HOST FAMILY HANDBOOK
2021-2022

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Thank You!

Thank you for volunteering to host a Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) student! The Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) hopes this handbook will help you learn more about the FLEX program and how FLEX students may be different from other foreign exchange students you have known. ECA hopes your experience hosting a FLEX student is both rewarding and educational. The Department of State would also encourage you to share with us about your hosting experience. You can write us at **discoverflex@americancouncils.org.** You can also follow FLEX on social media:

@FLEXProgram

discoverFLEX.org

FLEXProgram

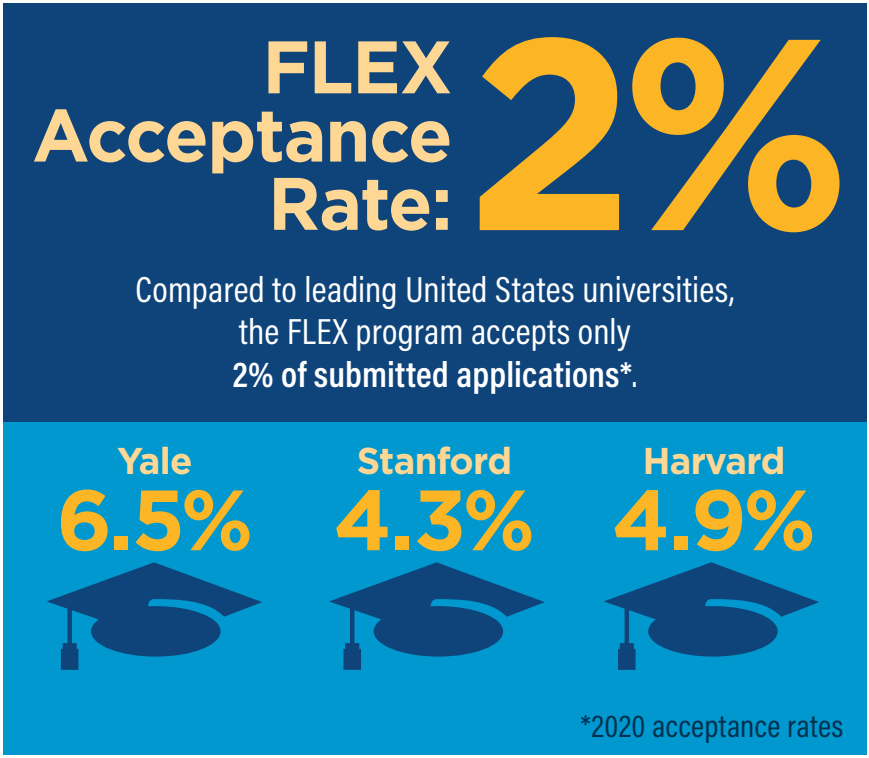
FLEX Program

What is FLEX?

The program was initially created from former Senator Bill Bradley's conviction that the best way to promote understanding between the United States and the countries of the former Soviet Union (Eurasia) is to help young people learn firsthand about the United States and Americans. The program has since expanded to include the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Mongolia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. The primary goal of FLEX is to improve mutual understanding between our countries by allowing young citizens of Europe and Eurasia to have the opportunity to experience our way of life. The United States Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) funds this program. Since the program began in 1993, tens of thousands of young people have participated in FLEX and have returned to their countries with a new enthusiasm and desire to help others and share their newly acquired experiences and knowledge to benefit their home communities and countries.

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA)

The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' (ECA) mission is to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchanges that assist in the development of peaceful relations. As mandated by the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961, ECA works to build friendly, peaceful relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries through academic, cultural, sports, and professional exchanges, as well as public-private partnerships. ECA administers global education and cultural exchange programs for hundreds of individuals each year.



FLEX Administration

The FLEX Program is funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). ECA is responsible for the implementation of FLEX as legislated by the U.S. Congress. ECA monitors and provides oversight for all aspects of program implementation, including on-program student support issues.

The ECA provides a toll-free emergency number for students, which is **1-866-283-9090.**

ECA awards federal grants and cooperative agreements to private, not-for-profit organizations to carry out various components of the FLEX program. One award covers FLEX program administration for recruitment, selection, health clearance, pre-departure orientation (PDO), international travel, and carrying out alumni activities in the FLEX countries. This organization is also the channel for communications with students' natural families. ECA also makes awards to Placement Organizations ("POs") that place FLEX students in American homes and schools. These POs provide support and monitor students' progress and their program activities. Generally, 12-15 private organizations receive placement awards each year.

The organization that placed the FLEX student with your family is one of these POs. A local representative of this organization will be a major resource person for you and your FLEX student during the entire time the student is with you. Your PO serves as a liaison with ECA, so this local representative should always be your first point of contact when you have a question or concern. To support students who have adjustment, behavior or other issues while on their exchange, the FLEX program administration grantee works with the POs to communicate with natural parents in home countries.

Program goals

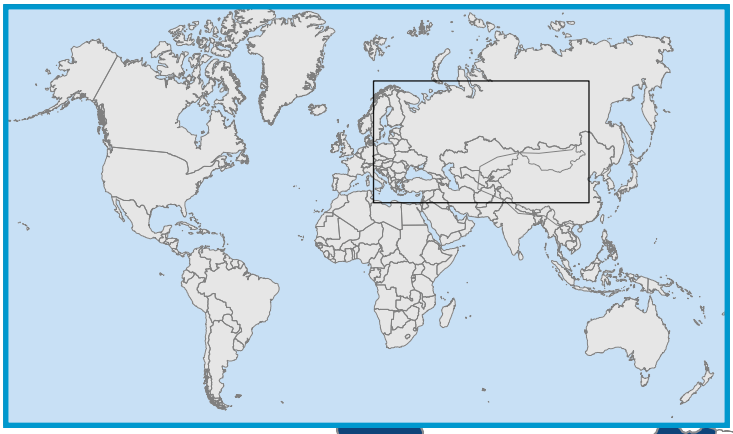
The FLEX program has five goals for its participants. FLEX students will:

- Expand their knowledge of American culture and its diversity.
- Teach Americans about their home countries and cultures.
- Interact with Americans and generate enduring ties.
- Explore and acquire an understanding of the key elements of U.S. civil society.
- Share experience and knowledge through their networks and communities upon returning home.

Participant Countries

Students come from countries in Europe and Eurasia. Eurasia is a term that refers to the landmass of Europe and Asia, where the countries that once belonged to the Soviet Union (dissolved in 1991) are located.

Each country has its own rich history, language, culture, and religion, and students, like Americans, take great pride in their country. Learn which country your exchange student is from, how to pronounce it, and where it is on a map. There are many good online resources to learn about these countries, including the Country Overviews created by American Councils, available at **www.discoverflex.org**.



Here are the names of current and past (in italics) FLEX countries as well as their location on the map:

- Armenia
- *Belarus*
- Azerbaijan
- Czech Republic
- Estonia
- Georgia
- Greece
- Hungary
- Kazakhstan
- Kyrgyzstan
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Moldova
- Mongolia
- Montenegro
- Poland
- Romania
- *Russia*
- Serbia
- Slovakia
- Tajikistan
- Turkmenistan
- Ukraine (*not* "the Ukraine")
- Uzbekistan

What makes FLEX students different?

The purpose of the FLEX program is to increase mutual understanding between the United States and FLEX students' home countries. Unlike students who pay a fee to come to the United States on a private exchange, over 35,000 students take part in three rigorous rounds of competition to win one of the limited (approximately 900) FLEX scholarships.

A major goal of the program is for participants to gain a real understanding of concepts such as student government, citizen engagement, and volunteerism so they can take these concepts back to their home communities. The Department of State also hopes that FLEX students will develop and maintain relationships with people in the United States communities where they are hosted. The federal grant awarded to your FLEX student's PO includes funds for enhancement activities that help students learn about the U.S. through visits to state and local government, participation in community service activities, and others. FLEX students are encouraged to experience each situation by thinking about what s/he might like to try at home, whether it would be suitable for his/her country, and how it would have to be adjusted to work in his/her country. The program's goal of increased mutual understanding is achieved through living with you and through every interaction your student has with Americans.

Participants' special responsibilities

FLEX students participated in a rigorous, lengthy competition in order to be selected for this program. Since they receive United States government scholarships, their responsibilities during the exchange period greatly exceed those of students who come to the U.S. under private programs. FLEX students are expected to be ambassadors of their countries and cultures and teach Americans with whom they interact about the culture of their home countries. Upon returning home, they also are expected to teach their fellow citizens about life in the United States. Many FLEX alumni have written articles for local newspapers, been interviewed on TV and radio, and made presentations about American life in their home schools and universities.

Inspired by their experiences in the U.S., alumni develop and implement initiatives in their home communities and countries such as:

- Conducting leadership and empowerment camps for girls;
- Leading environmental initiatives and workshops;
- Conducting skill-building camps for at-risk youth and for students with disabilities;
- Volunteering at local Habitat for Humanity sites;
- Leading grant-writing and public speaking workshops;
- Organizing "fun runs" to benefit targeted causes, hospitals and orphanages;
- Establishing registered alumni associations.

I help my teachers after school which allows me to get to know them much better. Twice a week I go to the local retirement community where I spend time with residents who have dementia. I paint ladies' fingernails, draw with them, help with cooking and serving meals. I learn what patience and family love is. I also meet new friends among other volunteers there. Besides that, I joined Ruriteen club where we do community service every month. All of my volunteer activities are very diverse, but local. I'm influencing the lives of people around me, and I truly believe that this is one of the things every exchange student finds important in the United States. I'm proud of realizing how much little things can mean to people around you, and I'm planning to continue volunteering in my home country.

Anastasiya, *Ukraine*

Alumni also hold food and book drives, debate tournaments, anti-smoking and safe driving campaigns, and much, MUCH more. While we expect that all high school exchange students will share their native culture with the Americans they meet, it is an obligation for every FLEX participant to be both a cultural teacher and student while he or she is in the United States.

FLEX students have been told to be prepared to give presentations about their home countries and to bring photos, national costumes, music, or other cultural items to support this kind of activity. ECA would appreciate your help in encouraging your FLEX student to be an active presenter at school and other appropriate venues in the community throughout the exchange year. FLEX students are required to make presentations during International Education Week. You may be able to assist your student in finding civic groups and other community organizations that would welcome such a presentation.

Most placement organizations incorporate a community service component into the program for its FLEX students. Each year FLEX students perform over 60,000 hours of volunteer service to their host communities, at homeless shelters, senior citizens' centers, Special Olympics events, soup kitchens, charity races, libraries, and local newspapers. ECA supports this effort, since participating in volunteer activities provides a way for these students to give something back to their host communities. In addition, the students gain an understanding

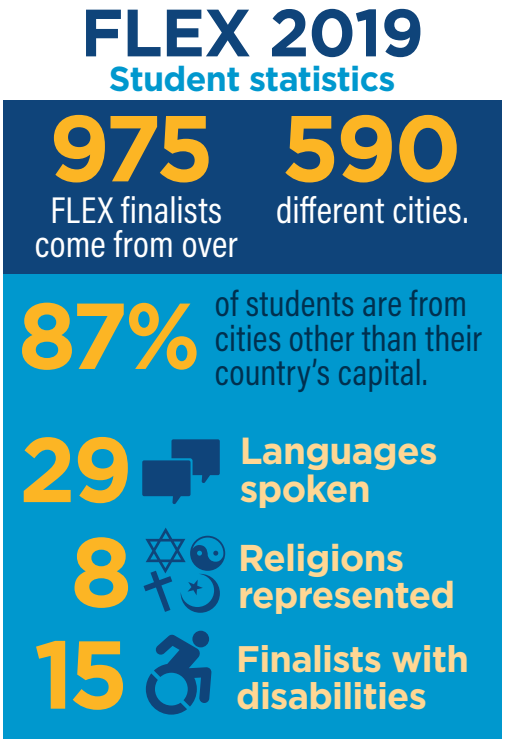
of volunteerism, a concept that is integral to American society but often not as widely practiced in the home countries of these young people.

Don't be surprised if your student isn't very knowledgeable about participating in volunteer work at first. This is still a fairly new concept in many countries, although FLEX alumni are very active in this sphere. What some of them may initially speak of as community service in their countries is likely an activity that was mandated either by their school or the local government. Even though FLEX students learn about the American value of volunteering at their pre-departure orientation, and some may have been exposed to it through FLEX alumni initiatives in their home countries, new students are often unable to fully understand and appreciate it until they experience it firsthand. By the time Global Youth Service Day (GYSD) comes around in April, most students are excited to be involved and show creativity in the projects they choose to undertake.

Student recruitment and selection

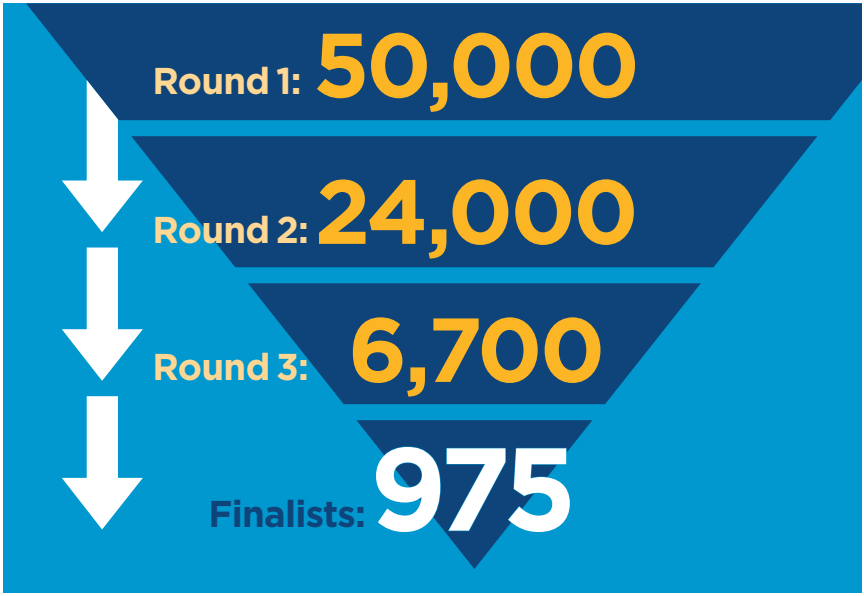
American Councils for International Education: ACTR/ACCELS is responsible for the recruitment and selection of FLEX students under a grant from the Department of State. American Councils manages this effort from its Washington, DC headquarters, while staff in its overseas field offices conducts on-the-ground operations in each country.

Recruitment of FLEX students is a large-scale effort that involves a comprehensive, three-phase, merit-based, open competition. American Councils field staff makes a tremendous effort to recruit students from diverse geographical areas, backgrounds, and ethnic groups. This ensures that the candidate pool is representative of the distinct groups of people that make up each population. Students with disabilities are also actively recruited to participate in the program. No special consideration is given to any candidate's financial status, which can range from working class to upper class. This is unprecedented in societies where bribes and connections were (and in some cases still are) often used as ways to get ahead. FLEX has won a reputation for being a respectable and prestigious opportunity that is truly open to all applicants who meet the age and grade requirements.



At the start of the recruitment period, trained American Councils staff advertises the open competition in over 140 targeted cities (including many in remote regions) throughout the region via social media, newspapers, radio, television, local schools, and Ministries of Education. Students are invited to go to the nearest testing site with a birth certificate and photograph to prove that they meet the eligibility requirements. Students who are eligible are administered a short, multiple choice English test to qualify them for the next round of testing. Those who pass are asked

FLEX 2019 Competition Participation



to write three proctored essays in English on specific topics. In countries that are newer to FLEX, students complete a similar initial round of testing online.

The essays students write are then reviewed by a committee of trained scholarship screening panelists in American Councils' Washington, DC office to determine who will advance to the third (semifinalist) round of competition. Students who make it to the third round are selected for demonstrating in their essays that they possess qualities necessary for intercultural adjustment. During the third round, students write two more proctored essays, receive the program application to complete within two weeks, take a comprehensive, secondary level English exam such as the ELTiS, and are individually interviewed by a team of American and local staff who have been specially trained to evaluate the students. Interviews are often conducted in both English and the student's native language. Applicants also participate in group activities that enable American Councils staff to observe candidates interacting with their peers.

Applications of those who participate in the final recruitment stage are sent to Washington, DC, where American Councils coordinates a committee of over 250 trained volunteers to evaluate the complete application materials and select the finalists. These evaluators

volunteer because of their interest in international youth exchange and commitment to public diplomacy. They may have had experience in the field of international exchange, or they may have worked or traveled overseas. Before beginning the selection process, American Councils trains the evaluators, so that they will recognize the qualities and characteristics in a student that would be most indicative of a student's ability to have a successful exchange experience.

2021-2022
INTRODUCTION TO THE USA

FLEX is a program of the U.S. Department of State with funding provided by the U.S. government.

Student preparation

All students participate in an extensive pre-departure orientation (PDO) program in their home countries before they depart for the United States. PDOs are conducted by trained American Councils field office staff and take place approximately six weeks before the students leave for the United States. The goal of the PDO is to prepare the students for what to expect on program and how to have a successful experience. Therefore, the 12 interactive sessions (and companion workbook, Introduction to the USA) focus largely on program information and cultural issues they are likely to encounter in the United States that will be different from what they are accustomed to:

- Program goals
- Program rules, rights, and privileges
- POs, problem solving and chain of communication
- American families and values
- Fitting in with your host family
- Tolerance and diversity
- Understanding your cultural baggage
- Adjusting to living in another culture
- Budgeting
- High school in America
- Friendship
- Succeeding in a cross-cultural environment

Students learn that they will need to use their flexibility, open-mindedness, friendliness, and interest in learning new things - referred to as the "tools" in their toolbox of resources and characteristics that will help them deal successfully with challenges and get (and give) the most out of their exchange. Students also learn about program rules, such as the prohibition against alcohol, drugs, and driving; the firm requirement to return home at the end of the program year; and the possibility that they might not receive a diploma from their American school.

When students are notified of their selection as finalists, they are also told which PO is responsible for them. The role of the PO is fully explained to students at the PDOs, and each student will receive a packet of informational materials provided by their PO that explain the PO's mission, rules, and regulations. After arriving in the American host community, local representatives of your student's PO will provide a welcome orientation to further explain details of the organization's rules and responsibilities, schedule of activities, stipend disbursal, insurance, and other policies.

Host family preparation

Under the terms of its State Department grant, each PO is required to conduct local orientations for families that will host FLEX students, before the students arrive. This will be the opportunity for you to ask all the questions you are sure to have about your hosting experience. Even if you have hosted private exchange students before, you may find hosting a FLEX student to be a different experience. The host family orientation covers the following topics:

- Differences between FLEX and private exchange programs, including goals of the FLEX program
- Family and student expectations
- J visa requirements
- Role of the local representative
- Communication with PO personnel, including emergency contact information
- Purpose and disbursement of the monthly student stipend and the student incidentals allowance
- Schedule of cluster/enhancement activities
- Community service requirement
- International Education Week
- Disciplinary procedures
- Religion
- Program components/student workshop opportunities
- Travel policies
- Cultural influences that may inform student behavior
- Alumni programming

Student travel

Because FLEX students are young, American Councils manages their travel to and from the United States in groups by home country for their safety and support. As a result, it is often difficult to accommodate individual student schedules. However, American Councils attempts to factor U.S. school start and end dates into students' arrival and departure travel plans whenever feasible.

Coming to the United States: FLEX students arrive in late July throughout August. Your PO will let you know what dates are available for you to choose from. Families often consider vacation plans, school start date and other commitments when selecting their student's arrival date.

Going home: In early winter, you and your student will receive a return travel information form regarding available departure dates from the United States. This form may give you and your student the opportunity to choose between two or more departure date options. Some FLEX students have to take exams in their home countries in late spring or early summer, and this is also taken into consideration when departure travel plans are being made. Students from smaller countries may not have a choice of travel date. American Councils makes every effort to accommodate requested dates, although this cannot be guaranteed. The sooner this form is returned to your PO, the better the chance of the student getting the date requested, as these are assigned on a first-come-first-served basis. There are places on the travel form for both you and your student to sign, indicating that all of you agree to the requested date and understand the travel policies as stated. You

and your student need to think very carefully when choosing a date. You should consider end-of-school activities (such as prom, class trips or other special events), plans that you have for your family and exchange student, or events that your FLEX student needs to be home for. Changing travel arrangements can be complicated and costly so return travel dates will not be changed except in the most extreme circumstances. Unfortunately we cannot make changes for prom, graduation, or any other year-end activity.

The Language Program (LP) and the Moldova EFL Workshop

Most FLEX students will arrive to the United States, overnight in Washington, DC, and go directly to their host communities the following morning. However, a small number of students have been identified as needing one or both of the special pre-program components: the Language Program (LP), and the Moldova English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Workshop. Both the LP and the Moldova EFL Workshop are designed to improve the English language capabilities of students who demonstrated that they are strong candidates but need additional instruction in order to meet the language requirements for a U.S. high school.

The intensive, five-week long, all-English Moldova EFL Workshop is organized and conducted by American Councils and professional teaching staff at the American Language Center in Chisinau, Moldova. Approximately 20-30 students are designated to attend this workshop each year, which runs from early-July through mid-August.

Typically about 10% of FLEX students are designated as needing LP. Once students are in the United States, each PO has the responsibility to arrange the English educational activities for its own LP students, ideally before the school start date, so the LP programming is different for students of different POs. For example, some POs arrange for their LP students to be tutored individually in their host communities. Others group their LP students in one location for a special English program, after which they will travel to their host communities. The LP emphasizes conversational English, so that students will be better prepared to take part in classroom activities and discussions when school begins. If you think your LP student needs continued language tutoring beyond the special English enhancement programming to be successful in school, or if you have a non-LP student that you think is in need of additional English instruction, you should contact your PO representative to find out what support may be available.

I applied for this program because I wanted to change my life, to be independent, to be a leader and different when I return home. I want to be a leader, who can change things for people with disabilities. I would like to bring some ideas and activities for the blind people back to my country and do some projects. I learned a lot of things about American culture, activities and also, I learned things about blind people, which I am always interested in. I have played Goalball, I am involved in African Drumming Ensemble, Choir and Music Listening Contest. I think that I am having the great exchange year because I have the great host family, friends and school.

One of my goals is to come back to my country and be leader of the blind community, who can help them to do new things and give them new ideas to do things. I learned lots of things, but the most important thing was that I always have to say, if I need a help, 'I need a help'. and also, 'I need a guide'. I always remember these sentences. I would recommend all students who wants to be a leader and who can be a representative of their countries [to apply for the FLEX program].

Ana, *Georgia*

Students with disabilities and reasonable accommodations

As mentioned earlier, American Councils actively recruits and selects students with disabilities to participate in the FLEX program. Approximately 12-20 students with disabilities are usually selected each year. These students must meet the same criteria as the other FLEX students. However, because people with disabilities often are stigmatized in many parts of the world including the FLEX countries, these students' English language and independence skills may not be as developed as their peers.

All students with disabilities will arrive in the United States in mid-August to attend the Preparatory Workshop conducted by American Councils' grantee organization, Mobility International USA (MIUSA) in Eugene, Oregon. This mandatory workshop for all FLEX students with disabilities serves to prepare students with disabilities for the year ahead in the United States. Through specially-designed activities and experiential learning, students have the opportunity to start the acculturation process, set goals for the year, learn about disability in the United States, and improve their independence skills as necessary. MIUSA staff conducts an initial assessment of each student's independent living skills and makes recommendations about the needs that may have to be addressed in the host family, community, and school. After the MIUSA workshop, these students will travel to their host communities. MIUSA also will serve as a resource for all students with disabilities during the year, and can provide information about community resources and other opportunities that may arise while the students are on program. Your PO will act as liaison between you and MIUSA staff.

Finally, your PO may have suggestions for enhancement activities that are tailored to fit your special needs student, e.g., skiing for the blind or wheelchair basketball. If you are hosting a student with a disability and have not yet been approached about special enhancement activities, be sure to ask your PO local representative. If you decide to host a FLEX student with a disability, you will find your impact on this young person's life, and theirs on yours, to be uniquely gratifying. Here are some things students with disabilities had to say about their exchange experience:

> *As a handicapped person, the FLEX experience and the U.S. showed me that I'm stronger than I thought. I can do great things for me and my society. This program taught me that dreams DO come true! I've learned to be self-confident and to not be ashamed of who I am. I've learned that everything is possible for people like us. I've learned that if we need help, people will always be there for us, and finally I've learned to never give up, no matter what!*
>
> **Victoria**, *Moldova*

i'm not
short
i'm fun
sized

The main thing I learned about blindness is that it is only characteristic. The only difference between blind and sighted people is only blind people can not see with eyes. Main thing I learned about myself that I can work hard and be free. Sometimes I was thinking I am too young to attend the FLEX program. But I think I am accomplished a lot this year. I learned that I can run a mile for only nine minutes and thirty seconds. I discovered that I can be away from my parents for that long time one year. I was thinking that life will be good and easy in America. But it was not and there were other challenges...honestly at first I was not ready for them...but now I am learning that I have enough strength and energy to face them and live a good but not easy life. I will prove to people in my society that blind people can do the same things as sighted people and that stereotypes about blindness are not true.

Bohdan, *Ukraine*

Program allowances

FLEX students benefit from two allowances: the monthly allowance and the incidentals allowance.

Monthly Allowance

Since FLEX students are not permitted to formally work under the terms of their J-1 visas (but can earn pocket money by babysitting, washing cars, or mowing lawns), POs send this allowance to students to offset basic needs. Further, FLEX participants need to interact with American friends if they are to carry out the most important goals of the program. It is hoped that this allowance will in part enable them to engage in some social activities with their friends. Appropriate use of this allowance includes:

- Toiletries
- Haircuts
- Social activities (such as a movie or a pizza with friends.

Incidentals Allowance

This allowance is held for each student by the PO to help cover the cost of school or program-related items to offset host family expenditures. Check with your placement organization so that you understand the rules for using this money and how to get reimbursed. Appropriate use of this allowance includes:

- School activity fees
- Special equipment for a school or extra-curricular activity
- Yearbook
- Clothing, if necessitated by a climate different from that in the student's home country (e.g., a winter jacket). It may *not* be used for a prom dress or a trip to a theme park.

Decisions on how to use the incidentals allowance should be made jointly by the student and host family in consultation with the PO. Occasionally, students confuse the purpose of the two allowances and think that the incidentals allowance is supposed to be their money, to be spent at their discretion only. If this happens, you can remind your student that the incidentals allowance was discussed at the PDO and is described in the Introduction to the USA workbook s/he used there and was instructed to bring to the United States. If your student has not brought this workbook to the United States and the problem persists, you may wish to contact your PO local representative for assistance.

Workshop opportunities

Approximately 200 FLEX students will be competitively selected to participate in a special Civic Education Workshop (CEW) held in Washington, DC in early spring. Workshop participants will attend seminars and lectures, meet their Congressional representatives on Capitol Hill, and participate in a number of other exciting activities designed to expose them to the American democratic system of government and the elements of a civil society.

Your student will receive information about how to apply for this and potentially other opportunities in the fall. ECA wants you to be aware of these so you can encourage your student to apply.

Cultural influences on behavior

Teenagers around the world share certain characteristics, and you will naturally find some of these in your FLEX student, too. Some of their "stumbles" may be very familiar or even predictable to you, and others less so. Since the first FLEX students came on program in 1993 up through the present, administrators have identified some common cultural issues that arise for some students every year, often based on the different customs or beliefs in their home country and the United States. These issues are addressed extensively at PDO, and students are given suggestions for how to avoid or overcome them.

The following chart lists some of these behaviors along with an explanation (sometimes cultural) and suggestions for addressing these issues. Of course, not all FLEX students will exhibit these behaviors, and some FLEX students will not exhibit any. Each student's individual personality and background will influence how s/he adapts to American life. The purpose of this chart is not to imply that FLEX students will be "more problematic" than other foreign exchange students, but rather to increase your understanding of the possible cultural roots and influences that may play a part in the behavior of your FLEX student. These issues can often be resolved with open conversation.

BEHAVIOR	POSSIBLE **CULTURAL ROOT**	**STRATEGY TO HELP STUDENTS ADAPT**
Persistence when told "no"	A legacy of complex bureaucracies endures in many FLEX countries. "No" meant "ask someone else" to avoid getting oneself in trouble for saying "yes." Asking multiple times increases chances of getting a "yes."	Remind student of rules and typical American attitude toward rules - rules are to be respected, and exceptions are rare. Students learn at PDO that if one host parent says "no," this does not mean to ask the other parent.
Transportation shock	Many students come from countries with reliable and affordable public transportation systems. It can be shocking to them that city buses in the United States, when available, come much less frequently and cost so much, and that school buses can take up to 1½ hours to get to school each day.	Explain the available public transportation options to your student. Help them find ways to wisely use their monthly allowance towards this. Encourage students to make friends who can sometimes give them rides. Help them understand that asking for a ride from a friend is common in the United States.
Cold meals	Often in FLEX countries, breakfast and lunch are hot meals prepared at home by a mother or grandmother. It can be a real adjustment for some students that they are expected to help themselves to a cold breakfast "to go," and that a cold bagged lunch is typical fare for U.S. teens.	Students have demonstrated a readiness to open their minds, a desire to be more independent and curiosity about America. Point out that this type of self-sufficiency was explained at PDO (where some students actually prepared and ate bagged lunches!) as part of that process. This is a typical part of American life!
Reluctance to help with certain housework	This may be attributable to cultures that embrace more traditional gender roles.	Remind your student that housework and yard work in the United States is not "women's work" or "men's work," it is just work and most American teens do chores.
Not able to manage money (spends too much or saves too much)	The student's natural family may expect a student to bring money home. If student perceives him/herself as a guest, s/he may expect the host to pay. In most FLEX countries, parents do not give allowances; rather, parents buy what is needed.	Remind your student that the stipend is provided to help them to learn about American culture and participate in events with friends. Help them set up a basic budget using the template in *Introduction to the USA*. Learning to manage money is an important life skill.
Direct manner of speaking	Students may be more direct in saying what they mean ("I don't want to see that movie, it's boring") without any of the polite phrases that are common in the United States ("I'm not sure about that movie, I heard it got a bad review...maybe we could see something else?")	Remind the student that in the United States this directness can come across as rude, even if not intended that way. Suggest that the student might listen to how others respond in these situations, and explain that they can soften their approach by using polite phrases, while still expressing themselves.

If your FLEX student's behavior becomes a problem, try to determine if it is due to a cultural influence. If it is, it can help to understand some of the cultural roots of your student's behavior. Tell the student how the behavior is affecting others and explain how Americans behave in this situation. Be alert, as well, to aspects of American society that are likely to result in culture shock because they are so different from what the student is accustomed to. Don't hesitate to seek help from your PO local representative if your student is exhibiting behavior that may be culturally-based. Often local staff has experience dealing with these types of problems or misunderstandings and can help you get things back on track. Your representative can also look to American Councils as a resource for helping host families and FLEX students work through misunderstandings that spring from a clash of cultures.

Sometimes, students have issues on program that cannot be resolved through the usual support and counseling avenues provided by you and your placement organization, or personal or health issues arise that require them to return home early. In these cases, the placement organization will request approval from the Department of State (as the program funder) to send the student home early. Only the Department of State can approve an early return request. When an early return is approved, American Councils makes their return travel arrangements. Tickets are usually arranged within a week of approval.

Whether or not your student experiences any of these issues, they have tremendous capacity for personal growth and self-reflection. Although it may be difficult for them to imagine what awaits them in the United States, there is no doubt about the lessons they've learned as they prepare to say goodbye (for now) to their "second" families:

> *Some people while thinking about the United States see New York or Hollywood, but I see small town in North Dakota. Thank you FLEX for giving me this opportunity to explore the real America.*
>
> **Zuziana,** '17, *Poland*

> *My host family helped me to realize that as much as we are different, we are so similar... They helped me to see that a mother is a mother no matter what side of planet you live on or what language you speak. They made me feel that when you are far away from your home that in fact you are at home. They made me feel that I belong where I am and that I am not a stranger.*
>
> **Dunja,** '15, *Serbia/Shelby, Alabama*

One of the best things that the FLEX program gave me is my host family. I'm so blessed to have these people in my life. They can be there to give me the best advice; can be serious, crazy, funny, and anything else with me. Now wherever I go I will have 2 entirely different families that are in different parts of the world but they both are in my heart."

Tatev, '17, *Armenia*

Computer use

While the topic of computer and Internet rules and usage is addressed at the PDO, it will be important for you to establish clear rules from the beginning regarding use of your home computer, especially if it is shared by several people, and how much "screen time" your student is allowed to have. Students are told at PDO that they are required to follow their host family, school and PO rules regarding computer and Internet use– both the amount of time spent on the computer and types of sites visited, and are warned of the dangers of sharing personal information online. Your student needs to understand that use of your family's home computer is a privilege, not an entitlement, and that time online is not time as well spent as spending it with you or American friends. Like many U.S. teens, FLEX students are tech-savvy and many if not most have a computer at home and some sort of mobile device. Many are active on social media, although in most FLEX countries there may be less concern about online privacy, predators, and excessive screen time as there is in the United States. Too much time on the computer is obviously not an appropriate way for your student to spend their time. This could keep the student from engaging in other activities and from interacting personally with family and friends. In extreme cases, this may affect the bonding process between you and the student and, therefore, should be discouraged. Please note that accessing pornographic websites is inappropriate and downloading copyright-protected material is illegal and may result in dismissal from the program.

On the positive side, the advent of voice and messaging apps such as Skype, WhatsApp, Viber and FaceTime has greatly increased the reliability of communication between students and their natural parents, resulting in far fewer expensive phone bills. But there needs to be a balance in the amount of time the student spends on the computer, and communicating with home, and you will have to help your student determine what that is. Most POs have set policies regarding appropriate computer use. If computer usage becomes an issue for you, be sure to contact your PO local representative.

Religion

Exchange students and their host families frequently have very different ideas about religion. For some families, religious services and the other activities offered by their places of worship are important to their weekly routine. For others, religion is not an important part of their lives, and still others might indicate “no religion” on their application.

In cases where a host family does not attend religious services, or observes a religion that is different from the student’s, the student may ask for help in finding a place of worship of their own faith.

During the PDO, students learn that for many Americans, the place of worship not only fulfills a spiritual need but also shapes their social, recreational and community life. This is in significant contrast to what most FLEX students are used to in their home countries, where the places of worship is generally not a place for social activity but rather a personal, individual experience. It is important for host families of FLEX students to be sensitive to this and even to anticipate initial reluctance on the part of some FLEX students to attend church with your family.

Students are encouraged to join all host family activities as a sign of respect and as an opportunity to observe another aspect of American culture. If attending services at a church, temple, or mosque on a regular basis and participating in related social activities are important parts of your family life, you may wish to suggest this to your exchange student as well. It is their choice to attend or not to attend services. Students

> *Many FLEXers ask what American church is like and what to do if you and your host family have different religions. Well, on Sunday I went to church, and it was nothing like what we are used to! Everyone there does what interests them – sports, dance, getting ready for holidays, volunteering. People come here to relax and socialize, and if there is anything that needs to be done, everyone pitches in willingly. So, future FLEXers, don't worry if your host family invites you to church. No one there will proselytize or preach to you. It's just one more place where you can find friends…and after church you can go to the movies or get coffee with them!*
>
> **Alinura '16,** *Kazakhstan/Michigan*

learn at PDO that if religious beliefs make it impossible to participate in religious services with their host family, they should take advantage of the many other social activities offered by most U.S. houses of worship. Lots of FLEX students sing in church choirs and participate in community service events organized by religions institutions.

Whether or not the student agrees to attend services, it is important to respect the student's choice by not applying pressure or reacting negatively if he or she chooses not to participate. In all cases, both host families and students must respect each other's right to their own beliefs. Both must refrain from any attempt to proselytize and must avoid the perception of trying to influence or convert.

It is also possible that some students whose natural families have begun to affiliate with a religion at home will perceive that going to a house of worship different from the one to which they are accustomed is inappropriate. This may be especially true for some Muslim students who may not be permitted by their religion to enter a non-Muslim religious sanctuary. It is essential for host families to respect their student's wishes and comfort zone and to make an effort to adhere to any religious practices and dietary restrictions the student may have. Since students are asked to list their religious preference on their applications, you should be able to tell whether a student whose application you are reviewing practices Christianity, Islam, Judaism, another religion, or no religion at all. It is also important to keep in mind

that how individual students practice their religion may vary. That is, they may not include all of the tenets which are generally attributable to that religion, due in part to the relative newness in many of these countries of embracing and exploring religion.

Before agreeing to host this student, you must consider whether you are willing to reasonably accommodate any needs that may be associated with the practice of that religion (for example the potential need of a student to attend services at a mosque, synagogue, temple or other house of worship). The word reasonable is key. No one expects you to drive long distances several times a week to take your exchange student to a particular religious sanctuary. But you may find that helping your student to practice his/her religion will give you to have a new and interesting cultural experience. Remember that cultural exchange is a mutual two-way street!

Why host a FLEX student?

FLEX students are bright and engaging and will present you with a unique opportunity to share your culture and values with someone from another country. In their own words, Americans host "*...to bring the world to their home,*" "*to foster a love for America and its citizens, and build strong relationships with those from a culture different than our own,*" and "*to offer a child the opportunity to be part of the life that I've been privileged to enjoy in this great country,*" finding along the way that "*we love these students as much as our own*."

In the early years of FLEX, the Cold War was slowly thawing. Prior to this the media typically portrayed a very negative image of the Soviet Union and surrounding Eastern Bloc countries ("satellite" states that were under the hegemony of the USSR, including Poland, Romania, and countries of the former Yugoslavia) and peoples. Likewise, people in these countries had little or no opportunity to encounter anything but negative stereotypes of Americans. Opportunities to meet face-to-face and counter these negative images were extremely limited, and that is exactly what FLEX provides. Host families like yours help students learn what Americans and American life is really like.

Although it has been decades since the Soviet Union dissolved and our nations began to forge new relationships, many of our impressions of one another remain informed by the negativism and stereotypes portrayed in mass media. True understanding comes only from personal interaction, making the FLEX program as valuable today, if not more so, as when it was created in 1992. The FLEX program offers an unprecedented opportunity for our people and countries to reach out to each other and bridge the divide.

As a FLEX host family, you will have a window into a region of the world that still remains a mystery for many Americans. You will have the opportunity to help your FLEX student learn about community service and civil society, possibly for the first time. While Americans tend to take many of these concepts and values for granted, a FLEX student is likely to find student government and volunteer service in one's community to be new and very exciting experiences – and as the FLEX student's host family, you will be a part of these dramatic discoveries. The student can learn many things from you about our values and community responsibility. Likewise you will have a wonderful opportunity to learn about your FLEX student's culture and traditions.

While in the United States, many FLEX students come to more fully appreciate and feel pride in their home country. They learn what citizenship means, and return home motivated to make a positive

difference. They will tell their friends and family about your community. Many alumni report that they stay in touch with their U.S. host family and community even years after their exchange year ends. We can assure you that hosting a FLEX student will be the experience of a lifetime!

Below are some detailed comments from families who have hosted FLEX students.

Mykola's host family writes:

> *We are the Thompsons. We decided to volunteer to host a FLEX student because we had met many of the past exchange students and they all seemed so pleasant, enthusiastic and came from very different cultures. For us, learning about the different culture is a very exciting part of hosting a student. We won the lottery when we were chosen to host Mykola "Nick" from Ukraine. Before Nick had even arrived, we had written to each other and knew that we were going to have a fun, exciting and educational experience. Our two sons have probably learned just as much about the Ukrainian culture as Nick has learned about our culture. Within the first few weeks of having Nick in our lives, he truly became a family member. We absolutely love having him with us. Nick is a typical teenager and has become very close to his host brothers. We have had an amazing time watching Nick excel in school and while playing soccer at school. He even had the opportunity to play on the varsity soccer team! Nick has made many American friends that we feel will become lifetime relationships no matter where in the world Nick is. This experience has been amazing for our family. Our only regret is that Nick has to go back to Ukraine. The time has flown by and our family will never be the same without Nick. I know that we will remain in contact with Nick for the rest of our lives!*

Zhenya's host parents said:

> *It will be very hard to see Zhenya go back home. But knowing that she has touched our family in a very special and wonderful way we will send her back. We will never forget her, her smile, her laughter, her personality, her enthusiasm and the love she gave to all of us. She not only touched our lives but her teachers, classmates and friends, elementary school children, people in church and in the community. My family and I have learned so much about her telling us about her country, her family, her lifestyle, her education, her religion and her overall culture. I admire Zhenya for being able to come to a foreign country and adapt as well as she has. I can only hope that we as her host family have impacted her life in a most positive way that she will always remember us and become a better person from her experience here in our little part of our country of America.*

Alex's host mother writes:

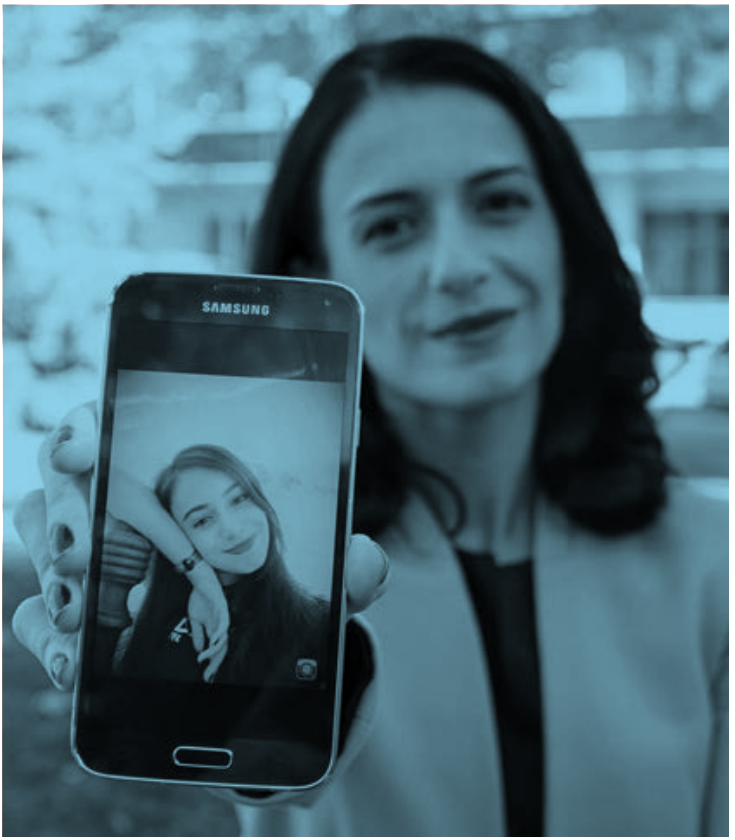
> *This has been an experience that I treasure…I believe the connections of the U.S. and the post-communist countries are vital to future diplomacy. The more we know and experience about one another, the more we understand why people, cultures, and nations act."*

FLEX students' natural parents are also affected by the exchange, learning about the United States and Americans through their children in ways they could never imagine. Here are some of their insights:

> *This has been an experience that I treasure…I believe the connections of the U.S. and the post-communist countries are vital to future diplomacy. The more we know and experience about one another, the more we understand why people, cultures, and nations act."*
>
> **Ofelya**, *mother of FLEX participant from Armenia*

I participated in FLEX in 1996…It was in the States that I first felt the importance of personal freedom. I was even surprised to see how much Americans respect the personal space of others and I wanted to raise my child with these values. 19 years have passed and in 2016 my daughter, Salome K., became a FLEX finalist and spent her year in Texas. Every time I talked to her, I realized how she sees and values the same things that had a profound impact on my personal development years ago. I am happy that, just like me, she had to independently deal with daily issues and take responsibility. It is one thing to be proud of your own achievements, but for every mother, her child's success brings twice as much happiness."

Nino Z., '96, *mother of* **Salome** '16



Nino (holding phone) and her daughter Salome

High school in FLEX countries

Your FLEX student will probably experience some culture shock when he or she first attends school in the United States since it will likely be very different from what he or she is accustomed to. Although each FLEX country has adopted and continues to modify its own educational standards, there are a few broad generalizations that can be made about the region. Usually, students of all ages study at the same, large "comprehensive" school from first grade through high school. Students do not change classes as frequently as American students and often cannot choose elective classes. It may take FLEX students a while to get used to having individual schedules and switching classes each period.

Many FLEX students are surprised that American schools have so many rules and regulations, such as hall passes and tardy slips. They find it paradoxical that our system allows them to choose their own classes, a liberty that their schools do not offer, yet will not allow students to walk in the hallways without permission. The opportunity to select their own classes is something that FLEX students greatly enjoy and appreciate while in the United States. The curriculum in most Soviet–era schools concentrated heavily on math and science, and you will notice that many FLEX students will excel in these subjects at your school. The methods of teaching (and learning) tend to differ quite a bit from the American model. In American schools, students are usually encouraged to develop their own thoughts and theories individually and to defend them. In contrast, FLEX students more frequently work in groups and are expected to memorize and recite information, but not necessarily offer personal opinion or participate actively in the classroom. FLEX alumni often recall how impressed they were with the interactive atmosphere of American schools and friendliness and supportiveness of American teachers.

Diplomas

Students are told before, during and after their PDO, including upon initial application to the program, that their U.S. school may or may not issue them a diploma, and that this decision is entirely up to the school. Further, students are told not to keep asking if a school says "no," because this is not a negotiation but a matter of policy. It is sometimes surprising to FLEX students that, due to the United State's decentralized school system, some students might be given diplomas and their friends may not. In most FLEX countries, there are nationwide educational policies and procedures that do not vary from region to region.

Some FLEX students and their parents feel that they need some sort of official document provided by the U.S. high school that proves to their home school that they were studying in America for one year. This can help them advance in their academic lives, both secondary and post-secondary, and sometimes even in their future careers. Many host schools issue certificates of participation or attendance in lieu of diplomas for FLEX students. A number of FLEX alumni have reported that these documents have been helpful, even though a diploma would have been preferred. If it is against the policy of your school district to award diplomas to exchange students, perhaps you could help your FLEX student by encouraging the school to provide an official document recognizing his or her enrollment. The Department of State respects the policies and decision of your local school district on this matter.

Similarly, some students may insist on being placed in 12th grade in their U.S. high school. The special status of the senior year in an American high school (prom, school trip, etc.) often appeals to FLEX students. Or perhaps the students are trying to ensure they will "graduate" and be awarded a diploma. Whatever the reason, if a student insists that s/he be placed in the 12th grade even though the host school has determined this is not appropriate, the student must be told firmly that "no" means "no."

Returning home

At the end of the FLEX year, some students and host families wonder if it is possible to extend the program for a second year. This is not permitted under any circumstances due to the type of visa that the students hold, and ECA asks for your support in helping to enforce this important program regulation.

FLEX students, being academically bright and motivated, may be interested in attending a U.S. university. While many FLEX alumni do this, it is important to remember that **all FLEX students must return to their home country at the end of the program, on their scheduled flight.** Students may not stay in the United States and immediately start university. In accepting the FLEX scholarship award, students have promised to return to their home countries at the end of their exchange year to share the values and concepts they experienced during their exchange year. If they don't return home, it represents a loss to the FLEX program. What's more, foreign governments may perceive this as "brain drain" and aren't likely to allow a program that takes away their best and brightest young people to continue for very long. If your student begins to talk about possibly staying in the U.S., ECA asks for your support in notifying your placement organization, and encouraging the student to remember the commitment he or she made in accepting the FLEX award. This may be another opportunity for you to help your FLEX student understand that in a democratic society such as the United States, citizens operate within the system and adhere to the rule of law. They keep their commitments and are accountable for their actions. In order to maintain the integrity of the program and of each individual participant, students must be encouraged to keep the commitment they made.

Going home at the end of the program year does not mean a student may never return to the United States It is true that FLEX students are subject to the two-year home residency requirement of their J-1 exchange visitor visa because their program is sponsored by the federal government (an obligation generally not shared by private exchange students). The J-1 visa requires that participants in U.S. government-funded exchange programs must return to their home country at the end of their program and live there for a total of two years before they are eligible to receive a U.S. immigrant or work visa. However, this "two-year" rule does NOT prevent individuals from returning to the United States for tourism, university study, and other purposes that involve a temporary stay.

ECA regulations limit high school exchange visitors' stays in the United States to one year. If a student does not return home on their assigned

flight at the end of the year, they will be considered “off program.” This means that their health insurance will be canceled, and the Department of Homeland Security will be informed. Their status in the government’s centralized guest visitor computer system will be listed as terminated, which means that if they apply for another U.S. visa, the consular officer will see this note and it will decrease their chances of receiving another U.S. visa.

The re-entry experience

Like all exchange students, FLEX students experience a reentry and adjustment period when they return home. Upon returning, some alumni feel as if they don't recognize the country to which they have returned while others feel frustrated with a perceived lack of progress during their absence. Students may start to compare the conditions in their home country with conditions in America. Sometimes, the comparisons are negative. Some alumni have commented that people in their countries do not smile or say thank you as much as Americans do. On the other hand, many students have a new respect for their cultural traditions and practices and a new appreciation of and patriotism towards their homeland.

Students also may have difficulty readjusting to life with their natural families. Traditionally, college–age students from this region live with their families and do not move out until they have married and can afford to live on their own (although this is changing somewhat, especially in urban areas, where an increasing number of university students from remote areas have their own apartments). After a year of being separated from their natural parents, alumni, particularly young women, frequently have a difficult time getting their families to accept their new independence. Parents often are not prepared for the changes that have occurred in their children. Under the terms of their ECA grants, the POs are required to conduct reentry training seminars for all FLEX students before they depart for their home countries. Your student's reentry seminar will probably be conducted in the late spring. In addition, American Councils conducts reentry seminars for returning FLEX alumni in their home country, which gives them a chance to share their experiences with each other and introduces them to the alumni community and its activities in their home cities and countries.

The alumni program

As your FLEX student prepares to go home, you should be aware that a vast network of organized alumni associations eagerly awaits returning FLEX alumni. American Councils coordinates alumni programming throughout the region. Alumni meet regularly for discussions, community service activities, viewing of American films, celebration of American holidays, debates, speaker nights, and professional development activities, as well as helping with recruitment and orientation of future FLEX students. Alumni who live in cities where there are American Councils offices have the opportunity to meet more frequently than students who have to travel to an event. However, all students are invited, and alumni in other cities will often travel great distances to attend an alumni gathering, perhaps spending the night at the home of a fellow FLEX alum. Alumni may also get involved when FLEX recruitment competitions are conducted in their hometown. In regions that are quite far from an American Councils office, some alumni have formed their own associations or become city representatives! Alumni stay connected with each other through social media and through The Bradley Herald (**www.bradleyherald.org**), which features news and articles about alumni accomplishments and initiatives, as well as available opportunities. In addition, they have the opportunity to register on an ECA alumni website at **alumni.state.gov** that will enable them to communicate with alumni from other State Department programs as well as FLEX; they may have already registered on this website while they're in the United States. Overall, FLEX alumni thus have numerous opportunities to stay connected and active, and the alumni have been extremely successful both in school and in their communities.

The alumni program was created to give FLEX alumni the opportunity to connect with one another and to continue their American experience. It provides both an outlet and a forum for these bright young students and gives them opportunities to participate in activities that support their movement into positions of leadership. In addition, alumni provide a support system for one another during the readjustment period. If your FLEX student wants to learn more about participating in the alumni program, tell him or her to contact the nearest American Councils office after s/he returns home.

NOTABLE ALUMNI

Aruzhan Koshkarova, '16 Kazakhstan, and her team (pictured to the right with Google CEO Sandar Pichai) won Google's 2017 Technovation Challenge (Senior Division) for their app, QamCare, which can be used in case of emergency to provide your location information to your contacts.

Shalva Tevdoradze, '05 Georgia, works as the head of NATO relations at the Ministry of Defense.

Andrei Shevchenko, '93 Ukraine, serves as the Ambassador of Ukraine to Canada.

Laylo Sabzalieva, '07 Tajikistan used an alumni grant to bring clean drinking water to an underserved town in her region that had gone without it for ten years.

In closing

We hope that the information provided in this booklet will be beneficial to you during the exchange year. More importantly, we expect that you find hosting a FLEX student to be a positive and worthwhile experience. It certainly will be a valuable experience for the FLEX student! Thank you for opening your home and your heart to one of these incredible students and for helping them develop the qualities needed to be a future leader.

I've always dreamed big, planned ahead and had the desire to make a difference in my life, as well as in the lives of the people around me, but I could've never imagined someone would make an enormous difference and change in my life as my host family did. I was placed in a single parent host family and from the very beginning I knew my experience was going to be different. Now, in the middle of my exchange year I can say that I have made a life-lasting relationship with my host mom and from now on I do not have just one, but two families and two homes.

Nermina, '15, *Montenegro/Indianapolis, Indiana*

We've been given this amazing opportunity to study abroad, learn about another culture, and represent our own culture and traditions. That has been the best part of my experience- learning and teaching at the same time.

Jovana '15, *Serbia/Hot Springs, Arkansas*

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