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International Student Support
at American Councils



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GREETINGS to our 2015-2016 American Councils A-SMYLE, Cultural Bridges, ExCEL, FLEX, and YES students! We look forward to hearing about your program year as you settle in to your host communities and begin school. We hope you enjoy the stories, pictures, and alumni advice on the following pages. Welcome to the American Councils family!

Best Wishes,
Benjamin, Emily, Tim, Amanda, Elizabeth, and Jeni
The International Student Support Team



Clockwise from left: Meri (FLEX-Armenia), Anna (FLEX-Ukraine), Kateryna (FLEX-Ukraine), and Alge (ExCEL-Lithuania) attend the Festival of Nations in St. Louis, IL; Ben-Badz and Al-Hada (YES-Philippines) meet their Local Coordinator, Sharon, at the airport in Iowa; Aveshen (YES-South Africa) meets his host family at the airport in Idaho; Anhelina (FLEX-Ukraine) meets her Local Coordinator, Sue, at the airport in Florida; Muddasir (YES-Pakistan) meets his Local Coordinator, Lin, at the airport in Wisconsin

Each spring, we hold an essay contest that asks our students to reflect on their year in the U.S. and what they have learned about leadership while on program. Here is the winning essay from 2014-2015.

MY AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

by Khaoula Anassteme (YES-Morocco)



Khaoula volunteering at Food & Friends in Washington, DC

Ambitious and earnest, I had an aim; to make a positive change. When I heard about the YES program, I instantaneously realized that it was the gate that will help me attain my goal; after spending 9 months in the US, my expectation about the program turned out to be right. The YES program shaped me to not only become a better person but also a better leader.

As an exchange student, I was put in an environment very dissimilar from what I was used to, which inspired me to challenge myself in order to take the most out of my experience. From AP Calculus to AP U.S. History, I took six AP classes, classes that I really revelled in throughout the year. I was able to stay on top of my courses and achieve straight As, but having such a heavy load didn't stop me from getting in-

involved in other activities such as SPARK tutoring, Science Olympiad, Key Club, etc. With the Science Olympiad team, I placed in all my divisions in regionals and with SPARK Club, I started to tutor maths. With Key Club, we planned so many events to give back to our community and show appreciation. Noticing both my efforts and achievements, the school board selected me to join the Student Leadership Team (SLT). SLT, a group of well-rounded students that the school picks as leaders, works on identifying some of the school's problems and creating a detailed plan to tackle those issues. Being a part of this group taught me to both set a direction for my goals and use management skills to design steps leading to its attainment. It also trained me to be able to adjust and adapt; sometimes the set plan doesn't work thus a newer and quicker one needs to be constructed.

Since developing my leadership skills was a priority for me, I applied for the Civic Education Week Workshop, and I and 99 other YES students were accepted from 500 applicants. During the week, I took part in seminars on the U.S. system of government and discussions with representatives of civic organizations and the media; add to that, I got the chance to listen to the Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Kathleen Stephens address to us as exchange students and meet with Members of Congress and staff representing the districts of my host state, Wisconsin. Thanks to the Civic Education Week Workshop, I had the opportunity

to interact with leaders and know about the qualities that made them as effective as they are.

Another thing that I really benefited from because of the YES program is community service. I've always believed in the concept of volunteerism and the idea of giving back to the community, but in my country or most of other exchange students' countries, this concept isn't really as ubiquitous. Community service involvement helped me shape my personal leadership skills, gain a better appreciation for academic work, and develop a spirit of involving myself in the community.

Everything I learned, from the Student Leadership Team to the Civic Education Week Workshop to the several community service projects I did, would create a perfect background and base to achieve my target and have a positive impact. I am fully aware that such big influence can only be possible through small effective steps. Therefore, I am planning to expand on and practice what I learned about volunteerism, citizen responsibility, and leadership back in my home country, Morocco.



Khaoula presents her alumni project plan at the March re-entry workshop

Since I regard education and knowledge as the key to success in life, I want to start a SPARK Club in my school back home in which students with higher potentials in a certain subject would help others with lower ones. To be a leader doesn't mean to be the boss but, for me, it is to demonstrate everything you expect from others to be; it's to motivate and inspire them to be their best.

MORE REFLECTIONS ON LEADERSHIP FROM 2014-2015 STUDENTS:

One of my primary goals when I came to the U.S. was to introduce Ukrainian culture to Americans. I always educated people on what was going on in Ukraine, what life was like, I told them about school rules, free time activities, sports, stereotypes, food etc. I understood that acting properly will help Americans remember my country in a positive way. I succeeded in making good and equal relationships with people being always friendly and polite.

Viktor Holyanych, FLEX-Ukraine

Leadership is the biggest skill that you need and you learn in an exchange program. As an exchange student, I found leadership in my everyday life in America; I use my leadership skills from when I wake up, until I go to bed, without even realizing them. I am not only a foreign exchange student, but I am also a Persian student; which means that what I think, what I say, and how I act affects Americans' thoughts about my country and my people.

Saina Abdollahzadeh, Bridges-Georgia

HELPFUL ALUMNI ADVICE FOR 2015-2016 STUDENTS

Every exchange student's experience is unique, but there are some common adjustment issues that you may come across during your first few months in the U.S. as you begin to adjust to your host family, your host community, and your U.S. high school. Last year's students share their advice about how to address some of these initial challenges and make the most of your exchange year.

Ever since I arrived to my host community, I talk to my family and friends in my home country almost every day. I really miss them.

Alumni advice: Don't spend too much time on Skype or the phone as you will be separated from the people around you and the point of your exchange is to be open to building your life here with your host family and people in your community. There will be sometimes you will feel homesick or down but you will move on and you will get used to it.

Before I came to the U.S., I thought my English was very good. Since I arrived, I have had difficulty understanding people, and I am self-conscious about making mistakes in English.

Alumni advice: If you do not understand something, don't be afraid to ask even if you think it may be silly. Americans are happy to help. Be talkative and do not be shy because of your accent.

I thought it would be easy to make friends and that everyone would approach me to ask me questions about myself, but they don't.

Alumni advice: Show initiative and do not just wait for others to approach you. Join as many clubs as you can to meet a lot of different people. Be open-minded. Share your experience and show others how you see America. Take advantage of opportunities and try things for the first time. Don't be afraid to get out of your comfort zone.

I really like my host family, but I sometimes feel like a guest in the home instead of a member of the family. I want them to know I appreciate this opportunity, but I do not know how.

Alumni advice: Set your expectations and then discuss with your host family what their expectations are of you. Come to a consensus together. Remember to always say "thank you"!



Far left: students in the Texas cluster representing all 5 programs show off their home countries' flags

Left: FLEX students at Language Camp meet Jon Graham, the Mayor of Calera, AL