
Advancing Regional and Bilateral Interests

“We recognize that nothing brings about a common understanding more effectively than getting the chance to live in another country, see the world through another lens, and forge friendships that can last for decades.”

– Sec. of State John Kerry

By targeting areas and relationships of strategic interest to the United States, regionally-focused international exchange programs are vital contributors to America’s diplomacy efforts, national security, and bilateral interests. Survey data show that these exchanges create international partnerships, foster democracy and social change, and increase mutual understanding.

AFRICA

International exchange programs that engage Africa empower emerging leaders and encourage collaboration when confronting global crises. Africa has the youngest median age of any continent – investing in people-to-people relationships brings great potential for future collaboration between our communities, companies, and leaders.

Exchange programs with Africa have fostered leadership potential and created lasting relationships of mutual understanding and respect, especially among emerging leaders. The **Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI)** is the largest exchange program the U.S. has ever conducted with Africa. The program boasted 500 Washington fellows in 2015 and aims to double in size in 2016. With a highly competitive selection process, YALI participants are drawn from a variety of sectors including business and entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and public administration. Investing in exchange opportunities for these emerging leaders empowers them to play expanded roles in strengthening their own communities and countries, and expands the prospects for meaningful partnership with the U.S.

ASIA

Exchange programs have for years supported the strong ties between the U.S. and Asian nations. During President Obama’s trip to China in November, he and Chinese President Xi Jinping [described](#) the positive impacts of student exchanges for their respective nations: breaking down barriers of mistrust, fostering mutual understanding, and “promot[ing] the long-term development of bilateral relations.”

With Southeast Asia’s growing strategic and economic importance (\$100 billion of U.S. exports annually and ten-fold growth in regional GDP over the last three decades), the U.S. is launching the **Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI)**. Speaking to the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council, Secretary of State John Kerry [described](#) YSEALI as a vital pathway “to help bring about a more prosperous future for both the United State and our ASEAN partners.”

EURASIA

Exchanges with Eurasia promote democratic values in the face of current tensions. The **Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX)** program brings future leaders from the countries of the former Soviet Union* to the U.S. for one academic year, during which they live with an American family and attend an American high school. The **Global Undergraduate Exchange Program in Eurasia and Central Asia (Global UGRAD)** is meant to build the capacity of youth leaders from underserved populations across the region. Ninety-eight per cent of FLEX alumni report visiting historical sites during their stay in the U.S., and many report that the most important concepts they learned during their FLEX experience were American freedom and equal rights. Three-quarters of Global UGRAD alumni¹ support equal rights for all citizens and a vast majority report they have a much better understanding of U.S. politics (95 per cent), culture (100 per cent), and economics (89 per cent) as a result of the program.²

[*Note: Russia withdrew from the FLEX program in 2014.]

EUROPE

International exchange programs with Europe cannot be overlooked, as they are vital to U.S. political and economic stability. In Europe, the U.S. has some of its strongest allies, but exchanges remain central to building bridges between the younger generations. Exchanges establish mutual trust, cooperation, and understanding between nations – an essential foundation for international collaboration when addressing the many global challenges and crises we face today.

Exchanges with Europe have a proven track record of success, creating a lasting positive impact on participants. For example, the **Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange (CBYX)** program enables high school students from Germany and the U.S. to spend an academic year abroad in the other country. After participating in CBYX, 84 per cent of American participants state that their impressions of Germany changed for the better as a result of their time abroad. It is important to note that these positive impacts are not short-lived, but are sustained for many years. In fact, 71 per cent of American CBYX alumni reported they kept up to date with issues related to Germany, even 15 years after participation in the program.³

MIDDLE EAST

In the midst of regional turbulence and the continued global threat of terrorism, exchange programs in the Middle East take on special significance for U.S. foreign policy and national

¹ Note: The Global Undergraduate Exchange Program in Eurasia and Central Asia (Global UGRAD) program was previously called the FREEDOM Support Act Undergraduate program, and these data come from an evaluation of the program under its previous name.

² Department of State Evaluations (<http://exchanges.state.gov/programevaluations/completed.html>)

³ Ibid.

security. Educational and cultural exchanges in the region have made great strides in bridging differences in religion, culture, and language, and have improved mutual understanding.

Exchanges with the Middle East enhance mutual understanding by exposing participants to the culture and values of the United States beyond what is portrayed in the media. For example, the **Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study Program (YES)** recruits participants from 40 countries with significant Muslim populations, including many in this region. After participating in the YES program, more than 90 per cent of participants recognized the importance of individual rights such as freedom of religion, access to information, and equality under the law.⁴ Enabling Middle Eastern youth to understand these democratic principles is central to U.S. national security interests, and opens the door for broader political engagement with the region in the future.

WESTERN HEMISPHERE/THE AMERICAS

Extending international exchange opportunities within the Americas is vital to pursuing meaningful regional partnerships in the Western Hemisphere on a wide range of issues: commerce and trade, immigration, regional security, and educational opportunities, among others.

Exchanges within the Americas have drawn significant support from our partners in the hemisphere. In 2014, the U.S. launched **100,000 Strong in the Americas** to increase student flows in both directions, mirroring the successful model seen with the 100,000 Strong campaign with China. In parallel, the Mexican government launched its own *Proyecto 100,000* initiative to increase the number of Mexican students studying in the U.S., as well as to increase binational research and innovation centers. The Brazilian government and also continues to invest in exchanges and educational collaboration through their *Science without Borders* program. In this way, educational exchanges serve as a platform to promote equal partnership.

The private sector has encouraged and contributed to funding for these programs and initiatives. The investment of the private sector – both in the U.S. and in the Americas – in increasing exchange opportunities demonstrates the importance of creating and preparing a global workforce.

⁴ Department of State Evaluations (<http://exchanges.state.gov/programevaluations/completed.html>)