



Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program

WhatisYES?

The United States Congress passed legislation in 2002 to extend a hand of friendship from the people of the United States of America to the people of the Arab and Islamic world. As a part of this, an exchange program called the Partnerships for Learning Youth Exchange and Study (P4L YES) Program was established for secondary school students from a variety of countries, including Afghanistan, to travel on a scholarship to the United States for one year. The program is supported by funds from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State.

In the fall of each year beginning in 2003, a team of expert recruiters travel to different provinces in Afghanistan to recruit a group of forty (40) male and female students from various ethnic groups and backgrounds. Each scholarship recipient will live as a member of an American host family and study in an American high school. American Councils for International Education is one of four organizations administering the P4L YES program worldwide.

Applicants are tested and screened in an elaborate open, merit-based competition. The minimum criteria for selection include being a citizen of Afghanistan, currently enrolled in a high school, aged not older than 15, proficiency in English language necessary for taking tests, filling in the applications and being able to communicate. The major criteria for selection are student's level of maturity and readiness to adapt to a different cultural environment at the same time retaining his/her own cultural identity. This is determined by an expert panel's review of the essays written by the Students. The final phase of the recruitment process involves an interview with American Councils staff and the readiness and consent of students' parents. Students are also required to pass a health examination, which is administered in Kabul by doctors working with American Councils and the American Embassy.

Finalists are notified in April- May and are assisted through the process of obtaining a passport, visa and other formalities. They are first taken to Pakistan for obtaining their U.S. visa and in July they leave their homes for Kyrgyzstan. There, they undergo a month long Pre-Departure Orientation (PDO) where staff from American Councils and past alumni of American Councils' academic exchange programs brief them about the differences in life and culture in the United States. It makes the cultural transition easier for the students who would otherwise be facing a lot different new things upon their arrival in the United

States. The PDO session also plays a vital role in improving students' language ability and their understanding of an American high school environment.

In August, YES participants arrive in the United States and 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 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 has established an office in Kabul 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 will be an active alumni association based at each program hub and the Department of State will receive monthly reports of their activities.

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

Freedom Support Act Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program

GOALS

1. Expand communication between the people of the United States and partner countries including Afghanistan in the interest of promoting mutual understanding and respect.
2. Promote international security and peace by educating American and foreign participants about each other, thereby alleviating misunderstanding and making for a better informed citizenry able to deal more effectively with international issues.
3. YES students will acquire an understanding of American values, the qualities of leadership, and important elements of a civil society, including concepts such as civic responsibility and volunteerism, the idea that citizens can and do take initiative to deal with societal problems, and an awareness of and respect for the rule of law.
4. YES alumni will work together upon returning home to share what they have learned and to make a difference in their home communities by initiating activities that build on acquired skills and experience.

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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 five versions of the pre-test to discourage cheating. 1,776 students from six provinces took the pre-test for 2004/2005. Approximately 650 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 (136 for 2004/2005) is invited to complete applications. One U.S. and one Afghan 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 the local language and led by Afghan 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 30 volunteer evaluators who meet daily for about a month to carefully review the applications and attached data. (From approximately 130 applications received from Moscow, 40 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 YES 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 YES 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 YES participants throughout the United States:

American Councils for International Education
World Link

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TheYear-LongProcess

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 in Kyrgyzstan



Placement

[Grants to NGO Placement Organizations]

School and Homestay Placements



Students travel to the US

During the Academic Year

Monitoring and Evaluation of Students

[Placement Organizations]



Liaison with Natural Parents and On-Program Support

Early returns 0% (04-05)

[American Councils: ACTR/ACCELS Administrative Components Grant]



Reentry Workshops

[American Councils: ACTR/ACCELS]



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]