect they liked best.

“Being able to stay 11 months in the U.S. was by far the most amazing experience in my life! For this reason I worked really hard for my brother to be an exchange student too, and he was able to stay in the same city I lived! No words to describe the feeling! I came back last year to see everybody and last month too! It’s amazing seeing all my friends and realizing that no matter how far away I am, they will be part of my life forever!”

Thais Oliveira, 22, Brazil

“My host family has really become my second family.”

Diana Orlandi, 19, Italy

“I was away from my country yet not from home. There’s really no place like home, but my host family!”

Esther Gonzalez Barrera, 20, Mexico

High school in America changed me forever! Three years later I still go back to Elizabethtown High School for homecoming games and to visit teachers. My host family has always been there for me, and never stopped loving and helping me along the way. Because of them I stayed in America for college, and in 2014 I graduate from the same college Margaret (mom) and Chris (dad) graduated from!”

Mariana Gomes, 20, Brazil
**Staying in Touch**

Privately funded student exchange programs, as well as publicly funded, are helping to produce a generation of leaders who understand American culture and politics and who have enduring ties to the United States. One indication of alumni ties with the United States is their continuing contact with friends, teachers, and their host families.

Many students were impacted so significantly by their exchange program that they went beyond simply keeping in touch and have already returned to the United States to study, work or – mostly – for pleasure. A remarkable 60 percent of core alumni report that they have returned to the United States since their program experience to visit their host families or friends (47 percent), study (10 percent) or work (three percent). The continued frequency of communication with friends and host families in the United States may indicate that visits will continue in the future because many alumni who responded to the survey were still in secondary school or university students.

**AYA core students have stayed in contact with...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Host Family</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Friends</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other AYA Participants</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Foreign Students Met in the U.S.</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Staying connected internationally is easier than ever before in history, and the students surveyed are certainly taking advantage of modern tools, such as social media. The majority of both core and grant students have kept in contact with their host families, U.S. friends, other AYA participants, and other foreign students they met while in the U.S.
Importance of Friendship

Hosting a student often forms deep international bonds between the host family and the young traveler and a strong desire to see each other again. Forty percent of students reported someone they met while in the U.S. has visited them in their home countries. Such a substantial figure is a testament to the lasting connections formed during these programs.

Students studying abroad also have the opportunity to form ties with other international students.

Almost all (97 percent) of the core students surveyed said the friendships they developed with Americans was somewhat important or very important to their total experience in the U.S., with the majority (77 percent) pointing toward “Very important.”

“My host family visited me few months after I went back to China. I currently attend University of Notre Dame. I am truly thankful to this experience as an exchange student.”

Ninghua Ding, 20, China

“This year has been an awesome year! I can’t even describe how great this experience was. I made friends that will stay in my life forever! My host family and good friends visited me in Germany and one year after my return from the exchange year I went back to the US to visit my host family and friends again. It’s a great feeling to know that you have another home on the other side of the World and that you have people there that care about you too!”

Jacqueline May, 19, Germany
I really loved my host family. And that’s probably why my year in the US turned out so well. It was hard at first but I’m so glad I made it! My host sister and I are even thinking about being roomies later on in college!”

Julia Rossow, 19, Germany

When you’re in the United States and you get friends they make you feel as welcome as you have never been welcomed before. The United States will always be home. If you get back they remember you and love you as much as they loved you the first day they got to know you!”

Annick Jupe, 18, Germany

The friends I made in U.S. have become my besties, who come from different countries and continents. My host family became my home in the states. This summer, I’m going back to the U.S. for college and I can’t wait to visit my host family and friends in holidays! I miss them so much!”

Yichen Lu, 19, China
The study abroad experience makes a lasting mark on every student. Students who had completed their programs five and 10 years ago said the time abroad contributed indelibly to their successes, adult personalities and goals, and who they are today. In fact, a large majority of both grant and core students reported their study abroad program was the most meaningful experience of their life.

**What did students like best about their exchange experience?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increasing self-growth, confidence, independence and tolerance</td>
<td>90.94%</td>
<td>763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making friends/meeting people</td>
<td>86.29%</td>
<td>724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving their skills and knowledge</td>
<td>83.79%</td>
<td>703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning about American culture and lifestyle</td>
<td>75.33%</td>
<td>632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with their Host Family</td>
<td>71.04%</td>
<td>596</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"For a year I’ve lived the life of a new culture, experiencing the great American school spirit and gotten friends for life time. I’ve loved being an exchange student, and I’m so thankful for being a part of the program!"

Ingvild Espedal, 18, Norway

"It was the most meaningful experience of my life. Over that year I learned so many things about the culture the people, but most importantly I have become an adult. I can only encourage anyone to go for it!"

David Banko, 21, Hungary

"Well I believe that the sentence that better expresses my year in America is "exchange is not a year in your life but a life in a year." All the experiences I had during my exchange changed completely the way I see my life/future now. I’ve learned so many things about American culture, society and their way of thinking, but the most important one was that I learned how to be independent and how to trust myself. If anyone come to ask me if is worth it to do an exchange my answer would be “WHAT ARE WAITING FOR? GO NOW!”"

Anna Maia de Alencar Melo, 17, Brazil
Conclusion

The findings of this impact study indicate that the AYA core participants emerged from the program with an improved and more nuanced understanding of American society and culture, with greater tolerance for other peoples and cultures, and with improved leadership and communication skills. Specifically, the study demonstrates the success of the program in:

1. Increasing students’ appreciation of the complexities of American society, as well as their own
2. Strengthening students’ confidence, tolerance and awareness, as well as communication and leadership skills
3. Promoting greater involvement in community and organizational activities
4. Fostering long-lasting memories and ties of friendship between the students and those they met during their exchange experience.
5. Creating good will and improving attitudes and beliefs about the American people by sharing their U.S. experiences at home.

These results echo those of the grant program students – the U.S. State Department-funded YES and FLEX high school exchange programs, which the AIFS Foundation also administers, and demonstrate unique and lasting benefits for the thousands of students each year who serve as their country’s youth ambassadors while on an international high school exchange program.

“Eight years have gone by since my high school experience in the US. This experience really shaped me as a person and almost all my decisions afterwards have in one way or another been influenced by this experience. I have gone on to do many other great things which have affected me profoundly and define my personality today. However, I wouldn’t have done any of them without the initial decision to leave home for the US that year. In a way, it has become the origin of who I am today.”

Kerstin Bickelmann, 24, Germany
Appendices

I. Response Result – Demographics

» Year in US, 2003 - 2012
» Country of Origin
» Size of hometown (See figure 1)
  • Capital city - 105 students
  • Other large city - 230 students
  • Town/small city - 326 students
  • Village/rural location - 178 students
» Current Employment Status (See figure 2)
  • High school student - 358 students
  • College/university/technical student - 418 students
  • Working - 51 students
  • Unemployed - 11 students
» Current Field of Work or Study (See figure 3)

II. Survey Background

On July 25, 2013, the survey was emailed to 5,550 alumni, which produced 953 responses within a 3-week period. Of the initial mailing, 116 of email addresses were invalid. A total of 3 reminder emails were sent between July 25- August 16, 2014. The mailing included a web link and unique code alumni could use to complete the survey. The 839 total core student responses reflect a 15.12% return rate.

The 8-page instrument contained questions to establish biographical data, including the size of student’s home town, current activity (high school, college, working, unemployed), influence of program on academic and career choice, and current field of study or profession. The sections on impact posed questions in the areas of school or community engagement/leadership, personal development, cultural understanding, extent of sharing of cultural information while in the U.S. and in home country upon return, ongoing connections, and satisfaction with the exchange experience. There were two opportunities for open comments: “What was the ONE most important thing you learned about the United States while living there?” and the final question which invited any additional feedback regarding the AYA experience.

Survey design weaknesses: Nearly 43 percent of core respondents are currently in high school and nearly 50 percent are currently in college. Therefore, while the AYA survey shows significant program impact, it is hard to gauge based on this study whether the impacts will last over time. However, other longitudinal studies have shown this to be the case – notably the AFS study and Youth for Understanding studies cited above. In addition, 74% (623 students) of respondents were from Germany, resulting in more data from this country of origin. Finally, program impact is self-reported by participants retrospectively, relying on respondent memory and his/her subjective assessment regarding the effects of their study abroad experiences. This is true of most international exchange program studies which also rely heavily on respondents’ interpretation and recollection of their experiences abroad. In some cases, studies have included control groups for comparison; however, this study did not.

Figure 1: Size of Hometown - Core Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital City</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>12.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Large City</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>27.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town or Small City</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>38.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village or Rural Location</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>21.22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2: Current Employment Status - Core Students

- College/University/technical student: 418 Students (49.82%)
- High School Student: 358 Students (42.67%)
- Unemployed: 11 Students (1.31%)
- Working: 51 Students (6.08%)

Figure 3: Current Field of Work or Study
(Includes Core and Grant Student responses)

- Agriculture, Natural Resources: .94% / 9 students
- Architecture, Engineering: 9.97% / 95 students
- Art, Design, Entertainment: 5.56% / 53 students
- Business, Finance, Accounting: 16.16% / 154 students
- Communications, PR: 3.67% / 35 students
- Community, Social Services: .63% / 6 students
- Computer, Mathematical: 3.67% / 35 students
- Education, Training, Library: 7.56% / 72 students
- Government, Politics, International Relations: 6.09% / 58 students
- Healthcare, Medicine, Nursing, Dentistry: 9.446% / 90 students
- Hospitality, Hotel: 1.05% / 10 students
- Media & Journalism: 3.88% / 37 students
- Law Criminal Justice: 4.62% / 44 students
- Other - Social Services: 3.57% / 34 students
- Other: 10.49% / 100 students
- Science & Research: 567% / 54 students
- Travel/Tourism: 4.62% / 44 students
- Social Services: 2.41% / 23 students
III. Institutional Background

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 to 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 provides grants to high schools and institutions of higher education to encourage international and educational travel.

The AIFS Foundation Mission

The AIFS Foundation Mission is to provide educational and cultural exchange opportunities to foster greater understanding among the people of the world.

The Foundation Seeks to Fulfill Its Mission by:

• Organizing high quality educational programs at affordable prices, enabling young people to live and study abroad.

• Supporting educational and travel opportunities for disadvantaged youth.

• Developing cooperative programs between organizations, both public and private, that share our goals.

• Providing grants to individuals for participation in culturally enriching educational programs.

The AIFS Foundation also sponsors the Academic Year in America program, which enables more than 800 international teenage students to spend a semester or academic year with an American family while attending their local high school. Since its founding in 1981, AYA has enabled over 35,000 international students aged 15-18 to come to the U.S. and experience the American way of life.

The Foundation is governed by a board of trustees that includes prominent educators and international business leaders. The board meets regularly to review the effectiveness and quality of the Foundation's AYA program and to ensure adherence to standards of excellence. Several distinctions document their success:

• AYA is listed in the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel (CSIET) Advisory List for high schools, which ensures a high quality program for participants, students, host families and high schools. The CSIET certification mark certifies that AIFS complies with the standards set forth in the CSIET Standards for International Educational Travel Programs. Founded in 1984, CSIET establishes standards for organizations operating international educational travel and exchange programs at the high school level, monitors compliance with those standards, and disseminates information regarding international educational travel organizations.

• AYA is an administrator of two highly competitive U.S. State Department sponsored high school exchanges: the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program, which welcomes students to the U.S. from Eurasia to experience life in a democratic society in order to promote democratic values and institutions; and the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program, which was established by Congress in October, 2002 in response to the events of September 11, 2001 and which welcomes students to the U.S. from predominantly Muslim countries. Both programs are administered by the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Both place special emphasis on leadership skills and seek ways for participants, who are aged 15-17, to develop these skills during the school year. The competitively selected students live with American host families, attend high school for up to one academic year, engage in activities to learn about American society and values, and help educate Americans about their countries and cultures. Desired program outcomes for both FLEX and YES students fit well to AYA's overall program vision.
About the Researchers

Sandra Davis
Sandra Davis is an expert in international education programs, with 30 years of experience in program evaluation. She has served as Project Director and/or provided oversight to over 30 international educational exchange programs, bringing strength in both research methodology and content area expertise. Currently working as an independent consultant, Ms. Davis has held senior leadership positions at Meridian International Center and the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and received awards for leadership, innovation, and technical excellence, as well as appointments to various boards, including the Alliance for International Educational Exchange. Ms. Davis has an MA in International Affairs from the George Washington University Elliott School in Washington, D.C. and BA from Stetson University, DeLand, FL.

Catherine MacDonald
Catherine MacDonald is an award winning writer and communications professional with expertise in research, data collection, analysis and writing. Her experience in publications includes work that ranges from serving as an editor at a monthly glossy magazine, to managing a twice weekly newspaper, to writing ad copy for National Geographic children's books. Ms. MacDonald has a bachelor's degree in mass communications from Virginia Commonwealth University and has received several professional and academic awards.

Danielle Carpino
Danielle Carpino has worked for the American Institute For Foreign Study/AIFS Foundation for 15 years, with an emphasis on sales operations and technology. She has provided data management and survey development support for outcomes evaluations for AIFS College Study Abroad, Au Pair in America and Camp America. Ms. Carpino has a BA in Social Psychology from Lehigh University and is completing an MBA from the University of Connecticut in the spring of 2014.

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