



Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program

What is FLEX?

The Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) was established in 1992 as the centerpiece of the NIS Secondary School Initiative, funded under the FREEDOM Support Act through a transfer of funds from the Department of State and USAID. Its goal is to provide an opportunity for high school students from Eurasia* to experience life in a democratic society in order to promote democratic values and institutions in Eurasia. Since 1993, more than 14,000 students from 12 Eurasian countries have participated and returned to their homes to pursue higher education and move into the job market.

Applicants are tested and screened in an elaborate open, merit-based competition, for which it is necessary to maintain an infrastructure—offices and personnel in key locations throughout Eurasia. All finalists participate in a pre-departure orientation in their home countries 4-6 weeks before they depart for the United States.

A small percentage of the students arrive in the United States in July to participate in a four-week intensive English language enhancement and cultural orientation program. This makes it possible to include students from remote areas where they may not have had the same opportunities to learn English as their counterparts from urban areas. It also allows for the inclusion of a small number of participants with disabilities. All other students arrive in August. FLEX participants are placed in host communities by a network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that cooperate with the Department of State under grants awarded specifically for that purpose. Students live with volunteer, unpaid host families, attend high school tuition-free, and engage in local, cultural enhancement activities, frequently with a civic education or community service focus that is in keeping with the democracy-building goals of the program.

The American Councils for International Education: ACTR/ACCELS maintains a network of 20 FLEX “hub” offices throughout Eurasia and handles all of the activities involving recruitment and screening, selection of finalists, communication with finalists and their documentation, pre-departure orientation, participant travel, and maintenance of information management and data processing systems. American Councils serves as a liaison with the students’ families and home/school authorities while they are in the United States. The organization also tracks and coordinates alumni activities. There is an active alumni association based at each program hub and the Department of State receives monthly reports of their activities.

For the past few years, the administrator of this grant has coordinated an essay contest to select participants in a week-long Washington D.C. Civic Education Workshop held in the spring. In recent years, FLEX students have been invited to meet with a number of high U.S. government officials, including former First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage.

For additional information, including alumni programming, see the Youth Program Division web page at: <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens/students/flex.htm>.

*The term Eurasia is used here to mean the 12 New Independent States (NIS) of the former Soviet Union. NIS was a State Department term coined in the early 1990s to refer to all of the countries that once made up the Soviet Union. It has become an anachronism since after 10 years, the “states” are not so new anymore; nor does it make sense to continue referring to a former political entity.

Freedom Support Act Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program

GOALS

1. FLEX students will acquire an understanding of important elements of a civil society. This will include concepts such as volunteerism, the idea that American citizens can and do act on their own to deal with societal problems, and an awareness of and respect for the rule of law.
2. FLEX students will show a willingness and a commitment to serve as agents for change in their countries after they return home.
3. FLEX students will develop an appreciation for American culture.
4. FLEX students will interact with Americans and generate enduring ties.
5. FLEX students will teach Americans about the cultures of their home countries and teach citizens of their home countries about the United States.

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Steps in the Recruitment and Selection Process

Round 1: *Pre-Test*

Students meeting the age and grade criteria are invited to take a 16-question, multiple-choice English test. The major purpose of the pre-test is to eliminate students with only a very limited knowledge of English. There are ten versions of the pre-test to discourage cheating. 58,000 students throughout Eurasia took the pre-test for 2004/2005. Approximately 20,000 applicants scored well enough to move on to round two.

Round 2: *Pre-TOEFL/SLEP and Essay Test*

Eligible students deciding to continue with the application process are invited to take the Pre-TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or the Secondary Level English Proficiency (SLEP) test. Students are also asked to write three in-class essays (in English) in response to specific questions. Questions are designed to elicit factors that indicate the student's maturity and suitability for international exchange. Essay questions focus on actual situations that students may confront, rather than abstract situations that may be more difficult to address. There are five sets of essay questions so students cannot share essay questions with their friends who may take the test at another test site in the future or at another session. All testing is proctored by program staff and alumni.

After all tests and essays are completed, they are sent to the Moscow data hub to be assessed and graded. First the Round 2 English tests are graded, and then the essays of students with adequate language proficiency are evaluated. Field screening committees at the data hub are specially trained to assess essays on the basis of ten factors considered critical for exchange experience success. Processing information and conducting the preliminary evaluation in a centralized location, rather than in the field, is important for the integrity of the competition and relieves the pressure often placed on the program staff by parents, local ministries, or others to include candidates who might not be qualified.

Round 3: *Applications and Interviews*

Students with the best assessments pass to the next level of the competition. They are asked to submit complete applications and are interviewed. Less than 15% of the original applicant pool (6,600 for 2004/2005) is invited to complete applications. One U.S. and one Eurasian employee return to the test site to conduct 20-minute interviews with students who have been invited to complete applications. Interviews take place in both English and the student's native language to enable interviewers to assess English language skills as well as to give students the best opportunity to present themselves.

In addition to the one-on-one interview, all applicants participate in group interviews (referred to as “games”). These are conducted in Russian or the local language and led by Eurasian staff members while U.S. staff observes. Four to seven students take part in each “game.” These provide an opportunity to observe the students in a less formal setting and to see how they interact with their peers. On the day of the interview, staff explains the application form in detail so students will understand how to complete it. Students have two weeks to complete the application and return it to an American Councils office. Applications are checked in the field offices for completeness and forwarded to the Moscow data hub. In Moscow, computer data files are updated for each student, and the original Pre-TOEFL or SLEP answer sheet and essay questions are attached to the application form. The complete application and computer data files are then forwarded to the American Councils headquarters office in Washington, DC for further processing and selection.

Round 4: Selection

American Councils organizes and trains approximately 150 volunteer evaluators who meet daily for about three months to carefully review the applications and attached data. (From approximately 6,600 applications received from Moscow, 1,200 finalists were selected for the 2004/2005 program.) Names of all finalists are randomly distributed to placement organizations by mainframe computer.

Host Family and Student Placement

The non-government organizations (NGOs) that are awarded grants to place students in host families and schools are referred to as “placement organizations” (POs). Placement organizations play a critical role in the functioning and success of the FLEX program because they deal with the program at the grassroots level. Public and private non-profit organizations submit proposals that describe how they will recruit and select host families for their FLEX students how they will find host schools. In addition to identifying schools and screening, selecting, and orienting families, organizations will be responsible for: orienting students at the local level; providing support services for students while they are in the U.S.; arranging enhancement activities and leadership opportunities that reinforce program goals; monitoring students during their stay in the U.S.; providing re-entry training; and assessing student performance and progress. The following placement organizations have placed 04-05 FLEX participants throughout the United States:

- 4-H Foundation
- AFS-USA, Inc.
- American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS)
- American Councils for International Education
- ASPECT Foundation
- ASSE International Student Exchange Program
- AYUSA International
- Center for Cultural Interchange (CCI)
- Council on International Educational Exchange
- Educational Resource Development Trust (ERDT)
- Nacel Open Door
- Program Academic Exchange
- Pacific Intercultural Exchange
- World Link

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The Year-Long Process

Prior to the Academic Year

Applicants



Recruitment

[American Councils: ACTR/ACCELS Administrative Components Grant]

16-question English Test

Pre-TOEFL or SLEP Test

Applications, Essays, Personal and Group interviews



Selection

[American Councils: ACTR/ACCELS Administrative Components Grant]

Review of applications by American evaluators in the U.S.



Finalists



Pre-departure Orientation



Placement

[Grants to NGO Placement Organizations]



School and Homestay Placements



Participants

Language Enhancement and Independent Skills Training (LEIST)
students arrive, including disabled students

Non-LEIST students arrive

During the Academic Year

Monitoring and Evaluation of Students

[Placement Organizations]

Liaison with Natural Parents and On-Program Support

Early returns approximately 4%

[American Councils: ACTR/ACCELS Administrative Components Grant]

Civic Education Workshop

Students compete for limited number of slots

[Separate grant to Close Up Foundation]

Technology Ambassadors Program

Students compete for limited number of slots

[Separate grant to Project Harmony]

Leadership Reentry Workshop for Students with Disabilities

For all students with disabilities

[Separate grant to Mobility International USA]

Reentry Workshops

[NGO Placement Organizations]

Students Return Home

[American Councils: ACTR/ACCELS Administrative Components Grant]

After the Academic Year

Organized Alumni Activities

Including an Alumni Grant Competition

[American Councils: ACTR/ACCELS Administrative Components Grant]

Global Village

Iacocca Institute, Lehigh University Global Village for Future Leaders of
Business and Industry

Program alumni compete for limited number of slots

Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program

Alumni Program

Since the inception in 1993 of the **Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX)** program, more than 14,000 high school students from Eurasia have come to the United States to participate in this academic year exchange. The vast majority of these students have returned to their home countries at the end of the program, either to complete high school or to enter university. Throughout Eurasia, a network of active alumni associations exists and is ready and eager to welcome every returning participant.

Organization of Alumni

FLEX alumni are coordinated under the FLEX Administrative Components grant with American Councils. There are 22 FLEX bases of operation (called "program hubs") throughout Eurasia, staffed by American Councils: eight in Russia, four in Ukraine, and one in each of the other countries. The program hubs provide a focal point for the organization of alumni activities in the regions where they are located. A full-time alumni coordinator who oversees all alumni activities is located in Moscow. A quarterly newsletter, *The Bradley Herald*, is sent to all FLEX alumni. Although it is compiled and published by the alumni coordinator, the newsletter mainly consists of contributions by alumni from varying program years.

Alumni programming has three major purposes:

- Tracking of alumni
- Ensuring that alumni have an opportunity and are encouraged to continue their "American" experience
- Preparing alumni reports

Alumni Assistants

American Councils hires a part-time alumni assistant (AA) for each hub. These assistants, who can be alumni of any program year but the most recent, are selected through a competitive process and earn a small monthly salary. They assist the American Councils FLEX staff person in coordinating alumni activities for that hub. Since the hubs are located in major cities, one major goal for the alumni assistants is to find ways to include more alumni from the remote regions. Second, each FLEX program hub staff member is required to submit to the alumni coordinator in the Fall a schedule of projected alumni activities for the year. An Alumni Assistants Training Conference is held each Fall to ensure that new AAs are properly trained and that all AAs are apprised of recent developments and innovations.

Grants Competition

Since 2001, FLEX alumni have been offered the opportunity to participate in a Small Grants Competition. Individual grants of up to \$250 have supported such efforts as attendance at conferences and community service projects. Group grants of up to \$3,000 have supported activities such as professional development or teaching programs, community service projects, promotion of English language and American culture, etc. In 2004, approximately forty one grants were awarded. The competition proved so effective that it will be repeated every year, providing funding permits.

Global Village

In Summer 2004, nine FLEX alumni were offered the opportunity to participate in the Lehigh University Iacocca Institute' s Global Village for Future Leaders of Business and Industry. FLEX alumni will be able to apply to this program when it takes place again in Summer 2005. Each alumnus/a will represent a different Eurasian country.

Types of Alumni Activities

Alumni activities are varied and are frequently chosen by the alumni themselves. They may include such things as celebration of American holidays (e.g. Halloween, Thanksgiving, July 4th), resume-writing workshops, guest speaker presentations, watching American films, pizza parties, debates (sometimes against another FLEX alumni association), career counseling and a variety of community service activities. They may also include political activities (e.g. pre-election campaigning or observing at polling places during an election). There must be a minimum of six scheduled activities during the year (held approximately bi-monthly), and at least half of them must be in keeping with the democracy-building goals of the FLEX program. For example, it is considered extremely important for FLEX participants to learn democratic values, such as citizen empowerment and volunteerism, while they are in the U.S., and all students are encouraged to do some kind of community service work (a concept that is foreign in Eurasia). This is one of the ideas that alumni tend to "take home" with them and is the reason why alumni associations include community service work in their activities.

Recent Alumni Activities

- ❖ **Armenia:** Alumni visited an orphanage in Yerevan. Alumni teamed up with groups of students and worked on creating masks, postcards, and other art projects. The alumni painted, did crafts, played games, and held contests with 35 children aged 3 to 7. A small pizza party concluded the event. The children also received candy, chocolates, and cookies. After the event the art supplies were left for the children to have for future use.
- ❖ **Azerbaijan:** Twenty-five FLEX alumni and a group of departing finalists shared their impressions of their U.S. experiences with the Minister of Education, U.S. Embassy representatives, and journalists in Baku. The Minister was pleased to hear FLEX alumni and participants answer his questions concerning their impressions of U.S. education in and outside the classroom. The Minister also challenged FLEX alumni to chronicle the growth and success of the program in Azerbaijan. Alumni immediately accepted the Minister's offer, suggesting development of a book about the program.

- ❖ **Belarus:** Four alumni of the Undergraduate Eurasia Program and FLEX alumni conducted a seminar on human trafficking. The seminar is part of a larger outreach effort on human trafficking. In the future, FLEX alumni interested in working on problems of human trafficking will participate in a training-of-trainers program regarding the issue.
- ❖ **Georgia:** Peace Corps Volunteer Terrell Starr led a discussion in honor of Black History Month, which is celebrated in February in the U.S. Thirty alumni and 11 guests from different international organizations attended the discussion. Terrell spoke about his own experiences as an African-American living in Georgia. He also covered a variety of topics, ranging from affirmative action to hip-hop culture. After Terrell's entertaining lecture, alumni asked many questions and discussion went on topics such as how people in Georgia treat other nationalities.
- ❖ **Kazakhstan:** The Almaty American Councils office organized an NGO development workshop for ten FLEX and eight other alumni of U.S. government-sponsored programs. Alumni met with an NGO specialist to learn the necessary information about creating an NGO. The director of Nuclear Society outlined the steps necessary to open an NGO in Kazakhstan and the alumni were told about the confederation of non-governmental organizations in Kazakhstan. The director also explained how to register different types of non-governmental organizations, prepare registration documents, start one's own business, arrange funding, and handle budget issues. During the workshop, participants presented their ideas and drafted proposals for discussion. Participants discussed recently published articles on non-governmental organizations.
- ❖ **Kyrgyzstan:** Two FLEX alumni won an Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) alumni grant to conduct "How to be Successful" seminars in six rural schools of the Chui region. Over 30 FLEX and Soros alumni attended a training of trainers. Alumni received training on time management, goal setting, independent problem solving, academic honesty, tolerance, and learning skills. Six teams were formed and prepared materials for the training sessions. Once all the teams were ready, alumni went to different high schools in the Tokmok, Sokuluk, Pervomaiskoe, Kant, and Kar-Balta villages of the Chui region and conducted workshops for 180 high school students.
- ❖ **Moldova:** Alumni hosted the Parliamentary Debates Tournament at the U.S. Embassy Information Resource Center and Institute of Continuing Education in Chisinau. Twenty FLEX alumni from Chisinau, Odesa, and Lviv attended the event. The tournament judges were volunteers from the Moldovan Debate League. There were two rounds of debates on the first day, followed by semifinals and finals on the second day. The following topics were debated: This House believes in social unity over cultural diversity; This House believes that presidential term limits should be revised; This House believes that minority privileges deny equality; and This House rejects the American way of life. Two alumnae from Odesa won the tournament.
- ❖ **Moscow:** Fourteen FLEX alumni attended a meeting with former Senator Harris Wofford at the IATP center. The former Senator led a discussion about politics and civil society in Russia. Following the discussion, alumni shared their thoughts on American exchange programs, and described some of their community service and volunteer initiatives.
- ❖ **Vladivostok:** U.S. Consular General for Vladivostok Pamela Spratlen gave a lecture on "United States Foreign Policy: Current Issues and Future Perspectives" at the Vladivostok State University of Economics (VSUES). Consular General Spratlen spoke for over an hour on some of the most important issues affecting international affairs. During the question and answer section after her speech, Spratlen answered questions on such controversial subjects as the war on terrorism and the current relationship between the United States and Iraq. Sixteen alumni from five U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs attended the lecture. University professors and graduate students from the International Department at the Vladivostok State University of Economics

- ❖ **Tajikistan:** Alumni participated in a seminar focusing on problems surrounding drug trafficking and drug use and abuse. The seminar was held at the Education Information Center in Dushanbe. The guest speakers presented detailed information on the kind of drugs that are legal in Tajikistan and in other countries throughout the world; the history of drug control legislation in Tajikistan; statistics on drug trafficking in Tajikistan; the work of the Republican Drug Control Agency; and prevailing arguments in favor of drug legalization. The discussion encompassed both drug abuse and drug trafficking and the importance of social factors surrounding these issues.
- ❖ **Turkmenistan:** A conversational café about the Earth Charter Youth group and their activities was held at the American Councils office. Jemal Meredova, who formed the first Earth Charter Youth group in Turkmenistan, led this event, which attracted more than 30 people, including visitors from American Councils, students, and professionals from various fields. Participants had a chance to watch a video about Earth Charter and its worldwide activities. Alumni who attended this event shared their ideas on ethics, the environment, social justice, sustainable development, globalization, international relations, and other issues related to Turkmenistan, as well as other regions of the world.
- ❖ **Ukraine:** Eighteen participants took part in a weeklong workshop organized by alumni on civil society development. This project, which was funded by a FLEX alumni grant, consisted of various training sessions on topics such as human rights, leadership skills, election awareness, project management, and web design.
- ❖ **Uzbekistan:** A presentation on grant writing was given by a FLEX alumna, Raihan Izimbetova, to other alumni at the Educational Advising Center in Nukus. Twenty-eight library visitors who wanted to develop basic grant writing skills also attended. Raihan explained the main concepts of grant writing and taught students how to prepare documents.