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## Department of State Youth Exchange Programs

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Youth exchange programs are a critical component of U.S. public diplomacy. The age of these individuals, who are high quality students carefully selected for participation, provides a unique opportunity to build positive, lifelong relationships with future leaders from around the world. For this reason, youth exchange programs are an investment in the future national security, public diplomacy, and economic interests of the United States.

Many youth exchange visitors to the U.S. return to their home countries with a greater understanding of democracy, and are more likely to apply these principles at home. The Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program brings more than 800 students annually from countries with significant Muslim communities to live and study in the United States. More than 90 per cent of participants from these predominantly Muslim countries recognized the importance of individual rights such as freedom of religion, access to information, and equality under the law after participating in the YES program.<sup>1</sup>

Young participants also gain valuable skills and lessons during their time abroad. In particular, youth exchange programs foster the leadership aspirations of participants. Among YES participants, 94 per cent reported that their leadership skills improved as a result of their exchange experience.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, many youth exchange participants return home and put these new leadership skills into action to affect change in their own communities.

Student exchanges are important for the future of the U.S. precisely because of the students' age, as Secretary of State John Kerry [noted](#), using U.S.-China relations as an example:

“These connections will help us to understand each other better and to forge a better relationship going forward...they will help us work through our differences, and these connections will ultimately erase the misperceptions and stereotypes that fuel mistrust.”

These programs have a proven record of creating closer ties of mutual respect and understanding between the United States and countries around the world.

### **DETAILS ON FEDERALLY FUNDED YOUTH EXCHANGE PROGRAMS**

- [America-Serbia and Montenegro Youth Leadership Exchange \(A-SMYLE\)](#) brings high school students from Serbia and Montenegro to spend a year in the United States, living with American host families and attending U.S. high schools. The program focuses on youth leadership and the role alumni can play in developing their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of State Evaluations (<http://exchanges.state.gov/programevaluations/completed.html>)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

- [\*\*Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange Program \(CBYX\)\*\*](#) has fostered productive dialogue and contributed to a strong transatlantic partnership for 30 years. Alumni of the Congress-Bundestag Program have contributed in fields of diplomacy, business, and education to the resiliency of the U.S.-German partnership. The program, a jointly funded venture between the U.S. Congress and the German Bundestag, provides opportunities for young Americans to live with host families and attend German high schools, and reciprocal exchange opportunities for young Germans in the U.S. The scholarship began in 1983 as a part of the President's International Youth Exchange Initiative and is an essential and highly visible part of the U.S.-Germany relationship. The U.S. financial commitment for the program has been consistently underfunded, leading to a decreasing number of U.S. participants.
- [\*\*Future Leaders Exchange \(FLEX\)\*\*](#) brings high school students from countries of the former Soviet Union to the United States to live with American host families and study in American schools. FLEX has brought more than 24,000 students to the U.S. since its inception. A U.S. government study demonstrated that the FLEX Program stimulates positive attitudinal changes that remain with participants after they return home. Compared to others in their age cohort, FLEX alumni have strongly positive attitudes towards democracy, free elections, and market economies and are already taking leadership positions in business and government. FLEX alumni have shown extraordinary activism upon their return home and a real desire to make their countries better places to live; alumni have taken up such causes as human rights, support for disadvantaged populations, and democratic process. The strongest supporters of FLEX are U.S. ambassadors in the region, who view the program as a critical long-term commitment to leadership development and strong bilateral relationships and see the contributions of alumni to their home communities.

Nearly all **Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX)** Program alumni reported visiting historical sites during their stay (**98 per cent**) and many reported that the most important concepts they learned about during their FLEX experience were American freedom and equal rights.

- [\*\*Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study \(YES\)\*\*](#) brings high school students from 40 countries with significant Muslim communities, as well as the West Bank and Gaza, to live with American host families and study in American schools for an academic year. Additionally, the YES Abroad Program provides opportunities for American high school students to live with host families and study for one year in 11 countries. Since its inception in 2003, the YES Program has provided opportunities for more than 8,500 participants. Upon returning home, YES alumni actively participate in community service events in their local communities, carrying on the mission of the program and increasing understanding of U.S. culture and people.

After participating in the Kennedy-Lugar **Youth Exchange and Study (YES)** Program, more than **90 per cent** of respondents (all from predominantly Muslim countries)

recognized the importance of individual rights such as freedom of religion, access to information, and equality under the law.

**94 per cent** of surveyed participants in the Kennedy-Lugar **Youth Exchange and Study (YES)** Program say their leadership skills improved as a result of their exchange experience.

- [National Security Language Initiative for Youth \(NSLI-Y\)](#) provides summer and academic year opportunities for American students to study languages not commonly taught in U.S. high schools. Participants learn critical languages through immersion and intensive courses in countries where those languages are spoken, and alumni routinely place into second- or third-year university language study. NSLI-Y specifically provides opportunities for high school students to live and take intensive language courses for a summer or academic year in a location in which the following critical languages are spoken: Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Persian, Russian, and Turkish.
- [Youth Ambassadors](#) and [Youth Leadership programs](#) provide meaningful opportunities for young people from key countries, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Brazil, Burma, Egypt, Iraq, and Mexico, to interact and exchange ideas with American youth.