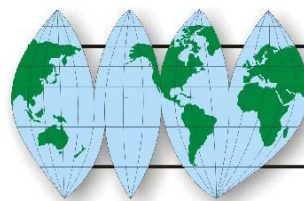


# ASSESSMENT OF THE FUTURE LEADERS EXCHANGE (FLEX) PROGRAM



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**Submitted to**

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US DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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The Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program is the U.S. government's premier youth exchange program, funded by the U.S. Department of State through the FREEDOM ("Freedom for Russian and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets") Support Act. Since FLEX began in 1993, more than 11,000 secondary school students from the New Independent States have spent an academic year in American high schools and lived with U.S. host families throughout the United States.<sup>1</sup>

FLEX honors a highly select group of high school students from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. The application process is extremely rigorous, and includes two initial tests of English language ability, a written application, and group interviews. Approximately 30 percent of those who take the initial English tests go on to the second round pre-TOEFL test; more or less one-third of the pre-TOEFL takers are then invited to complete the application and participate in group interviews, and ultimately, only about 20 percent of this group are selected as semi-finalists. Final selection is ultimately based upon English ability, personality factors, social skills, academic achievement, and leadership potential. For the 2001-2002 academic year, for example, 51,583 participated in the initial screening, 14,646 advanced to second pre-TOEFL test, 6,091 completed applications and participated in the group interviews, and only 1,211 were selected as finalists.

The FLEX application process ensures that students from throughout each participating country have an equal opportunity to be selected (thereby ensuring no overrepresentation of students from capital cities). FLEX also includes a component for physically disabled students, which provides an opportunity for these students to travel abroad – a program characteristic not available under most other exchange programs.

The FLEX program shares the same overarching legislative goals as other NIS programs funded by ECA, which are to

- contribute to economic and democratic reform and development in the independent states of the former Soviet Union, as specified in FSA legislation, and to
- contribute to the broader Mission of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs to promote mutual understanding through exchange activity, as mandated by the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange (Fulbright-Hays) Act of 1961.

More specifically, the FLEX program is designed so that:<sup>2</sup>

1. FLEX students will acquire an understanding of the important elements of civil society, including concepts such as volunteerism, the idea that American citizens can and do act on

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<sup>1</sup> This figure includes the current 1,265 participants.

<http://exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens/students/eurasia/flex/goals.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens/students/eurasia/flex/goals.htm>

their own to deal with societal problems, and an awareness of and respect for the rule of law.

2. FLEX students will show a willingness and a commitment to serve as agents for change in their countries after they return home.
3. FLEX students will develop an appreciation for American culture.
4. FLEX students will interact with Americans and generate enduring ties.
5. FLEX students will teach Americans about the cultures of their home countries and teach citizens of their home countries about the United States.

### *Methodology*

This evaluation sought to understand the impact of the FLEX program on students who participated in the program between 1993 and 2000. Four countries were chosen for the study: Armenia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. During the period under study (1993-2000), 3,574 FLEX participants were selected from Russia, 1,356 from Ukraine, 275 from Armenia, and 339 from Uzbekistan to spend an academic year in the United States.

Program evaluations such as this one seek to understand the impact of the program on the lives of the participants. Evaluations generally try to isolate the effects of the “treatment” – participation in the FLEX program – by comparing participants with others who are as similar as possible on all other measures. The FLEX program, because of its rigorous selection process, has a valuable set of comparison students – the semi-finalists. Semi-finalists are those applicants who progressed through the entire application process, including English language tests, the one-on-one interview and the group interview. They were not, however, ultimately selected for the program. While there are some differences between the groups (the finalists were selected to participate and the semi-finalists were not), the semi-finalists provide as close a “match” to the alumni<sup>3</sup> as it is possible to have.

FLEX alumni and semi-finalists from Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, and Uzbekistan participated in face-to-face interviews and focus groups conducted by the University of Iowa Social Science Institute supported by local social research organizations. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in 2001 with 1,159 alumni and 812 semi-finalists (see Table 1). At the time of the interviews, alumni and semi-finalists were between the ages of 16 (very few cases) and 26 (again, very few cases). The evaluation should be read with the ages of the respondents in mind: they are very young and yet both groups have accomplished a great deal both academically and professionally.

Table 1: Distribution of Survey Participants		
Country	Alumni	Semi-finalists
Russia	443	218
Ukraine	464	252
Armenia	71	119
Uzbekistan	151	223

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<sup>3</sup> “Alumni” and “participants” are used interchangeably throughout the report.

### *Introduction to Alumni and Semi-Finalists*

Survey respondents (both alumni and semi-finalists) applied to the FLEX program between 1992 and 2000. Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents by year of application.

The FLEX program is a high school exchange program. Not surprisingly, then, most FLEX alumni surveyed (91%) were 15 or 16 years old (another 7% were 17 years old) when they arrived in the United States. More than half of respondents were women – 68 percent of alumni and 60 percent of semi-finalists.

<b>Table 2: Year of Application (Respondents)</b>		
	<b>Alumni %</b>	<b>Semi-Finalists %</b>
<b>1992</b>	4	3
<b>1993</b>	19	14
<b>1994</b>	24	15
<b>1995</b>	21	16
<b>1996</b>	17	22
<b>1997</b>	19	23
<b>1998</b>	16	26
<b>1999</b>	7	14
<b>2000</b>	1	1
<b>N</b>	<i>1159</i>	<i>812</i>

#### *Alumni and Semi-Finalists: Life after FLEX*

As described above in the introduction, both alumni and semi-finalists are highly qualified students. One indication of their level of scholarship is the percentage of students who applied for and were accepted to university. About 95 percent of both alumni and semi-finalists applied for university (only 2% of alumni and semi-finalists did not apply, and 2-3% of each group were still in high school at the time of the interview). Of those who applied to university, about 97 percent (of both groups) were accepted.

### *This Report*

This report reviews the data collected during interviews and focus groups with FLEX participants and semi-finalists. Chapter 2 describes the impact of the FLEX program on the lives of the program's young participants in terms of the program's five goals. Chapter 3 compares the academic, professional, and personal development of alumni and semi-finalists. Chapter 4 presents alumni reflections on their program experience, and Chapter 5 offers a more detailed look at the experiences of disabled alumni. Finally, Chapter 6 presents our conclusions and proposes several recommendations for the FLEX program.

## CHAPTER 2: IMPACT OF THE FLEX PROGRAM ON ALUMNI

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This section describes the impact of the FLEX program on alumni and analyzes differences in outcomes for alumni and semi-finalists (who did not participate). The section is organized by program goal and describes each of the five goals in turn:

- Participants will acquire an understanding of civil society.
- Participants will show a willingness and a commitment to serve as agents for change in their countries after they return home.
- Participants will develop an appreciation for American culture.
- Participants will interact with Americans and generate enduring ties.
- Participants will teach Americans about the cultures of their home countries and teach citizens of their home countries about the United States.

### *Goal 1: Learning about Civil Society*

During their stay in the United States, FLEX participants take classes in American high schools, live with host families, and experience various facets of American civil society and culture. This section describes the academic and other school experiences of alumni while in the United States, alumni and semi-finalist participation in community service activities, the opinions of alumni and semi-finalists regarding democracy and politics, and their views of the political and economic situation in their home countries.

#### **1. Academics and Participation in Student Groups**

A major component of the FLEX program is academic learning: students learn about American politics and culture through their high school courses. FLEX alumni are very bright: while about 90 percent of alumni were 15 or 16 years old during their year in the United States, more than half (57%) were placed in senior level classes; another 32 percent studied in junior level classes. Sixty percent of alumni reported that the grade in which they were placed was the appropriate level; 40 percent (primarily those in sophomore and junior classes) believed they should be placed in a higher grade level.

Most alumni – 86 percent – took classes in American Government or History during their stay in the United States. Twenty-six percent took classes in political science, 34 percent in economics, and 21 percent in law.

FLEX students also had the opportunity to participate in special programs: English language training and Civic Education Week. Twenty-two percent of alumni participated in a four-week English language program after arrival in the United States. Sixty percent of alumni also applied to participate in the highly competitive Civic Education Week; 52 percent of those applicants were selected and attended Civic Education Week activities in Washington, DC.

More alumni participated in school-related clubs while in the United States than did the semi-finalists who remained in their home schools, and alumni participated more often.<sup>4</sup> Seventy-five percent of alumni and 70 percent of semi-finalists participated in school-related clubs; 34 percent of alumni, compared to 19 percent of semi-finalists, participated in clubs on a daily or weekly basis ( $p=.001$ ).<sup>5</sup> Table 3 shows participation rates for alumni and semi-finalists.

Table 3: Percentage Participation in School-Related Clubs		
	Alumni %	Semi-Finalists %
Daily	8	5
Weekly	26	14
Monthly	17	17
3-6 times	9	14
Once or twice	14	19
Never	25	30
Total %	99	99

A particularly telling example of alumni involvement at their American high schools is their participation in student government. Fifty-five percent of alumni reported involvement in student government. While more semi-finalists (65%) reported that they participated in student government than alumni, the

high rate of alumni participation is striking: participation in student government in the United States requires election. The very fact of participation by new (and foreign) students visiting for a single academic year indicates a high level of civic involvement and dedication to understanding the American high school experience.

Finally, more than half of FLEX participants – 59 percent – held part-time jobs, such as baby-sitting and lawn care, to make pocket money while in the United States.<sup>6</sup> And, as described below, this experience of working while in school may have influenced alumni behavior later: more alumni held part-time jobs while at university than did semi-finalists (discussed below in Chapter 3).

## 2. Community Service

American involvement in community service activities serves as one significant indication of our strong civil society. Alumni involvement in community service activities while in the United States reveals something about how well they understood the U.S. community service orientation.

When asked how often they participated in community service activities during their year in the United States, alumni were less likely to report participation on a daily or weekly basis (17%) than their semi-finalist counterparts (22%,  $p=.001$ ).

The difference between the participation rates of the two groups might be explained by several factors: first, alumni were asked to estimate their participation during their single academic year in the United States while semi-finalists were asked to estimate participation during *secondary school*, lasting at least four years. Second, alumni –as with participation in student government – may have had less opportunity in their new milieu to participate as they adapted to their new, temporary home. Third, participation in the FLEX program may have given alumni a different understanding of community service after their experience of volunteerism in the United States. Instead of counting single acts of charity, for example, alumni may have understood the question to ask about organized activities conducted through established organizations.

<sup>4</sup> Semi-finalists were asked about their participation levels in the equivalent time period, after application to FLEX.

<sup>5</sup>  $p$  denotes statistical significance.

<sup>6</sup> Similar statistics for semi-finalists are unavailable.

An additional issue may help us understand the survey responses. Both alumni and semi-finalists were asked to report their level of community service participation *in the past*. When answers are compared by age grouping<sup>7</sup> (16-19, 20-22, and 23-26), older semi-finalists report more frequent participation during secondary school than alumni. In other words, the differences between respondents aged 16 to 19 – those closer to their secondary school experience – are not statistically significant whereas the differences in participation rates for the older students are.<sup>8</sup>

### **3. Political Attitudes/Views of Democracy**

Another aspect of Goal 1 is that alumni develop an awareness of and respect for democratic principles and the rule of law. The survey attempted to gauge respondents' dedication to democracy and rule of law through several different types of questions. As described below, alumni are more oriented toward democracy than semi-finalists – more alumni prefer a democratic political system, and alumni are less likely to be willing to give up rule of law and democracy in times of crisis.

As shown in Table 4, alumni are more likely than semi-finalists – 73 percent to 62 percent – to believe a Western-style democracy or other system would be better for their country than the current political system. In contrast, 34 percent of semi-finalists and 23 percent of alumni prefer their country's current political system. Very few of either group thought the Soviet system should be reinstated.

<b>Table 4: Which Political System Would be Best for Your Country?</b>		
	<b>Alumni %</b>	<b>Semi-Finalists %</b>
Old Soviet System	2	3
Current Political System	23	34
Western-style Democracy	53	48
Some Other System	20	14

Asked about their level of interest in politics, 24 percent of alumni responded they were very interested, compared to 20 percent of semi-finalists ( $p=.10$ ). Nevertheless, alumni seem to be more skeptical of party politics than semi-finalists: 25 percent of alumni and 31 percent of semi-finalists identify with a single political party in their home countries ( $p=.01$ ); and only 12 percent of alumni (14% of semi-finalists) take part in the activities of a political party.

Differences between alumni and semi-finalist participation in several political activities are not statistically significant. About 66 percent of each group has voted at least once in a regional or local election, and 23 percent of both groups have signed a political petition.

Some survey questions explored the issue of democratic principles and rule of law by asking respondents about their views of politics and economics in their own countries. The responses indicate that alumni are more likely than semi-finalists to prefer democracy over strong leadership in their own countries and to disagree with the use of force. Alumni are also more likely than semi-finalists to believe it is “always wrong” to restrict certain activities during times of instability. Table 5 presents these findings. In fact, in every case, alumni are significantly more likely than semi-finalists to support positions that favor principles of individual freedom, civil and human rights, and representative democracy.

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<sup>7</sup> Age of respondent in 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Differences in participation rates for those 20-22 is significant at the .01 level; for those 23-26 it is significant at the .001 level.



Table 5: Democratic Principles			
	Alumni %	Semi-Finalists %	P
What my country needs right now is strong leadership more than it needs democracy (fully agree or agree).	50	64	.001
It is better to live in an orderly society than to allow people so much freedom that they become disruptive (fully agree).	30	41	.001
My government should use force if necessary to preserve the unity and integrity of the country (fully agree or agree).	53	63	.001
In times of instability, it is always wrong to cancel presidential elections.	76	70	.001
In times of instability, it is always wrong to limit opportunities for travel abroad.	65	57	.01
In times of instability, it is always wrong to imprison opposition leaders.	65	60	.01
During times of instability, it is always wrong to censor the mass media.	57	51	.05

The survey revealed interesting differences between respondents from the different countries. Armenian respondents, both alumni and semi-finalists, were much less likely than others to believe it is “always wrong” to cancel presidential elections, censor the media, imprison opposition leaders, or restrict travel during instability ( $p=.001$ ).

#### 4. Respondent Views of the Political Situation in Their Home Countries

Alumni views of the current situations in their home countries also indicate that the FLEX program has had an impact on their perceptions and expectations of democracy. Increased pessimism – and perhaps realism – resulted: 53 percent of alumni and 46 percent of semi-finalists view their own countries as unstable ( $p=.01$ ). Fifty-four percent of alumni and 45 percent of semi-finalists say there are few or no opportunities in their countries to start their own businesses.

More alumni than semi-finalists believe that the rights to speak and demonstrate, read books, travel, and worship are always or often guaranteed in their countries (see Table 6). Alumni are more pessimistic than their counterparts regarding free speech rights, but less so regarding access to books critical of the government. One explanation for this difference may be the continued alumni access to English language materials and the Internet. As described in Chapter 3, alumni report much greater access to English language materials and use the Internet and email at much higher rate than the semi-finalists. This access to information fostered by their FLEX experience may have a significant impact on alumni views of freedom of information in their countries.

Table 6: To What Extent are these Rights <u>Always or Often</u> Guaranteed in My Country (% who agree)		
	Alumni	Semi-Finalists
Right to speak out or demonstrate against the government ( $p=.001$ )	56	50
Right to read books showing the country in a negative way ( $p=.001$ )	75	68
Right to travel freely to other countries ( $p=.05$ )	73	74

Alumni are also more pessimistic regarding religious freedom in their home countries. As described in Chapter 3, alumni may be more likely to practice religion as a result of their visits to the United States; or, having seen the religious diversity which characterizes the United States, they may have come to recognize that

their home countries are less tolerant of religious pluralism.

## **5. Respondent Views of the Economic Situation in Their Home Countries**

Asked to identify the most important national problem facing their countries, more semi-finalists (38% compared to 35% of alumni) noted economic problems generally<sup>9</sup> while more alumni (14% compared to 9% of semi-finalists) cited political<sup>10</sup> problems ( $p=.001$ ). Nevertheless, when asked whether their national economy has gotten better or worse in the past 12 months, alumni were more pessimistic than semi-finalists: 52 percent of alumni and 58 percent of semi-finalists stated that their national economy had improved (“much better” or “somewhat better,”  $p=.001$ ). Notably, Uzbek respondents were more positive about their economy than other respondents – 61 percent stated that their economy improved, compared to about 50 percent of those from other countries ( $p=.001$ ).

On economic issues, alumni and semi-finalists share similar views: about 70 percent of both groups agree that economic reform should be pursued (even if people experience significant hardship); about 75 percent believe foreign investment in their countries should be encouraged rather than discouraged. However, alumni are less likely than semi-finalists to believe that the government is using tax revenues effectively to improve the situation in their countries (16% of alumni and 26% of semi-finalists,  $p=.001$ ).

To gauge their attitudes toward economic reform and privatization, respondents were asked whether enterprises should fire ineffective workers or a job should be guaranteed to everyone. Semi-finalists were more likely than the alumni (17.4% vs. 13.6%) to believe that workers should be guaranteed a job ( $p=.05$ ). Analysis by country, however, showed that Uzbek respondents strongly preferred firing ineffective workers rather than guaranteeing their jobs – 63 percent compared to 52 percent for Ukrainian and Russian respondents and 42 percent for Armenians ( $p=.001$ ).

About 72 percent of both groups of respondents believe that Western aid is needed in their countries, with 46 percent of alumni and 42 percent of semi-finalists stating that Western aid forces the donor countries’ political views on the recipient countries ( $p=.05$ ).

## **6. Gender Attitudes**

When asked about women’s role in contemporary society, less than half of alumni and semi-finalists agreed that men and women should have an equal role (47% of alumni and 42% of semi-finalists).<sup>11</sup> As one might expect, female respondents were more likely than male to believe women should have equal roles (51% of female respondents compared to 34% of male respondents,  $p=.001$ ). In addition, a belief in equal roles was more likely to be expressed by Russian respondents than those from other countries ( $p=.01$ ).

### ***Goal 2: Appreciation of American Culture***

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<sup>9</sup> Economic responses included “financial problems,” “inflation,” “economic problems,” and “lack of foreign investment.”

<sup>10</sup> Political responses included “ineffective political leadership,” “political instability,” “ineffective laws,” and “infringement of human rights.”

<sup>11</sup> Differences are not statistically significant.

The U.S. government funds student exchange programs, such as FLEX, in order to increase understanding and appreciation of American culture around the world. Student exchange programs are supported at the highest levels of the Bush Administration, as Secretary Powell indicated in a statement on International Education Week, “I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here.”<sup>12</sup>

FLEX students represent those future leaders, and the survey indicates that alumni took full advantage of the opportunity FLEX presented to learn about the United States. Ninety-five percent of alumni visited states other than their state of residence during the program, and 15 percent of alumni visited eight or more states. In addition, 98 percent of alumni visited historical sites during their stay, with 40 percent visiting historical sites as often as weekly or monthly.

Asked the most important difference between life in the United States and life at home, alumni tended to note differences in family life and economics:

- Parents in the U.S. give children more freedom (14%)
- Income is higher in American families (11%)
- Relations are warm between children and parents in American families (10%)

Alumni were also asked about the most important thing they learned about the United States during their FLEX experience; semi-finalists were asked to state the first thing that comes to mind when they think about the United States. Alumni, perhaps as a result of their extended stay in the United States, and their program experiences at school and with American host families, were more likely to comment on American freedom and equal rights. Alumni also gained a more nuanced view the United States and were less likely to note the high standard of living in the United States. Respondent statements are summarized in Table 7.

<b>Table 7: Most Important Thing Learned about the United States (Alumni) First Thing that Comes to Mind about the United States (Semi-finalists)<sup>13</sup></b>		
	<b>Alumni %</b>	<b>Semi-finalists %</b>
American culture is unique	10.5	12.1
Freedom/independence	5.4	4.7
Equal opportunities, equal rights	8.0	5.2
Democracy, free speech	5.9	8.7
Problems of the United States	4.1	0
High standard of living in the United States	3.2	10.2

The FLEX exchange experience also leads alumni to reflect on their own countries. Alumni were asked to name the most important thing they learned about their own countries by living in the United States,

and semi-finalists were asked to name the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of their own country. As noted above, living in the United States for a year did not make alumni more likely than semi-finalists to state a desire to move to the United States. In fact, when asked the most important thing they learned about their own countries during FLEX, many alumni reported love of their own country or national pride (see Table 8).

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Senator Kennedy Submits Bill to Enhance U.S.-Muslim Understanding,” May 13, 2002, at <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/islam/t051302.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Differences are significant at the .001 level.

Table 8: Most Important Thing Learned about Their Own Countries (Alumni) First Thing that Comes to Mind about Their Own Countries (Semi-finalists) <sup>14</sup>		
	Alumni %	Semi-finalists %
My nation has much potential	6.8	2.6
My nation is marked by crisis/instability	6.3	6.6
My nation has a unique culture	5.4	4.2
My nation has a low standard of living	4.2	7.6
Love for country/pride	4.0	12.0
Economic and democratic reforms have failed in my nation	3.6	3.3
Necessity of change, reform	3.6	0.3
There is nothing good about my nation/I wish to leave	0.4	0.4

Alumni responses revealed interesting differences among the four countries. Ukrainians, for example (18% of Ukrainian respondents), believed Americans were not knowledgeable about Ukraine or knew Ukraine only as the home of Chernobyl. Uzbek alumni were more likely to believe that economic and democratic reforms failed in their country (12% of Uzbek respondents compared to only 2% of Ukrainians and 1% of Russians).<sup>15</sup> Uzbek alumni were also more likely to note the low standard of living in their country (compared to 8% of Ukrainians, 2% of Russians, and 7% of Armenians).

### *Goal 3: FLEX Alumni as Change Agents*

FLEX alumni are expected to return home following their exchange experience, and, it is hoped, act as change agents in their own countries over the long term. FLEX students, as described in the Introduction, are very young when they visit the United States, and their ability to change the political or economic situations at home immediately upon their return is limited. Nevertheless, there are several ways in which FLEX alumni can begin, even at a young age, to have an impact at home. This section explores alumni and semi-finalist organizational membership, their subsequent travel experiences, and their preferences for citizenship.

#### **1. Organizational Membership**

Both alumni and semi-finalists continued their involvement in organizations and clubs while at university and were very active: 65 percent of alumni and 70 percent of semi-finalists participated. In addition, 30 percent of alumni and 34 percent of semi-finalists held leadership positions in these organizations. (It will be noted below that alumni worked more often than semi-finalists, suggesting that a lower percentage of organizational participation by alumni should be expected due to trade-offs in their use of time.)

Organizations in which respondents participated included religious organizations, trade unions, political parties, sports organizations, social groups, music/arts/cultural groups, foreign policy/human rights organizations, youth organizations, and women's organizations. Alumni were more likely than their semi-finalist counterparts to participate in religious organizations (11% compared to 4%) and political parties (7% to 5%). Semi-finalists were more likely to participate in

<sup>14</sup> Differences are significant at the .001 level.

<sup>15</sup> No Armenian alumni responded.

youth clubs (48% to 43%). Participation in other organizations (education/arts groups and foreign policy groups) was similar for both groups.

Analysis of respondents by country indicates a statistically significant difference between alumni and semi-finalists only in Uzbekistan. Uzbek alumni were more likely than their semi-finalist counterparts to be involved in political organizations, foreign policy/human rights groups, social groups, youth organizations, and religious organizations. Semi-finalists were more likely than alumni to be involved in sports.

For those alumni and semi-finalists not enrolled in a university at the time of the interviews, about nine percent of alumni and 13 percent of semi-finalists hold organizational membership after university. Differences in participation between post-university alumni and semi-finalists included the following ( $p=.10$ ): alumni were more likely to belong to religious organizations (11% compared to 2%), and semi-finalists were more likely to belong to political parties or groups (5% to 1%) and trade unions (18% to 7%).

## 2. Foreign Travel and Citizenship

Critics of student exchange programs warn that students who visit the United States will either not want to return to their home countries or will attempt to obtain U.S. residency or citizenship later. The data, however, do not support this fear.

FLEX alumni, despite spending an academic year in the United States, are no more likely than semi-finalists to say they would like to move to the United States and become a citizen. About two-thirds of each group stated they do not want U.S. citizenship. As noted above, less than one percent of both groups stated a desire to leave their home countries permanently.

And while both alumni and semi-finalists state they would like to work or study in the United States, Canada, or Western Europe, few are doing so. Only four percent of alumni and two percent of semi-finalists were enrolled in foreign universities at the time of the survey. Forty-four percent of the small group of alumni who *are* studying outside their home countries are studying in the United States.

Alumni were more likely than semi-finalists to travel outside their home countries after their FLEX experience (participation for alumni or application for semi-finalists) – 53.6 percent of alumni compared to 40.5 percent of semi-finalists ( $p=.001$ ). Table 9 shows the purposes of respondents' foreign travel. Of those who did travel, 53 percent of alumni and 62 percent of semi-finalists traveled on holiday. Alumni were more likely than semi-finalists to travel abroad to study or work.

Table 9: Traveling Abroad after FLEX Participation/Application		
	Alumni %	Semi-Finalists %
% of total who traveled	54	41
Of those who <i>did</i> travel, their purpose in traveling:		
On holiday	53	62
Academic study	21	14
Work	21	14

One indication of the importance of the FLEX program to provide opportunities for young people to travel to the United States is the percentage of semi-finalists who were able to travel to the United States in the absence of the program: only seven percent of semi-finalists traveled to the United States.

### ***Goals 4 and 5: Formation of Enduring Ties***

#### **1. Maintaining Contact**

As the quote by Secretary Powell above indicates, America's dedication to student exchange programs is intended to help produce a generation of leaders who understand American culture and politics and who have enduring ties to the United States. One indication of alumni ties with the United States is their continuing contact with friends, teachers, and their host families. A further indication is whether or not alumni undertook presentations about their home countries while in the United States; teaching Americans about their home countries is one way alumni begin a dialogue with their American friends, and this dialogue will increase understanding on both sides.

- 80 percent of alumni reported they are still in contact with their host families.
- 75 percent of alumni are still in contact with classmates or friends they met in the United States, with 12 percent maintaining weekly or daily contact.
- 80 percent of alumni are in contact (monthly or more frequently) with other FLEX alumni they met while in the United States.
- 49 percent of alumni remain in contact with their American teachers.
- 64 percent of alumni are in contact with adults they met while in the United States (other than teachers and host family members).

The survey asked semi-finalists – as a loose comparison – how often they are in contact with friends who currently attend school abroad. About 60 percent of semi-finalists maintain contact with these friends; eight percent have weekly or daily communication.

The FLEX program appears to create a solid network of FLEX graduates. Ninety-seven percent of alumni and 85 percent of semi-finalists report that they know FLEX alumni in their home countries.

#### **2. Visits to the United States and from Americans**

Some FLEX alumni (15%) have returned to the United States since their program experience to visit their host families or friends. The frequency of communication with friends and host families in the United States may indicate that visits will increase in the future; many alumni who responded to the survey were just out of secondary school, and many were still in university (and, therefore, unlikely to be able to fund the trip). More alumni, however, have hosted visitors from the United States – 26 percent of alumni reported that someone they met while in the United States has visited them since the end of their FLEX program. Further, 42 percent of these alumni had received visitors more than once.

#### **3. Teaching Americans about Participants' Home Countries**

Goal Five encourages participants to share information about their own countries while in the United States. Students may make presentations at school or to community groups, or they may share information informally through chats with host siblings or friends at school.

Ninety-three percent of alumni made formal presentations about their home countries while in the United States, and more than a quarter (27%) made presentations monthly, weekly, or daily. Table 10 shows the frequency of presentations made by alumni and indicates that fewer Ukrainians made formal presentations and more Uzbek alumni made frequent presentations ( $p=.001$ ).

Table 10: Frequency of Presentations Given about Home Country, Alumni %					
	All Alumni	Armenia	Russia	Ukraine	Uzbekistan
Never	7	6	5	11	5
Once or twice	30	41	28	31	28
Three to six times	36	34	40	32	34
Monthly, weekly, or daily	27	18	27	25	33
Total	100	99	100	99	100

## CHAPTER 3: IMPACT OF THE FLEX PROGRAM ON THE ACADEMIC, PROFESSIONAL, AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

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This chapter explores the impact of the FLEX program on the lives of participants by comparing outcomes for alumni with those for semi-finalists.

### *Academic Skills*

#### 1. Skills Improvement

Alumni and semi-finalists were asked to report on their skills – both gains in certain skills during secondary school and their assessment of their current English skills. Alumni, as described below, reported greater skills improvements in both written and oral English comprehension as well as computer skills.

A significant portion of any student exchange program is the opportunity to speak a foreign language with native speakers – and, hopefully, to increase speaking, writing, and reading skills. As expected, alumni rated their own English comprehension skills more highly than did semi-finalists. The survey asked respondents to rate their ability to comprehend English language newspapers and movies. Alumni assessed their abilities to read a newspaper highly, with 78 percent of alumni stating they could understand 90 percent or more of an English newspaper (23% stated they could understand 100% of an English newspaper). Only 41 percent of semi-finalists believed they could understand 90 percent or more (with 7.7% stating they could understand 100%) ( $p=.001$ ).

Similarly, alumni rated their comprehension of English language movies more highly than did semi-finalists: 83 percent of alumni stated they would understand 90 percent or more of the dialogue in an English movie (34% rating their comprehension as 100%); only 37 percent of semi-finalists said the same (with 9% rating their comprehension as 100%) ( $p=.001$ ).

Alumni and semi-finalists were asked whether they improved certain skills during their FLEX (alumni) or secondary school (semi-finalists) experience. According to these self-reports of skill gains, more alumni reported gaining computer skills than semi-finalists: 92 percent of alumni compared to 63 percent of semi-finalists believed their computer skills improved ( $p=.001$ ). Semi-finalists were more likely to report gains in group studying and teamwork (90% of semi-finalists and 83% of alumni) and library skills (63% to 52%) than alumni ( $p=.001$ ).



## 2. Participation in Exchange Programs

Many alumni – about one-third in Ukraine, Armenia, and Uzbekistan and about 40 percent in Russia – indicated they could not have participated in an exchange program without FLEX. These students may have been correct in their evaluation of their abilities to participate in other exchange programs: most semi-finalists – 93 percent – did not go on to participate in other student exchange programs during secondary school. In addition, only seven percent of semi-finalists visited the United States (for any reason) in the absence of FLEX participation.

## 3. University

As described in the introduction, by the time of the semi-finalist competition in the FLEX application process, the students competing are the top students in their countries. Not surprisingly, then, most alumni (91%) and semi-finalists (92%) have been accepted to university and have attended or are attending (1% of each group had been accepted but had not yet attended). Only one percent of each group applied to university but were not accepted.

Almost two-thirds of alumni – 65 percent – believe that their participation in the FLEX program helped them gain acceptance to the university of their choice, with 40 percent reporting that the experience helped “a great deal.” A few alumni believed that the FLEX experience harmed their chances of university acceptance: seven percent said it harmed them somewhat, and two percent said it harmed them a great deal. Interestingly, this varied significantly by country: no FLEX alumnus from Armenia felt that it caused harm, while almost 13 percent of the Uzbeks felt that it may have caused some harm.

Participation in FLEX – as compared to participation in other secondary school exchange programs – appears more likely to affect participants’ educational and career choices. More than 60 percent of alumni (62.5%) but only 35 percent of semi-finalists<sup>16</sup> reported that their exchange experience influenced their educational or career choices ( $p=.001$ ). An analysis of responses by age revealed that older alumni<sup>17</sup> (ages 20-26) are more likely than their younger counterparts (16-19 year old respondents) to state that FLEX influenced their choices: 65.7 percent of alumni aged 20-22, 65.1 percent of those aged 23-26, and 55.9 percent of those aged 16-19 reported that FLEX influenced their choices ( $p=.05$ ).

Table 11 provides more detail regarding FLEX’s influence on alumni and indicates that more than a third of alumni in each country reported that the FLEX program influenced them to choose languages or philology. Once at university, alumni tended to major in business, law, economics, or language/philology. Table 12 presents university majors for alumni and semi-finalists.

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<sup>16</sup> Only those semi-finalists who participated in another secondary school exchange program were asked this question.

<sup>17</sup> A similar analysis by age for semi-finalists did not reveal any statistically significant differences.

Table 11: How Did Participation in the FLEX Program Influence Your Educational or Career Choice (%)				
	Armenia	Russia	Ukraine	Uzbekistan
Knowledge of English led me to choose language/philology study	36	34	35	37
Made me want to study another culture	0	7	2	0
Increased my interest in economics	8	6	1	0
Made me want to study law	0	3	0	0
Increased my interest in information technology	2	1	2	0
Improved my communication and life skills (without reference to field)	6	5	11	11
Changed my values (without reference to field)	17	13	10	10
Had some influence (unspecified)	24	19	37	35
Other	5	5	0	7
I don't know	2	7	2	0
Total	100	100	100	100

Table 12: Field of Study in Higher Education								
	Armenia		Russia		Ukraine		Uzbekistan	
	Alumni	Semi-Finalists	Alumni	Semi-Finalists	Alumni	Semi-Finalists	Alumni	Semi-Finalists
Business	4	6	6	10	19	12	17	13
Law	6	5	10	11	6	11	11	8
Economics	17	25	16	16	22	15	30	20
Language/Philology	38	18	26	21	20	23	17	27
	All Countries <sup>18</sup>							
	Alumni	Semi-Finalists						
Business	14	12						
Law	9	10						
Economics	22	19						
Language/Philology	25	25						

Alumni and semi-finalists fund their university educations differently ( $p=.01$ ):

- Alumni are more likely than semi-finalists to pay for their own university educations (9.5% to 4.2%).
- Alumni are more likely to have their employers pay for their educations (2.3% to 1.8%).
- Semi-finalists are more likely to have their parents pay for their educations (22.9% to 19.2%).
- Semi-finalists are more likely to receive their educations “free of charge” (70.1% to 68%).

### *Professional Life*

Alumni and semi-finalist professional experiences present the starkest differences between the two groups. This section explores job experience, job mobility, and economic independence.

<sup>18</sup> These differences are not statistically significant.

## 1. Work Experience

As discussed above, FLEX alumni reported that the FLEX experience influenced their educational and career choices. Readers should note that interviews were conducted with persons who applied to the FLEX program between 1992 and 2000 – many of these respondents were still in school at the time of the interview and not in full-time employment. Nevertheless, 72 percent of alumni had worked part-time (or were currently working) while at university; 59 percent of semi-finalists worked while in school ( $p=.001$ ). University students in both groups held part-time jobs in business, teaching, and languages although alumni were more likely to hold jobs as language professionals (translators or interpreters) – 32 percent compared to 17 percent ( $p=.001$ ).

Because most respondents (85% of both groups) were enrolled in university, only 40.3 percent of alumni and 34.5 percent of semi-finalists held full-time jobs at the time of the interview ( $p=.05$ ). Of these full-time workers:

- Alumni were more likely than semi-finalists to work in business management (27.8% to 17.5%).
- Alumni were more likely than semi-finalists to be language professionals (8.8% to 4.7%).
- Semi-finalists were more likely to be teachers (17.0% to 9.4%).
- As should be expected, alumni and semi-finalists aged 23-26 were more likely than younger respondents to be employed full-time ( $p=.001$ ).

Of those respondents who were neither enrolled in school nor working full-time, most were either looking for work or on maternity leave.

## 2. Remuneration

Of those surveyed who are paid in dollars rather than local currencies, 61 percent are alumni.<sup>19</sup> Further, FLEX alumni paid in U.S. dollars also earn substantially more than semi-finalists. On average, these alumni earn \$425 per month, while semi-finalists earn \$119 ( $p=.001$ ). Alumni are therefore considerably more likely than semifinalists to enter those sectors of the economy where salaries are paid in the international currency and, when they do, they earn substantially more. Alumni may be more likely to find positions with Western firms, perhaps because of their increased English skills, because of their first-hand familiarity with American or Western culture, or because of the resume value participation in FLEX provides. For respondents paid in their home currencies, no statistical differences were found between the incomes of alumni and semi-finalists. In addition, there were no differences in income for male and female respondents.

## 3. Job Mobility

Alumni were no more likely than semi-finalists to change jobs frequently. The average number of jobs held by working alumni was 1.9; semi-finalists held 1.7. About half of alumni (49%) and 57

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<sup>19</sup> Respondents were asked their total monthly income, and they could reply in their home currencies or in U.S. dollars.

percent of semi-finalists had, at the time of the interview, held only one job in their careers – an unsurprising finding given the age of respondents.<sup>20</sup>

Finding a job that matches their qualifications seems to be a bit challenging for both groups. Of those currently working full-time, 55 percent of alumni and 59 percent of semi-finalists report that their current jobs are at their level of qualification. However, 27 percent of alumni and 22 percent of semi-finalists believe their jobs are below their level of qualification. Another 11 percent of both groups report that their jobs are “just not a good match for my qualifications.” For a few respondents – seven percent of alumni and eight percent of semi-finalists – their jobs require higher qualifications than they possess.

When asked what job they hope to have in five years, semi-finalists were more unsure about their long-term job goals than alumni (41% of semi-finalists and 20% of alumni could not say what job they hoped to have in five years).

Of those respondents who *could* identify a long-term goal, several interesting points emerge:

- 35 percent of alumni and 31 percent of semi-finalists hope to have jobs in business or management.
- Only six percent of alumni and eight percent of semi-finalists want jobs as language professionals (as noted above, 9% of alumni and 5% of semi-finalists currently hold jobs in language).
- Seven percent of alumni and eight percent of semi-finalists prefer jobs as government officials.

#### **4. Workplace Attitudes**

Both alumni and semi-finalists are generally satisfied with their jobs: 77 percent of alumni and 76 percent of semi-finalists are very satisfied or satisfied with their current jobs. Only two percent of both groups reported being very unsatisfied.

Alumni hold more “democratic” workplaces attitudes than semi-finalists. When asked questions about work authority and supervision, alumni were more likely to seek input from those under them and give those they supervise more freedom, as shown in Table 13.

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<sup>20</sup> Differences are not statistically significant.

**Table 13: Workplace Attitudes**

		<b>Very True (%)</b>	<b>True (%)</b>	<b>Somewhat True (%)</b>	<b>Not True at All (%)</b>
I am happiest at work when I am in a position of authority (p=.05).	Alumni	42	37	25	7
	Semi-finalists	42	36	19	3
Getting input from those who work under you is often unnecessary (p=.10).	Alumni	2	12	48	39
	Semi-finalists	2	17	48	32
The best supervisor maintains close control over those they supervise (p=.001).	Alumni	12	23	43	23
	Semi-finalists	20	24	42	14

### ***Personal Life***

Determining whether the FLEX experience had an impact on participants' personal lives indicates the breadth of the program's impact on alumni. As this section shows, alumni benefited by their participation in very important ways.

#### **1. Mentality**

Having the opportunity to spend an academic year in the United States may have subtle influences on participants' mentality or attitudes. Alumni were asked to identify how their FLEX participation changed their "mentality." Alumni responded:<sup>21</sup>

- Increased my communication skills (16.2%)
- Increased my tolerance (11.1%)
- Increased my independence (10.3%)
- Changed my values (7.6%)
- Increased my self-confidence (7.6%)

#### **2. Life Satisfaction**

Alumni are more satisfied with their lives than are semi-finalists: 32 percent of alumni and 25 percent of semi-finalists are "fully satisfied" with their lives as a whole. Further, 16 percent of semi-finalists and only 10 percent of alumni said they were "not very satisfied" or "fully unsatisfied" with their lives (p=.001).

#### **3. Material Wealth**

A majority of alumni and semi-finalists reported that their family's material wealth has stayed the same or gotten better in the past year. Only 12 percent of alumni and 11 percent of semi-finalists believe their wealth has decreased.<sup>22</sup> When asked about their family's economic situation before perestroika and now, however, alumni (48%) were more likely to report that their families are better off now than semi-finalists (40%) (p=.001).

<sup>21</sup> Alumni could identify more than one change in mentality. These responses include only the first responses given.

<sup>22</sup> Differences are not statistically significant.

#### **4. What is Important in Life?**

When asked what is most important to them, both alumni and semi-finalists prefer professional and financial success, though more alumni value creativity, and more semi-finalists value professional and financial success. More semi-finalists (74%) than alumni (63%) state that having their own business is “very” or “fairly” important to them ( $p=.001$ ). Alumni (89%) are more likely to prefer having opportunities to be creative than semi-finalists (85%) ( $p=.01$ ).

As the statistics above indicate, both groups value being successful at work and financially. These findings are reinforced with respondents’ answers to a follow-up question – what is least important to you? More than a quarter of both groups – 27 percent – responded that being active in community affairs was least important to them. Sixteen percent of alumni and 18 percent of semi-finalists viewed being a leader as least important, and 27 percent of alumni and 18 percent of semi-finalists had no interest in opening their own businesses ( $p=.001$ ).

#### **5. Self-Reliance**

Both alumni and semi-finalists attribute success in life to intelligence, skills, and hard work.<sup>23</sup> However, semi-finalists are more likely to attribute success to outside forces than their own abilities. When asked whether success is due to good luck, 11 percent of semi-finalists (8% of alumni) fully agreed. Eighteen percent of semi-finalists attributed success to influential people (13% of alumni) ( $p=.001$ ).

One indication that alumni internalized these views of self-reliance is that alumni are more likely to live in their own homes or apartments rather than with their parents or other relatives. Thirty percent of alumni and 24 percent of semi-finalists live on their own ( $p=.05$ ). When responses are analyzed by age, older respondents are more likely to live outside their parents’ homes, but at all ages, more semi-finalists than alumni live with their parents. For example, for the oldest respondents (aged 23-26), 61 percent of semi-finalists and 48 percent of alumni live with their parents or other relatives ( $p=.001$ ).

#### **6. Access to the Internet**

Access to the Internet is difficult for many in the NIS; alumni are more likely to have access to the Internet and use the Internet or email more often than semi-finalists ( $p=.001$ ):

- 44 percent of alumni and 24 percent of semi-finalists use the Internet daily.
- 41 percent of semi-finalists and 16 percent of alumni did not use the Internet at all in the week prior to the interview.
- 44 percent of alumni and 34 percent of semi-finalists have access to the Internet at home.
- 38 percent of alumni and 30 percent of semi-finalists have access to the Internet at work.

#### **7. Use of English and English Language Materials**

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<sup>23</sup> About 70 percent of both groups fully agree.

Both alumni and semi-finalists report that materials in English are available to them, with alumni somewhat more likely to say that English language materials are “very available” (35% of alumni and 31% of semi-finalists,  $p=.05$ ).

More alumni than semi-finalists speak English daily: 43 percent of alumni compared to 30 percent of semi-finalists ( $p=.001$ ). Speaking English at work is more common for alumni than semi-finalists: while 13 percent of alumni primarily speak English at work, only eight percent of semi-finalists do ( $p=.001$ ).

Despite the fact that only a third of each group view English language materials as very available, 61 percent of alumni and 48 percent of semi-finalists read or write in English every day ( $p=.001$ ). The disparity in perceptions of availability and actual use may be due to access to the Internet and the need to speak (and perhaps write) English at work.

## CHAPTER 4: ALUMNI REFLECTIONS ON THE FLEX PROGRAM

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This Chapter presents alumni views of several aspects of the FLEX program – the selection process, their academic experiences, life with host families, and alumni activities. This evaluation was well-timed: FLEX has been bringing students to the United States for ten years. There are a substantial number of participants and semi-finalists to respond to the survey, but the program is young enough to benefit from any improvements or changes recommended by participants.

### *Overall Views of the FLEX Program*

Alumni and semi-finalists evinced very positive views of the opportunities afforded them through participation. Both alumni and semi-finalists were asked to describe the most important aspect of the FLEX program,<sup>24</sup> and the top two choices were the same for both groups:

- Trip to the United States/staying abroad
- Development of English language/communication skills

“Trip to the United States” was selected as the most important aspect of the FLEX program by 21.6 percent of alumni and 24.1 percent of semi-finalists. Another 20.9 percent of alumni and 23.9 percent of semi-finalists believed that development of their English language skills was the most important.

Alumni were also asked to describe their biggest disappointments with the program while semi-finalists were asked about the biggest drawback of *not* participating in the program. Half of alumni (51%) said they experienced no disappointments in the program at all. The single largest disappointment alumni did face (noted by only 10.3% of alumni) was host family selection/ host family relationships.

Semi-finalists, not surprisingly, were primarily disappointed by losing the opportunity to travel to the United States – 28 percent of semi-finalists reported this as their biggest disappointment.

When asked to rate the FLEX program overall, alumni rated the program highly: 72 percent of the alumni rated the program 80 or higher (on a 100 point scale). While there were no statistically significant differences in responses by age, there were differences by home country. Armenian alumni were more likely to give the program a lower score ( $p=.01$ ).

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<sup>24</sup> Semi-finalists were asked to think back to the application process and describe the single most important thing that attracted them to the FLEX program.



## Selection Process

### 1. Advertising

Schools serve as a focal point of FLEX program advertising: about half of all alumni (49%) and semi-finalists (53%) reported learning about the FLEX program from a teacher or school advisor. Table 14 presents the most commonly reported methods of learning about the program.

Table 14: Initial Source of Information about FLEX <sup>25</sup>		
	Alumni %	Semi-Finalists %
Teacher or School Advisor	49	53
Announcement Posted at School	33	33
Friend who was an Applicant	8	8
Parents or Relatives	7	6
Friend who Participated	8	8

### 2. Host Families

The host family experience is an important aspect of the FLEX program experience; through the host families, participants learn about American culture (and family life, of course). Living with a host family can be difficult, perhaps especially for teenagers. Most participants, however, were comfortable with their host families: 70 percent of alumni remained with their initial host families; about 25 percent had two host families, and fewer than 10 percent had three or more host families. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 2, alumni noted the warmth and close relations in American families.

### 3. Program Coordination

Most alumni (65%) reported that their program coordinator in the United States was helpful. Nine percent, however, complained that the coordinator “ignored me completely.”<sup>26</sup>

### 4. Civic Education Week and English Language Training

The FLEX experience includes two special components to increase participant skills – the chance to participate in Civic Education Week (held in Washington, DC), and English language classes held prior to the start of the school year.

- 22 percent of alumni participated in the four-week English course in the United States.
- 60 percent of alumni applied to participate in Civic Education Week.
- 52 percent of those who applied were selected and attended Civic Education Week in Washington, DC.

## Alumni Activities

A full-time alumni coordinator based in Moscow coordinates alumni activities throughout the region with the help of part-time alumni assistants in each country (six in Russia, four in Ukraine, and one

<sup>25</sup> Percentages do not equal 100%; respondents were allowed to name more than one source. Only the top five sources are reported here.

<sup>26</sup> Analysis of responses by respondent’s home country and age found no statistically significant differences.

in each of the other countries). The coordinator compiles alumni articles and news and publishes a quarterly newsletter, *The Bradley Herald*. Alumni associations throughout the region organize activities that have included: celebrating American holidays, resume-writing workshops, social gatherings, and political activities (such as observing at polling places). Alumni associations must hold a minimum of six activities during the year, and at least three of these must contribute to FLEX's democracy-building goals. Box 1 provides examples of recent alumni activities.<sup>27</sup>

### Box 1: FLEX Alumni Activities

- **Ukraine.** Odessa alumni held 3-day leadership seminars for 10th and 11th grade students in Nkolayev, Ilichivsk, and Uzniy.
- **Russia.** FLEX alumni donated five bags of clothes to the Moscow Charity Movement, an organization assisting underprivileged families and the homeless.
- **Belarus.** Alumni collected 150 articles of clothing, 20 pairs of shoes, 90 books and two large boxes of toys for the children at Orphanage #6.
- **Turkmenistan.** Eleven alumni volunteered to teach English at an orphanage for blind children every Saturday.

Democracy-building includes community service; participants are encouraged to engage in community service activities while in the United States, and alumni organizations continue that “tradition” by organizing community service events for alumni.

When asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with alumni events, 51 percent of alumni stated that they were “fully satisfied.” Another 30 percent indicated they were less than fully satisfied, and 19 percent responded that they did not know. When asked for suggestions for improvements in alumni programming, about 50 percent of alumni made suggestions, and of these, 39 percent wanted more events. Other suggestions included:

- Establish additional FLEX offices to facilitate alumni activities (15%)
- Increase programming on career topics and employment assistance (8%)
- Increase charity events (7%)
- Improve information about alumni events (7%)

Alumni preferred that events be social: 62 percent of alumni stated that alumni activities should be primarily social, while 20 percent preferred a focus on career planning, and 15 percent wanted to focus on philanthropic or charity events.

Non-attendance at alumni events was generally attributed to lack of time; 61 percent of alumni reported they did not have time to attend events, and 19 percent stated that there are no events where they live. Only fifteen percent of alumni cited lack of interest as a reason for not attending events.

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<sup>27</sup> <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens/students/eurasia/flex/alumni.htm>.

## CHAPTER 5: EXPERIENCES OF SPECIAL FLEX PARTICIPANTS

High school students with physical challenges have fewer opportunities than other students to participate in exchange programs. These students may face discrimination in their home countries, and programs and facilities serving people with disabilities are rare in the former Soviet Union.

The FLEX program provides exchange program experiences for disabled students each year. Fifty-three of these special alumni participated in this evaluation and indicated they had very positive experiences.

### *Reflections on the FLEX Experience*

Disabled alumni rated their FLEX experience an average of 88 (on a 100 point scale), compared to an average of 83 for non-disabled alumni.<sup>28</sup> In addition, 57 percent of special alumni could report no negative aspects of the program. Of those who did report something negative, 31 percent noted a general lack of assistance. Another 15 percent indicated that the program was not long enough – a response that suggests that the program not only met their needs but provided a stimulating and interesting experience.

Like their non-disabled counterparts, special participants identified the opportunity to visit the United States and develop their English skills as two of the most positive aspects of the FLEX program. Table 15 compares the responses of both groups of alumni to the question, “Thinking back on your overall FLEX experience, what would you say was the single most important positive aspect of the program?”

Special alumni viewed their treatment during their FLEX experience positively:

Table 15: Most Often Noted Positive Aspects of the FLEX Program <sup>29</sup>		
	Special Alumni %	Alumni %
Opportunity to visit the United States	44	56
Development of English skills	25	31
Forging new relationships	22	22
Opportunity to use own abilities to “get along”	8	14
Opportunity to live with an American family	11	5
Opportunity for new life experiences	7	7

- 94 percent of the disabled participants stated that their experience in the United States was *not* adversely affected by their physical challenges (only two students reported an adverse effect)
- 97 percent believed they were treated fairly during the FLEX selection process
- 94 percent reported that their host families understood their special needs
- 92 percent stated that their host school administrations understood their special needs

<sup>28</sup> The difference is not statistically significant.

<sup>29</sup> Percentages do not total 100 percent because respondents were allowed to give more than one response.

*Comparison of Life at Home and in the United States*

Asked to compare life at home and in the United States, 42 percent of disabled alumni believed life was easier in the United States while 36 percent reported that there were no major differences between life at home and life in the United States. Only 22 percent believed life was easier at home.

More than 40 percent of special alumni reported that they learned new ways of managing their disabilities during their stay in the United States. Most of these alumni reported they gained a sense of independence or increased psychological stability. Alumni responses are shown in Table 16.

<b>Table 16: New Ways Learned in the United States to Manage Disability</b>	
	<b>% of Disabled Alumni</b>
I had more independence	37
I had psychological stability	36
I learned special mechanics	9
I became more confident	9
I found myself more motivated	9

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Without question, the FLEX program has a significant positive impact on the lives of program participants. These impacts must be interpreted in light of the program and this evaluation: the students (both alumni and semi-finalists) were very young when they applied to participate in FLEX, and most respondents interviewed for this evaluation were still at university. None was older than 26. Nevertheless, FLEX participation had a striking impact on alumni.

### *Major Findings*

The evaluation shows that the FLEX program is meeting its goals. Moreover, alumni reported that they were very happy with their FLEX experiences. Perhaps one of the most startling findings is that the FLEX program was and continues to be the only way for young students to come to the United States to study (or indeed, to study in any other country); only 30 percent of the FLEX alumni said that they would have been able to come to the United States without such a program and of the semi-finalists, only seven percent have visited the United States or studied abroad.

<p><i>Goal 1: FLEX students will acquire an understanding of the important elements of civil society, including concepts such as volunteerism, the idea that American citizens can and do act on their own to deal with societal problems, and an awareness of and respect for the rule of law.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During their year in the United States, 55% of the alumni participated in student government – a striking achievement, given that student government in the United States requires election. The very fact of participation by new (and foreign) students visiting for a single academic year indicates a high level of civic involvement and dedication to understanding the American high school experience.</li> <li>• Alumni are more self-reliant: they are less likely than semi-finalists to attribute success to outside forces or influential people (21% v. 29%). In addition, more alumni live in their own homes or apartments rather than with their parents or other relatives (e.g., among the oldest group interviewed, 61% of semi-finalists and only 48% of alumni lived with parents or relatives). Alumni are also significantly more likely to have worked to support themselves while at the university (72% v. 59%).</li> <li>• Alumni are more likely than semi-finalists (73% to 62%, respectively) to believe a Western-style democracy or other system would be better for their country than the current political system.</li> <li>• On a range of rule of law and democracy questions, alumni are <i>significantly</i> more likely than semi-finalists to prefer democracy over strong leadership in their own countries and to disagree with the use of force. Alumni are also more likely than semi-finalists to believe it is “always wrong” to restrict certain activities during times of instability.</li> </ul>
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<p><i>Goal 2: FLEX students will show willingness and commitment to serve as agents for change in their countries after they return home.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alumni hold more “democratic” workplaces attitudes than semi-finalists. When asked questions about work authority and supervision, alumni were more likely to seek input from those under them and give those they supervise more freedom.</li> <li>• More than 60% of alumni reported that their exchange experience influenced their educational or career choices.</li> <li>• Alumni are more likely than semi-finalists to work in business management or languages.</li> <li>• Alumni are more likely than semi-finalists to be paid in U.S. dollars, and of those respondents who are paid in dollars, alumni earn 3.5 times the income of semi-finalists. FLEX alumni are thus more likely to enter the “dollar” sectors of the economy and, when they do, they earn substantially more than semi-finalists.</li> <li>• Alumni are also more likely to have a vision for their careers and jobs than semi-finalists; 80% were able to articulate what kind of job they wanted to have in five years, compared to 59% of the semi-finalists.</li> <li>• Overall, alumni are more satisfied with their lives than are semi-finalists: 32% of alumni and 25% of semi-finalists are “fully satisfied” with their lives as a whole.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Goal 3: FLEX students will develop an appreciation for American culture.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ninety-five percent of alumni visited states other than their state of residence during the program, and 15% of alumni visited eight or more states. In addition, 98% of alumni visited historical sites during their stay, with 40% visiting historical sites as often as weekly or monthly.</li> <li>• When asked about the most important thing they learned about the United States during their FLEX experience, alumni were more likely to comment on American freedom and equal rights.</li> <li>• Alumni reported a higher comprehension of English newspapers and movies than semi-finalists (78% and 83% of alumni felt they had mastery, respectively of English newspapers and movies, while only 41% and 37% of semi-finalists made the same claim).</li> <li>• Alumni are more likely to use English daily at work.</li> <li>• Nearly all (94%) disabled FLEX participants stated that their experience in the United States was <i>not</i> adversely affected by their physical challenges.</li> </ul>

<p><i>Goal 4: FLEX students will interact with Americans and generate enduring ties.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some 80% of alumni reported they are still in contact with their host families.</li> <li>• Seventy-five percent of alumni are still in contact with classmates or friends they met in the United States, with 12% maintaining weekly or daily contact.</li> <li>• About 80% of alumni are in contact (monthly or more frequently) with other FLEX alumni they met while in the United States.</li> <li>• Twenty-six percent of alumni reported that someone they met while in the United States has visited them since the end of their FLEX program.</li> <li>• More alumni than semi-finalists have access to the Internet and email (44% of alumni report having daily Internet access, while only 24% of semi-finalists do so).</li> </ul>
<p><i>Goal 5: FLEX students will teach Americans about the cultures of their home countries and teach citizens of their home countries about the United States.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ninety-three percent of alumni made formal presentations about their home countries while in the United States, and more than a quarter (27%) made presentations monthly, weekly, or daily.</li> </ul>

### Conclusions

This review of findings shows that the FLEX program is successfully fulfilling its mandate in fostering the development of young agents of change in the countries studied. The program encourages new attitudes, values and practices that support market reform and the growth of democratic institutions. It also clearly plays an important role in increasing mutual understanding between the peoples of the United States and the NIS. All these factors lead the evaluators to recommend that the FLEX program continue to be one of the hallmark exchange programs between the United States and the NIS region.

The logic behind the program is to give extraordinary young people the opportunity to experience a new world, to learn from that new world and expand their own vision of what is possible, and then to return home to *make a difference*. The first step is clearly taking place: alumni are indeed changed as a result of the program experience. Because of their youth when they take part in the program, they are only now moving into professional and community positions where they can influence wider spheres, the organizations in which they work and volunteer and the communities in which they live. However, thanks to the FLEX program's strong alumni activities, these young people appear to be able to move back into their home countries with facility and have already created wide-ranging networks that are likely to support them as they ascend to positions of increasing influence and responsibility. The FLEX program thus stands out as a flagship undertaking for the United States and is likely to have an increasingly beneficial impact on the relations between the peoples of the United States and the NIS.

### ***Recommendations***

***Inquire about community service more explicitly in future evaluations.*** Some alumni responses indicated areas of potential improvement or clarification. For example, the survey suggests that fewer alumni participated in community service activities during secondary school than semi-finalists. However, the questions asked of alumni and semi-finalists were slightly different, giving semi-finalists a longer timeframe on which to report their community service activities. In addition, alumni and semi-finalist definitions of community service may simply be different: alumni are well-aware of the type of activity considered by FLEX program administrators to be “community service” (examples are shown above in Box 1). They may not engage in that kind of organized community service in their nine months in the United States. Future evaluations should be more explicit regarding their community service questions: what kinds of community service would “count” as a valid response; should alumni be asked to report their community service activities during all of secondary school (as semi-finalists are asked)?

***Continue supporting physically-challenged participants.*** Disabled FLEX alumni were extremely positive in their evaluations of their experiences and the effects of the programs on their lives. These alumni did not appear to encounter insurmountable obstacles while in the United States and many reported that life in the United States was easier or the same as life at home. Because exchange opportunities for these special students are less available, ECA should consider including more disabled students in future years.

***Increase alumni events and activities.*** FLEX alumni clearly want more alumni events and activities. In addition to providing a venue for alumni social interaction, the alumni associations could serve as a positive “brand” for State Department exchange programs. The FLEX alumni network is already well-established: most alumni *and semi-finalists* know at least one FLEX alumnus. A larger more visible alumni network, through its community service and other activities, would expand the name recognition and impact of ECA exchange programs in the region.